



PURITY 6:
Shameless

Swic

Dedicated to Cooper
"I took a walk down a road
It's the road I was meant to stay ..."
~Cinderella; Long Cold Winter

*Blanket disclaimer for this fanfic (will apply to this and all other chapters in **Shameless**)
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Chapter 1
Cancun

“Gavin Jamison.”

“Please, please, please, please, please, please—”

Chuckling softly as he sat back in the padded leather office chair, Gavin shook his head and tapped his pen on the open folder atop his desk. “Hey, Jillian. What do you need?”

Jillian Zelig drew a deep breath and let it whoosh out of her in a pronounced sigh. Gavin didn’t have to see her face to know that she was very likely pouting, her pale blue eyes wide and sad. He knew the expression far too well. It had gotten him in his fair share of trouble in the past, and he had a feeling that whatever she had on her mind would probably end up that way again. “Funny you should ask that . . . I need for you to hop on a plane and fly down here, PDQ.”

He nodded slowly. He’d figured it was something like that. “Are you still in Cancun?”

“Yes . . .”

“And why do you need me?”

“Because . . . I’m bored—*horribly* bored, and you’re the only one who can save me.”

Glancing dolefully at the stack of files littering his desktop, Gavin stifled a sigh and slowly shook his head. “Jilli, as much as I’d love to just get up and go, I’ve got a ton of stuff here that I have to take care of, and—”

She snorted indelicately, effectively cutting him off as he could sense her pout deepening. “And weeks and weeks of vacation time that you—workaholic that you are—refuse to use—*ever*.”

Grimacing as much from the truth in her words as well as because of the plaintive tone she had reverted to using, Gavin rubbed his left eye and sighed. “How much longer do you have to be there?”

“Another whole week.”

He shook his head. “Jillian . . .”

“You’re losing hero points, you know.”

“Well, that’s hardly fair, don’t you think?”

“Please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please—”

Grimacing when she resorted to using the one ploy that never failed to work in her favor, Gavin dropped his ink pen and shook his head. “All right; all right . . . calm down, okay? Let me talk to my boss, and I’ll see what I can do, but I swear this is the last time I rescue you. Do you hear me, Jillian?”

He could hear the smile in her voice. She obviously thought she’d won. “That’s what you *always* say, Gavvie, and you never, ever let me down.”

“Maybe I can get a day or two toward the weekend,” he mumbled almost to himself.

“But it’s only Monday!” she complained. “I’ll *die* by then! Did you know? They won’t let me have *real* food, and it’s *killing* me!”

Gavin rolled his eyes but smiled. “Cut the histrionics, okay? Let me see what I can arrange.”

“I love you.”

“So you’ve said.”

“But I do!”

“And you’d better.”

She giggled, completely undaunted. “Anyway, you’re already packed, and there’s a ticket in the front pocket of your suitcase.”

He shook his head. Somehow the idea that she’d packed his suitcase before she’d left two days ago didn’t really surprise him at all . . . “You already packed for me?”

“Of course I did . . . someone has to take care of you. What would you do without me?”

He chuckled. “So you had this planned all along?”

“I believe in being prepared for all contingencies, yes.”

“I’m not sure whether to thank you or be scared of you.”

“You can’t be scared of me! I’m your future mate!”

“Jilli . . .” he began in a warning tone.

She giggled. “Kisses, Gavvie.”

He wrinkled his nose and opened his mouth to tell her just what he thought of the shortened, cutesy version of his name that she insisted on using since he knew damn well that she was able to say his name just fine—the main reason she’d started calling him that to start with—but she’d already ended the phone call.

The trouble with Jillian was that she tended to act first and regret it later. She'd done that for as long as he'd known her. He should have known that first day . . . she had been almost four at the time, and he was nearly nine. It was the first time he'd gone to Cain Zelig's house in Maine for training. His father was one of Cain's top hunters, and when Moe Jamison had asked Cain—the tai-youkai—to train Gavin, Cain hadn't had to think twice about it

He'd fostered with Cain all through his youth, spending his summers running around the Maine countryside. The oldest of Cain's sons, however, was five years older than him, and by the time he'd first made the trip from Montana to Maine, Bas Zelig was spending his summers in Japan, training with his grandfather, InuYasha and his uncle, the Japanese tai-youkai, Sesshoumaru. In fact, Gavin hadn't actually met the future North American tai-youkai until he was thirteen.

Cain had another daughter—an older daughter—named Bellaniece. She lived in Japan most of the time, though, with her mate, so the only other children in Cain's house were Evan, who had just turned four, and Jillian, who was almost four at the time. Back in those days, Evan spent most of his time shadowing his mother everywhere she went, but Jillian . . .

“I'm going to climb that tree,” Jillian had announced bravely, pointing at the very tall, very old white ash tree that stood in the middle of the back yard. One hand wrapped in the folds of the pastel pink sundress, she glanced over her shoulder, pale blue eyes coming to rest on him as she blinked solemnly.

Gavin glanced up from the comic book he had been reading. Gin was in the kitchen making dinner. Cain was in his study working on paperwork. Jillian had been following Gavin around since his arrival. He looked past her out the plate glass doors at the huge tree and shook his head. The lowest branches were a good ten feet off the ground, and he doubted that the tiny youkai girl could jump high enough to do any real climbing. He turned his attention back to the comic once more.

“Come wif me, Gavvie? Come wif Jilli?”

Gavin made a face, burying his face deeper in the cover of the comic. The idea of hanging out with a nearly four year-old just wasn't really something he wanted to consider. “No, thanks.”

Jillian sighed. “Okay . . . Jilli play alone.”

The second he peeked around the comic, Gavin knew he was making a mistake. She tugged at the heavy sliding door; he watched her pad out onto the deck, her tiny feet skimming across the warmed stone. Her legs carried her so quickly that he couldn't help but think that her movements flowed like water. She stopped at the edge of the patio and glanced back at him, her pale face brightening in a warm smile as she lifted her hand and waved.

He watched as she ran down the steps and across the lawn to the tall tree. Standing below the canopy of leaves, she tilted her head back, staring up at the nearest branches that were well out of reach. She stood up on tiptoe, catching the stumpy end where a branch used to be, and using it for leverage, she managed to pull herself up off the ground. Using whatever handholds she could find and bracing her bare feet against the tree bark, she worked herself about

five feet off the ground before she slipped and fell, landing flat on her back. Gavin tossed the comic aside and ran out the door, his heart thudding painfully in his chest as he closed the distance between himself and the child.

“Jillian? Are you okay?”

She blinked, her gaze almost bewildered, and she slowly turned her head as he dropped to his knees beside her. “I falled,” she whispered.

“Did you break anything?” he demanded, tentatively feeling her arms and helping her to sit up.

“No,” she said, her eyes still round, as though she couldn’t really understand how she could have possibly fallen off of the tree. She stood up slowly, moving her arms and legs gingerly. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, she giggled suddenly and threw her arms around him, pinning his arms to his sides in her exuberance. “Jilli climb Bassie’s tree,” she exclaimed. Letting go and careening around, she sped toward a row of trees near the edge of the yard.

‘Bassie’s tree?’ Gavin wondered, scowling as he darted after her.

He caught up to her at the base of a huge old American elm and winced. Jillian was already climbing up the tree, and he watched as she shimmied her way onto an old, moaning branch. “Come down, Jillian! You’re going to fall again . . .”

She giggled, her childish laughter ringing in the air like the wind chimes that Gavin’s mother adored. That sound reminded him of home, and a sudden pang of homesickness washed over him with a brutal abandon. Back home he’d have been riding his horse or helping the ranch hands mend fences, doing odd chores around the ranch. It was the first time he’d been away from home, and the distance between Montana and Maine seemed insurmountable in his nearly nine year-old mind.

“Climb, Gavvie? Climb?” she called down to him.

“No, Jillian . . . that branch is gonna break . . .”

He couldn’t see her very well. She’d climbed higher in the tree, and his view of her was obscured by the lush green leaves. The slight cracking sound registered in his brain seconds before Jillian screamed. It felt as though his body froze. He didn’t remember leaping off the ground, didn’t know how he’d managed to catch her. He was shaking when he landed on the ground again. Jillian didn’t seem to weigh anything at all, but he fell back, landing hard on his rear, his body trembling as Jillian held onto him, her arms wrapped so tightly around his neck that he almost couldn’t breathe.

“No more climbing trees,” he told her, his voice husky, catching. His throat ached; his eyes stung, and he told himself that he must have gotten dirt in them because suddenly he was blinking furiously, trying to stave back the moisture that gathered in his eyes and spilled down his cheeks.

“Jilli’s hero,” she mumbled, her heart beating so hard that, for a moment, he worried that she was going to pass out. “Gavvie Jilli’s hero . . .”

“Don’t do that anymore, Jillian, okay?”

She nodded, burying her face against his shoulder. “Gavvie takes care of Jilli?”

Gavin sighed and stood up as Jillian’s arms tightened just a little bit more. “Yeah,” he promised, setting her feet on the ground but unable to get her to let go. “I’ll . . . I’ll take care of you.”

And that, so far as Gavin could tell, had been the beginning of the end. He was her hero, and for years, she’d been telling him that he was going to be her mate, too. He never took that claim seriously, though. Jillian was his friend—his *best* friend—and despite the things that she might say, he knew that she lived in an entirely different world than he did.

Jillian Zelig was one of the most sought-after models in the world. Her face graced the covers of magazines and runways from New York to Paris to Los Angeles. She lived in front of a camera. He’d seen the paparazzi trailing her more than once. It used to horrify him, how the little girl he’d first met had become this icon. People thought they knew her because they’d seen her so often over the last few years. She laughed it off, maintaining that it didn’t really bother her. Gavin wasn’t so sure. It seemed to him that she was looking around more often, as though she were trying to stay one step ahead of the ever-vigilant cameras: the flashing lights of the falling stars . . .

She attended celebrity functions, was completely at home on the red carpets. He’d seen her stepping out of limousines in million-dollar dresses, on the arms of men who knew how to talk to women, how to schmooze the general public. Gavin watched her on television as she arrived at the Oscars or the Grammy Awards. He convinced himself that he didn’t mind; told himself that Jillian had always belonged in the spotlight. It was getting harder and harder to believe himself, though . . .

Glancing at the work on his desk, he made a face and stood up with a sigh. He wasn’t really sure if he could get away from work at all, but he’d promised her that he’d ask. ‘*Might as well get it over with,*’ he told himself. The worst that could happen would be that his boss said no . . .

Gavin headed for the door and grimaced. Hanging out in Cancun with Jillian as she shot a swimsuit layout? He groaned. ‘*Then again, maybe it’d be worse if I’m given the time off, after all . . .*’

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Jillian wrinkled her nose as she scowled at the array of fresh vegetables and heaved a sigh. ‘*Hurry up and get here, Gavin . . .*’

Hans Grafer, the photographer, was busy grumbling under his breath about the sun, of all things. Apparently it was too strong and was causing too harsh shadows that had to be counteracted with harsh lighting that made Jillian feel as though it were at least fifty degrees hotter under the warm spring sun. “Jillian! Come over here, will you, darling?” he called.

Jillian stifled a sigh and pasted on a bright smile as she turned her back on the catered table and stepped out from under the canopy covering the makeshift dining area. “Where do you need me?” she asked.

“Stretch out on the beach over there, will you? I want to check the lighting.”

Jillian did as she was told, stretching out on her belly in the sand and trying to ignore the uncomfortable scratch as sand filtered into areas where she’d rather that it wasn’t. As ‘sexy’ as it might look on film, she had to admit that there was absolutely nothing at all that was even remotely romantic about getting sand stuck in areas where chafing was not welcome. ‘*I hate swimming suits,*’ she thought with a heavy sigh. ‘*I hate them, I hate them, I hate them, I—*’ she cut herself off, sitting up quickly seconds before she shot to her feet and broke into a sprint. Spotting the tall, hulking form of the man—her hero—she ignored the protests of the assembled crew in her hurry to get Gavin past the security blockade. “*Gavvie!*” she screamed, darting past the scowling security guards as she launched herself against Gavin’s chest. “You *did* come!”

“I told you I’d be here,” he remarked quietly, hesitating a moment before wrapping his arms around her shoulders to pat her back almost clumsily. “You didn’t really miss me that much, Jilli.”

“No, I did,” she argued. “I always miss you when we’re apart.”

“Is this guy with you, Ms. Zelig?” one of the guards asked, scowling at Gavin.

“Of course he is,” she said with a shake of her head. “He’s my husband. We eloped last weekend—didn’t you hear about it?”

The man blinked, and Gavin cleared his throat as he let his arms drop from Jillian’s back. “Jilli—”

“So you let him in, or else!”

“Understood,” the guard blurted before he hurried back to the little booth that had been set up as a security station. “Absolutely.”

Gavin rolled his eyes but couldn’t hide the little blush that tinged his skin. “You shouldn’t have lied to the poor guy,” he pointed out.

Jillian wrinkled her nose. “It’s just a matter of time, Gavin Jamison. You’ll marry me one day.”

Gavin sighed and shook his head, giving up on chastising her since it never really worked, anyway. “You don’t look like you’re starving to me.”

“That’s because you got here in time to save me . . . wait . . .” Eyeing him suspiciously, Jillian shook her head. “Gavvie, you didn’t bring me food!”

Gavin shrugged offhandedly. “Thought I should find out what you wanted, first.”

She waved her hands. “A cheeseburger . . . a *big, fat* cheeseburger dripping with mayonnaise and ketchup and mustard . . . extra pickle and just a little onion . . . and fries—lots and lots of greasy, fatty fries!”

He chuckled, crossing his arms over his chest. “So, the usual.”

She nodded enthusiastically, bracing herself against his forearm to kiss his cheek. “Yes! Oh! And a green Napoleon milkshake!”

Gavin chuckled though he was staring over her head in the general vicinity of the lights that Hans had ordered set-up. “I’ve told you a thousand times, it’s a green *Neapolitan* shake, and you do realize that the odds you’ll get that flavor out here is slim to none, Jilli. How about plain chocolate?”

She heaved a melodramatic sigh but shrugged. “Fine, fine . . .”

“I’ll be back,” he assured her, turning and ambling back toward his rental car.

Jillian watched him get into the vehicle and pull out of the small parking area of the secluded beach where they were doing the photo shoot. Her stomach growled, and she grimaced, hoping that it wouldn’t take him very long.

‘It makes no sense, really,’ she fumed as she shuffled through the hot sand toward the beach where one of the techs was busy arranging some sand where Jillian was supposed to be lying. *‘They want me to look healthy enough. They pay me to work out and to lay in a tanning bed three times a week, but heaven forbid I should gain so much as a pound . . . They don’t want models to eat; the just want us to look like we’re healthy . . .’*

Ignoring Hans’ grouching about her unceremonious departure, Jillian stood patiently waiting as the makeup tech touched up her lip gloss while his assistant blotted powder into the cleft between Jillian’s breasts. “You were shining, doll-face,” Justin Kramer, one of the world’s most renowned makeup artists, crooned. “Not so heavy on the powder, Jay-Jay,” he admonished. The assistant blushed and quickly whipped out a clean white handkerchief to brush off the excess powder.

“Careful, Jay-Jay, careful! We don’t want her to pop right out of that bikini,” Justin grouched.

“They taped me in,” she pointed out patiently.

“Let me retie the strap,” Jay remarked. The tiny man hurried around Jillian, tugging the string around her neck and tightening it. Jillian winced as the double-sided tape that held the strip of cloth onto her breasts pulled against it. When the men were finally done fussing with her appearance, Jillian picked her way through the meticulously arranged sand to reassume her pose as Hans heaved a relieved sigh.

“Lights,” he demanded, staring through the lens of the camera on the tripod. It looked precarious at best, and Hans made a few minor adjustments before digging the remote control out of his pocket and lifting the smaller camera that hung around his neck with the other. “Pout for me, Jillian,” he commanded.

Jillian did as she was told, letting her mind wander as the gentlest breeze stirred her hair. She smiled to herself. So there were worse things than being paid to roll around in the sand all day . . . it wasn't a horrible profession, she supposed, and she was good at it.

He'd come to rescue her . . .

She had hoped he would. Even after he'd called to say that he had been given the time off work, she'd still half-expected him to back out. It wasn't that Gavin was unreliable. Quite the contrary, really . . . No, it was simply that, at nearly twenty-four years old, Jillian had spent the last twenty years of her life trying to convince the stubborn man that he was her mate—a feat that she had yet to accomplish and nothing but friendship to show for her efforts.

It used to be enough. For the longest time, she had contented herself with simply being Gavin's best friend. Even now, she could talk herself into believing that it was only a matter of time until he came to his senses. Trouble was, while she could do that, she also knew that it was getting more and more difficult.

She'd met him the first time when he'd come to train with her father. He'd been nine that summer, and she was four. On the scrawny side, he was short and skinny and pale. He liked to sit in the living room, reading comic books and science fiction novels, messing around with his laptop computer and dreaming of the antique *Star Wars* figures he swore he would collect one day, and for some reason, Jillian had thought he was fascinating.

Tagging around after him all the time, she had crawled into his bed the first night after he'd arrived. Looking back now, she had to wonder just why he'd let her stay there, but he had, and she'd soon gotten into the habit of creeping into his room after everyone had gone to bed, curling up on her side and content to be near him. The only thing her parents had said was that Jillian had to leave the door open, though Gavin had alluded to the subtle and not-so-subtle threats against certain crucial parts of Gavin's anatomy that he'd been dealt both by Cain, her father, as well as from Bas, her oldest brother, over the years.

But the idyllic memories of her youth, of summers spent coercing Gavin into one escapade or another, had ended sooner than she'd expected. Everything had changed the year Gavin was seventeen. He was between his junior and senior years of high school, and Jillian was twelve at the time. She hadn't realized during the summer that it was the last time she'd see Gavin in person for over three years. The next summer, he'd opted to start college early, taking summer

classes to get a jump on his prerequisite subjects. He'd chosen to attend the University of Montana, and Jillian had been inconsolable. For the next two years, she'd held out the hope that he would come back to Maine for the summer. The few times she'd spoken to Bas about it, her brother had grumbled that it was time Gavin grew up, didn't she think, and that Gavin didn't really need to come back to Maine since his training was already completed.

Still Jillian emailed Gavin religiously, sending him snapshots over the Internet whenever she could. She called him, mostly on the weekends, but she got used to his half-answers and perpetual insistence that he had to study. Gavin's responses grew more infrequent, and by the time she was fifteen, she'd almost given up hope that she'd really see him ever again, so it had been a complete shock when her mother told her in mid-November that Gavin was really coming back.

She'd taken the cowards' way out. Insisting that she had to go to school because of a huge pep rally for the varsity football team, Jillian hadn't gone with the rest of her family to pick Gavin up at the airport, and then she'd accidentally missed the bus after school, opting to walk home instead of catching a ride with one of her friends. By the time she'd reached the mansion, she'd been unable to go inside. Unsure what sort of greeting she'd get from Gavin, she'd turned tail and run, heading for the one place that he'd know—that was, if he wanted to find her at all . . .

She sat on the rock extending over the water of the pond so lost in thought that she hadn't even felt the bite of the chilly November air. Having lost track of time long ago, she wasn't sure when she sensed the shift in the air; the unmistakable presence that she'd missed for far too long . . .

"Jilli?"

His voice had grown deeper in his absence. Strange, she'd not really realized that on the telephone. She straightened her back, squared her shoulders, but she couldn't get herself to turn around. 'Gavin . . .?'

"Your mom said you were probably out here," he muttered as he sat down beside her.

She swallowed hard, careful to keep her eyes focused on the water. "I'm a cheerleader," she said quietly. "I couldn't miss the pep rally today."

"I-I know," he blurted. "I thought . . ." He sighed and shook his head. "It doesn't matter what I thought."

All too aware of just how much Gavin had changed over the years, Jillian scrunched up her shoulders, willing her thundering heart to slow before the unsettling emotions made her want to scream. Taller—impossibly tall, really—almost as tall as her father and her brother, both of whom were nearly seven feet tall—Gavin had filled out nicely, obviously the result of rigorous training—perhaps a regime of practicing as well as weight lifting. The scrawny, short boy she'd known so well seemed conspicuously missing, and Jillian was almost afraid to look him in the eye, lest she found that she really didn't recognize him at all . . .

"How long will you be here?" she forced herself to ask, carefully trying to mask the anxiety in her voice.

Chapter 2
Welcome to Mexico

Gavin rolled his eyes but smiled as Jillian snatched the bag out of his hand and grabbed the wax-paper wrapped sandwich. He caught the bag still containing her french-fries before it slipped from her grasp, chuckling softly as she bit into the sandwich with a loud moan of pleasure. Eyes fluttering closed with a glob of ketchup and mayonnaise trailing from the corner of her mouth, the girl looked like she was bordering on ecstasy—rather disconcerting to him since he was way too familiar with that particular expression . . . It normally followed Jillian’s inexplicable knack for talking Gavin into things that would otherwise go against his better judgment.

Digging a napkin out of the bag, he caught the disapproving glower of the photographer and the rest of the staff. He wiped her face gently and tried to ignore them since they obviously didn’t bother Jillian in the least. “Thank you, Gavvie,” she mumbled around a mouthful of cheeseburger. “This is so-o-o good . . . Want a bite?”

Leaning back when Jillian stuck the sandwich under his nose, Gavin chuckled again and shook his head. “No, thanks.”

“Shake!” she demanded, swallowing the food and waving her sandwich toward the Styrofoam cup in his hand.

“Here,” he said, hooking the straw with his index finger to tip it toward her. She stooped over, catching the straw and sucking hard to draw the thick, frothy chocolate shake through the straw. “Oh, that’s really good!” she approved with a mischievous little grin. “I’m going to give myself a headache trying to drink it through that, though.”

Gavin sighed and popped the lid off. Jillian grabbed it and giggled as she tipped the drink to her lips. “I don’t think your photographer-friend likes this,” Gavin muttered.

Jillian rolled her eyes and handed the cup back, licking the milkshake mustache away with the tip of her little pink tongue. “That’s what they get for starving me . . . honestly, Gavvie, if you hadn’t come, I swear I would have died!”

He rolled his eyes but played along, knowing Jillian’s penchant for the uber-dramatics just a little too well. “Died? Well, I suppose *that* would have been bad . . . your fries are getting cold.”

Jillian uttered a little noise as she nodded quickly at the bag. He set the shake on the caterer’s table and fished out a couple fries. Jillian leaned forward, neatly snagging the food out of his fingers. Gavin grimaced and pulled his hand back. “Leave some meat, will you?” he teased.

“I iddn ite oo,” she mumbled.

“You almost did . . . you sure you’re not a piggy-youkai instead of a water-youkai?”

She wrinkled her nose and bit into the cheeseburger again. “Hush, doggie,” she mumbled around a mouthful of cheeseburger.

Gavin chuckled and fed her another french-fry. “Jilli, you’re a mess . . .”

Jillian leaned back and glanced down, grimacing as a glob of mayonnaise, ketchup, and pickle juice dripped from the sandwich and ran down the cleft between her breasts. She shrugged, digging into the bag for another handful of fries while Gavin shook his head and grinned.

“You’re not going to clean that up?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’ll just let Jay do it. He hates the shine, you know.”

That earned her a marked scowl as Gavin fished another napkin out of the bag. “Jay can keep his damn hands away from your breasts, Jilli,” he grumbled, cheeks pinking as he carefully blotted the mess away.

“You missed some,” she remarked carelessly.

“Pardon?”

“You’ve got to dig for it, Gavvie . . . it’s smeared all down between my boobs.”

Gavin choked and sputtered indignantly. “Jilli! I c-can’t—What are—?”

It was too late. Thrusting the sandwich into his empty hand, Jillian reached behind her neck and tugged at the little string that held the bikini top in place. It fell away only to catch on her breasts, but a single tug later accompanied by the harsh sound akin to Velcro being pulled apart, her breasts sprang free, bobbing up and down for a moment as Jillian nabbed the napkin and finished wiping herself clean.

Gavin’s head snapped to the side, inadvertently meeting the inconsolable gaze of Hans the photographer, who looked like he was about to cry. Gavin narrowed a formidable glower at the man who blinked in surprise then rolled his eyes in an exaggerated show of impatience before turning his head to the side with a pronounced sigh. “Is he—you know . . .?” Gavin growled under his breath, more to himself than to Jillian.

“Hmm? Oh, gay, you mean? Yeah, I think they all are . . . Hans . . . Justin . . . Jay-Jay . . . They’d be happier if you dropped *your* top, Gavvie!”

He grimaced. “Put those away, will you? And why do you have tape on your . . . breasts?”

She rolled her eyes and quickly tied the bikini behind her neck once more. “Why else, silly? To keep them from popping out!”

He groaned as Jillian made quick work of the rest of her food. “I’ll be back,” she promised, rising up on tip-toe to kiss Gavin’s cheek. “Just going to go brush my teeth really quick. Don’t miss me too much!”

He watched her go with a frown. She seemed fine, didn’t she? She always seemed fine. Full of smiles and laughter, Jillian was a law unto herself. Still, there were times when he’d noticed that her smile seemed a little strained, a little forced. She really *didn’t* like it; not at all . . .

“Why would you want to be a model?” he’d asked her one time just after he’d moved to New York City—after he’d given up hope of ever seeing her again. She lived in the city. Her mother had told him as much. He’d told himself that it was enough to stay near her in case she should ever need him, but . . .

Seeing her pictures plastered all over subways; all over bus stops and billboards . . . the same girl he’d always known had been buffed and polished and shone like a star in the darkest night. He’d taken a job in Detroit after graduating from the University of Maine. He hadn’t understood why she’d walked out of his life during his senior year of college. She just stopped showing up on weekends, and he hadn’t been able to get any real answers out of her family. He hadn’t realized back then that she’d moved to New York City, opting to finish high school via the internet while living with her brother, Evan and embarking on her mission to become one of the most recognizable faces in the world . . .

He’d never forget that day, though. It was raining—pouring actually—and Gavin, as usual, hadn’t bothered to grab an umbrella despite the dire predictions of torrential rain and slate gray skies that morning. He’d walked the thirty blocks to his apartment only to find Jillian huddled on the steps outside the building. Clad in a pair of faded jeans and an old University of Maine t-shirt that he recognized as having once belonged to him, she didn’t look at all like a supermodel. She looked like the girl he’d always known.

She didn’t return his smile as she awkwardly got to her feet. Wringing her hands in a decidedly nervous fashion, she bit her lip and brushed her sodden bangs out of her face. It hadn’t surprised him that the girl hadn’t bothered to grab an umbrella, either. She was a water-youkai, after all, and natural water—rain, lakes, ponds, oceans—was something she craved. “I-I was just passing by,” she lied. She was much too wet to have just gotten there. Gavin smiled tentatively, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “I thought . . . it was nice to see you again,” she muttered.

He caught her arm as she started to hurry past. She shot him a nervous glance bringing to mind a deer caught in the headlights. “W-wait!” he blurted, trying to repress the surge of panic at the idea of letting her slip away again. “I was going to dry off and grab some dinner . . . you still like cheeseburgers?”

A reluctant smile finally surfaced, illuminating her gaze with a brilliant sheen of happiness. “You remembered?”

He shuffled his feet, feeling unaccountably flustered by her softly uttered question. “Of course I remembered,” he mumbled. “How ‘bout it? My treat?”

Her smile had widened, and she’d nodded. They’d been together ever since. He’d asked her why she’d wanted to become a model that night at dinner. She’d grinned and shrugged. “It’s the only thing I’m good at,” she replied simply.

“That’s not true,” he countered.

Jillian laughed and reached across the table, patting his hand as though she were consoling a child. “It’s okay, Gavvie. I know my limitations. I’m not smart like Bassie or Evan, and modeling isn’t really so bad.”

He let it go at that, unwilling to upset her by pointing out that she was every bit as smart as her brothers; just in an entirely different way.

“Hey, you—lover boy.”

Gavin snapped out of his reverie and blinked, gaze shifting to the side, stifling the desire to growl at the little photographer who was speaking to him as though Gavin was way below him on the food chain. “Pardon?”

The photographer—Jillian had called him ‘Hans Something-Or-Other’—spared a moment, deliberately staring Gavin up and down before thoughtfully scratching his chin with his pinky finger extended up and out. “You need to stay out of the way, hmm? We’re on a very tight schedule—” He pronounced the word ‘shed-yule’, “—and you’re nothing but a distraction to our little Jilli.”

Smothering another low growl at the much-too-personal use of the nickname that Gavin felt should be reserved for family and close friends, he pasted on a tolerant smile and crossed his meaty arms over his chest. “I’d never dream of getting in the way,” he quipped. “Wouldn’t want to interrupt your . . . ‘shed-yule’.”

Hans smiled rather tolerantly, leaning toward Gavin close enough to whisper as he stared off toward the trailer where Jillian had gone to brush her teeth. “This is supposed to be a closed shoot,” he admitted. “Since Jilli seems to like you, I’ll let you stay. Just don’t distract her, if you would be so kind . . . You’ve already delayed the shoot, you understand, and we simply *must* stay on track since tomorrow is *the* day.”

Gavin scowled at the little photographer and shook his head. “*The* day? What’s that mean?”

Hans twittered out a grating laugh, waving a hand in front of his face as though Gavin had just told a really great joke. “You don’t know? *The* day! *The* day! Coventry Jewelers is loaning us *the* diamond and platinum bikini . . . they want Jilli to be their *diamond* girl!” He heaved a sigh, his leathery tanned skin taking on a pinkish glow. “You probably won’t be allowed on-site,” he mused. “Security, you know . . .”

Gavin returned the insincere little smile and shrugged. “We’ll see.”

The door on the tiny white trailer opened, and Jillian stepped back outside. Pausing a moment to slip her finger along the back of the string bikini to adjust it, she wandered toward Gavin. “It shouldn’t take long,” she assured him, slinging her arms around his neck and giving him a squeeze. “I’m so glad you’re here!”

He blinked and stared, struck yet again by just how beautiful the water-youkai really was. “Me, too, Jilli.”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Jillian pushed Gavin into the hotel room and kicked the door closed, dropping her duffle bag on the floor and arched her back, knitting her fingers together and pushing her hands up over her head in a lethargic stretch. “Sorry that took so long,” she apologized, stifling a yawn with the back of her hand.

Gavin smiled. “It’s okay,” he assured her. “It’s your job.”

Jillian made a face and fluttered her hand dismissively. “Let me go wash off all this makeup,” she told him as she grabbed her bag and headed toward the master suite. “Then we can go get some dinner.”

Gavin sat on the sofa and nodded. “Okay. I’m going to check my email.”

Sparing a moment to wiggle her fingers at him, she hurried off to put her things away and grab a quick shower.

It only took him a few minutes to set up his laptop. Sure, he was on vacation, but he’d assured his boss that he’d check his email every day in case they needed him. Marcus, his boss, had laughed at him and told him to have a good time. Still, given that he hadn’t taken any of his vacation time in the six years that he’d worked there, Gavin just wasn’t good at being ‘away’.

The only email he had was from his mother, Natalie. It was the same stuff as always: when was he coming home to visit? Was he dating anyone yet? Was he taking care of himself? Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera . . . Heaving a sigh, he snapped the lid closed, sending the machine into standby mode.

Jillian’s laptop sat on the table. Out of habit, he leaned to the side, pulling the computer over and opening it up. Drumming his fingertips on his knee as he waited for it to boot, he shook his head. It took entirely too long to start up. He hadn’t gotten around to running any of the crucial programs to make sure that it stayed running well. Normally he ran all the scans and such on a weekly basis, but with Jillian’s insane schedule and the overtime he’d been putting in lately at work, he hadn’t really had the time to do it. Maybe he could talk Jillian into ordering room service. Scowling as he looked at her diagnostic files, he sighed again. From the looks of things, it might take him a few hours to fix her computer this time . . .

Starting up the spyware scan, Gavin scratched the back of his neck. The only reason Jillian had a computer was so that she could check her email, though he had made the mistake of teaching the girl how to use ASA, a popular chat program. She loved to chat with her mother back home

in Maine, and there had been a few times that she had tried to commandeer Gavin's computer so that she could stay in touch.

Jillian padded out of the master bedroom suite, toweling her hair dry with one hand and carrying a jar of something or other in the other one. The little peach satin robe she wore barely covered her, and he knew from past experience that she was very likely quite naked underneath it all.

"When's the last time you defragged your hard drive?" Gavin asked, refusing to spare more than a cursory glance at the girl.

She flopped down on the sofa, kicking her feet up and nudging his arm aside so that she could stretch her legs out over him. "Defragged my hard drive?" she quipped. "Sounds completely sexual, Gavvie."

She giggled when he blushed. He couldn't help himself. She had a horrible habit of saying things designed to embarrass him. She'd done it for years. "It's not," he grumbled, trying to hide his discomfort behind a brusque tone; a clipped voice. "I've told you, Jillian; you have to run these programs regularly if you want your computer to operate smoothly."

"I thought you set them up to run automatically," she reminded him, unscrewing the lid off the jar and digging out a glob of thick cream.

"Yes, well, the programs will only run at their scheduled times if you have the computer turned on," he remarked dryly.

"But you said not to leave the computer on if I'm not going to use it every day," she reminded him as she pushed the robe open and applied the cream to her reddened breasts. Irritated from the tape she'd used to keep herself from falling out of her bikini during the photo shoot, she moaned softly as the cream offered her a modicum of relief from the inflamed skin.

Gavin saw all of it out of the corner of his eye. Refraining from commenting about the downside of her vocation since it never failed to upset her, he finished off the spyware scan and started up a virus scan. "I could order room service," he offered, frowning at the computer screen.

"Aww, but I wanted to go out for dinner . . . I've eaten here—*alone*—every night this week. Come on, Gavvie . . . you're on vacation, right?"

He grunted in reply. "Sure . . . I wanted to get your computer working right again, though."

"It's fine," she argued. "Anyway, I've been dying to try out some local cuisine all day. Your stomach up for it?"

He smiled. "Maybe."

She worked the cream into her breasts before starting in on her legs. "The air here's been so dry. I feel like a snake."

“That bad?”

With a nod, she shot him an impish smile. “Yes. Wanna cop a feel?”

Gavin leaned back when Jillian stuck her leg under his nose. “Come on, Jilli. I thought you were hungry,” he mumbled, gently but firmly pushing her leg aside. Rising to his feet, he strode over to the windows, staring out over the busy city of Cancun.

“Okay,” she relented with a melodramatic sigh. “Fine, fine . . .” Tightening the belt of her robe, she wandered over to stand beside him. “So you never did tell me . . . Marcus didn’t give you any trouble about taking some time off, did he?”

“Marcus? Are you kidding? As soon as I told him that it was for you, he couldn’t get rid of me fast enough.”

Jillian beamed, her eyes sparkling with happiness as she giggled softly and clapped her hands. “Such a nice man,” she cooed. “Remind me to send him a fruit basket when we get back to New York.”

Gavin rolled his eyes but chuckled. As charming as Jillian could be, he had his doubts that his boss had taken her feelings into consideration when granting Gavin the time off. No, it was Jillian’s family he was thinking of. After all, if it made one of the doted-upon daughters of the North American tai-youkai happy, then it stood to reason that it would make Cain Zelig happy, too. Marcus—a kitsune—was probably glad of the opportunity to do ‘a favor’ for one of the Zelig’s family members. “I’ll write that down,” he assured her.

Fluttering a hand at the base of her throat, she giggled, but the sound was cut short as her smile faded only to be replaced by a sense of alarm—eyes wide, nostrils flaring—as she patted her throat with a strangled cry. “Oh, *no!*”

“What?” he asked, shaking his head in confusion. “Jilli?”

Jillian’s pale blue eyes filled with inexplicable tears. “No, no, no, *no, no!*” she whimpered, dropping to her hands and knees as she scanned the area under the sofa; under the coffee table. “No . . .”

“Jillian, what’s wrong?” he asked, hurrying over to her and grabbing her by the shoulders. “Did you lose something?”

She nodded miserably, sniffing as she shot him a worried glance, almost as though she expected him to be angry. “I had it! I *swear* I had it! I had it this morning . . .”

“Had . . . what?”

“My butterfly!” she wailed.

It took a few moments for Gavin to grasp what it was she'd apparently lost. He'd given her a cheap gold necklace with a ten-carat gold filigree butterfly pendant years ago for her Sweet Sixteenth birthday. He hadn't realized she still had it. He hadn't really noticed that she still wore it. "That old thing? You still have it?"

His questions only worsened her upset. It'd been his experience that most women didn't cry gracefully. Blotchy skin, swollen, reddened noses . . . Jillian, however, wasn't most women. 'Damn it . . .' Grimacing as he rubbed his face, he sat back on his haunches and pulled Jillian into a firm hug. "Calm down, Jilli . . . I'll go look for it, okay? That chain was really thin . . . maybe it broke while you were sleeping."

She sniffled and shook her head, wiping her eyes as she tried to stop crying. "I had it this morning," she insisted. "I touch it every morning because it reminds me of you."

"Okay, okay," he agreed quickly—anything to keep her from crying again. "Let me go look for it."

She nodded as more tears sprung to her eyes again. Gavin let go of her and strode off toward the master bedroom. Pulling all the blankets off the king size bed, he sighed. He hadn't figured it'd be there. Housekeeping had probably been in and out of the suite today, so even if it had been there, it had probably been removed with the old linens—if the maid hadn't found and pocketed it . . .

He winced. 'No, best not to consider that one,' he thought with an inward sigh. Trouble was, she'd been out today, too. There was a chance, he supposed, that she'd lost it in her changing trailer. If that were the case, then it might still be there. "Jilli?" he called as he walked out of the bedroom. "Did you have it at the shoot?"

Her eyebrows knitted together as she considered his question. "No," she said slowly. "I don't think I did . . . I don't remember Hans reminding me to remove it, and I know I didn't take it off, myself . . ." Blue eyes lifted to meet his, full of hope, of unfaltering belief that Gavin could do just about anything—the same sort of look she'd given him for years whenever she needed him . . . "You'll find it, right, Gavvie? You'll try?"

Gavin winced and heaved a sigh. He wasn't entirely sure he could find it. Still, the expression on her face—the hope in her gaze—he loved the feeling it gave him deep down. "I'll try," he promised. "Maybe someone found it and turned it in. I'll go down to the front desk and ask. Why don't you get dressed? You said you were hungry, right?"

She sniffled again but nodded. "Okay," she agreed. "Okay."

Stepping out of the room, he took the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator. He doubted that anyone actually turned in the necklace. Still he had to try . . .

"Excuse me," Gavin said to the young man behind the front desk.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked, his English heavily masked in a thick Mexican accent.

Chapter 3
The Million Dollar Girl

“God, Jilli . . . why do you do this to yourself?”

Jillian craned her neck to peer over her shoulder at Gavin. He was scowling at the raw skin on her back where the diamond studded bikini had rubbed against her all day. Wincing as he gently applied the cold body cream, she sighed. “It’s a paycheck,” she told him in a completely pragmatic tone.

“A paycheck,” he repeated darkly. “You could do anything, you know. You don’t have to model.”

“We’ve been over this, Gavvie,” she said, rolling her eyes despite the playful little grin that surfaced on her lips. “I’m not smart like you or Bassie . . . or Evan, for that matter, even if he does try to hide it.”

“Yeah? You don’t have to make it sound as though you’re stupid, either,” he pointed out.

“I’m not stupid,” she agreed. “I just know what I can and cannot do.”

“What about photography? You always liked doing that . . .”

Wrinkling her nose, Jillian shrugged and heaved a sigh as she closed her eyes, lulled by Gavin’s tender ministrations. “I like that,” she agreed. “I’d have to go back to school to do it, though.”

“Not necessarily,” he argued. “I mean, you *could*, but you don’t *have* to.”

Idly touching the gold butterfly pendant around her neck, Jillian smiled. She woke up to find the necklace dangling in front of her face. The chain had broken, and Gavin had left her long enough to buy a new thicker chain while she was doing the diamond bikini shoot. “I can’t believe you found it,” she said, pulling the pendant away from her throat and holding it up so that he’d know what she was talking about.

“I was surprised, myself,” he admitted. “Can’t believe you still have that. It was just a cheap little necklace.”

“It was not!” she argued. “Of course I still have it! I have everything you’ve ever given me, Gavvie. Don’t be silly!”

His hands stilled for a moment before resuming the soothing motion. “You do?”

She nodded, eyes drifting closed once more. “Yes, I do.”

“There. Does your back feel better?” he asked, wiping his hands on a hand towel.

Jillian tugged her robe onto her shoulders and cinched the belt tight. “Yes, lots, thanks,” she assured him. He sat back, frowning at his hands, and she giggled softly, curling her legs to the side on the sofa and snuggling against his shoulder. “It’s not that bad, Gavvie . . . just body cream.”

He made a face and tossed the towel onto the coffee table before picking up his laptop and checking his email. “Girly stuff,” he complained though his tone lacked any real disgust.

Jillian nodded. “Mm . . . you can check mine while you’re at it.”

“Your email, you mean? Which one?”

“The public one,” she told him. “I can’t remember my log-in for that one.”

Gavin shook his head, obviously not surprised. Jillian was good at forgetting things, like passwords. Grimacing as her inbox loaded on the computer screen, Gavin wasn’t surprised to see that she’d managed to amass over five hundred emails since the last time she’d checked them, and that wasn’t counting the ones in the spam folder, either. “How long’s it been since you checked this?” he asked.

“I don’t know . . . a week or two?”

That didn’t surprise him, either, if the smile on his face meant anything. Gavin heaved a sigh and slumped lower. “This’ll take awhile. Do you read all of these?”

“I read as many as I can,” she said. “Not all of them . . .”

“You need a secretary,” he grumbled, clicking on the oldest email on the list.

“Oh? Like Jillian Zelig, Incorporated? No, thanks. I’ll pass. Wake me up when you’re ready to go to bed.”

Gavin uttered a grunt in response as he scanned through the email.

:::

‘Dear Ms. Zelig,

‘I’m your biggest fan . . .’

:::

He moved on to the next one. They all seemed basically the same. While the wording changed, they all proclaimed to be the biggest fans; or worse: her future husbands. He grimaced. He wasn’t surprised by people asking for her autograph whenever she was recognized, and though that was a constant enough occurrence, he’d never cease to be appalled at the sheer numbers of obsessed fans she tended to have.

When did all that happen? When had she stopped being the girl he knew—the one who loved to be outdoors; who found and nursed injured animals back to health? When had she become an icon?

A scanned attachment; an image of Jillian in a little black cocktail dress with her arm around what looked to be a college kid . . . the boy wanted to thank her for taking a moment for the picture. Gavin let out a deep breath and clicked on the next email.

∴

‘My darling,

‘I’ve been working on the little nest I’ve been building for you, my dove. Why haven’t you answered my emails? I don’t like playing games, but I will if you force me to. Answer me, Jillian. We belong together. It’s been prophesized . . .’

∴

He scowled at the email and closed it out, clicking on the next one as he tried to brush aside the irrational irritation brought on by the words. He didn’t realize he was digging his claws into the arm of the sofa . . . “Hey, Jilli?”

“Hmm?”

“This guy—Mickey B . . . Have you ever responded to his emails?”

“Hmm? No . . . I don’t think so . . .”

Gavin stifled a relieved sigh. “Good. You know, maybe you shouldn’t mess with this email account anymore.”

“Why not?”

He forced a smile, smoothing her hair as she leaned back to gaze up at him. “You get a lot of fan mail. It’d take you forever to get caught up.”

“If you say so, Gavvie. I trust you.”

“I know. Go to sleep, Jilli. I’ll wake you up in a little while.”

“Kay,” she agreed with a wide yawn as she snuggled back down again. Gavin watched her for a few minutes, allowing the sight of her face to calm him before turning back to the email account again.

Twenty emails later, he found the next one. Same guy: Mickey B, same line of garbage . . . Gavin closed it and opened the next one.

Jillian sighed in her sleep, cuddling closer to him. Lifting his arm and draping it over her shoulder, he noted absently that he rather liked the warmth of her beside him.

Truthfully, he had to admit that he was entirely too used to having her with him. After summers spent with her practically glued to him, it had been disconcerting, to say the least, to return to Montana. He was an only child, and Jillian was like a little sister to him—or so he'd told himself often enough over the years. She might have said time and again that they were destined to be mates, but Gavin had to wonder just how much of that was habit. Like a comfortable old t-shirt, she'd just grown accustomed to being with him. The truth of it was that they were simply too different to stand a chance. It complimented their friendship well, but Gavin wasn't fool enough to even try to believe that it would ultimately be a mistake if they were more than friends. Jillian was used to red carpets and champagne, high class parties and all the glitz that surrounded her. Gavin was too simple for that, wasn't he? Ranching and the outdoors; finances and Wall Street . . . those were the things he knew.

To be blunt, Gavin just wasn't very good with people. He could handle himself on a business level, sure, but when it came to social situations, he was a miserable failure. Entirely too self-conscious, he wasn't one to attend parties, and he certainly never wanted to be in the limelight. Truth be known, he didn't even want to be a stock broker, at all. No, he'd chosen his profession because he needed the money to restore the ranch he'd inherited from his grandfather.

'And you get to be near Jillian, too.'

Shifting uncomfortably at that reminder, Gavin shot the sleeping girl a quick glance. She looked so sweet, didn't she? Sooty lashes fanning out over her high cheekbones, her dusty rose lips slightly parted . . . a hint of pink tinged her cheeks . . . Gavin smiled despite himself, pulling a thin blanket off the back of the sofa where he'd left them when housekeeping had brought it up earlier and carefully spread it over her. She snuggled down into the warmth.

'Near Jillian . . .'

That was it, wasn't it? That was the real reason he'd moved to New York City. After working for a couple years for a firm in Detroit, he'd accepted another job offer on Wall Street, telling himself that it'd be more money when he knew deep down that the real reason he wanted to go wasn't because of the money. No, it was because he knew that's where Jillian was, and damn him for wanting to be close to her . . .

The long and short of it, he supposed, was that he just didn't know how *not* to be with her. For nearly twenty years, she'd been a constant, more or less, and in that length of time, he'd come to depend on her smile; on her cheerfulness; on her gentle encouragement.

Damn him for that, too.

Heaving a sigh, he turned his attention back to the computer. Scowl darkening as he noticed one glaring thing: the same email address kept popping up, time and again: Mickey B, sometimes as often as three or four emails in a day.

Clicking on the next one, Gavin rested his elbow on the arm of the sofa, propping his chin on his fist.

⋮

‘Where have you been, Jillian? I drove past your condo today, but all the lights were off . . .?’

⋮

Gavin’s scowl darkened. *‘Drove by her condo? He knows where she lives . . .?’*

Telling himself that knowing where she lived really wasn’t that big a deal since lots of people knew where celebrities had homes in the city, and because she rarely spent any time there, Gavin still couldn’t quite brush aside the unsettling feeling that something wasn’t right.

⋮

‘Who is he? Are you cheating on me? I’d really hate to think you are because you know that would really make me angry, so who is he, and why have you been staying over at his apartment? Don’t you ignore me, Jillian. It isn’t very nice, you know . . .?’

⋮

Gavin shook his head. The ‘he’ that Mickey was referring to had to be him, didn’t it? She stayed over at his apartment more often than she went home. *‘Damn it . . . who is this guy?’*

Mickey’s next few emails were basically the same: angry venting because she hadn’t bothered to respond to him, dire warnings of what would come to pass if she continued to ignore him but no real, concrete threats. As much as Gavin didn’t like the tone of the emails, there wasn’t much he could do unless Mickey made a real threat against Jillian . . .

An email sent three days ago, though, froze the blood in his veins. A picture attachment showed the interior of Jillian’s condo, and while the images were obviously taken from the outside looking through the windows, they were upper story windows. Jillian wasn’t in any of them, but he could tell from the tarps covering most of her furniture that they were recent pictures. She was having the condo renovated, which was a small part of the reason she wasn’t staying in her home. The next email had a picture, too, and this one . . . Gavin’s aqua eyes narrowed. It was the inside of her bathroom—a room with frosted windows . . . a picture the man couldn’t have gotten from outside . . .

⋮

‘As you can see, my darling, I know where you live. I’ve even been inside. Are you missing a few pairs of your pretty little panties?’

⋮

A vicious growl erupted in Gavin's throat, and he shot Jillian a worried glance. Still sound asleep, she was completely oblivious to the turmoil that was trying to nudge Gavin's powers of rational thought aside. Carefully scooping her up, he carried her into the bedroom and tucked her in before striding back into the living room and grabbing his cell phone off the table by the door.

"Gavin?"

Dropping back onto the sofa, Gavin clicked the next email from Mickey B. *'More pictures,'* he thought with a grimace as he opened the first one. "Hey, Cain. I hope I'm not interrupting anything, but I wanted to talk to you."

"Is Jillian all right?"

The concern evident in the tai-youkai's voice was immediate. Jillian, for all intents and purposes, was his baby, never mind she was only three months younger than her brother, Evan. "That dirty little bastard," Gavin mumbled, glowering at the close up of Jillian's rumbled bed-sheets.

"Come again?" Cain questioned.

Gavin sighed. "Jillian's been getting emails from this guy. He says his name is Mickey B. The older ones were just sort of creepy, but the newer ones . . ." Trailing off with a sigh, Gavin buried his free hand in his reddish brown bangs and scratched his head. "You at your computer, by any chance?"

"I will be."

Gavin caught the cell phone between his ear and shoulder, flagging all the emails from the guy and forwarding them to Cain. "There are a few more recent ones I haven't gotten to look at yet."

He heard the clicks of Cain's claws on the computer keyboard as the tai-youkai opened his email. "What the . . .? The hell . . .?"

The pictures kept getting worse. Snapshots of Jillian on the street with her hair caught up under a baseball cap . . . of Jillian and Evan talking outside Madison Cartham's hair salon . . . of Jillian and Gavin walking back to his apartment after picking up some groceries . . .

Seven emails later, Gavin groaned. "Damn it," he mumbled. "Cain . . ."

"Hmm?"

He grimaced, staring at the newest picture he'd opened. "It's . . . your mansion."

Several seconds ticked by before Cain answered. "Which one?"

“June 10 . . . 3:12 p.m.”

Cain scanned through the mass of emails and clicked on the one Gavin was talking about. “Son of a . . . who is this guy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hold on.”

“Okay.”

He heard the phone click while Cain put him on hold. A minute later, he was back as another voice joined in the conversation. “What’s going on?” Bas Zelig asked.

“I forwarded the emails to Bas,” Cain explained.

“Right,” Gavin agreed. “I don’t know, exactly.”

“Looks like the bastard’s got Jillian’s condo breached,” Bas grumbled with a heavy sigh. “Damn it all, he got your apartment, too, Gavin?”

“Yeah,” Gavin admitted, opening the most recent email. This one was longer, though, and seemed to be nothing but a dossier of Jillian’s life—a frighteningly accurate one, at that. Mentioning her family in Japan . . . her entire school career, including names and addresses of her various teachers . . . the man even knew that Jillian was adopted—a fact that the family didn’t broadcast though Jillian, herself, didn’t think it was a big deal. The picture, however, was enough to unleash a vicious growl; a sound that Gavin rarely made. “Bastard,” he muttered, rubbing his face with a slightly trembling hand.

“What’s that?” Bas asked.

“The . . . the most recent email,” Gavin grumbled.

“God,” Cain growled. “So he knows about your place, too.”

Gavin nodded slowly, forgetting for a moment that the other men couldn’t see his agreement. “Apparently so.” Scowling at the image of Jillian and himself sleeping in his bed, he balled his hand into a fist so tight that his claws dug into his palm. The picture was taken from the outside through the window of his twenty-fourth floor apartment. His bedroom had a fire escape, though, and Gavin figured that was how the miscreant had gotten access to it.

“So he’s got Jillian’s condo, your apartment, and my home under surveillance,” Cain mused. “What about Evan’s?”

Gavin shook his head, opening Jillian's email settings so that he could reroute her emails to a newly created account for filtering. "I didn't see anything about him, but it's a safe bet that if he doesn't know about Evan yet, he will soon enough."

"That's what I figured, too," Bas assented. "Dad, I don't think she should come back here."

Cain sighed. "Don't jump the gun. How much longer is Jillian's shoot supposed to last?"

"A few more days if they keep to schedule."

"Okay, well, see what you can find out, Bas—you and Gunnar. I'd like to know who we're dealing with before we panic too much. Gavin, don't let Jillian see those emails. I don't want her to worry."

"Understood. I've already forwarded all her emails to a dummy account I just set up. The clean ones can be sent to her account after I filter them first."

"Good," Cain said with a heavy sigh.

"I'll get a hold of Gunnar and get started on this right away," Bas assured them. "Send me the new account information, Gavin. Bye."

The third line went dead, and Gavin let out a deep breath as he composed an email with the information that Bas requested. "Keep me posted, Gavin. I don't like this . . ."

"I don't, either," he allowed. "Sorry for disturbing you."

"Disturbing me?" Cain echoed darkly. "If it's about my daughter's safety, then it isn't a disturbance."

"Yes, sir," Gavin answered. "Good night."

He clicked off his phone and sighed as he logged off the computer and snapped the lid closed. He had a bad feeling about this Mickey B. character. He just wished he knew who he was and how to stop him . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Blending into the dusky shadows in the parking garage, he skulked, pausing in his movements to tug off the black Gila-monster-youkai-skin glove, he stretch out his hand, smiling grimly as a bolt of electricity shot out of his fingertips. He pulled the glove back on as he watched the arc of energy hit the nearest security camera mounted high on a pillar support. It crackled and buzzed before shorting out entirely. The current passed along the wires overhead, zapping each of the cameras, one by one. The electricity flickered but didn't cut off. It would look like a simple

short circuit, which was exactly what he wanted. With a satisfied chuckle, he strode through the empty garage, stopping long enough to scan the silent vehicles. ‘*A white Mercury Leviene . . .*’

There were two white Mercury Leviens in the garage. Narrowing his eyes, he squinted to make out the license plates.

He found it. Sparing a moment to scope the garage once more, he skirted around the perimeter of the garage until he reached the car in question. Yanking off the glove once more, he placed his palm on the hood of the car, sending an electrical impulse through the vehicle’s frame. A soft beep announced the deactivation of the car’s security system. Kneeling down before the car, he leaned to the side to peer around the garage once more before lying down on his back to scoot under the car.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Reaching up, he fingered the long metal tube that descended from the engine assembly above. That was the one he was after . . .

Puncturing the line with a razor-sharp claw, he twisted his hand back and forth to widen the hole. ‘*That should do it,*’ he decided. Scooting to the side, he watched, satisfied when the first droplet of the slow drip hit the concrete.

Crawling out from under the vehicle, he pushed himself to his knees, tugging the glove onto his hand once more. Slowly rising to his feet, he perused the garage. ‘*Piece of cake,*’ he gloated with an arrogant smirk. ‘*What a waste of my skills . . .*’

Tossing his head with a disingenuous snort, he stepped back into the shadows and disappeared in the darkness.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

Jillian sighed and cuddled closer to the warmth of Gavin’s body as the layers of sleep thinned and ebbed away. She heard the ominous rumble of thunder outside the window. Dulled by the heavy sheet glass windows, she wondered if humans could hear it. She could, of course. Youkai hearing was so much keener than that of mortals, after all. A dizzying thrill rushed up her spine; a delicious tremor that bespoke a wanton urge. She doubted the photo shoot could proceed as planned, given the weather. ‘*Maybe I can talk Gavvie into going for a nice, long drive . . . or a walk in the rain . . .*’

She loved the rain. In fact, she loved water in any form. Rain, snow . . . all of it. The rain was comforting to her. Gavin had teased her over the years since she was a water-youkai. Still, she couldn’t quite explain the feeling that she got every time she felt the moisture on her skin, in her hair . . . she never felt as alive as she did at those times. Gavin knew and understood this about her. Then again, Gavin had always understood things about her. Of course, the chances of getting the much-too-serious dog-youkai to swim with her were slim to none. He used to when they were younger. She wasn’t sure why he refused now.

'Maybe it has something to do with the idea that you like to swim naked,' her youkai chided gently.

Jillian smiled and nuzzled closer to Gavin's side. *'Maybe. It's nothing he hasn't seen before, though.'*

'You're an accident waiting to happen, Jillian Zelig, and Gavin knows it, too. Good thing he's around to save you from yourself. What'll you do if he ever leaves you?'

'He won't leave me,' she argued. 'Gavvie's my mate. He just has to admit it to himself; that's all.'

'And you've been trying to get him to admit that for nearly twenty years, and he hasn't budged. Do you really think you can do it now?'

Choosing to ignore that, she sighed happily and draped her leg over his. He tightened his arms around her but didn't stir. Her smile widened as she savored the feel—the absolute comfort of Gavin's presence. She loved early mornings. Able to lie around and enjoy the security he offered, she couldn't help the sigh of complete happiness that escaped her.

She lay still for a few minutes more before wiggling enough to lean up on her elbow. Gazing down at his face, she bit her lip. He'd changed so much over the years, hadn't he? She could still recall the scrawny little boy he had been the first time she'd seen him. Though he was nearly five years their senior, he had been just a few inches taller than her brother, Evan. Over time, he had grown, sure, but he hadn't grown much. By the time Jillian was nine, she was well taller than Gavin was at fourteen. While she loved to kiss the top of his head, he'd always scowled at her with a blush staining his pale cheeks before shoving her away and stomping off to sulk. She'd thought it was the cutest thing, and the pictures from those years said it all. In the pages of Jillian's photo albums, she cherished the pictures of Gavin and herself the most. One of her favorites—Gavin sitting on her lap—was framed and sat on the nightstand in her condo back in New York City.

It stayed that way until the last fateful summer. Jillian turned twelve. Gavin was seventeen. It was the last summer he came to Maine for training. While he'd never said as much, Jillian had known that Gavin believed that his father wanted him to become a youkai hunter, too, but . . . but the young man she knew so well wasn't a hunter. Too kind, too gentle, Gavin wasn't the kind of person who could end a life, no matter how deserving. It was one of the many things that she adored about him.

She hadn't been ready for the change. Looking back now, it had been a good thing, she supposed. No matter how much she missed him during that time, Jillian realized that she'd been forced to rely on herself in his forced absence. She'd never had to do that before; not really. Gavin had a way of making everything better. She lived for the precious months of summertime when Gavin would invariably drift back into her life. The two years that he was gone were two of the loneliest times in her memory, and yet . . . She sighed. Yet she had grown a lot in those years, too.

When he came back, she hadn't known what to make of him. Gone was the scrawny youth only to be replaced by a very tall, very broad young man whose eyes she recognized, even if she really

Chapter 4
Centrifugal Force

Gavin stood back with a scowl on his face as he waited impatiently for his cell phone to ring. The latest email from Mickey B. had alluded to the idea that he knew that Jillian was in Cancun and was threatening to follow her there. As it was, Gavin was worried that even the security surrounding the undisclosed location of the shoot would be compromised, and it grated on his nerves that he really had no idea just who this Mickey B. was. He hated having to wait while Bas ran the guy's IP address through the system. As much as Gavin wanted to do something to help, he had to admit that Bas, with his position as one of the heads of the Youkai Special Crimes Unit, ultimately would have a much simpler time obtaining information.

Jillian didn't know a thing. Pasting on a sultry expression as she rolled onto her belly and peered up at the camera lens, she was completely unaware of the worry that wrapped his stomach in tight knots. The waiting was killing him, though, and that was worse than anything . . .

Smothering a low growl as Jay-Jay carefully powdered the cleft between Jillian's breasts, Gavin told himself for the millionth time that it was their jobs; that there wasn't anything personal in what they were doing.

It didn't help much.

It had completely appalled him, the way they'd treated Jillian during the diamond bikini shoot. Unable to sit during breaks because of the risk that something would happen to the bikini, Jillian hadn't complained at all. He'd sensed it though, hadn't he? Her discomfort at being made to stand all day long while everyone else took breaks when necessary was something that she tried to hide, to no avail. Gavin could sense it. He could see the weariness in her gaze that she tried to cover with a bright smile while the crew relaxed in the folding chairs that had been set up near the caterer's tent. In the end, Gavin had scooped Jillian up, letting her rest against him since they wouldn't let her sit in a real chair. The security team hired by the jeweler was a little too thorough, even following Jillian into the bathroom to make sure she didn't try to steal the bikini. When Gavin had figured out what they were doing, he'd gone along, too, pinning the four security guards with the fiercest glower he could muster as he planted himself between Jillian and the guards, standing immobile with his arms crossed over his chest and a foreboding scowl on his features so that he could block the girl from their view as she took care of her needs. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell them all to go to hell. Jillian, however, acted as though the entire affair were no big deal. That was the only thing that had kept him calm . . .

'At least she's back to normal swimwear today,' he decided. With the current troubles fresh in his mind, he wasn't so sure he'd be able to be very patient with anyone, especially overzealous security guards who seemed to have forgotten that the girl wearing the bikini was still a person.

His cell phone rang, and Gavin hurriedly answered it. "Hello?" he growled, careful to keep his voice down since Hans was already irritated with him because he dared to protect Jillian the day before.

“Gavin, where’s Jilli?”

Scowling at the unorthodox way Bas Zelig had greeted him, he glanced at the girl in question. “She’s right here . . . almost done for the day, or so they said.”

“I mean, she’s can’t hear you, can she?”

“Nope. Why?”

Bas sighed. “There’s been another email. Dad thinks . . . well, he’ll call you later, I’m sure, but he wants you to think about taking Jillian somewhere to hide her.”

Gavin shook his head. “Hide her? Why?”

“There’re more pictures,” Bas said. “Pictures of you and Jillian having dinner at some restaurant in Cancun.”

“*What?*”

“Dad’s going to talk to Jilli’s manager; see if he can’t get him to cut the shoot short. Don’t tell anyone about your plans. Just get out of Cancun as fast as you can. Ordinarily, Dad would have you bring her straight back here, but with the security around the mansion compromised, that’s not really a good idea, either. As it is, Dad’s on his way to take Mom to the airport.”

“The airport?”

Bas let out a deep breath. “Aunt Nezumi miscarried, so Mom wanted to go there. Anyway, Dad’s staying here, but he figured it would be safer for Mom to be in Japan until we can get more information on this guy.”

“God, I’m sorry . . .”

“Yeah, we all are. In any case, Dad’s afraid to send Jilli anywhere with any of us. This guy knows who her family is, and if he followed her to Cancun, he’d follow her to Japan, too. She’s probably safest with you, at the moment. That way the bastard might not realize that we’re trying to find him.”

“I see.”

“Do you have somewhere you can take her?”

Raking his hands through his hair, Gavin tried to come up with a solution. “I don’t—I—” Cutting himself off abruptly, a sudden thought solidified in his mind. “Yeah,” he said slowly, “there is a place . . .”

“Okay . . . good . . . Dad’ll call you when he’s back from seeing Mom off. Just don’t let Jillian know, okay? Don’t let her worry.”

“Understood,” he agreed, biting back the impatience that Bas would even suggest that Gavin would do anything of the sort. Snapping the cell phone closed, he tightened his jaw stubbornly. Protecting Jillian had become second nature over the years. He certainly knew better than to tell the girl anything that would make her worry. Letting out a deep breath, Gavin tried to calm his temper. Bas wasn’t trying to offend him, he knew. He was simply reminding Gavin; that was all.

‘He’s followed her to Cancun . . .’

“Penny for your thoughts, Gavvie,” Jillian said as she sauntered toward him.

“Not even worth a penny,” he quipped.

“Sure they are,” she argued. “You looked like you were a million miles away.”

“What do you want for lunch?” he asked, deliberately mentioning the one thing that would be sure to distract the water-youkai.

“Hmm,” she mused, mulling the question over in her mind. “Another cheeseburger would be nice,” she said slowly. “Who were you on the phone with?”

Gavin grimaced. “Your brother,” he answered truthfully. He could tell her part of it, he supposed, even if he couldn’t really tell her everything. Besides, she’d be more upset if he didn’t tell her and she found out that he’d known. “Your aunt miscarried.”

Jillian’s pale blue eyes rounded in alarm. “Aunt Nezumi? But how?”

“I don’t know. Bas didn’t say. He just said that your father was taking your mom to the airport so that she could fly back to Tokyo.”

“Poor Nezumi,” Jillian said, her eyes filling with tears. “The baby . . .”

Gavin grimaced, hating the smell of her upset. “Don’t cry, Jilli. If you do, that damned Justin will probably throw a conniption fit.”

She waved a hand but sniffled, blinking back the tears with commendable effort. “Mama’s going to be with her?”

Gavin nodded, pulling Jillian into a comforting hug. “Yes.”

“Then that’s okay,” she decided, heaving a tremulous sigh.

Gavin sighed, too.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Jillian got into the rented white Mercury Leviene and slumped back against the high headrest. It had been a long day. To her surprise, Hans had come to her trailer a few minutes after calling it a night. He'd looked distressed, but he said that something important had come up and that the remaining three days of the shoot were being cancelled. It was fine with her, though. She was looking forward to going home.

Starting up the engine, Gavin spared a moment to cast her a worried glance. "You all right?" he asked quietly.

"Fine," she told him, savoring the feeling of doing absolutely nothing for another moment before digging into her bag for her cell phone. "Why don't we get out of here? We could be back in the city by midnight—if we can get a plane at this hour."

He smiled wanly and slowly shook his head. "We could," he agreed. "You look tired, though."

"I can sleep on the plane," she said. "Besides, I want to get home . . . Daddy said that Belle was all upset when she called to tell Mama about Aunt Nezumi."

"That makes sense," he mused. "I'll call the airport while you're showering. How's that?"

She nodded, opening her phone and dialing her father's number. "Daddy?" she said when he answered on the third ring.

"Hi, Jilli. Is everything all right?"

She frowned at the weariness in her father's soft tone. "Of course it is," she assured him. "Did you get Mama off to the airport?"

"I did," he agreed. "She should be in Tokyo by morning."

Jillian clucked her tongue, hating the complete feeling of helplessness that she couldn't do something more for her aunt. "They don't know why Nezumi miscarried?"

Cain sighed. "Not really."

"Well, my shoot got cut short, so I'll be home soon . . . maybe I should go to Japan, too . . ."

"I don't think you should do that. Let your mother help them out. The last thing they need is everyone descending on them. Give them some time, okay?"

Jillian snorted in obvious disagreement, but she heaved an acquiescent sigh. "Okay," she allowed. "Do you think flowers would be too much?"

She could hear the smile in Cain's voice when he replied. "I think flowers would be a great idea."

"I'll send them as soon as we get back to the hotel," she decided.

"You do that . . . Gavin's there, right?"

Jillian nodded. "Of course he is!"

"Why don't you let me talk to him for a minute?"

She wrinkled her nose. "You're not going to threaten him, are you, Daddy?"

"Would I do something like that?"

"Hmph," she grunted, catching the phone between her shoulder and ear as she turned in her seat to stick the earpiece in her companion's ear. "Daddy wants to talk to you," she informed him, lowering the phone and plugging in the cord.

"Yes, sir?" Gavin answered without taking his eyes off the road. Buzzing along the country road, he listened to whatever Cain had to say.

Jillian rubbed the back of her neck, closing her eyes.

"I think so," Gavin said. Jillian spared him a glance. Something in his tone . . .

Turning her attention out the window, she gasped as a coyote ran out in the road in front of them. "Gavin!" she hollered, bracing her feet against the floor. He hit the brakes hard—she heard him stomp down on the pedal once—twice—before the car responded, and Jillian pitched forward only to be jerked back by the seat belt as the car screeched to a stop. The coyote ran across the road, pausing on the other side to stare at the car. "You all right, Jilli?" he asked.

"Fine," she replied, giving him a bright, if not somewhat shaky, smile.

He nodded, looking around carefully before taking his foot off the brake pedal. "Wha . . .? No . . . a coyote ran out in front of us . . . no, she's fine."

Stifling a yawn with the back of her hand, Jillian settled against the seat and closed her eyes as her heart slowly returned to a normal cadence. It would take at least thirty minutes to reach the hotel in Cancun. She might as well catch a little nap . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

'Damn it . . .'

Gritting his teeth as the rental car screeched to an abrupt halt on the stretch of road below the high cliff, he hunkered down a little lower. Overshadowed by sharp crags that rose around him, he was fairly certain he was safe from view, even if the occupants of the vehicle chanced to look up.

He'd hoped he could get the nastiness of his task out of the way quickly enough. It didn't look like it was going to be as simple as he had thought.

'If he hadn't showed up, it'd have been a cake walk,' he fumed. 'Damn city boy... I fucking hate dogs...'

Narrowing his eyes as the car inched forward, slowly picking up speed as it moved on, he pushed himself to his feet and sprinted over the rocky ridge. He had a few more days to get it done. He'd figured it'd be easier to get to Jillian Zelig out here in the middle of nowhere. She could be gone longer before she was missed. In the city, it was too easy to lose track of his prey. In the city where the smells and sounds were easily masked, it would be harder to close in on her, let alone to find her where there would be no witnesses . . .

There were just too damn many people around the little princess, weren't there? A brother—a rock star, for the love of God . . . another brother who was destined to become the next tai-youkai . . . and her father, damn him, was the worst of them all. Entirely too much power resided in that one family—not simply the Zelig, himself, but his wife's family back in the Old Country. It was a dangerous venture, at best, but the payoff would be worth the risk . . .

"Smile pretty for now, Jillian Zelig . . ." he mumbled as he ran. "Soon enough, you and your secrets will be mine . . ."

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin rubbed his face tiredly, dropping his cell phone onto the coffee table and plopping down on the sofa. Everything was set up; he just had to convince Jillian that he was telling the truth. Trouble was, he'd never been able to lie to her. She'd see right through it, wouldn't she? Of course she would. *'Who am I trying to fool?'*

'Come on, Gavin... you know how important this is. Don't let her down...'

He nodded. *'Don't let her down. Right...'*

Bas was right. Gavin had seen the snapshots from the restaurant they'd been to last night. Because of that, Cain had told Gavin to take Jillian and get out of Cancun but not to bring her home. Luckily for him, Jillian had fallen asleep in the car, and he'd been able to tell Cain that she'd be safest at his ranch in Montana. As far as he knew, the stalker didn't know anything about the ranch, and if he found out about it, all of Gavin's hired hands were youkai and had worked the place for years. She'd be safe enough there, he didn't doubt. Cain had ultimately agreed.

Since the mansion in Maine had been targeted, Cain hadn't wanted Jillian to go back there, either. The idea of sending her to Japan had been discussed but was discarded at length, too. Neither Cain nor Gavin wanted to apprise Jillian of the situation, and neither thought it wise to tell Gin, either; at least, not yet. No, better to have her go on an impromptu 'vacation' with Gavin than to let her run all over Tokyo, especially when Mickey B. knew that she had relation in the old country.

Now if he could just convince Jillian of his sincerity, he'd be one step ahead of the game.

He'd just gotten off the phone with the ranch's foreman, Hank Preston—a bobcat-youkai whose father used to work the ranch for Gavin's grandfather years ago. Hank was a couple years older than Gavin, and the two had grown up together. A simple man who loved the ranch almost as much as Gavin did, Hank said he'd explain the situation to the other men. The cover story was that Gavin had to go to Montana to take care of some things that had suddenly cropped up. Jillian had been bugging him for years to take her there. He smiled wanly. She had a way of getting exactly what she wanted, didn't she?

'That's because you're a big ol' sucker,' his youkai voice pointed out in a rather gleeful tone.

'Who asked you?' he shot back.

"Gavvie?"

Snapping out of his reverie, he dropped his hands from his face and glanced at Jillian. Clad in a short sleeved white sweater that bulged sharply at odd angles, and a pair of faded blue jeans, she also wore a coquettish expression that worried him. "Why do you look like the cat that ate the canary?" he asked dubiously.

"Do I?" she countered, her clear gaze brightening in the warm light of the living room.

"Yes, you do," he answered. "What's going on in that pretty little head of yours?"

"You think I'm pretty?" she teased.

Gavin rolled his eyes. "You know I do, Jilli."

She giggled. "Want your birthday present, Gavvie?"

He blinked in surprise. In the chaos and concern over Jillian's well being, he'd forgotten his own birthday . . . "Sure."

"I have to tell you, it was nearly impossible to find," she said with a shake of her head. "But I think you'll like it . . . I *hope* you'll like it . . . If you don't like it, you can pretend to so that I don't feel bad, okay?"

Gavin chuckled despite his grim thoughts. It was impossible not to laugh around her, wasn't it? "Okay, I swear I'll like it," he replied.

“Come and get it, Gavvie,” she said, holding her arms out to her sides and gesturing at the misshapen sweater.

“Jilli,” he began in a warning tone, unable to staunch the flow of blood that heated his cheeks.

“Don’t you want it?”

He snorted.

“But I bought it for you . . .”

Staring at her for a long moment, he slowly strode over to her. Pinching the fabric of the sweater, he tugged on it until the festively wrapped package fell onto the floor. Letting go of the sweater, he bent over to retrieve the gift, turning it over in his hands as he scowled at it. She’d decorated the paper, herself. It was a tradition in the Zelig family. That she’d put that much effort into his birthday made him smile. She was thoughtful like that . . . “What is this?” he asked.

She giggled, clapping her hands before grabbing his arm and squeezing. “Open it!”

He shot her a quick look but did as she commanded, slipping his claw under the edge of the paper and carefully slitting it open. “Oh, wow,” he breathed as he pulled the paper away. “Wow . . .”

“You like it?” she asked breathlessly. “He’s the one, right? The one you needed to complete your collection?”

Gavin nodded absently, staring at the first edition Luke Skywalker mint in package action figure. He’d been looking for the figure for years and hadn’t found anyone willing to sell. Star Wars action figures were hard to come by these days, and the farm boy Luke Skywalker one . . . well, it was damn near impossible to get. “This had to have cost you a small fortune,” he mumbled, unable to take his eyes off the collectible. “Jilli . . .”

“He is the one you needed, right?” she asked again. “First edition . . . released in 1978 as part of the early bird package along with Chewbacca, Princess Leia, and Artoo-Detoo . . .? The brownish-haired one—you already have the yellow haired one . . .”

He shook his head. Sure, he’d commented a few times that he needed one figure to complete his collection, but he’d never told Jillian which figure, exactly . . . How had she known? “Jilli . . . how did you know . . .?”

She smiled. “Evan helped me, you see. He knew which doll you needed.”

“I can’t believe you—they’re not *dolls!*”

“Sure, they’re dolls . . .”

Gavin wasn't impressed, and he quickly shook his head as he tried to disabuse her of that particular notion. "They're *action figures*."

"Yes," she agreed happily. "Action figures . . . dolls . . . same thing."

He snorted.

"Anyway, you like it, right?"

"I *love* it . . . even though it's *not* a doll."

"Good! I'll get a cake for you as soon as we get back to the city," she promised. "Did you call the airport?"

The abrupt change in topic was like a dousing of cold water, snapping him out of his bemusement in a harsh sort of way. Clearing his throat as he carefully set the action figure on the coffee table, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and sighed. "About that," he began, carefully choosing his words in hopes that she wouldn't see straight through the lie he was about to tell her. "How'd you like to go on a vacation of sorts?"

"A vacation?" she echoed, gathering her things and pausing long enough to glance at him before resuming her task. "You never go on vacations," she reminded him.

He nodded. "That's true . . . it's not really a vacation for me, though. Some stuff's come up at the ranch, and I need to go up there for awhile."

She arched her eyebrows and shook her head as she stopped long enough to peer at him. "So I'd be on vacation, and you'd be working the entire time?" she asked lightly.

"Not *all* the time," he grumbled, scratching the back of his neck in a decidedly nervous fashion. "Thought you said before you wanted to go up there sometime."

"I did," she allowed, "but I can't just run off . . . I have bookings and stuff . . ."

"So call Tate and tell him that you need a break. Not like you need the money," he reminded her with a marked lifting of one eyebrow.

Jillian considered that for a moment then made a face. "He'll be awfully angry," she predicted.

Gavin scowled, trying to decide exactly what tactic would work better to convince her to accompany him to Montana without having to admit the truth of it. "It'd be good for you, Jilli. When's the last time *you* had a vacation—a *real* vacation?"

She sighed. True enough, she didn't take vacations. Of course, her job wasn't quite as stressful as his, and she certainly had free time to spare. Still, he could see that she was seriously

considering his words, and that bolstered his courage. “Come on, Jilli . . . keep me company?” he prodded.

“It has been awhile, hasn’t it?” she murmured. Her tone wasn’t completely convinced, but she sounded rather hopeful.

“Fresh air . . . beautiful scenery . . . you could get some really great pictures up there . . . though you might get a little bored.”

“Why’s that?”

He shrugged, sensing that the battle was over—and that she didn’t doubt his story in the least. “Well . . . there’re no red carpets in Montana . . . at least, not the kind you’re used to.”

She narrowed her eyes at him for that and wrinkled her nose. “You make me sound like a snob, Gavin Ryan Jamison,” she pointed out, “and I’m not.”

‘Watch it, Gavvie . . . she just used your full name . . . that can’t be good . . .’

“You’re not a snob,” he placated. “I’ve never thought you were.”

“Anyway, I think your ranch sounds wonderful,” she went on airily. “Oh, I’ll have to get some cowgirl clothes, huh?”

He rolled his eyes but grinned. “If you think so, Jilli,” he agreed.

“I didn’t bring my camera, though. Do we have time to go back to New York? I should talk to Tate, too, don’t you think?”

“It’s pretty urgent,” Gavin remarked. “I really need to get to the ranch.”

“You could go, and I’ll fly in after I talk to Tate and pack.”

“That’s okay. I’ll buy you whatever you need once we get there. That’d be okay, right?”

“I have my own money,” she pointed out. “You said so.”

He chuckled. He handled her finances, too, since Jillian and bookkeeping just didn’t mix. He’d encouraged her to buy a few homes since real estate was always a worthwhile investment, and he was constantly monitoring her stocks to make sure that she was financially sound. “Come on,” he cajoled again.

She sighed then giggled, dropping the things in her arms on the sofa and hurrying over to hug him. “All right, Gavvie . . . I can’t wait!”

Breathing an inward sigh of relief, Gavin returned her hug. Whether he’d really acted that well or because she desperately wanted to go on a prolonged trip with him, he couldn’t say, but

Chapter 5
Montana Skies

“So this is your ranch,” Jillian exclaimed softly as she climbed out of the car and gazed around the area. It was clear from the look on her face that she appreciated the wide open space; the clean air. As cities stretched their malignant fingers ever-outward over the expanse of land, there were precious few places left in the world where the numbers of trees were greater than the population, and Montana was one of them.

“This is it,” he agreed, smiling rather proudly as he watched her unabashed response.

“It’s spectacular,” she murmured, her hand fluttering at the base of her throat. “So fresh . . . so simple . . .”

He chuckled, unaccountably pleased that she so heartily approved. “I like to think so.”

Throwing her hands out to her sides, she twirled around in circles, bringing to mind the little girl he’d met so long ago. The carefree days of his childhood flashed through his head. Back then all it had taken was a look, a pleading glimmer in those fathomless eyes, and he’d follow her anywhere. How often had he caught hell for disappearing while he was supposed to be training with Cain? He grinned. Running through the forests together, climbing hills and watching the rain fall from the trace shelter of the high rock crags . . . watching and smiling as Jillian danced on her tiny feet, her hands thrown out to her sides as though she were embracing the falling moisture . . . as though she were embracing life, itself . . .

He blinked and sighed as the images faded from his mind. Gone were the intangible memories that he held close to his heart. As beautiful as they were, they were also painful. That time was gone—the innocence was gone. The only thing left was the whispering truth shadowed and hidden in the recesses of his consciousness and the fiercest need to protect her, always her—then . . . now . . . forever . . . even if it meant that he had to protect her from himself.

‘*For Jillian,*’ he thought as he watched her antics. ‘*Jilli . . .*’

“And you have horsies?” she demanded, her body stopping abruptly as her arms continued along their path. Letting them drop to her sides, she ran over to him, throwing herself against him as she hugged him tight.

He chuckled. “Of course.”

“Like a real cowboy?”

“Don’t know about real cowboys,” he drawled. “Real enough, I guess.”

“Well, I’ll be a son of a bitch,” a gruff but teasing tone cut in. “So you *didn’t* forget where the J and H was . . .”

Pulling herself up against Gavin's shoulders, Jillian peered over his shoulder. "Hello," she greeted brightly. Gavin pried her loose and set her on her feet before turning around to face his ranch foreman and friend. "The J and H?" she asked.

"Jamison and Hastings," Gavin answered. "When my grandfather married my grandmother, the two smaller ranches were combined. Ever since then it's been the J and H—or so I've been told."

"That's such a sweet story," she gushed. Breaking away from Gavin's side, she hurried over to the intruder. "I'm Jillian Zelig."

The man's eyes lit up as a smile twitched the corners of his lips. "Hank Preston, ma'am."

"Jilli's fine," she told him.

"So *you're* Jilli," he remarked as he cast Gavin a suspect glance. "The model . . .?"

Jillian giggled softly. "You know who I am?"

"Doesn't everybody?" he countered with a lopsided grin that made Gavin narrow his eyes menacingly—an expression that would have been so much more effective if the bobcat-youkai had deigned to notice it. Gavin snorted inwardly, making a mental note not to leave Hank alone anywhere near Jillian for the duration of their stay. Hank loved women—adored them, really—and he invariably left them all crying in the end . . .

"Back off, Hank," Gavin growled, pulling Jillian closer to his side and unconsciously stepping up, insinuating himself between the two of them before Hank got any strange notions.

Hank simply grinned, ass that he was. Tipping his Stetson, he nodded to Jillian before sauntering back toward the main stable.

"He seems nice," Jillian commented.

Gavin snorted as he aimed the keychain of the rental car at the trunk and pressed the button to release the hatch. "Seems that way, maybe," he grumbled. "Stay away from him."

"I don't know . . . He looks harmless enough," she commented as she dug two gargantuan shopping bags out of the trunk.

Gavin pulled out their suitcases and closed the hatch with his elbow. "Hank is many things, but I'd hardly call him harmless," he remarked acerbically.

She laughed at him as though he'd just made a really good joke. He didn't respond as he strode past her onto the wide, wrap-around porch that ran the length of the three story house. He'd asked Hank to unlock the doors, and it opened with a soft click when he leaned against the handle.

The house was how he remembered it though perhaps a little emptier than he'd noticed before. The darkened interior of the log house was welcome, inviting. Stone and timber—that's what Roger Jamison had used when he'd built the place. A simple man with a pragmatic attitude, Grandpa Rog had not taken beauty into account when erecting the house. It added to atmosphere, in Gavin's mind. There was always a lived-in sort of feel to the place—nothing fancy, of course. Everything in the building was created with function and comfort in mind. Grandpa Rog had even built most of the furniture, himself, too. The clunky wood pieces were thick, solid, and the carefully constructed cushions that Grandma Rose had sewed by hand still lent a certain level of welcome despite the tell-tale signs of age. In a time when things seemed so transient, the permanence of the house appealed to Gavin in a way that he couldn't quite credit. He loved it all, didn't he?

Jillian set her bags down next to the thick birch washstand that served as an occasional table beside the door. Eyes bright as she wandered over to draw back the thick tan curtains that shrouded the far wall, she gasped quietly as the wall of windows were revealed. It was Grandpa Rog's only concession to vanity. He'd loved the outdoors, and the floor to ceiling windows that encompassed the wall attested to that. Overlooking the broad expanse of the prairie land and the forest just beyond, Gavin smiled, gazing at the steep rise of the Rocky Mountains in the distance.

In his mind, he could still hear his grandfather's voice—softened with the passage of time but recognizable despite the years since Roger's voice had been silenced forever. *"It hasn't changed, Gavin, not since I was a boy . . . and my dad told me that it hadn't changed since he'd known it, either . . . Those mountains are forever—they'll be here after I'm gone, and they'll be there after you're gone, too . . ."* Those words had been spoken when Gavin was four years old. Grandpa Rog was killed in a cattle stampede later that year, but his words would always live on in Gavin's heart and mind.

Wandering over to the portrait that hung over the huge stone fireplace, Gavin brushed his fingertips over his lips and touched the old paint lovingly. Grandpa Rog and Grandma Rose were smiling ever so slightly in the image. It was a gift from Gavin's parents to his grandparents. Moe Jamison had commissioned Cain to paint the portrait from a series of photographs that Moe had procured.

"Which room is ours, Gavvie?" Jillian called down the stairs.

"One at the very end on the right," he hollered back. Turning away from the portrait, he dug his laptop out of the carrying case, setting it up on the desk near the wall of windows. It didn't take long to hook things up. Frowning at the old printer-slash-fax machine that was covered in plastic to keep dust out, Gavin tapped his chin thoughtfully. He should replace that one, but it worked all right after a fashion. He didn't really want to buy a new one, he supposed, since he wasn't at the ranch very often. That one would do, even if it did make horrible noises that brought a dying cow to mind . . .

Figuring that Jillian was probably changing out of the airy little sundress she'd worn to travel in, Gavin booted up his laptop to check the new email account. Sitting back in the creaking chair, he glanced out the windows and smiled. There was nothing quite as calming as the Montana

skies. The peace that invariably settled over him was a welcome emotion. As much as he wanted to be near Jillian, he had to admit that being home on the ranch just felt right.

After his grandparents died, he'd helped his father with the ranch though they hadn't ever moved into the house. Opting to remain in the house on the other side of the old property line—Grandma Rose's house—Moe and Natalie Jamison had taken care of the ranch that had officially been left to Gavin in his grandparents' will. Moe was one of Cain's top youkai hunters, and while he loved the ranch, he'd never really been a rancher at heart. Gavin wanted to restore the old place, but that'd take money. He'd managed to save up a good bit thus far. If he worked for another twenty years or so, he'd have more than enough to renovate the place and get it up and running in the way it should be done.

His cell phone beeped, and Gavin grimaced. He'd forgotten that he'd turned the ringer off, and the beep indicating that he'd received a voicemail interrupted his quiet musings. Checking the caller ID, he sighed when he realized that it was his boss calling. Opening the device and hitting the button to retrieve his messages, Gavin scratched the back of his neck. The first message was from his boss' secretary to tell him that his request to use the rest of his vacation time was officially okayed though it had already been unofficially verified before he'd left Cancun. The second message was from his mother. She was overjoyed that Gavin was coming home for awhile, and then she spent a few minutes muttering dire promises of horrible retribution if he neglected to visit her while he was in Montana. With a half-smile, Gavin deleted the messages and dropped the phone on the desk before opening the email window on his laptop. Three new emails since the account had last been checked. Two looked all right. One was from Mickey B.

:

'I'm getting rather impatient with your games, Jillian. The hotel clerk was playing coy with me, telling me she couldn't tell me which room you are staying in. I came all the way down here to see you. The least you could do is tell them to let me into your room.'

:

Gavin frowned. The image attached to the email was a picture of the rental car—the white Mercury Levene—parked in the garage under the hotel. “Damn it,” he muttered, closing the email program before snapping his laptop closed. At least Mickey didn't appear to have figured out that Jillian had left Cancun as yet. Now if they could only catch the guy before he figured out where Gavin had taken Jillian . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Stepping out onto the balcony that overlooked the back yard and the paddocks that extended beyond, Jillian braced herself on the railing and breathed deeply, eyes drifting closed as the fresh air tingled in her nose. *'This place is amazing,'* she mused as the breeze rippled her hair, as the warmth of the sun permeated her skin, sinking into her pores. After so many years of begging

and cajoling, she couldn't quite believe that he'd finally given in; that he'd finally brought her here.

'This is a good sign,' she decided with a bright little grin. 'Gavvie's finally coming around . . .'

The voice of her youkai blood sighed. *'Don't get your hopes up, Jilli . . . Gavvie's told you that you're not his mate for years now, hasn't he? What makes you think that he's changed his mind at this late date?'*

'Stop being so pessimistic, will you? He's coming around. It's just taking him awhile.'

'Yeah, well, there's something you really haven't considered at all, isn't there?'

Jillian wrinkled her nose, unsure if she wanted to hear what her youkai was saying or not. Probably not. Too bad the irritating voice would say whatever it was it wanted to say, despite her strongest resolve not to listen. *'You know that old saying? 'If you can't say something nice . . .'? Well, it applies.'*

'Cute, but no cigar. You know—at least, you should know—that if Gavin really was your mate then you'd be in a heap big shit right now.'

She shook her head. *'That's not entirely true,' she argued though she couldn't say exactly who she was trying to convince. 'We're together all the time. We're always together.'*

'Be that as it may, Gavin's youkai hasn't fully accepted you, has it? If it had, I'd know it, and if I knew it, then I'd tell you, too. No, Jillian, you've just convinced yourself that Gavin's the one when he might not be. He's just familiar, and you're too stubborn to try to see anyone else but him.'

'That . . . that isn't true,' she insisted. 'That can't be true . . .'

'Sure, it can. Listen . . . Gavin's your friend—your best friend. He knows you better than anyone else alive, but that doesn't mean he has to be your mate. You can still be friends, even if you aren't meant to be together.'

She winced at the deadly accuracy of her youkai's advice. She'd thought the same thing before, hadn't she? She'd thought it the last time they'd been separated . . . It wasn't true, though, was it? She'd figured that out long ago. She couldn't stand to be with him if she didn't hold onto that hope . . . it hurt too much, and to be honest, the idea of seeing her Gavvie with anyone else . . . Jillian gripped the railing that enclosed the balcony so tightly that her knuckles turned white. It was something she just couldn't bear; not again . . .

"He's not here . . . he's on a date."

"He . . . what?"

"A date, Jillian—a date. You've been on a date before, haven't you?"

Shaking her head to dispel the sound of the voice that echoed in her memory, she tried to ignore the ache in her soul that chiseled away at her heart. Funny how that one memory could still hurt her after all the years that had passed since then . . .

“Nice, isn’t it?”

Gasping softly as Gavin’s voice cut through the melancholy of her thoughts, Jillian pasted on a bright smile as she turned around to face him. Chestnut colored hair caught back in the low ponytail that hung over his shoulder, Gavin’s aqua eyes scanned the horizon over Jillian’s head. A tiny smile tugged the corners of his lips, and he chuckled softly as he stuffed his hands into his pockets and slowly shook his head. “It’s lovely,” she agreed.

He stopped beside her, his arm brushing hers. “I like to think so.”

“I can’t believe you finally brought me here,” she teased lightly, leaning against his arm with a happy little smile. “Seems a little intimate, don’t you think?”

Gavin rolled his eyes but couldn’t help the light blush that surfaced on his skin. “I told you before that I’d bring you here,” he grumbled, shuffling his feet in his bashful sort of way.

She giggled, grasping his forearm to brace herself as she leaned up to smack a loud kiss on his cheek. “Yeah, and then you came up with excuse after excuse not to do it.”

He shrugged, wiping the trace amount of lipstick off his cheek with a sigh. “I wasn’t making excuses, Jill. Some of us have to put in grueling hours . . . not everyone gets to lie around in bathing suits and make obscene amounts of money for doing it.”

She recognized his teasing for what it was and smiled. “I’m just lucky that way,” she quipped. “Can we go ride horsies now?”

Shaking his head at Jillian’s choice of words, Gavin chuckled despite himself. “I don’t know . . . maybe you should take a nap or something,” he told her. “You were falling asleep in the car.”

“I’m fine,” she argued, waving her hand in an impatient dismissal of his concern. “Re-energized, actually . . . Must be the fresh air . . .”

Intercepting the sidelong glance she was giving him, Gavin laughed softly and slung his arm around Jillian’s shoulders. “Maybe tomorrow,” he told her with a smile. “There are a few things I have to do yet today.”

She made a face, wrinkling her nose as she heaved a melodramatic sigh. “That’s right . . . this isn’t a vacation for you, is it?”

“Sorry, Jill . . .” he drawled with an unrepentant and completely un-Gavin-like grin.

“You’re not,” she huffed in mock-indignation. “Good thing I’m here to save you from yourself.”

“That’s a *good* thing?”

She nodded matter-of-factly. “Yes,” she assured him, “it is.”

“If you say so,” he agreed slowly, scratching his chin thoughtfully. “Then again . . .”

“Watch it, Gavvie,” she warned.

He chuckled as the trill of his cell phone interrupted. Digging the gadget out of his pocket, he scowled at the caller ID screen and sighed. “I have to take this call,” he apologized. “Why don’t you just take a nap or something? I’ll take you for a walk later; if you want . . . show you around the grounds?”

“Okay,” she agreed lightly, turning around and crossing her arms over her chest as she leaned back against the railing, watching Gavin’s hasty retreat. Flipping the phone open, he lifted it to his ear. “Gavin Jamison,” he answered as he strode back inside and through the bedroom.

Jillian sighed again, stifling a yawn with the back of her hand. ‘*All right,*’ she allowed, pushing herself away from the railing and wandering inside but leaving the sliding glass door wide open. ‘*Maybe a little nap . . .*’

Crawling onto the huge bed, she curled up in the center of the downy comforter with a happy little smile.

She was asleep within minutes.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“Have you seen the news?”

“Afternoon, yourself,” Gavin remarked acerbically, peering over his shoulder as he strode down the hallway to make sure that Jillian wasn’t trailing him. “Can’t say that I have.”

Cain heaved a sigh as static from wind hitting the receiver crackled in Gavin’s ear. “Yeah, well, don’t let Jillian watch it, all right?”

“What’s going on?” Gavin asked, lowering his voice as he ran down the steps and through the house, heading for the garage—the one place that he figured was safe from being overheard should Jillian get it in her head to follow him.

“Jillian’s rental car . . . do you remember the plate number?”

“Plate number? No . . . why?” he demanded as he strode back into the house and turned on the television in the kitchen, flipping through the channels impatiently until he found CNN. “Hold on . . . they’re talking about it now.”

“Where’s Jillian?”

Gavin grunted, turning up the volume enough that he could hear the reporter. “Lying down, I think.”

“Preliminary reports speculate that the late model Mercury Levene rented by Jillian Zelig, the international supermodel, exploded when the car failed to stop at an Arlico gas station on the outskirts of Cancun. It has been confirmed that Ms. Zelig wasn’t in the car when the explosion happened. Apparently, she’d returned the vehicle earlier in the day. Eyewitnesses say that the car, driven by one of the rental agency’s employees, barreled straight into the gas pump and blew up on impact. The driver has been confirmed dead, and foul play hasn’t been ruled out. Ms. Zelig has not been reached for comment. This is Juana Diaz, CNN news.”

“Shit,” Gavin muttered, raising the remote to change the channel then turning off the television.

“The reports we’ve gotten so far indicate that the brake line was tampered with,” Cain went on, his voice weary, a harsh edge of anger sharpening his tone. “Bas and Gunnar are checking into it now.”

“You think Mickey B. had something to do with it,” Gavin remarked slowly. It wasn’t a question.

“We don’t know.”

“His latest email . . . there’s a picture of the rental car in the garage under the hotel attached to it.”

Cain sighed again. “Yeah, I know. I just saw it. As much as I hate to get the human authorities involved, we might have to, for Jillian’s safety.”

Gavin clenched his teeth so hard that his jaw ticked, eyes darkening as he glowered out the window over the white enamel sink. “I’ll protect her,” he growled.

“I’m sure you will. Just don’t let her see those reports. She’ll feel responsible, and you know Jillian . . .”

Gavin winced, understanding what Cain was telling him. Jillian tended to take everything personally, and if she thought she had anything at all to do with the employee’s death, she’d be beside herself, worrying about the man’s family and ultimately blaming herself for it. “I won’t, but if they try to contact her . . .”

“They’ll get her agent or her publicist, and both of them have been warned not to tell Jillian about it; at least, not yet. While we can’t protect her from it forever, we can get all the information. Ben’s on his way down to Cancun to talk to the man’s family; to see if there’s anything we can do to help.”

With a sigh, Gavin nodded. “All right,” he agreed. “Any progress on tracking Mickey?”

“Nope. His ISP was routed through a generic host, and the privacy laws are impeding our ability to trace him through that.”

“Without a court injunction,” Gavin grumbled.

“Even then, there’s a good chance that he’s managed to cover his tracks well enough conceal him for awhile. We can get to him eventually. It might take longer than we first anticipated, though.”

“She’s safe here,” Gavin intoned. “I told my foreman about the situation, and he’s talked to the others. They’re all looking out for anything suspicious.”

“Good.” Gavin heard the faint ‘snick’ of a disposable lighter being struck. Cain exhaled slowly as the creak of the phone indicated that the tai-youkai was adjusting the device. “It goes without saying, Gavin . . . I’m putting a hell of a lot of trust in you. Jillian is my daughter—my youngest child.”

“Yes, sir,” Gavin replied.

“Her safety—my *family’s* safety . . . it’s the most important thing to me. You understand?”

“Yes, sir,” he said solemnly.

“I’ll be in touch.”

“All right.”

Gavin snapped the phone closed against his thigh and dropped the device into his pocket with a heavy sigh. Protecting Jillian . . . he’d done it for so long that he wasn’t sure what he’d do if she ever discovered that she really didn’t need him.

The trouble was maintaining the balance between keeping her in the dark and making her feel as though he was treating her like a child. She hated that, didn’t she? Her family had done that for years, sheltering her from things that they didn’t think she could handle, and while Gavin wasn’t particularly thrilled with the idea of telling her about Mickey B. or the rental car, he had to wonder just what right they had to keep such things from her in the long run.

Cain was right, though, and Gavin knew it. Jillian, with her sweet smile and happy disposition, still maintained a semblance of innocence; still believed that no one would truly try to hurt her. She was still the girl he’d grown up with; the girl who had teased him and laughed with him . . . the girl who had so proudly showed him the huge gap in her teeth the first time she’d lost one only to realize the next morning that she had a nice, shiny big tooth in the empty space. He’d laughed at her back then. She’d looked so disillusioned. She hadn’t been able to understand why other kids in her class had gaps in their teeth for months. Even understanding that she was youkai and they were humans did little to console the girl. That same sort of naiveté was still

very present in her now, and that was the part of her that they were all desperately trying to protect. *'She'll be fine,'* he told himself. *'She has to be . . . I swear it.'*

'You're taking it more personally than you should, Gavin,' his youkai voice pointed out.

'I'm not,' he argued, wincing as he opened the refrigerator only to remember too late that he had yet to buy any groceries.

'You are. You still blame yourself for that incident with Henson Collings, and don't deny it.'

Slamming the refrigerator, Gavin strode through the house once more only to find Jillian sleeping soundly on the bed. Opting not to wake her, he headed back downstairs, scrawling a note on a tablet near the door to tell her that he was going to buy some food. There was a little store about five minutes away, and while the groceries tended to cost a little more, Gavin was willing to overlook that. When Jillian napped, she tended to sleep for a couple of hours at a time. So long as he was quick about it, he doubted that she'd miss him at all.

Digging his keys out of his pocket, he closed and locked the front door before running down the porch steps, heading toward the stables instead of the rental car. "Hank!" he called, leaning on the corral where the ranch foreman was exercising one of the horses.

Hank glanced up, tipping back the brim of his smudged Stetson. Taking a minute to unsnap the horse's lead, he patted the animal's neck before turning away, looping up the leather lead strap as he ambled toward the fence. "Damn, it's weird to see you here . . . dressed in those, no less," Hank remarked with a lazy grin, waving his gloved hand in Gavin's direction.

Sparing a moment to glance down at his tan slacks and white dress shirt, Gavin waved away Hank's teasing. "I have to go to the store. There's nothing to eat in this place."

Hank grinned. "You said to open the house up. You didn't say that I was supposed to be your maid, too."

"Anyway, keep an eye on things?"

Hank shot him a bored glance. "Don't I always?"

Gavin sighed. "The car Jillian rented in Cancun was tampered with. They think the brake lines were cut."

"Shit."

"Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction. The guy who was driving it was killed, and Jillian doesn't know about it. I'd prefer that she doesn't . . . understand?"

Hank nodded. "No problem. I'll tell the boys."

"Thanks."

Chapter 6
Autographs

The incessant pounding on the door wouldn't let up. "I'm coming," Gavin grumbled, stumbling through his darkened apartment as he tried to open his sleep-grainy eyes. Stifling a yawn with his hand, he stubbed his toe on the table beside the door and grunted, catching himself just before he ended up flat on his face. Rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hands, he sighed. "Hold on," he called, shaking his head to dispel the fuzziness that lingered around the edges of his mind. Smacking his hand against the keypad to release the door lock, he jerked the handle with his other hand, fully prepared to give whoever was standing on the other side a very large, very loud piece of his mind.

The blur of a woman who threw herself against his chest, though, shocked him into silence. Unable to discern more than the tormenting scent of her fresh tears, Gavin stumbled back but caught himself, clumsily wrapping his arms around her as she trembled; as she sobbed.

"Jilli?" he finally asked, his voice soft, gentle. Her hair had been caught up in a sleek French twist he'd seen on the television broadcast from the Grammy Awards was now hanging in wayward strands around her drawn and peaked face. "What happened? I thought you were at that awards thing . . ."

His question only made her cry harder, and she shook her head, burying her face against him as though she couldn't bear to talk about what had happened. "Hold me, Gavin," she whispered, her voice muffled by the faded black Geekfest Sci-Fi Con tee-shirt he'd worn to bed. "Please?"

He did as she asked, wishing he could understand what had frightened her so badly. Kicking the door closed before he scooped her up in his arms, he carried her over to the sofa and situated her on his lap without bothering to turn on the lights. "It's okay, Jilli . . . please don't cry."

It seemed like forever before she wound down to sniffles and hiccups. He wasn't certain how long he sat there, holding her and rubbing her back while uttering nonsense in the hopes that he could reassure her when he hadn't a clue why she was so upset in the first place. Little by little, her body relaxed against him, and she wiped her eyes with her fingertips as she snuggled as close as she could get. "I told him 'no'," she finally murmured, her voice tiny, ashamed. "I told him I wasn't interested . . . I wasn't, Gavvie, I swear!"

". . . What?" he growled, unable to keep the sharpness out of his tone and equally unable to keep himself from sniffing Jillian a little more carefully. She smelled just fine, thank God . . . Just what had happened, anyway?

She'd gone to the Grammy Awards with one of Evan's rocker-friends: a thunder-youkai named Henson Collings, and while Gavin had been anything but pleased about the arrangement, he couldn't bring himself to ask her not to go, either, even when she joked around, telling him that if he had something better in mind, she'd be more than happy to blow off the date and fly back to New York City. Evan had maintained that Jillian would be doing him a favor, hadn't he? Thing was, she'd arranged to wear one of Zsallee Prescott's infamous designs months in advance, and she'd chattered all day over the telephone about having to have her hair and makeup done especially for the event.

As if he could tell her that he didn't want her to go when she'd obviously been looking forward to it for months . . . He couldn't be that big of a jerk, even if he wanted to be.

She winced at Gavin's unintentionally gruff tone as another wash of tears sprang into her eyes. "I told him 'no,'" she stated once more. "I said I didn't want him . . ."

"Where is he?" Gavin demanded, struggling to keep his temper under control for her sake.

She choked out a little sob and shook her head, balling up her fists around handfuls of his tee-shirt. "Evan caught him, and—" Gasping as she reared back, her already pale skin paling even more, she shot Gavin a wild-eyed glance and struggled to stand up. Locking his arms around her, Gavin pulled her back against him. "Evan was arrested," she blurted, pushing against his chest in a show of token resistance. "He's in jail, and it's all because of me."

"Calm down, Jilli. It's okay. Let me make a few calls and see if he's still being held," Gavin said. "Are you all right? Did that bastard hurt you?"

"No," she whispered. "Evan stopped him before he . . ."

"Good," Gavin intoned though his irritation still wasn't receding. "Let's go get you into the tub. Baths always calm you down."

She whimpered in protest but wrapped her arms around his neck as he stood up without relinquishing his hold on her. "Will you stay with me?" she asked, her eyes bright as she blinked back her tears. "Don't leave me, Gavvie? I . . . I don't want to be alone . . ."

He sighed, unable to give voice to his belief that it simply wasn't a good idea for him to sit in the room with her while she bathed. "All right, Jilli; you win. I won't leave you . . . I'll never leave you."

"I never should have gone," she chastised herself. "I should have stayed here with you."

"It's all right, Jilli," he assured her as he strode down the hallway and shouldered the bathroom door open. "You're safe now, right? If Henson Collings ever comes near you again, I swear on all that is holy, I'll kill him, myself."

She shivered when he set her on the counter so that he could start filling the tub with water. The simple champagne colored satin sheath dress was smudged and torn. One thin spaghetti strap dangled off her shoulder, and she rubbed her arms as though she were cold. The heel was snapped off her right sandal, and her makeup was smudged beyond repair. Smiling sadly, he stifled a sigh and held out his hand. Jillian hesitantly took it, and he gently pulled her off the counter. "You get in your bath while I call and check on Evan," he told her.

"You'll be back?" she asked, unable to hide the hint of panic that surged in her soft voice.

"I'll be back," he promised, sparing a moment to kiss her forehead and give her a quick hug before he ducked out of the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Jerking awake with a low groan, Gavin slowly opened his eyes. The clock on the nightstand read a quarter after three in the morning, and he sighed. It'd been awhile since he'd thought about that night . . . In the end, he'd called and gotten a hold of Evan's best friend, Madison, who had filled in the blanks that Jillian couldn't. After the awards show, Collings had wanted to go to one of the many parties, but Jillian didn't. She'd told him that she wanted to get back to the hotel early so that she could catch a flight out first thing in the morning. In the end, Madison had driven her to the airport on the way to the police station to bail out Evan, and she'd stayed long enough to make sure that Jillian had gotten on a plane heading home.

She'd come straight to his apartment upon arrival. She hadn't bothered to go home, and she hadn't bothered to get her luggage, either. No, she didn't want to be alone, and Gavin . . . well, he'd let her stay, of course. The first thing she'd said to him the next morning was that he ought to think about redecorating his bedroom—something that she normally mentioned at least once a week. If listening to her grumble about the framed reprint of the original *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* movie poster that hung over his bed made her feel better, then Gavin didn't mind hearing about it.

He sighed as Jillian snuggled closer against him in her sleep. Lips turned up with the vaguest hint of a smile on her face, she looked like she didn't have a care in the world. He'd do anything to make sure that she remained as happy as she seemed to be. It was what he'd always done, wasn't it?

A lifetime of protecting Jillian . . . Sometimes he thought that it was his calling. He'd thought more than once that she was a little too much like her mother, Gin. Seemingly untouched by the world that could easily jade a man, both Gin and Jillian possessed a rare sort of innocence, and while Jillian was a bit more street-savvy than her mother, she still retained an aura that could make even the strongest man's resolve falter . . .

Gavin yawned and closed his eyes, pulling Jillian a little closer as he willed away the unpleasant memories of the dream. Making sure that the damsel in distress was happy . . . that was the hero's job, wasn't it?

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin stepped out of the house, scanning the area as he tried to locate Jillian. Catching her scent on the breeze, he trailed her to the main barn and followed her inside. Not surprisingly, all the work had come to a screeching halt while the ranch hands stood around a tack table. Jillian sat atop the high surface, scribbling her autograph on magazines that the men gave her.

Stifling an inward sigh, Gavin stuffed his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans and ambled forward.

"Here," Jillian said, handing back one magazine before reaching for another. "What's your name?" she asked, pen poised above the magazine as she peered at the coyote-hanyou before her.

“Max,” he replied, holding his hat in both hands. Gavin shook his head as he stopped behind Hank. He’d seen this sort of thing too often for it to really bother him. At least, he told himself that it didn’t bother him.

“Damn, she’s cute,” Hank commented without taking his eyes off Jillian.

“You, too, Hank?” Gavin countered, scowling at the rolled up magazine in the foreman’s hand.

“Of course,” Hank quipped with a lopsided grin. “You think I’d pass up the chance to get her autograph?”

“I was hoping, yes,” he grumbled.

“Fat chance,” Hank retorted.

“There,” Jillian said, handing back the magazine with a bright smile. “I didn’t even write over my boobs.”

That got Gavin’s attention fast. Head snapping up, he narrowed his eyes on the publication, realizing too late that the magazines she was signing all appeared to be the February issue of *Oliveri*, a men’s magazine that featured topless pictures of celebrities to boost their sales. The general interest magazine had approached Jillian late last year, citing that they wanted her to ‘be their Valentine’s Day girl’, and much to Gavin’s chagrin, Jillian had actually accepted their offer.

She’d gotten a couple of copies early, giving one to Gavin and sending the other one to her parents in Maine, and Gavin had nearly choked when he’d seen the seven page layout that featured the girl he knew bearing almost everything. She’d looked so hopeful, though, hadn’t she? “*What do you think, Gavvie?*” she asked, her eyes sparkling and her tone a little breathless.

He thought he might have choked out that the pictures were ‘nice’. If he’d said more than that, he didn’t remember it. He was rewarded with one of her blinding smiles and an exuberant hug as Gavin had tried not to think about what, exactly, the men who saw the pictures would be doing while they ogled the images . . .

With a pronounced snort, Gavin snatched the magazine from Hank’s hand then stomped toward the gathering to grab those publications, too, ignoring the protests as he glowered at his hired hands. “Don’t you all have work that you’re supposed to be doing?” he asked with a marked arching of an eyebrow.

“Morning, Gavvie . . . something wrong?” Jillian asked brightly as he snatched the pen out of her hand and stuffed it into his pocket for good measure.

“Not any more,” he growled tightly, holding the magazines against his chest lest Jillian get any weird ideas about trying to get them back for the men.

“I was just signing a few autographs,” she pointed out with a soft giggle.

“Autographs are fine,” he allowed, “but these are *not*.”

“Oh, Gavvie!” she laughed, waving her hand dismissively. “You’re so funny sometimes.”

“I wasn’t trying to be funny,” he grumbled. “What are you doing out here?”

Hopping off the tack table, Jillian kissed his cheek. “I wanted to go horsie riding,” she informed him. “Why don’t you come with me?”

Sparing a moment to glance down at her denim shorts that barely covered her bottom and the gauzy white baby-doll blouse she wore, he slowly shook his head. “You’re not dressed for riding, Jilli,” he told her.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

Gavin shook his head, grabbing a butane lighter off the work table and the metal trashcan before turning on his heel and stomping outside. “They’re just not really riding clothes.”

Jillian watched him dump the magazines into the can, heaving a sigh as he lit them. “You shouldn’t have done that,” she remarked. “Those weren’t yours . . .”

“So I’ll reimburse them later,” he growled, stepping back and crossing his arms over his chest as he watched the fire.

“But you said that I should do it,” she reminded him.

He grimaced. “I said that you should do whatever you thought was best for you,” he corrected.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, honestly, Gavvie . . . sometimes you are so archaic. If you didn’t want me to do that shoot, you should have said so.”

“Not my place,” he grumbled. “Anyway, you do remember how upset your father was over the layout, right?”

That earned him another eye-roll. “Daddy paints and sculpts naked women all the time, and even then, I wasn’t naked.”

“Your father might paint and sculpt naked women, but he doesn’t paint *or* sculpt naked *daughters*.”

“That’s silly,” she said. “Mama thought they were very tasteful.”

Gavin’s only reply to that was a marked snort. “Why don’t you change your clothes, and I’ll take you for a tour?” he suggested in an effort to change the subject.

“There’s nothing wrong with what I’m wearing,” she insisted.

“Your legs’ll chafe,” he predicted.

“I wore shorts when I took lessons,” she argued.

“Hour long lessons two days a week hardly qualifies as horseback riding,” he told her. “You’ll be sorry if you wear that.”

She waved off his concern with a little giggle. “Well then, you can kiss them and make them all better, can’t you?”

He groaned and shook his head.

“I want to ride that one,” she said, pointing at the corral.

Gavin glanced over to see what horse she was talking about. “That’s nice. If that’s what you— What?” he growled, his head swinging back to stare incredulously at the beast in question. “No.”

Jillian wasn’t even fazed by the terseness in his response. “He’s so pretty!”

“No,” Gavin stated once more, this time a little louder. “He’s not a rider, Jilli.”

“What’s his name?”

Shaking his head and wondering if anything he was saying was making any sense at all to the stubborn girl, Gavin sighed. “His name is Waterspell, and I just told you, right? He’s not a rider; he’s a breeder. No one rides him. He’s not stable enough for that.”

“Waterspell,” she breathed, her eyes dancing merrily as she spun around to face Gavin once more. Clasp ing her hands in front of her chest, she shot him her most winning smile. “He was named after me!”

Gavin winced since the horse actually had been named after her. It was born the day after Gavin’s return from college. He hadn’t really understood why she’d stopped coming to see him, and even now, she’d never given him a real reason. He’d been missing her, and without thinking much about it, he’d muttered the name ‘Waterspell’ when Hank asked. Since Jillian was a water-based youkai, it had seemed natural, at the time. Damned if he’d tell her that, though . . . “Don’t be ridiculous. Why would I name a horse—a *male* horse—after you?”

She laughed. “Because you love me, Gavin Jamison, and one of these days, you’ll admit it.”

“Not that horse, Jilli,” he told her, his tone leaving no room for argument. “I mean it.”

“You’re not disagreeing with me about admitting that you love me,” she mused. “That’s progress . . .”

“That’s because it’s not going to happen,” he said with a snort despite the dusting of pinkness that filtered into his cheeks. “Let’s go find you a decent rider.”

Slipping her hand into his, she laughed as she let him lead the way back to the stable, thankfully letting the subject drop. He sighed, noticing with a scowl when everyone inside the stable stopped what they were doing and stared at Jillian. It couldn’t be helped, he supposed. He’d had the same reaction to her for years. There was just something about her that commanded attention whether she realized it or not, and it wasn’t simply her face or body. No, it was an inner luminance that drew people, a certain naiveté that disarmed them. She was the flame, and people gravitated to her like moths.

‘But you do love her, Gavin. You know you do.’

Heaving a sigh as Jillian hurried over to ask Hank which horse she should use for the sojourn, Gavin leaned back against the tack table and contented himself to glower at the still-gawking men. They didn’t even notice him, which just figured. *‘Does that really matter when there’s no way she’d really be happy with me in the long run?’*

‘Which could be complete idiocy on your part. Who says she wouldn’t be happy with you?’

Grimacing as he considered the question, he slowly shook his head and grunted a reply when Hank asked him if he needed a horse saddled up, too. *‘She’s used to life in the spotlight,’* he replied. *‘I can’t give her that. I’ve never wanted that . . . The parties and the glitz . . . that’s her world. It’s not mine. It’ll never be mine.’*

‘But she wants to be your mate—she’s said as much.’

‘Sure, she’s said it. She’s also said that she thinks that fairies exist, and she believed in Santa Claus until she was nearly fifteen . . . She’s said that she wanted to move to Brazil and become an archeologist, too. Jillian’s said a lot of things over the years. Doesn’t mean she really believes it, now does it?’

His youkai voice sighed but didn’t bother to argue with him. Gavin brushed the gloomy thoughts aside and forced a smile when Jillian skittered over to him, linking her arm through his. “This is going to be a great vacation,” she predicted with a bright smile.

“You think so?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m going to save you from your boring existence, Gavvie. Just you wait and see.”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Jillian gritted her teeth and wondered just now much ribbing she’d have to endure if she broke down and told Gavin that he’d been right about her shorts.

'Gavin never makes fun of you, Jilli,' her youkai chided gently.

She wrinkled her nose as she stifled a low moan. Her thighs were chafed and sore from the constant rub, and she had to concentrate to keep herself from begging for mercy. *'Maybe not, but I would if I were him. I really should have listened . . .'*

"You okay?" Gavin asked. As though he could read her thoughts, he frowned at her with a very real air of concern.

"Fine, fine," she forced herself to say. "Never better, Gavvie."

"You're sure?" he pressed.

Jillian forced a tight little smile. "Yes."

"Want to stop for awhile?"

Jillian opened her mouth to say 'yes', but snapped it closed again when she thought better of it. She'd love to stop. She was dying to stop. If they stopped, however, the chances of her getting back onto the horse was slim and none. *'No, best to keep moving,'* she told herself sternly. "I'm fine," she assured him, inflicting enough cheer into her voice to keep him from suspecting a thing.

Gavin nodded, his gaze roving over the landscape of the ranch as his horse fell into step beside hers. "I'm sorry about the autographs," he grumbled.

Jillian blinked, casting Gavin a quick glance. He wasn't looking at her, but she could tell that he had been moments before. He must have thought that her quiet mood was a residual effect of his unceremonious interruption of the impromptu signing session. "It's okay," she assured him quietly. "I'm not mad about that."

"Well, I'm not sorry for taking their magazines," he countered hotly. "Next time, use regular paper. I've got some in the house."

She didn't roll her eyes though she was half-tempted to do just that. "Those pictures still bother you?" she asked with a soft giggle.

"That's a stupid question," he grumbled, cheeks pinking.

"Is it?"

He snorted in response.

Jillian stifled a sigh. She'd asked him when *Oliveri* had first made the offer, after all. She'd wanted to know if the idea of her doing topless photos would bother him. He'd told her that she should do whatever she was comfortable with. Truthfully, it didn't really bug her anymore. She was used to being seen in various states of undress. It went with the territory, so to speak.

People were forever running in and out of her changing rooms during photo shoots. What was the difference between having a dozen people see her topless there and posing for the gentlemen's magazine?

'The difference is that you know very well that Gavin's never been comfortable with the idea of you being nearly nude in front of anyone, including himself,' her youkai pointed out.

Jillian made a face. *'Being naked is natural—beautiful. That's what Mama's always told me.'*

'Be that as it may, I don't think your mama had that in mind when you decided to pose for Oliveri magazine . . . and that's beside the point. Don't you remember what Gavin said?'

'What Gavin said . . .' she repeated as she tried not to smile.

Staring at the magazine she'd plopped into his lap, Gavin's eyes bulged as his mouth dropped open in rather dim-witted awe. "Oh, God," he rasped out, color infusing his face as he slowly shook his head. "You did it?"

Jillian scrunched up her shoulders, smiling as she perched on the edge of the sofa and leaned in closer to peer at the magazine. "Sure," she said brightly. "You said that I should do whatever I was comfortable doing."

"Jilli . . ."

"I think they're very nicely done," she said, narrowing her gaze as she critically eyed the photos. "Very tasteful."

"Tasteful?" Gavin choked out as the magazine slipped from his slack fingers. "These aren't—I mean, you're—Do you have any idea why guys look at stuff like this?" he blurted.

She opened her mouth to retort then snapped it closed as a calculating grin surfaced on her face. "No, Gavvie . . . suppose you tell me why guys look at stuff like that," she demanded.

Gavin made a face as his cheeks reddened. "They . . . they . . . you know . . . do . . . stuff . . . to themselves."

Jillian giggled. "Do you do stuff to yourself when you look at topless women's pictures?"

Gavin shifted uncomfortably but was saved from answering when the telephone rang. It didn't take long for Jillian to figure out that the person on the other end of the phone was her father, who had obviously received the package she'd had delivered with the other pre-released copy of Oliveri magazine. After a few minutes of wincing and glaring at the publication that he'd dropped on the coffee table when he'd stomped off to answer the phone, he pinned her with a no-nonsense glower. "When does this hit the newsstands?" he asked, covering the receiver with his hand.

"Next week . . . Wednesday, I think," she replied, flipping her hand over and extending her fingers as she inspected her perfectly manicured claws.

"Wednesday, she thinks," he repeated into the telephone. A few seconds later, he sighed. "Yes, sir."

Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back belongs to George Lucas, et al.

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Final Thought from Jilhan

Doing . . . stuff . . . to himself . . . ?

~~Chapter 7~~
~For Jillian~

“Please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, pl—”

Gavin rolled his eyes and tried not to look at Jillian. “No.”

“But, Gavvie . . .”

“No.”

“Please?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Why not?”

“Drop it, Jilli,” he growled.

“Please?”

“N—”

“All right,” she gave in with a loud, melodramatic sigh. “Fine, fine . . . if you refuse to take me, I’ll just go see if one of your stable hands wants to go.”

Gavin gritted his teeth. He *knew* what she was doing. She did it all the time, didn’t she? Back home, though, she’d simply say she’d call Evan, and that was bad enough. Evan was just a little too good at getting into trouble, and Jillian . . . well, she never had been any good at tempering Evan’s wild streak. Gavin had pulled her fat out of the fryer more than once over the years when her escapades with her sibling ran amok. At least his hired hands would be calmer and less likely to suggest anything that could be potentially damning for Jillian to do . . .

“I’ll just see if Hank’s busy.”

Head snapping up, Gavin dropped the stack of mail onto his desk as he narrowed his eyes and swung around to face Jillian, who was looking entirely too innocent about the entire affair.

Then again, he could be entirely wrong . . .

Pausing long enough to kiss his cheek, Jillian started to head for the door. Gavin caught her hand and pulled her back. “You win, Jilli,” he grumbled. “I’ll take you out for dinner, but I am not—*am not*—dancing with you.”

She giggled and clapped her hands. “Gavvie! You *love* me!”

He rolled his eyes. "Let me go shower and change."

"Okay," she agreed. "I should change, too."

Gavin watched her run off with a long-suffering sigh before heading for the stairs. He really didn't mind the idea of taking Jillian out for the evening, but he was waiting for Bas to call back about the latest emails. It seemed that Mickey B. was quite irritated that Jillian would abscond from Cancun without his prior knowledge, and was even more irritated that he had no idea where she was at present. Good news for them, Gavin supposed, but Mickey was threatening 'dire repercussions' if Jillian didn't respond to him posthaste.

Luckily for them, Jillian had spent the last couple days immersing herself in ranch life, spending yesterday following Gavin around as he mended fences with Hank, and trailing him today while he trekked all over the grounds to make sure that everything was as it should be. She seemed to like the day-long outing. He'd opted to walk since she still seemed a little reluctant after their first horseback ride. All in all, she appeared to be enjoying herself, but he had to wonder how long it would take before the novelty of being stuck out in the middle of nowhere wore off.

It didn't take long to give himself a quick shower, and even less time to pull on a pair of faded jeans and a black tee-shirt. Opting for a pair of sneakers instead of the cowboy boots he'd worn all day, Gavin spared a moment to catch his hair back in a low riding pony tail before heading out of the bedroom once more.

Jillian was waiting in the living room, and he stopped short when he saw her. All decked out in pale pink pseudo-cowgirl gear, he tried not to laugh outright when she carefully smashed the pink Stetson onto her head, casting him a saucy grin, turning around so that he could get the full effect. The wide pink suede skirt billowed around her, the white fringe flipping with her movements. The rhinestone snaps on the pink and white plaid cowgirl shirt she wore winked in the light filtering through the windows, and she had tied a pink bandana around her throat for good measure. Even her little boots were pink, he noted with an amused grin. "What do you think?" she prompted when he didn't remark right away.

Gavin chuckled. "Cute, Jilli, but a little overdone for dinner at the Burning Barn."

"Nonsense, Gavvie," she argued with a flick of her wrist. "There's no such thing as 'overdone'."

Shaking his head, he let the subject drop. Jillian, he knew, could wear just about anything, and it wouldn't really matter in the end. She was one of those rare women who didn't have to do a thing to demand attention. Grabbing his keys off the table, he held out his hand for her. She ran over, smiling up at him before ducking under his arm as he held the door open. "That's what you think," he replied dryly as he closed and locked the door behind them.

Jillian paused at the top of the stairs, her eyes darting over the horizon, a quiet sense of awe illuminating her gaze. Gavin chuckled softly, stuffing his hands in his pockets. '*How often have I done the same thing, myself?*' he wondered. Seeing Jillian do it, too . . . it filled him with a sense of

satisfaction that he could barely credit. “Ready to go?” he asked, loathe to break the sense of serenity that had fallen over the girl.

She shot him a quick smile and shrugged. “Sure.”

He nodded, caught off guard by the stunning smile she bestowed on him. *‘It’s those dimples . . .’* he mused in a distracted sort of way.

She grabbed his arm and tugged him down the steps, heading for the truck that he’d been using the last few days. It wasn’t the nicest of the vehicles owned by the ranch, but it was the best one on gas mileage. Jillian didn’t seem to mind the scratches and dents. Hopping into the passenger seat, she rolled down the window and pulled the seatbelt over her lap as Gavin climbed in behind the steering wheel.

“You know, this is sort of like a date,” Jillian mused as Gavin pulled the truck out of the parking space and crept down the dirt driveway.

“Hmm,” he grunted.

“No, it is, really,” she insisted.

“If that’s the case then we go on ‘dates’ all the time.”

She giggled. “Do we? Then you owe me.”

“Owe you?”

“Yes, owe me,” she went on, hooking her hair out of her face and tucking it behind her ear.

“Owe you what?”

Her giggle escalated into full-blown laughter. “Kisses, Gavvie . . . what else?”

“*K-k-kisses?*” he choked, unable to staunch the flow of hot color that surged just below his skin.

“Yes,” she went on, ignoring his obvious embarrassment as she pulled down the sun visor to look in the mirror, running her index finger along her lower eyelashes. “Lots of them, I’d say . . . at least one per date that we’ve been on when you’ve been too shy to kiss me.”

Making a point of ignoring Jillian’s silly banter, Gavin flicked on the radio and turned the volume up to drown out her words. Jillian laughed as though she figured out just what he was doing but didn’t move to decrease the noise. Satisfied that he’d quieted her, at least for the moment, Gavin heaved a sigh of relief and concentrated on the road, instead. Something told him it was going to be a long evening.

Sometimes he really despised being right . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“That was the best steak I’ve ever had,” Jillian said with a happy sigh as she sat back in the red vinyl booth.

“Yeah, it was,” Gavin agreed. Draining his beer, he set the bottle aside and stifled a belch with his fist.

Jillian scooted around the table to lean against his arm. “You sure I can’t get you to dance with me, Gavvie?” she asked, staring wistfully toward the dance floor where a few locals were shuffling around to the latest twangy ballad blaring out of the old fashioned juke box near the door.

“You know, Jilli, you can talk me into just about anything, but I’m not dancing, so forget it.”

She giggled. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“You did dance with me once before,” she reminded him with a teasing wink.

Gavin snorted and snatched up the fresh beer that the waitress set on the table. “Did I?”

“Yes, Gavvie, you did.”

“When?”

Shaking her head almost sadly, Jillian tried to brush off the upset that nipped at her. That dance had been one of the highlights of her teenage years, and he’d forgotten? She forced a bright smile. “Oh, well, it was awhile ago. Years ago, really . . .”

He shot her a questioning glance as he lifted the bottle to his lips. “Eh?”

“Bassie and Sydnie’s wedding reception . . . you really don’t remember, do you?”

Setting the bottle back on the table once more, he blushed a little and studiously avoided her gaze. “Oh, yeah . . . I remember that.”

“You said you’d step on my feet, but you didn’t.”

Grabbing a thick, fluffy slice of bread out of the basket on the table between them, he shoved damn near half of it into his mouth as he concentrated on telling himself that he really didn’t have to blush every time Jillian reminded him of things that he’d rather not think about. The instance that she was talking about was not one of his better moments. Sure, he hadn’t stepped on her, but it had been a close thing, and the only reason he hadn’t was because he’d flat-out

refused to lift his feet up high enough for that to happen. “Yeah, and I told you that was a one-time thing, didn’t I?”

She couldn’t keep the hint of longing out of her expression despite her best efforts to the contrary. “That’s why I remember it.”

He didn’t respond to that. Digging his wallet out of his back pocket, he pulled out his Visa Gold—his only credit card, so far as Jillian knew—and dropped it on the table. “You about ready to go?” he asked, nodding at the waitress as she took his credit card and hurried away without a word.

Jillian rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on, Gavvie! We just ate! Let’s do something fun; what do you say?”

“Your idea of fun and mine are vastly different,” he pointed out dryly.

“You always have fun with me, Gavin Jamison, even if you don’t like to admit it.”

He chuckled and shrugged. “I suppose I do,” he allowed.

She wrinkled her nose. “Yes, you do. What else is there to do?” Snapping her fingers and grabbing Gavin’s arm, she squealed when a sudden inspiration hit her. “Let’s go to that bar we passed on the way here!”

He blinked. “Bar? Why?”

Waving her hand in a blatant dismissal of his caustic tone, she laughed, leaning across the table as though she were going to tell him a secret. “Karaoke night, silly! I saw it on the marquee sign!”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding,” he stated.

“Do I look like I’m kidding? It’ll be fun!”

“Heh. Yeah. Right. Um, no.”

“Gav-vie!” she protested. “You sing so nicely!”

“I think you have me confused with your brother, Jilli. I can’t carry a tune in a bucket.”

“That’s not true, and you know it,” she argued.

The waitress returned with the receipt and Gavin’s credit card that he promptly stowed in his wallet as he got to his feet. “It is true.”

“You sing just fine in the shower,” she pointed out.

He snorted. “You’re not supposed to be listening to me sing in the shower.”

“I can’t help it,” she shot back as she scooted out of the booth and followed him out of the restaurant. “Naked Gavvie, just add water . . . it’s the combination that I *live* for.”

“*Jillian!*” he hissed, increasing his stride as his cheeks shot up in flames.

“What?” she demanded, her tone pleading her innocence. “I *am* a water-youkai, you know . . .”

He shot her a quelling glance but kept walking. “Sometimes I think you need your mind washed out with soap,” he grumbled.

Jillian giggled softly, linking her arm through his and hanging onto him as they headed for the truck. “Luckily for you, you’re the only man I ever fantasize about.”

“You’ll be the death of me yet,” he predicted as he jerked the passenger door open and stepped back for Jillian to get in.

She climbed into the truck and sat back while Gavin shoved it closed and strode around to the driver’s side. “We’re inevitable, you know,” she went on, careful to keep her tone light.

“Just like death and taxes,” he mumbled.

“Why are you being so stubborn about this?” she pressed as he started the truck and negotiated the full parking lot. “I mean, I’ve known since we were children, so you’ve had to know, too . . .”

“No, Jillian,” he growled, gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles turned white. “I don’t.”

“Nonsense!” she countered. “We’re meant to be, like Romeo and Juliet—”

“They committed suicide.”

“Or Antony and Cleopatra—”

“Also suicide. I don’t have a sword, and you hate snakes, remember?”

She waved her hand to silence him. “Or Abelard and Heloise—”

Gavin paused at a red light, narrowing his eyes on Jillian with a slow shake of his head. “Abelard was castrated, which is pretty much what your father’s said he’d do to me if I ever so much as *looked* at you like that.”

“Sampson and Delilah?”

He snorted indelicately. “She betrayed him for money, and he was put on display for public ridicule . . . *then* he went kamikaze . . . Not a good example, Jilli.”

“Okay, so that *was* a horrible one. Still, you get my meaning, right? We’re *destined* to be together. Who are we to ignore destiny?”

Braking sharply, he cranked the steering wheel to turn into the parking lot at the bar.

Jillian blinked in surprise. “What are we doing?”

“Karaoke,” he informed her. “Thought you wanted to.”

“Are you going to sing, too?”

He snorted, pulling into a parking space and killing the engine. “No.”

She waited for him to help her out of the truck. “Is this your way of trying to distract me?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

He finally smiled, just a little. “Is it working?”

Jillian laughed. “Never, Gavvie. I’ll never give up on you.”

“Jillian, listen . . .”

She grasped his arm, forcing him to stop and look at her. “No, Gavin; *you* listen. Would it be so bad? Spending our lives together?”

A thousand emotions played over his features in a matter of moments; each one too fleeting for her to comprehend. Lowering his chin, he refused to meet her gaze. “Come on,” he grumbled, taking her hand and pulling her toward the bar. The throbbing pulse of the music could be discerned outside. With a defeated sigh, Jillian followed Gavin inside.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin leaned back in his chair and scowled at the bar where Jillian stood, surrounded by at least half a dozen men. She sang one of her brother’s songs—a raunchy, grinding tune aptly called, ‘Thigh Sweat’. He sighed. Leave it to good ol’ Evan to write a song about such a thing, and then to say it was a love song, at that . . . Of course, what else would be expected from a man who named his debut CD *She Swallows?* Evan had been so proud when that CD had been released. He’d sent Gavin a copy of it, autographed, no less, and the picture on the cover had made Gavin grimace: a naked woman with her back to the camera in front of an apparently naked Evan. He had his hand on the back of her head and a shit-eating grin on his face, and it looked like she really was giving him a blow job. He’d changed his name to Zel Roka, which was a simple

switch of his middle and last names, and it was a running joke that he never appeared anywhere with the same hair or eye color. Having just released his second album, he was somewhere in Europe getting ready to kick off an international tour—his first as the headliner—which meant that he'd be gone for eighteen months or more.

One of the men near Jillian reached out to tweak her hat. He could hear her giggling over the din of the loud music, and he wasn't surprised to see many of the women in the bar glaring at the girl. Trying his best not to glower at the men, Gavin suppressed another sigh and slowly shook his head. It was the same everywhere they went, wasn't it? Jillian simply attracted men, and Gavin had to wonder if it was because they knew who she was or because she was just a really pretty girl. Either way, the end result was always the same. Jillian would spend the better portion of the evening talking to those men and forgetting that Gavin was sitting alone at a table in the back of the bar.

'Which you don't have to do,' his youkai voice pointed out reasonably.

'I don't?'

'No, you don't. You could go talk to someone, yourself. There are plenty of women in this place, in case you haven't noticed.'

'Oh, yeah . . . so there are.'

'You're really going to do it, aren't you? You're going to sit around here all night and pine over the girl you don't want—or so you've claimed.'

'It's not like that,' he argued, scowl darkening as Jillian's laughter carried across the room to him. *'It's not about what I want or don't want. It's about her . . . she wouldn't be happy with me; not for long, anyway.'*

'So you say; so you say . . . I think you're overanalyzing things. You always overanalyze everything.'

'It doesn't matter what Jillian says. Her insistence that we're mates . . . It's just a habit . . . It doesn't mean a thing.'

'Not a thing, huh . . .?'

He didn't answer. Downing the rest of his now warm beer, Gavin glowered at the gaggle of men surrounding Jillian and motioned at the waitress to bring another drink. With a grimace, he slowly shook his head. *'Always the same thing . . .'* It was always one thing or another, wasn't it? There was always something keeping Gavin from telling Jillian how he felt. In the beginning they'd been pups. There wasn't a reason to tell her anything. No, back then it had been simple. Jillian was just a friend—a younger child who looked up to him; one he protected because she was the tai-youkai's daughter. True, he had liked her well enough. Of course he would. Having always been smaller than anyone else his age, Gavin had enjoyed the feeling of being almost larger than life; the feeling that he really could do anything in her eyes.

They'd grown over the years, sure, but it always seemed as though Jillian was beyond him. Every year, he was pleased that he had grown an inch or two over the months of their separations only to find that it wasn't quite enough. When he'd arrive in Maine, he'd find that she, too, had grown a few inches; that she was still taller than him, faster than him, better than him. He sighed and winced. No, Jillian was beyond him back then. He should have known that she always would be. Too bright, too shiny, too beautiful . . . Jillian was close enough to touch him but never close enough to be touched in return.

By the time he was seventeen, Gavin was a good four inches shorter than Jillian, which was better than the eight inches that had separated their heights when he was thirteen and she was eight. She used to kiss the top of his head all the time, patting his hair like a much-loved puppy, and as embarrassing as it was to be Jillian's 'pet', knowing that he was so much older than her hadn't helped at all. Evan loved to tease him about his marked lack of height. Scrawny, short, he hadn't been much to look at in those days. Jillian loved to pull him into her lap like he was little more than a child. He'd hated that; *really* hated that . . . and the memory of it was enough to set his teeth to grinding. "*Sit still, Gavvie! If you're squirming around, I can't see the television . . .*"

When he'd left that summer, he hadn't realized that he wouldn't be coming back to Maine. Looking back, he wondered if he simply hadn't wanted to realize that. After all, he'd known that he'd be starting college after graduating from high school, and he'd taken it for granted that he'd be back the following year, but when the opportunity came to get into a special class . . . Idly turning the beer bottle on the table, he frowned, not really seeing anything at all. The next summer, he'd opted to start classes at the University of Montana instead of journeying to Cain's home. Jillian, true to form, had always sounded so cheerful whenever she called, and in his mind, he had to wonder just what she'd look like when he saw her again. When he told her that he wasn't coming that year, she'd tried her best to mask her upset. "*Oh . . . I see . . . yes, that's a wonderful thing for you, isn't it? I'm so . . . happy for you, Gavvie, honest!*" That was what she'd said, and he'd seen right through it, though he had tried to tell himself that he was just reading more into it than what was obviously there.

He hadn't meant to be separated from her for so long. Three years had seemed like a lifetime, hadn't it? Sure, Jillian sent pictures, and yes, he'd seen in the distorted images that the girl he knew so well was changing. "*Blossoming,*" his mother had once said when she'd stumbled across the pictures. Gavin had felt Jillian quietly slipping away . . .

It was a sense of utter desperation that had brought him back to Maine. Unable to admit as much to himself—at least, not out loud—Gavin had researched the idea of transferring from Montana to the University of Maine. Sure, it had a nationally touted economics department, and that was a plus, but he would have transferred anyway, wouldn't he, just to be near her once more . . . "*Are you transferring here for me . . .?*" she'd asked him.

He'd always been painfully shy around girls. Jillian was the only one that he didn't get tongue-tied around. It wasn't as though he had any real interest in the other women he'd met. Something about them just made him uncomfortable in the extreme. He wasn't certain why that was, but Jillian . . . Probably because he'd known her for so long, he'd never had that

problem with her. She was Jilli, and he was her hero, wasn't he? He smiled wanly, almost sadly. 'Jilli's hero . . .'

Curious things happened in the years of their separation. Gavin had grown—finally. Over a foot of height gained over the course of three years, he was finally fairly confident that he would be taller than Jillian. He'd filled out, too, dedicating himself to a strenuous regime of working out and training while balancing school work, as well. He'd been so excited when the plane touched down in Bar Harbor, but when he'd stepped out of the tunnel only to find a smiling Gin and Cain and no Jillian . . . She was a cheerleader and had a huge pep rally that she couldn't miss, and while Gavin understood that, he couldn't help but feel a certain sense of loss. Had things really changed so much over the years? Yes, he supposed maybe they had . . .

When he did see her after he'd finally tracked her down at the pond that evening, he had been taken aback. The pictures had hinted at the beauty that she'd become, but nothing could have prepared him for the sight of her. Gone were the spindly arms and legs that had always reminded him of a newborn foal. She'd put on a bit of weight; her body rounded softly with gentle curves that belied her age, and when she'd reluctantly looked at him, he couldn't help the unsettling surge in his stomach, like the earth had been yanked out from under him . . . and then, she smiled . . .

It hadn't taken long to fall back into the roles that they'd been playing since childhood. He was her voice of reason while she was the free spirit; as impetuous as the sea. Maybe it was in her nature. Water was governed by natural law that really couldn't be completely understood. Jillian was a mystery to him. She always had been. She probably always would be . . . He hadn't expected her to come crawling into his bed on his first night back in Maine. He should have known. Waking up from a fitful slumber only to find Jillian snuggled against his side, Gavin hadn't known what to do. "*Go back to sleep, Gavvie . . . I'm tired . . .*" Part of him demanded that he wake her up and send her right back to her own bedroom on the other side of the mansion. The other part?

In the end, he'd wrapped his arms around her and buried his nose in her hair, breathing in the clean scent of her until he fell asleep once more.

Still he hadn't been able to tell her just how much she meant to him. He'd tried to do it the night of his arrival, but Cain had summoned him into his study to dole out the warnings that he'd been given at the start of every summer since it became apparent that Jillian and Gavin were pretty much inseparable. The gist of the warnings were threats to certain crucial parts of Gavin's anatomy should he let himself get carried away with Jillian. Cain allowed his daughter to sleep with Gavin, but always with the door open, though Gavin suspected that the decision had more to do with Gin than Cain. After all, it wasn't a secret that the *real* tai-youkai in the Zelig household wasn't actually Cain Zelig.

So he'd contented himself to wait. Cain was right, anyway. Gavin was twenty years old, sure, but Jillian was only fifteen. He waited. What else could he do? He stayed with the Zelig family for the rest of that term. Having transferred in mid-year, he hadn't been able to get housing on campus. Jillian had said it was destiny. "*If you try to fight your destiny, you'll be doomed to a life of*

misery. That's what my fortune cookie said," she told him one day as they split the last of the cookies in the jar Gin kept on the counter in the Zelig's kitchen.

'A life of misery, huh?'

It took him two and a half years to finish school. He had to take a few extra classes to fill in the differences between the two universities' curriculums. He'd just started the last semester of classes when Jillian stopped visiting. Used to having her underfoot on the weekends, he hadn't been able to understand why she just stopped coming. His roommate at the time—a hockey jock named Brandon—had only said that maybe she got tired of waiting on Gavin, but still . . .

Jillian had been seventeen then, and Gavin had been biding his time till her high school graduation to try to tell her how he felt. Though a small part of him was certain that she'd laugh in his face, he couldn't help but hope that maybe she *was* telling the truth whenever she joked about being mates. When he finally borrowed Brandon's car and drove down to Bevelle to see Jillian, though, Gin had greeted him at the door with a friendly if not somewhat reluctant smile only to tell him in a rather vague way that Jillian wasn't there. *"I'm, uh, sorry, Gavin . . . Jillian . . . She went away with Evan. She thought it'd be best, you see?"*

Gin told him that Jillian had moved in with Evan, whatever that meant. He hadn't understood at the time. It wasn't until later that he found out from his father, who was one of Cain's top youkai-hunters, that Evan had moved into the family's condo in New York City to attend the university, and apparently Jillian had gone, too, opting to finish school via the internet.

She'd changed her cell phone number and closed her email account, cutting all ties with him without so much as a word. She didn't come to his college graduation. Unsure what he had done that had caused Jillian to shut him out, Gavin had accepted a job offer in Detroit, Michigan.

He'd stayed there for nearly three years before a chance meeting with the CEO of Williamson Exchange brought about the possibility of working on Wall Street. The better job wasn't the first thing that Gavin considered, however. Jillian, he knew, was somewhere in New York City. He'd seen her on the news and in the papers, on magazine covers and billboards. The girl he thought he knew so well was becoming one of the most easily recognized faces in the world, but even when he looked at the polished pictures; the highly glossed images, he still saw the girl he used to know—the girl he wanted so desperately to protect, and he'd taken the offer without a second thought. *'New York City . . .'*

It seemed to him that those were the words—the omen—he'd been waiting for. *"I'll take it,"* he said without hesitation as Jillian's voice whispered in the back of his mind—something about destiny and misery . . . and fortune cookies . . .

Even after that fateful day when he'd found her sitting on the steps of his apartment building in the rain, one thing had been clear: no matter what she said or what he felt, they really weren't meant to be. Their worlds were too different, weren't they? She lived her life in the spotlight, attending red carpet events and parties with the big names and the high rollers. He was nothing but a country boy at heart; a geek who loved computers and video games; old sci-fi movies and

Chapter 8
Tongue Tied

“You know, it’s occurred to me, Gavvie . . .”

Startled out of his reverie, Gavin blinked and shot Jillian a cursory glance as she slipped into the chair beside him. “What happened to your fan club?” he asked with a wry grin that he couldn’t hide as the waitress set the beer on the table and took the money that he offered her, stuffing it into the pocket of her dingy white apron as she turned on her heel and hurried back toward the bar.

Jillian wrinkled her nose. “I just wanted a white wine spritzer,” she went on, waving her hand dismissively.

He chuckled. “Has the bar tender even *heard* of white wine spritzers?”

Jillian made a face. “I don’t know . . . she said they just have beer . . . *manly* beer.”

“Manly beer,” he repeated with a smile as he slowly spun the Budweiser bottle in his fingertips.

“Not even a good Corona Extra,” she lamented.

He chuckled again. “Poor Jilli.”

“I *know!*”

His chuckle escalated when she uttered a melodramatic sigh. “So what was it you were thinking?” he prompted.

Jillian smiled impishly, her dimples carving deeply into her cheeks. “Well, *since* you asked . . .”

“Uh-oh . . .”

She swatted his arm. “Since you keep insisting that I’m not your mate, I’ve decided to make it my mission to help you find one.”

Too bad he’d just taken a swig of his beer. Coughing and sputtering, spewing droplets of the drink over the table, Gavin wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and shot Jillian a dark look. “*What?*”

“You heard me, Gavvie.” She smacked his arm once more, nodding toward the bar without so much as looking at him. “What about her? She’s cute, and she looks smart.”

Following the direction of Jillian's perusal, Gavin shook his head. The young woman was cute enough, he supposed. Dark brown hair cropped short in a pixie-ish sort of way, she sat with another woman at the bar. "Not my type," he grumbled, hoping that Jillian would leave it go at that.

He should have known better.

"How do you know?" she demanded. "You haven't even *tried* to talk to her."

Gavin sighed. "I just know."

"Gavvie . . ."

Trying to ignore her reproachful glance, Gavin shifted in his chair and studiously avoided her gaze, narrowing his eyes rather menacingly and sitting up just a little straighter, puffing out his chest and making a show of flexing his muscles in a nonchalant sort of way when he caught two men at the bar giving Jillian the once-over. The men grinned at Gavin's uncharacteristic show of hostility. One of them touched the brim of his hat while the other nodded. They both turned away, and only then did Gavin relax. "I'm not interested, Jilli . . . can we just leave it at that?"

She shook her head stubbornly. "You *have* to know what you're looking for, Gavvie. Tell me what your dream girl is like."

"My dream girl?" he echoed with a raised eyebrow. "I don't have a—"

In true Jillian fashion, she completely ignored his insistence that he wasn't looking for a mate. "Is she tall?"

"Tall?"

"Blonde?"

"Blo—I don't . . . o-o-okay," he agreed, knowing that once Jillian got her brain wrapped around something, she wouldn't just let it drop.

Satisfied that he was at least trying to comply with her line of questioning, Jillian leaned forward and set her pink Stetson on the table. "All right, tall and blonde . . . what color are her eyes?"

"Jilli, I don't—"

"And you *won't* unless I make you! Now come on, Gavvie! Tell me about her!"

"But I—"

"Does the eye color *really* matter?" she asked suddenly, spinning around on her chair to pin him with a penetrating stare. "I mean, they're just eyes . . ."

“But you—you’re the one who asked—”

“Help me here, or you’re going to end up on some cheesy late night talk show lamenting the girl you never found!”

Gavin shook his head and slumped back in his chair. “I don’t want to date anyone, Jilli . . . why are you so obsessed with my marital status?”

She giggled then waved a hand dismissively. “Firstly, Gavvie, you don’t *have* a marital status. Secondly . . . I’m a romantic at heart, you know! Everyone needs to be in love!”

“Technically, I *do* have a marital status . . . I’m *not*; there’s your answer. As for your other statement . . . who are *you* in love with?” he growled.

She shot him a calculated grin and shrugged a little too off-handedly. “That’s a secret, Gavvie . . . I’ll tell you one day, if you’re nice.”

He narrowed his eyes at her and snorted. “If you’re about to say that you’re in love with me, I swear on all that’s holy, I’ll—”

“Which is *exactly* why I won’t say it now!” she cut in, her lips turning down in a marked pout. “See? I’m smarter than your average bear, huh?”

“Can we just drop this?” he asked again, scowling at her to emphasize his point.

“Just as soon as we hook you up,” she allowed. “She’s tall and blonde . . . though I can’t see her eyes from here . . .”

“She’s not . . . I don’t . . . I can’t talk to *women!*” he hissed.

“You talk to me, don’t you?” she reminded him.

“Sure, but . . . I can’t—You’re not—”

Jillian sat back and crossed her arms over her chest as her eyes narrowed rather dangerously and she slowly shook her head. “If you’re about to say that I’m not a woman, I may never speak to you again, Gavin Jamison,” she informed him.

Gavin snorted. “That’s different,” he grumbled; face pinkening as he slowly shook his head.

She laughed at his disgruntlement. “Okay, then just pretend that she’s me . . . and if you don’t like her eye color, you can buy her contacts. Go buy her a drink!”

“Cute, Jilli,” he snorted. “No. I’m not doing it, no matter how much you beg.”

She grinned. “Please, Gavvie?”

The woman smiled at him, and he tried to return the gesture. Her smile faltered then faded, only to be replaced by one of mild shock, and she leaned back against the bar in a wary sort of way. “H-h-h-hi,” he said in a tone that reminded him of the old Disney movie that Jillian adored . . . he thought it was called *Lilo and Stitch*, but why he was thinking of such inane things was completely beyond him. ‘*Concentrate, stupid!*’ he growled at himself.

“Hi,” she replied a little uncertainly.

He cleared his throat and wiped his palms on his jeans. “Wannebuyou-dr-dr-drink?”

“Excuse me?” she asked, shaking her head in confusion.

Gavin winced, his cheeks painfully hot as he could feel every single eye in the bar boring holes in his back. He cleared his throat again to dislodge the fist-sized lump that was blocking his airway. “C-c-can I . . . buy you a drink?” he repeated.

“Oh, um . . . sure,” she agreed without taking her eyes off his face. The shocked expression was still there though she looked a little more perplexed than before.

He took a deep breath, glancing at the half-empty glass on the counter behind her. “A barn burner,” he said, glancing at the bartender. The girl nodded and shot him a quick smile before turning away to prepare the drink.

“Your teeth . . .” the woman said, pointing at her mouth and moving her hand back and forth with a slight shake of her head.

“M-my . . .?” Gavin reached up and felt his mouth, unable to figure out just what she was talking about.

“Here you go,” the bartender said, setting the glass on the counter beside him. “A little early for Halloween, but I have to say, those fangs almost look real, Dracula.”

‘*Shit!*’ he thought with an inward grimace, fighting furiously to redo the concealment that had slipped when his nerves had taken over. “Oh . . . uh . . . genetic,” he mumbled, hoping that the females wouldn’t see through his lie. “M-my family is weird that way.”

“Ah,” the woman nodded, her smile finally seeming more natural. “What’s your name?”

He glanced around, unable to grasp the slow understanding that she was talking to him. “My name?”

She nodded.

“I-I-I have a name,” he blurted.

“What is it?” she prompted.

“I . . .” Biting his lip as his brain slowed to a crawl, he shook his head dumbly and shrugged. “Uh . . .”

‘Holy mother of . . . you’ve forgotten our name?’

‘Shut—up!’

“On the house, Dracula,” the bartender said with a wink, sliding a Budweiser across the polished counter.

“Gavin!” he exclaimed suddenly then grimaced at the volume of his voice. “M-my . . . I’m . . . Gavin,” he repeated, making a mad grab for the beer and downing half of it in short order.

“You’re cute, Gavin,” the woman remarked. “I’m Sissy.”

He tried to smile though he was fairly certain that the expression turned out more like a grimace than a show of happiness. “Th-that’s a . . . girly . . . name . . .”

‘Wow,’ his youkai moaned, ‘that was . . . lame . . .’

She giggled, sipping the fresh drink that the bartender set down. “Nice . . . I like an observant man . . .” she quipped, holding up her glass so that he knew what she was talking about.

Gavin nodded, lifting the beer to his lips in a desperate effort to quench his parched throat. Choking on his beer when Sissy laid her hand on his forearm, he tried not to cough but couldn’t quite contain it. Sissy squealed and jumped back as his coughing fit sprayed her with the liquor. Snatching a paper napkin off the bar, he tried to dab at the moisture. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry,” he mumbled, switching the bit of tissue into the hand holding the bottle. They were the tiny ones that bars only kept around to set drinks on, and that just figured. Leaning to the side, he snagged another napkin, only to grimace when her second screech drew his attention. Realizing a moment too late that all he had succeeded in doing was dumping the remaining beer on her, as well, he dropped the bottle and flinched when it shattered on the hardwood floor. It registered somewhere in the back of his mind that if people hadn’t been staring before, they certainly had to be now. Gritting his teeth as he willed himself not to panic, he snatched up a handful of napkins in another pathetic attempt to help her. “I’m so . . . s-s-sorry!” he stammered once more.

“I think you’ve done quite enough,” she gritted out as she snatched the napkin and waved him away.

Setting the bottle onto the bar, Gavin kept muttering apologies. “Let me . . . I’m sorry . . . Here,” he said, blotting the beer off her chest with the clean napkin.

“No, no, it’s okay,” she insisted as she tried to step back. His claw caught on the pocket of her blouse, and with what seemed like an obscenely loud tearing sound, the fabric ripped. Sissy uttered a harsh little noise as she knocked his hand away and covered her chest with her arm.

Moments later, her free hand cracked against his cheek before she careened around and ran toward the door, shoving people aside in her haste to get away from him.

Gavin could feel his face flaming, hot. Slowly glancing around the bar, he groaned inwardly when he realized that the entire place had ground to a screeching halt and that every single person was gawking at him. Jillian was still standing beside the table where he'd left her, and he could see the obvious upset on her features as her fingers fluttered before her lips in a decidedly nervous fashion. Dropping the napkins onto the bar along with a few crumpled up dollar bills, he muttered a low apology to the bartender and turned on his heel, striding through the parting crowd, pausing just long enough to grab Jillian's arm to drag her out of the establishment.

"Oh, Gavvie," she crooned as the thick oak door swung closed in their wake. "That was . . . that was . . ."

"It was humiliating," he growled from between clenched teeth. "If you ever—*ever*—do that to me again, I swear, I'll—"

"I'm sorry," she cut in, the pitch of her voice rising in panic. "Don't be mad," she begged.

He heaved a sigh as he escorted her around the truck and jerked the door open. "I'm not mad," he grumbled.

Jillian winced. "You *sound* mad."

"I'm a *little* mad," he conceded, "and a lot embarrassed . . ."

"I didn't think . . . hmmm," she half-whined, wringing her hands as he pushed her door closed and strode around the truck.

She didn't speak again as he drove out of the parking lot and turned onto the road that headed out of town. It was just as well. Gavin could still feel the painful, mortified flush staining his cheeks . . .

Jillian rolled down her window and sighed, staring at the passing landscape illuminated by the harsh headlights of the truck. "I suppose there's no help for it," she finally said, her voice rife with resignation.

"No help for what?" he asked though he wasn't sure he wanted to hear her answer.

"Well, I can't let you do *that* to yourself, ever again," she remarked without so much as glancing at him. "That ranked right up there with the time you tripped over your shoelaces in front of all the girls at my slumber party."

Gavin grimaced. She just *had* to go there, didn't she? "You *tied* them together, Jilli—while your *girlfriends* were laughing over the idea that I'm five years older than you but looked *younger*."

She laughed. It just figured. “It was a joke, Gavvie! Anyway, I’ve only seen that shade of red on your face once before—what would you have called it? I would have said it was almost scarlet, but with a little more of a purple tint . . .”

“Jil-li!” he groaned. “Enough of the stroll down humiliation lane: ‘Let’s see how many times we can embarrass the crap out of Gavvie’, right?”

She giggled, covering her mouth to hold back her amusement and failing miserably. “Of course not! The girls all thought it was so cute that you crawled into my ‘My *Pretty Princess*’ sleeping bag with me, too!”

He snorted, gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles turned white as he gritted his teeth together. “Only because *someone* was crying and carrying on about monsters in the living room,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, Evan was always a pain, wasn’t he?” she quipped.

“All he did was sneak around behind the sofa and grab your arm.”

“During our scary movie fest!”

“Incidentally, don’t think I didn’t realize that was the last slumber party *you* ever had,” Gavin grumbled acerbically.

“I think Daddy was afraid of what Evan would do with that many girls in the house,” she said with a shake of her head. “True enough . . . I think he holds the record for getting suspended for illicit behavior at school . . .”

“And that amuses you?”

“It doesn’t amuse you?” she parried, digging a small compact out of her purse and checking her lipstick in the small illuminated mirror that turned on when she opened the compact.

Gavin’s answer was a decisive snort as he swung the truck onto the dirt path that led back to the ranch.

“Anyway, back to my original thought . . . I don’t care what you say, Gavin Jamison: I’m going to save you from yourself, whether you like it or not,” she went on, snapping the compact closed and stowing it in her purse once more.

“Save me? How?” he asked though he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to hear the answer.

Jillian pushed her door open and hopped out of the truck before Gavin could come to a complete stop. “Jilli!” he chastised, grinding his foot down on the brake and slamming the vehicle into ‘park’ as he killed the engine. “That’s dangerous, you know!”

Chapter 9
Evan

“Great set, Zel.”

Evan Zelig lifted his face from his cupped hands and glanced at the doorway to nod at Mike Murphy, his manager. “Thanks,” he replied, leaning to the side to rummage through Madison Cartham’s makeup case in a vain effort to find something worth smoking. He hadn’t actually thought that she’d have any such thing in there, but he’d hoped . . .

“You should be washing that shit off, not finding more to put on,” Mike remarked with a chuckle.

Evan shot him a dark look then grinned. “You’re just fucking jealous because you ain’t nearly as pretty as me.”

Mike rolled his eyes and shook his head but smiled as he waved and moved away from the doorway. “Let me know when you’re ready to head back to the hotel,” he called over his shoulder.

Evan grunted before turning back to scan the abysmally dreary changing room. He could hear the screaming fans—mostly girls—being held back by the security blockade down the hall. Ordinarily, he’d go out there and rap with the fans a little, but tonight . . .

He sighed. He wasn’t sure why he didn’t want to do it. He was finished with his set. Since he wasn’t as well known as some of the other artists on the bill for the Megalo-Monster Rock Festival, he’d had to perform in an earlier time slot. He cracked a grin. Only the most notorious, the most outrageous of artists were invited to do the exclusive show. He was definitely making progress . . .

“Hey, Zel,” the head of Evan’s security team—a huge buffalo-youkai that everyone called ‘Bone’—said as he paused in the doorway.

“You got anything to smoke on you?” Evan demanded without preamble, waving his hand at his childhood friend.

Bone lowered his chin and crossed his arms over his chest. “Sure,” he replied. “Listen to me first, ya?”

“Okay, fine,” Evan replied, wiping his face with the thin white towel that was draped around his neck before gathering all of his waist-long hair—dyed Priscilla-black for the occasion—and flipping it up and down in an effort to cool his overheated skin. When that didn’t work, he growled and reached forward, jerking the makeup kit over and snagging a pale pink hair clip out of the top tray. “Where the hell’s Maddy?” he grumbled, twisting his hair into one long rope and

twisting it around into a knot at the nape of his neck before securing it with the pink clip. “This hair’s gotta go . . .”

Bone scratched his stubbly chin. “Did you see the news?”

“What news?” Evan asked, his tone flat as he shook a small plastic vial of white powder. “What do you think this is?”

“Knowing Maddy? Probably something girly—baby powder or some such shit,” Bone countered with a wolfish grin, his teeth bright white against the darkness of his skin. If he were human, Bone would have been classified as African-American. Since he was youkai, though, Evan tended to think of him simply as ‘Bone’ . . .

Conceding Bone’s point, Evan wrinkled his nose and dropped the vial back into the beauty kit. He didn’t really like snorting stuff, anyway. It really fucked with his nose . . .

“Anyway, about the news . . .” Bone went on, lounging against the doorframe.

Evan dug a hot pink tube of lipstick out of the kit and pulled off the cap. “Not my color,” he remarked, screwing the stick of gaudy orange makeup down before replacing the lid. “I haven’t had five minutes *to* watch the news,” he said in a tone that implied that Bone ought to know as much.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so,” Bone commented, rubbing one of his ham hocks he called hands over his face. Something about the youkai’s tone of voice drew Evan’s attention, and he pushed the makeup kit away. Hunching over with his hands dangling between his spread knees, Evan focused his attention on Bone, waiting for him to go on. With a heavy sigh, Bone pushed himself away from the doorframe and strolled over, dropping into the chair diagonally across from Evan. The horridly upholstered orangey-red crushed velvet chair creaked and groaned but didn’t break. “Jillian . . . she was down in Cancun, ya?”

“Yeah,” Evan agreed slowly, trying to ignore the surge of trepidation that shot through him at the foreboding in Bone’s voice.

“It’s been on the news, you know? Her rental car blew up.”

It took a few moments for Bone’s words to sink in. “*What?*”

“Relax, man . . . she wasn’t in it. Thing is, no one knows exactly where she is, either.”

Shooting out of his chair, Evan stalked the room, flexing his claws as he tried to tamp down the surge of absolute rage that surged through him. “What do you mean; no one knows where she is? What the . . .? *Fuck*, no! Someone’s gotta know, goddamnit!”

Bone shook his head as he pinned Evan with a somewhat bored gaze. “I’m sure your peeps know where she is, dumb ass . . . the media don’t know; that’s all.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” Evan growled, rounding on the head of his security team.

“I just saw it, myself, ya? Anyway, don’t get all bent over it, Duckie.”

Evan snorted, draping his hands on his hips as he glared at Bone. “I’m not getting bent, and don’t fucking call me ‘Duckie’.”

Bone cracked a grin. “Yeah, and . . . yeah . . .” he replied as he pushed himself out of the chair and lumbered toward the door.

“Fuck you!” Evan hollered at Bone’s retreating back.

“Had better offers, Duckie,” Bone shot back without missing a step as he pulled the door closed behind him, leaving Evan alone once more.

“Damn it!” he growled, snatching his cell phone off the makeup table in front of the lighted mirror and dialing the fourth number on speed-dial. It rang five times before switching over to voice mail. He hung up as Jillian’s voice greeted him and dialed his father’s number, instead.

“Hello?” Cain Zelig answered, his voice haggard, weary.

“What the fuck is going on, Cain?” Evan demanded, drumming his knuckles against the table.

Cain sighed. “Evan . . . how’s the tour going?”

“Fuck the tour, damn it. I want answers. Just why the hell wasn’t I told about all this bullshit? I had to hear about it from *Bone*?”

“Everything’s fine, all right? Calm down.”

Gnashing his teeth at the placating tone of his father’s voice, Evan growled in frustration. “Spare me, will you? Just tell me where Jilli is.”

Cain didn’t answer right away. With a long sigh, he let out his breath in a slow gust. “Bas and Gunnar are doing what they can. It’s taken care of.”

“The hell it is!” Evan snarled, digging his claws into the hardwood table. “I’m comin’ home.”

“No.”

“Why the fuck not?” he demanded, ignoring the voice in the back of his mind that told him that Cain was not acting quite normal.

“I told you; we have everything under control. There’s no need for you to worry about it.”

“The hell there ain’t, *Cain*. I can help, too, you know.”

“Evan . . . do you remember the last time you ‘helped’ Jillian?”

“Yeah, so?”

Cain paused long enough to light a cigarette. Evan could hear the soft ‘snick’ of the lighter. “So you ended up nearly killing the guy—”

“Who fucking well deserved it if you’ll remember.”

“I’m not saying he didn’t,” Cain allowed. “What I am saying is that your temper gets you into trouble, and your sister doesn’t need that right now.”

“He was trying to *rape* her,” Evan bit out, his voice low, gravely. “Bastard deserved to die, not to be banished.”

“But he didn’t rape her, and it wasn’t your call to make. Even if I did agree, Jillian couldn’t have dealt with the idea that someone died because of her, and you know it.”

“I’m still coming home,” Evan insisted. “Now where the fuck is Jilli?”

Cain sighed yet again. “Let Bas and Gunnar do their jobs, all right? In the mean time, just call Gavin.”

“Bassie . . . of *course* . . .” Evan mocked. “He can handle *everything* because he’s got *such* a level head on his shoulders, right?”

“Evan . . .”

It was too much. He had every right to help, every right to protect his sister as much as Bas and more so than Gunnar. She was his sister, too, damn it all . . . “It’s bullshit, and you know it! *What the hell is going on?*”

“Call Gavin,” Cain repeated.

“Fuck you, *Father*,” Evan snarled, snapping the flip-phone closed to end the call. Gritting his teeth so tightly that his jaw ached, he opened the device again and dialed Gavin’s number, instead, tapping his foot impatiently while he waited for Gavin to answer.

“Gavin Jamison.”

“Spare me the shit, Gavin. Is Jillian with you?”

“Evan, hi . . . yeah, she’s here.”

“Why the hell didn’t anyone tell me about the car?” he bellowed.

Gavin sighed. “I don’t know . . .”

“Nice . . . first Cain’s acting all fucked-up, and now you’re hedging, too . . . Tell me what the hell you know, Gavvie,” Evan growled.

“That’s just it, Evan . . . we don’t really know much. This guy—he calls himself ‘Mickey B.’—keeps emailing Jilli . . . telling her that he knows where she lives and stuff . . . He’s got pictures, too.”

Evan snorted. “So he’s a fucking loon . . . Three-quarters of the people who live in New York City are.”

“Listen . . . there’s more to it than that. Hold on a minute.” Evan snorted but refrained from comment. He could hear the groan of old wooden stairs from Gavin’s end of the line, and he waited, albeit impatiently, for Gavin to put the phone back to his ear. The creak of a door’s hinges . . . the moan of the stairs once more . . . Finally Gavin’s voice returned, and Evan had to bite his tongue to keep from snapping for the disruption. Gavin sighed. “This guy . . . he’s taken pictures of Jillian’s apartment—from inside her apartment—”

“*What?*”

“—And mine, but those were from the outside, it seemed. Your father didn’t want me to take Jilli home because the mansion’s been breached, too.”

“Son of a bitch.”

Gavin cleared his throat. “Anyway, Cain’s got Bas and Gunnar looking into it. They’ve got the resources to track this guy that no one else really has.”

Evan digested that for a moment. “Why the hell didn’t you call me, Gavin?” he demanded as the precarious hold he had on his escalating temper thinned.

“It’s not that simple. We don’t know what all this guy knows. He’s taken pictures of the house in Maine, which is why I assume Cain told you to call me. Mickey B. followed Jilli to Cancun . . . he sent her a picture of us having dinner at a local restaurant . . . and he sent a picture of the rental car, too . . .”

“Shit . . .” Evan shook his head as he assimilated the information he’d been given. “You’re telling me that you think this guy fucked with the car?”

“It’s . . . possible. The reports that Cain’s gotten indicate that the brake line was tampered with.”

“This guy was trying to *hurt* her?” Evan pounded his fist against the table top in an angry cadence. “Where are you right now?”

“Montana,” Gavin replied. “We’re at my ranch.”

“Yeah, fine . . . I’ll be there as soon as I can get a flight.”

“No, Evan, don’t,” Gavin broke in.

Evan held the phone away from his head for a moment to glower at the gadget as though he thought it just might be broken, smothering a defiant growl as he smashed it against his head once more. “You, too, Gav? What the . . .? Why does everyone act like I’m a liability?”

“It’s not that,” Gavin said slowly. “It’s just . . . you can’t . . . You and Jilli . . . well, you two are always getting into some sort of trouble or another. She’s fine; I promise. I won’t let anything happen to her.”

Evan snorted indelicately. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Gavin. ‘Preciate it. I really do. She’s *my* sister, damn you! She ain’t *your* responsibility!”

“She *is* my responsibility,” Gavin argued coldly. “She’s my *friend* . . . so long as she is, I’ll protect her.”

“Your friend? Yeah . . . As if she’s ever wanted to *be* just your friend.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Evan sighed. “Forget it. I’ll be there as soon as I can get a flight.”

He hung up then, cutting off whatever argument Gavin had been trying to make. It only took a few minutes to reserve a seat on a trans-Atlantic flight that would reach New York City tomorrow evening. Tossing the phone onto the table, he stalked over to grab a white button down shirt off the rolling garment rack that had been installed shortly after his arrival at the venue. The first goal was to get out of the stadium and back to the hotel where he could shower and change in peace, and where he could have Madison cut his hair so that he could escape London without drawing notice.

The phone rang as he reached for his black leather jacket—entirely unnecessary since it was late June, but he’d worn it out of habit. Snatching the phone up, he grimaced when he read the number on the caller ID but answered it, anyway. “What?”

“Forget it, Evan. Just stay where you are,” Bas growled without bothering with any sort of pleasantries.

Tamping down the irritation that welled up inside him, Evan grimaced, fangs glinting in the harsh light of the changing room and willed himself to loosen his hold on the phone before he crushed it in his fist. “Fuck you, Bassie-boy. You can’t tell me what to do.”

“Listen you little runt-fucker, if you’re smart, you’ll stay where you are. The last thing we need is for you to blow her cover with one of your idiotic displays,” Bas shot back.

Evan snorted, catching the telephone between his shoulder and ear as he patted his pockets for a sorely-needed smoke. “Was it your idea to keep me out of the loop, Bas-tard?” he demanded, pulling a mangled but still smoke-able joint out of his zippered breast pocket and catching it between his lips as he fumbled for a lighter.

“Evan—”

“Put Mom on the phone.”

“She’s not here. She’s in Japan.”

“Wha . . . ? Why?”

Bas sighed. “Aunt Nezumi miscarried, and Dad thought it’d be better for her not to be here at the moment, anyway.”

“So Mom doesn’t even *know* that Jilli is being stalked?”

Bas sighed again. “No.”

“Nice to know that you’re all lumping me in with the women,” he grumbled.

“Don’t be a baby. We’re trying to do what’s best for Jillian. What do you think she’d do if she found out about any of this? Huh?”

“Oh, come off it! You don’t give a holy rotten damn about what’s best for Jillian! It’s nothing but another one of your fucking power trips, and you know it!” he blasted, letting the joint fall onto the table as his anger crested.

“Damn it, Evan! Why can’t you get it through your thick skull? This isn’t about me or you or anyone else! It’s about Jillian and what’s best for her! Now knock off your bullshit and leave it the hell alone!” Bas snarled.

“You know, I haven’t had to listen to your ration of shit since we were pups, bubby, and I sure as hell ain’t gonna do it now, either! She’s my sister, and—”

“—And she’s mine, too, and I’m telling you that you need to stay out of this. We’ve got it under control; we’re taking care of everything. Just back off before you cause more damage.”

Growling low in his throat, Evan’s grip tightened on the digital device. The plastic creaked ominously, and he forced himself to slacken his hold. “Look, you pompous bastard, Jilli’s in danger, and I’ll be damned if I’ll just sit here and let you and Gunnar take your sweet fucking time catching the son of a bitch.”

“It’s not your concern,” Bas insisted. “*You’re* the one who chose to abandon the family. You can’t pick and choose your moments.”

“I did . . . *what?*” Evan bellowed. “The fuck I did!”

Bas growled low in his throat. “The fuck you didn’t! You’re the one who changed your name and ran off to be a rock star. You’re the one who can’t be bothered to call home more than once every six months! Do you have *any* idea how upset Mom gets because she hadn’t heard from her widdle baby brat? Do you even *care*? Step off, Evan! We don’t *need* your help! You’ve never known how to *‘help’*. All you’ve *ever* done is fuck things up—it’s what you’re best at, isn’t it? Why don’t you do everyone a favor and stay in your little rock-star-bubble? Just leave the dirty work to those of us who give a great goddamn!”

“Fuck you, Sebastian,” Evan ground out quietly. “Fuck you all.”

Slapping the phone closed, Evan hurled it away as the door opened. The device flew past a very stunned Madison. She choked out a tiny scream as the phone whizzed past her face, missing her by a fraction of an inch before smashing into the wall. Whipping around, she threw her arms over her face in time to avoid being blasted by bits of debris as the phone exploded on impact. The action didn’t bring Evan any sort of satisfaction. Wheeling around on his heel, he swung at the first object he saw. The wall trembled as his fist slammed through the drywall. The steel structure beam clanged as bits of plaster crumbled from the ceiling, falling on Evan like snow in December.

“Sorry,” Evan growled, sounding anything but contrite for the near-miss.

Madison grimaced at the indent left by the cell phone and pulled the door closed quietly. “Bone told me,” she said softly. “How’s Jilli?”

“Fucking . . .” He sighed, drawing a deep breath to calm his raging temper. “She’s fine—for now.”

“Good . . . I take it no one’s told her about the car?”

Evan snorted, stalking the room and flexing his knuckles. He shook his hand to alleviate the sting. He’d torn his knuckles open when he’d hit the wall . . . “Of course not! They treat her like a baby or something,” he complained.

Madison smiled. “And you don’t?”

He shrugged. “Not nearly as much as they do.”

Maddy shrugged, crossing her arms over her chest as she sauntered toward him. He could see the questions in the depths of her violet eyes, but he ignored them, perversely set to make her ask them before he’d offer any real answers. “There’s more to it, isn’t there?” she finally mused.

“She’s being stalked. They think the same guy is the one who fucked with the car.”

“What?”

“Mom doesn’t know, Jilli doesn’t know, and they weren’t going to tell me, either.”

“Evan . . .”

Digging into his pocket for a lighter, Evan swiped the joint up off the table where it’d fallen during his ‘discussion’ with Bas. “You know something? I hate him.”

Madison nodded. “I don’t blame you. Maybe he’s mentally ill.”

“Not *him*—though I hate him, too . . . I’m talking about that fucking dick of a brother of mine.”

“Bas?”

“Do I have another brother?” he snarled then shook his head, pausing only long enough to light the joint and toss down the lighter before resuming his pacing once more.

She sighed, peeling off the tailored black leather jacket that covered her sheer black bra. Her nipples were hardened, and she reached for a red silk shirt—Evan’s, of course—that was slung over the back of a chair without comment.

“Stupid prick’s always had everything handed to him, and he’s never even cared,” Evan fumed.

“Is this about Sydnie again?” she asked, Sydnie being Sebastian’s mate. Evan had been well past mere irritation when Bas had nearly fumbled their relationship in the first few months of being married, and Madison knew it. He made a face as she shook out the shirt, turning it to and fro as she examined it, probably to make sure it was clean.

Evan snorted. “Keh! He was too damn stupid to know that he was making her miserable, wasn’t he?”

Madison glanced over her shoulder. “That was just in the beginning, and he’s been wonderful to her since.”

“Still a fucking bastard,” he protested.

“She doesn’t seem to be complaining,” Madison pointed out reasonably, pulling the shirt on.

“Yeah, and that makes it all okay, doesn’t it?”

She brushed his sarcasm aside. “Bas and you used to get along pretty well,” she mused.

He shot her a dark glance, dragging long and deep off the joint before answering. “Did we? I don’t remember.”

She rolled her eyes but stepped into his path. Pushing the unbuttoned shirt down her arms, Evan let his hands linger on her shoulders as the fabric fell to the floor with a whisper. Madison Cartham had been Evan’s best friend for as long as he could remember. She understood him; he

Chapter 10
The First Lesson

Gavin glowered at the clothes that Jillian had lain out on his bed and uttered a loud snort. He still wasn't sure how she'd talked him into this, truthfully. He was also reasonably sure that it was nothing but a huge mistake readying itself to bite him right in the ass . . .

'You're a sucker, Gavin, you know it?'

Gavin sighed, yanking off the sweat-soaked tee-shirt he had worn all day while mending fences along the southern perimeter of the ranch. *'Yeah, I know it.'*

'You could have told her 'no'.'

'Yeah . . . when have I ever said 'no' to her and meant it?'

His youkai laughed. *'Your words, Gavvie; not mine . . .'*

Ignoring the annoying voice, he stomped into the bathroom and slapped his hand against the wall beside the door only to realize a moment later that the shower was one of the old-fashioned kind. So used to the master bathroom in his apartment back in New York City, he always slapped for the wall-panel out of habit. It was preset to turn on at the exact temperature that Gavin had programmed in. This one, with the turning knobs, was always a pain in his neck. It took almost ten minutes for the water temperature to even out, and in the meantime, he was left either scalded or freezing, depending on how far he turned on the taps.

Which, of course, was entirely beside the point. Jillian was hell-bent on his ultimate destruction; he was sure of it. What other reason could there possibly be for her insistence that he just needed practice in dating?

Gavin sighed as he yanked the shower curtain closed and turned the knobs that controlled the water, pulling on the stopper to redirect the flow of water to the showerhead above. Dropping onto the toilet with a dejected sigh, he kicked off his boots and wiggled his toes with a grimace.

This was going to blow up in his face, wasn't it?

Gripping the back of his neck with his hand and rubbing furiously as he let his head roll from side to side, Gavin stood up and sighed yet again. At least it seemed that Bas had been successful in talking Evan out of flying to Montana. It wasn't that Gavin thought that Evan would get in the way, but Evan was just too . . . Gavin winced. He liked Evan well enough, but he had to admit that the burgeoning rock star had a habit of drawing way too much attention to himself and those around him, whether by accident or design. *'Flamboyant,'* Jillian had called Evan once. Gavin supposed that was a good way to describe him.

Showering didn't take long. The hot water drumming down on his back helped to alleviate the stiffness that had set in since it had been awhile since he had to do so much manual labor. Grabbing the bottle of baby shampoo that Jillian insisted was better for his hair than regular soap; he lathered his hair a couple times. Back in the day, she'd go so far as to sniff his hair to make sure that he used the shampoo she went out of her way to buy for him. Of course, at the time, she'd also made a point of saying that she bought him the 'no more tears' formula, too . . . He sighed as he shut off the shower taps and shoved the curtain aside.

'*You should shave, you know,*' his youkai spoke up.

Gavin grimaced as he dropped a towel over his head before reaching for a second one to drape around his hips. '*Shave? I shaved this morning . . .*'

'*Yeah, and this is a date, remember? You can't be all scruffy when you're going on a date, especially when you're going on a date with the Jillian Zelig.*'

'*Knock that off,*' he grouched but reached for the can of shaving gel sitting on the counter next to the sink. '*She's just Jilli . . .*'

"Gavvie, are you almost ready?" Jillian called, her voice muffled by the bathroom door.

"H-hold on," he barked, hoping that she'd listen for once and stay out of the room while he was finishing up. "Wait for me downstairs."

"Okay," she replied with a happy little giggle. Gavin grimaced. Over the course of time, Jillian had proven time and again that she really didn't have any sense of propriety as far as he was concerned. So comfortable in her own state of undress, it never seemed to occur to her that other people might not be as pleased, and Gavin had lost track of the number of times when Jillian, in her exuberance, would just traipse right into a room without bothering to check whether or not he was decently clad . . .

Figuring that he was living on borrowed time, Gavin made quick work of shaving, too. Half-scared that Jillian would decide that he was dawdling on purpose, he wasted no time in shaving. Luck was with him, though, and he managed to finish up and get completely dressed before Jillian's voice interrupted once more.

"Hurry up, Gavvie! I'm starving!" she hollered up the stairs.

Rolling his eyes, he straightened the collar of his shirt but grinned slightly as he strode out of the room and down the hallway. "You're not going to die if we're ten minutes . . . la-a-ate . . ."

His words trailed off as he stepped off the bottom step and finally lifted his gaze to meet Jillian's. Fussing with her long bluish-silver hair in the mirror hanging over the table in the living room beside the front door, she appeared even more delicate—even more ethereal than he could credit. Balancing easily on four-inch black stiletto heels held onto her feet by little more than a configuration of silver straps, she turned her head when he spoke long enough to shoot him a brilliant smile. The black skirt flowed around her hips in a whisper of motion, and the fitted

bodice hugged her frame like a second skin. Too used to seeing her in jeans and tee-shirts or even her cute little dresses that looked nothing at all like the one she was wearing, he supposed, but for reasons he didn't want to consider, he couldn't seem to remember that he really had to breathe, and words? His youkai snorted indelicately. *'Forget about it . . .'*

"You look nice," she told him, her voice soft and her eyes glowing with an emotion that Gavin wasn't sure he wanted to understand.

"I-I-I . . ." He drew a deep breath, shaking his head to dispel the dizziness that clung to the edges of his mind. "Y-you, too."

Her smile widened, and she turned away from the mirror, closing the distance between them only to brace herself against his forearm to kiss his cheek. "I'm ready when you are, Gavvie."

Unable to staunch the flow of blood that surged to the surface of his skin, Gavin could only blink and nod as Jillian let go of his arm and sauntered toward the front door.

'Cra-a-ap . . .' his youkai breathed as he watched her hips swing back and forth with her gait.

'Yeah . . .' he thought as the dizziness surged once more. He couldn't have stated that better, himself . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

'Where . . . is . . . she?'

Gritting his teeth as he tossed the tabloid newspaper aside, he flopped back in the rickety old chair at the metal computer desk in the corner of his loft apartment and stifled a frustrated growl.

Almost a week had passed since her unceremonious disappearance from Cancun. She'd slipped away from him, hadn't she? *'Damn it . . .'*

She'd hear about this; no doubt about it. Cross him, would she? *'I think not.'*

Grabbing the grimy half-full glass of whiskey off the desk, he didn't notice as liquor sloshed over the rim and splashed onto his fingers. Downing the drink before slamming the glass onto the desk, he grimaced as he swallowed it in one large gulp.

She was testing him; damned if she wasn't. She was pushing him, and she was doing it on purpose . . .

He grunted as a vicious swell of rage gripped him. *'How could she do this to me?'*

He'd have to teach her a lesson, wouldn't she? She'd have to learn who the boss really was, wouldn't she?

With a ticked-off sigh, he jerked out the shelf that held the computer keyboard and started to type. Staring blankly as the blinking cursor moved across the white field, he pressed his lips in a thin line and narrowed his eyes to slits. Ending the email with a flourish, he clicked on the 'attach' button. He hated to send her one of *those* pictures, but she was forcing him, wasn't she?

Slumping back once more, he nodded to himself, sending the email with a click of the laser mouse.

'The ball's in your court, Jillian... Now if you'll just come out and play...'

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

Jillian peeked out of the corner of her eye and smiled to herself when she noticed Gavin's hands-stuffed-in-pockets gait. Shuffling along beside her, he seemed relaxed enough, and that was a relief. Even she had to admit that their dinner date hadn't gone so well. After forgetting that he should help her sit down at the quaint little table in the back of the restaurant, Gavin had bumbled his way through ordering and had ended up sharing his meal with her since he'd made the mistake of ordering her a stuffed bell pepper—something that she'd always hated. He knew that. He'd simply forgotten it.

'Poor guy... why is he so nervous?' she pondered as she walked along the sidewalk.

'You mean you have to ask?'

'What's that mean?'

'Jilli, you're on a date, and Gavin knows it. He's always nervous about stuff like that. It stands to reason that he's nervous, doesn't it?'

'Don't be silly! Gavin's always been comfortable with me...'

'Maybe... then again, you've never been on a date with him before, have you?'

She didn't deign to comment on that.

"You know, Gavvie, I could really go for some ice cream right now," she finally said.

Gavin dug his hands deeper into his pockets and shrugged. "O-okay," he agreed, turning around to scan the street for an ice cream shop, she supposed. "I'm not sure I can get you some, though," he finally allowed. "I guess I could run to the grocery store..."

Jillian grabbed his arm before Gavin could make a break for it. “No, that’s okay. I was just making small talk,” she assured him with a bright smile as she twined her arm around his.

He stiffened slightly as she leaned on his arm, and she ignored the nervous glance he shot her. Veering off onto the meandering path that branched off of the main sidewalk, Gavin led Jillian into the trees that lined the edge of the park. “It’s so peaceful here,” she commented softly, unwilling to raise her voice and risk breaking the serenity of the mild night.

Gavin nodded. “Guess it’s always been this way,” he ventured. “Small towns, you know.”

She smiled up at him, her eyes hidden in the deepest shadows, shining gently in the night. “Reminds me of Bevelle.”

He chuckled. Comparing Bevelle, Maine, where she grew up, and Hidekea, Montana, was like comparing apples and oranges. “Hidekea makes Bevelle look like New York City,” he remarked with a wry smile.

“Hidekea is lovely,” she argued. “Anyway, I like it here.”

“Do you.” It wasn’t a question.

Jillian shrugged. “Yes.”

“You’d get bored here quickly enough.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That’s what you think,” she retorted. “I’d be happy enough, I’ll have you know. I’d be happy anywhere with you.”

He rolled his eyes but didn’t respond. When she stole a glance at him, she smiled. Staring at his feet, he shuffled along the path with his gaze studiously averted. She didn’t need light to know that his face was very, very red.

“You think I’m just humoring you, don’t you?” she asked quietly.

Gavin shrugged. “Dunno.”

She giggled. “I’m not, you know.”

“I know you *think* you’re serious.”

She uttered a sound suspiciously like, “hrumph.”

“Come on, Jilli,” he said at last, increasing his stride as they passed under the bright circle of a path lamp. “Maybe there’s something else we can do, if you want.”

“Like what?” she asked, her shoes tapping lightly as she hurried after him.

Casting her a quick almost lopsided grin, he shook his head slowly and kept walking. “I don’t know . . . there isn’t much to do around here during the week, I guess.”

“I’m having a good time,” she ventured, tilting her head back to gaze up at the stars. Giggling softly, she kept walking—almost dancing—as they stepped off the path and onto the sidewalk once more.

His snort bespoke his disbelief at her claim. “Right . . . because it’s *stellar* when your date forgets his manners,” he grumbled, “and even *better* when he steps on your feet when you’re dancing.”

“You didn’t step on me,” she pointed out. “You just sort of bumped into my feet, was all.”

“Yeah, and that really doesn’t make me feel much better,” he grumbled.

She laughed. “Oh, Gavvie! You’d be fine if you weren’t so self-conscious.”

“Forget it, Jilli. I’ll leave the dancing to your brother.”

“Please! If you really want to call *that* ‘dancing,’” Jillian shot back. For reasons that no one quite understood, Evan had felt the inner desire to try his hand at stripping for a short time.

“Well . . . exotic dancing is *still* dancing,” Gavin mused.

Her laughter was soft, easy. “If you think so, Gavvie . . . you know, you’d make a killing if you tried it.”

“God forbid,” he groaned.

“We could go back to the ranch, if you wanted,” she ventured.

Gavin shrugged. “No . . . It’s okay. You’re having fun, right?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “That’s a silly question,” she remarked.

He snorted but didn’t argue with her. Stopping in the center of the town square, Gavin chuckled when Jillian breathed in sharply as she stared at the statue of the town’s first mayor that stood in the middle of a small plaza. Depicted as a Daniel Boone-esque character complete with raccoon skin cap and leather-looking clothes and moccasins, Malcolm Forrester stood over ten feet tall on a marble pedestal that added another three feet to his towering height—something that Gavin had always found rather ironic since he knew that, according to history, Forrester barely stood five feet tall. He sighed. It was something that Natalie Jamison had stressed to Gavin for years . . . “*Some of Hidekeed’s most prominent men were on the small side, Gavin . . . there’s nothing wrong with that.*” The words were normally accompanied by an obscenely loud schmatz on the top of his head and the perfunctory ruffling of the hair.

'She was right, of course,' his youkai pointed out. *'Look at Napoleon . . . he was short . . . and you can't forget the midget from 'Austin Powers' . . .'*

He snorted. *'Shut up.'*

Dragging him toward the statue, she let go of his hand long enough to hike up her skirt as she hunkered down to wiggle her fingers on the surface of the water in the wide but shallow fountain that surrounded the base of the statue. Underwater lights illuminated the square, and Gavin had to admit that the effect was pretty remarkable. The bronze statue seemed to glow in the darkness while the short founts of water that jettisoned six feet into the air before the water cut off abruptly, allowing the droplets of moisture to fall like rain. Jillian laughed softly, captivated by the coursing liquid. She was so easily entranced by water that her reaction didn't surprise him in the least.

"It's a wish fountain," he commented at length, stuffing his hands into his pockets once more and offering her a bashful shrug as he pulled out a penny and held it out to her. "Here."

Springing lightly to her feet, she held out her hand. He dropped the coin, but it slipped through her fingers, hitting the ground with a muffled clink before it rolled in a wide circle that narrowed as it traveled along its path before it rattled to a stop and fell flat. Jillian stooped to retrieve it, and Gavin did, too. Another hand flashed out to nab the coin, and Jillian stood up slowly, offering the strange man a reluctant if not sincere smile. "Thank you."

He grinned at her, shifting slightly in his stance and effectively shutting Gavin out as he insinuated himself between them. "You're Jillian Zelig, aren't you?" he asked as his grin widened.

"Yes, I am," she replied brightly. Gavin stifled the desire to growl.

"I'm Major," he said with a courteous nod. "Major Lloyd."

"Nice to meet you, Major," she replied. "Are you in the military?"

Choking back a chuckle, Gavin tried to hide his amusement when Major looked completely disgruntled.

"No, ma'am . . . Major's my name."

Jillian blushed and grimaced, which effectively put an end to Gavin's amusement since he hated to see her looking so uncomfortable. "Oh, I'm sorry . . . I didn't think . . . I hope I didn't offend you."

"Oh, uh, no," he said quickly enough. "What're you doing in a piss-ant town like Hidekea?"

Jillian's smile widened in a friendly sort of way. "I'm here on vacation," she informed the young man. Gavin snorted indelicately.

“Vacation, huh? Never really thought I’d see a supermodel vacationing here, of all places.”

Jillian shook her head, looking rather confused by that statement. “Why wouldn’t I be? The air is clean; the people are friendly . . . It’s a lovely community.”

“Yeah, I suppose . . . ‘to each his own’, right?” Major commented as he dropped the penny into Jillian’s hand and folded her fingers over top of it. “Maybe I’ll see you around again before you head back to the big city.”

“Maybe,” she agreed though Gavin could hear the noncommittal tone in her voice.

The man tipped his hat and nodded before ambling away. Gavin couldn’t help the low growl that escaped him as he watched Major’s retreating back. Jillian laid a hand on his forearm, and only then did he realize just what he was doing. Cutting himself off abruptly, he shot Jillian an apologetic wince and nodded at the fountain. “Make your wish, Jilli,” he grumbled as he fought the color that was fast rising under his skin.

She braced herself on his arm and rose on her toes to kiss his cheek before whirling around, grasping the coin in her hands in front of her chest in the sort of pose that reminded Gavin of the cutesy drawn Christmas cards with the depictions of the little angels praying by the manger of the Baby Jesus.

He sighed. It didn’t surprise him, did it? Jillian drew that sort of attention from men wherever she went, and the men always seemed to ignore the fact that Gavin was standing right there. Though he’d resigned himself to it long ago, it still grated on his nerves from time to time, especially tonight . . .

‘Because you’re on a date, Gavin. Jillian says it’s a date . . .’

‘So she says,’ he fumed with an inward snort. *‘Some date . . . ambushed by a dork named Major . . .’*

‘You weren’t ambushed,’ his youkai pointed out reasonably. *‘You dropped the penny. He was just being nice, and if you didn’t notice, Jillian barely gave him more than standard courtesy.’*

‘Yeah, well . . . whatever.’

‘Which is what you always say whenever you can’t think of something better.’

“There!” Jillian exclaimed softly as she spun around to face him once more. “Gavvie?”

Blinking rapidly as she waved her hand in front of his face to snap him out of his reverie, Gavin leaned away but smiled. “Finished?”

“Yes,” she stated, slipping her arm through his once more.

“Okay. What’d you wish for?”

Chapter 11
Waterspell

“Why?”

Gavin rolled his eyes but didn't stop as he hefted the saddle over the rack and grabbed a smaller one that would better fit Jillian. Without missing a stride as he stalked across the barn floor, he hooked the gear under his arm and jerked the stall door open. The sedate old mare affectionately called Lattice nudged Gavin's breast pocket for a lump of sugar or a hunk of carrot—neither of which he had on his person. Finding nothing of interest, she turned away with a snort, sticking her nose into the feed bag hanging on a peg on the far side of the stall.

“Forget it, Jillian,” he stated flatly as he heaved the saddle over the horse's broad back.

“But he *likes* me!” she argued.

“Save your breath, Jilli. You're not riding Waterspell, and that's final.”

He didn't have to look at her to know that her face had contorted into 'The Pout'. He did, anyway, heaving a sigh when he caught sight of the distended lower lip, the tilt of her head as she peered through her lashes at him. Eyebrows drawn together in a consternated frown, she had her arms crossed over her chest as she shuffled her pink cowboy boots against the rough wood plank floor. “That's *so* not working this time, brat,” he growled inflicting a bit of irritation into his tone in hopes that she would let the subject drop.

He should have known better.

“I know how to ride horses,” she pointed out reasonably—*too* reasonably.

Gavin shook his head as he secured the buckles on the saddle and gave Lattice a light slap on the hindquarters. “He's not a rider,” he maintained. “Keep talking, Jilli . . . you're still not getting your way.”

“He hates being in that corral all day,” she pouted.

“I'm sure he does,” he agreed rather mildly. “He's too dangerous, though, and you're not riding him. Ever.”

Jillian rolled her eyes. “But he's such a pretty boy,” she crooned as she gripped the windowsill that overlooked the paddock where the horse in question had been put out. “What's the good of having him if he can't be ridden?”

Gavin sighed as he slipped the bit into Lattice's mouth. "He's a breeder, Jilli—only a breeder. He doesn't have the temperament to be a good rider. He's too much like his father and grandfather that way."

"Oh?"

He nodded as he continued to ready the horse for Jillian's ride. "His grandfather—Old Dusky . . . my grandfather wanted to tame him. He tried to, but . . ."

"But?" she prompted when he trailed off.

Gavin shrugged off-handedly. Scowling as he fastened the bridle by rote, he tamped down the melancholy pang that always assailed him when he thought about his late grandfather. "But he couldn't be tamed," he finished simply.

He could feel Jillian's eyes boring into his back as he kept working. He didn't doubt for a second that she was smart enough to figure everything out on her own. He'd told her before that his grandfather had been killed in a cattle stampede, but he hadn't told her that Old Dusky had caused the stampede. Grandpa Rog had been trying to tame the devil, and his upset had managed to spook the cattle . . .

"You win, Gavvie," she said quietly, sighing as she stepped away from the window. He heard the soft rustle of her clothing—at least she'd opted to wear jeans for the excursion—moments before he felt her arms slip around his waist. Hugging his back, she gave him a little squeeze. Gavin blinked and stared at her hands; at her splayed fingers pressing into the fabric of his shirt. "I'm sorry about your grandpa."

His smile was a little sad, but he clumsily patted Jillian's hands. "It's okay, Jilli," he assured her. "It was a long time ago."

Resting her cheek against his back, Jillian paused a moment before letting her arms drop away. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost someone I cared about," she ventured.

Gavin nodded. Youkai lived so much longer, and it was much, much harder to kill them . . . Jillian hadn't really been touched by death before. She knew, of course, that her mother had died just after giving birth to her. Thing was, she couldn't remember her, and while it was better that way, he was certain, it also lent a certain level of distance when the only parents she remembered were Cain and Gin Zelig. Truthfully, the concept of death was a difficult one for most youkai and hanyous to understand. In a day and age when violence was further removed for most youkai, the very idea of it was something that had become more of an abstract thought than a conscious possibility. The true nature of the youkai had changed over time. After Sesshoumaru's legendary edict centuries ago—after youkai began to hide their ways from nervous human eyes—youkai had been cautioned against showing too much of their aggressive tendencies, and to that end, they'd been able to fade into myth and legend.

"Don't worry about it, Jilli. Dad always told me that Grandpa Rog didn't have regrets."

She let her arms drop and stepped back. Gavin glanced over his shoulder and grimaced when he saw the sadness in her eyes. Was she thinking about her own grandparents? InuYasha and Kagome . . . of course she was. The hanyou of legend and the powerful miko . . . they loved and doted on their granddaughter, didn't they? *'Everyone loves Jillian,'* his youkai whispered in his mind. She was trying to understand what it would have been like, to lose them, wasn't she?

"Jilli," he mumbled, turning around and clumsily pulling her into his arms. "Don't be sad, okay? We . . . we're on vacation, remember? You can't be sad on vacation."

She nodded, choking back a quiet sob as she buried her face against his chest. "Aunt Nezumi . . . she lost a baby . . . and that means the baby died, right?"

He sighed, stroking her hair and scowling over her head out the window at the horse cantering around the large paddock. "It does," he agreed.

"Oh . . ." She sniffled. "Gavvie?"

"Yeah?"

Drawing a ragged breath, Jillian leaned back, dashing the back of her hand over her eyes, swatting the tears off her cheeks as she swallowed hard. "Would it be all right if we went for a ride later?" she asked with an apologetic shake of her head.

He forced a wan smile. "Whatever you want," he told her.

She nodded and gulped, crossing her arms over her chest as she turned on her heel and slowly shuffled toward the barn door. "I think . . . I think I want to call Mama," she said. "I think I should see how Aunt Nezumi is doing."

He watched her go and sighed. Truthfully, he had been surprised that she hadn't called Gin sooner. Though he didn't expect that she'd be told that Nezumi was completely fine, he figured that it would make Jillian feel better to know that her aunt was trying to cope.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

Bas Zelig dragged his hand over his face with a weary sigh as he slammed the cover of his laptop computer closed. *'Damn it . . .'*

They were no closer to finding Mickey B. than they had been at the start. Somehow the bastard had been able to cover his tracks a little too well. Whether he was that computer savvy or if he just knew enough to cover his tracks through a number of internet fallacies, Bas wasn't sure, but with every passing day, Mickey seemed to be growing a little more restless—angrier . . .

The door to his office opened with a soft click. Bas didn't have to look up to know that Sydnie, his mate, had slipped into the room. "Here, puppy," she said as she approached the desk, her heels clicking against the marble floor.

Reaching out to take the cup of coffee she held in her hands, Bas finally sighed and sat back, shaking his head slowly without taking his gaze off his mate. "Thanks."

"You don't look so good," she mused. "Another email?"

The idea of lying to Sydnie never even crossed his mind. With a curt nod, Bas shoved the laptop toward her with one hand as he brought the Styrofoam cup to his lips with the other. "He's like a damn cockroach," Bas growled. "We just can't get rid of him."

"Oh, my God," Sydnie mumbled as she stared at the image that was attached to the latest email. Green eyes flashing to meet his, she slowly shook her head. "Has Gavin seen this one?"

Bas shook his head, too. "No."

"And I'm assuming your father hasn't seen it, either."

He didn't stop shaking his head. "*Hell*, no."

Sydnie settled on the edge of the desk, clicking through the different emails as the chime sounded announcing the arrival of yet another correspondence. "There's a new one, too."

"Shit."

Grimacing as she opened the email, she shot Bas a worried glance as she bit her lip and reluctantly nodded. "Another shower shot," she informed him as he reached over to snag the edge of the laptop and swiveled it to check it out. She flinched when an explosion of expletives colored the air in the office.

The first image of Jillian's form in the shower had been bad enough. She'd been hunched over as though she were washing her legs, but he'd seen enough of her head to know that it was her and to realize that the camera that had taken the pictures had to have been mounted in the exhaust fan. In fact, that was where Gunnar was, at the moment. He'd left last night to go to Jillian's apartment and conduct another sweep for intelligence-gathering devices. He'd called awhile ago to confirm that there had been a tiny camera transmitter in the bathroom. According to Gunnar, it was one of the newer ones, roughly the size of a pencil eraser—disposable. The battery life was only about three weeks, and it worked in much the same manner as a webcam, transmitting images or even video footage to another computer terminal that could be set up anywhere it could get a signal from the transmitter the same way that a cell phone could pick up signal from towers and satellites. In the end, it wouldn't matter if it was left wherever it was planted since the camera itself retained no active memory and could not be traced back to the mother device. Still, one of the cameras normally ran around two-thousand-five-hundred dollars—no small bit of pocket change, really . . .

The only real bit of luck was there were only five or six companies worldwide that manufactured the cameras, so it would be entirely possible to pinpoint the manufacturer of the electronic, and if they were really lucky, the company might be able to provide a list of everyone who had purchased the devices in the past year.

This picture, though . . .

Bas sighed as Sydnie slipped off the desk and kissed his forehead before heading out of the office once more. “Hey, kitty . . . where are you going?” he called after her.

She poked her head back into the office long enough to smile at him as she tucked a long strand of auburn hair behind her ear. “Someone has to concentrate on the other cases,” she remarked. “Anyway, you concentrate on doing something about that bastard. After all, if Jillian doesn’t come back soon, I’ll go crazy dealing with you and your nasty sports. Who else will keep me company while you’re screaming at the television?”

“I’m not *that* bad,” Bas grumbled.

“That’s what you think, puppy,” Sydnie retorted but smiled.

Bas chuckled despite his bleak thoughts. “Let me know if you need me,” he told her as he closed out the emails and snapped the lid closed once more.

‘No sense in putting it off,’ he thought with an inward sigh as he reached for the telephone. Gavin was going to be mad as hell about it, but he’d be madder still if Bas let him find the email on his own . . .

Dialing Gavin’s number, he sat back to wait.

“Gavin Jamison.”

“Hey, Gav; it’s me, Bas.”

“Hold on,” he mumbled, covering the receiver with one hand. Bas could hear him saying something though he couldn’t make out the words. He could hear shuffling, and a minute later, Gavin uncovered the receiver. “Any news?”

Shifting in his seat to prop his forehead on his fingertips, Bas sighed. “Another email,” he finally allowed. “Another picture.”

Gavin sighed, too. “What’s this one?”

“It’s . . . worse,” he admitted, tapping a claw against his forehead.

“Worse?” Gavin echoed. “How could it possibly be worse?”

Bas grimaced. “It just is,” he ground out.

“Hmm . . .”

Bas' grimace shifted into a full-blown scowl when he heard the tones signifying that Gavin had turned on his computer. “You might not want to see it,” he drawled.

“Spare me, Bas,” Gavin grumbled. The sound of keystrokes came through the phone line, and Bas heaved another sigh. Gavin was far too stubborn when it came to Jillian. While it didn't surprise him that Gavin wanted to check the email for himself, Bas also knew that it was probably not exactly what he was expecting to see, either.

“Wh—what the—?” Gavin sputtered.

Bas winced as the image of Jillian, slumping against the tile wall of the shower came to mind. Over the frosted glass of the doors that enclosed the shower stall, he could still see her face. Head leaned back, mouth hanging slack, her cheeks dusted with a pretty pink flush that had little to do with the temperature of the water and everything to do with the feelings coursing through her body, there wasn't a doubt in Bas' mind as to what, exactly, his sister had been doing, and Gavin . . . well, judging from his reaction, it was a safe bet that Gavin knew what she was doing, too.

“Gunnar found the camera. It was installed in the ventilation fan in the ceiling,” Bas went on, judiciously choosing to ignore Gavin's incoherent stammering. “He'll be bringing it in for analysis, but he said that it's one of those disposable ones, so I highly doubt there's any sort of mechanical fingerprint on it.”

“Damn him,” Gavin growled, his tone taking on a predatory rumble. It was a tone that Bas hadn't heard from Gavin before. “*Damn him!*”

“Take it easy, Gavin. We're doing what we can. With any luck, we'll be able to find out something when we figure out who manufactured the camera. Losing your cool isn't going to help anything.”

“You think I don't know that? I think I know—” Gavin snarled then cut himself off with a sigh. “Sorry,” he allowed, sounding anything but contrite.

Bas rubbed his eye and sighed yet again. “Don't worry about it. Just . . . keep Jilli away from the computer, and don't let her watch the news.”

“Yeah, well, at least that's not a problem,” Gavin grumbled. Bas smiled despite the seriousness of the situation. He knew as well as anyone that the odds of Jillian sitting down to watch the news were slim and none. She hated the endless onslaught of depressing stories—stories that confirmed the bad in mankind.

“Anything unusual going on there?” Bas asked, more to change the subject than because he believed anything really was happening.

Gavin snorted. “Not really . . . nothing ever happens around Hidekea.”

“Good. Glad to hear it.”

“Hurry up and catch this asshole,” Gavin ground out.

Bas nodded. “We’re working on it, Gav. I want this bastard’s balls as much as you do—probably more.”

“I *highly* doubt that.”

Bas grinned. “Speaking of ‘balls’ . . .”

Gavin snorted again. “Yeah, yeah, I know . . . keep my hands off your sister; I got it.”

“So long as we’re clear,” Bas remarked.

“Sure.”

“Keep me posted if anything does happen.”

Gavin sighed. “Right. You, too.”

“Not a problem.”

The phone line went dead, and Bas’ grin faded as he dropped the phone into the cradle once more.

True enough, Jillian had said for years that Gavin was her mate, and he believed that she thought so, sure. Thing was, if the message was getting through to Gavin, then he wasn’t acknowledging it, leaving Bas to wonder if there were any truth to Jillian’s feelings or not. Maybe she’d simply convinced herself that there was more to it than friendship. In any case, Bas kept up his threats against Gavin mostly to save Jillian’s sensibilities in the end. She cared far too much about Gavin for a casual fling to be good. Unlike Evan and Madison—and Bas didn’t even pretend to grasp the intricacies of *that* relationship—Jillian *did* want Gavin to be her mate, and sleeping with him could only be a huge mistake. No, the best thing for those two would be for them to either become mates or to go their separate ways. As good as Gavin was at keeping Jillian grounded, her dependence on him wasn’t; at least, it wasn’t if they really weren’t mates . . .

Heaving another long sigh, Bas reached for the phone once more. No sense in trying to hide anything from Cain. He’d figure it out sooner or later. At least this way, Bas could warn him about the graphic nature of the photograph . . .

He just really hated having to make the call . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“How is everyone?” Jillian asked as she shuffled around the bedroom.

Gin sighed and gave a half-hearted laugh. “As well as can be expected,” she replied. “Nezumi’s doing her best to move on.”

“I wish I could be there.”

“No, dear . . . it’s okay. I think it’s a little overwhelming for her . . . Sierra and Belle come over every day and fuss over her . . . Coral came home just to spend time with her, and Cassidy just left yesterday . . . Chelsea and Charity have been by at least once a day—Charity even planted a memorial garden in the backyard. It’s really pretty, and Alexandra’s been around, too . . . Mama’s dropping by constantly with little gifts, and you know Papa . . . Kichiro’s been telling everyone to give Nezumi some space, so I’ve been staying with Morio and Meara since your father’s so insistent that I not stay at the house alone . . . Uncle Sesshoumaru donated an obscene amount of money to the clinic to fund more research on prenatal care of youkai and hanyou babies . . . Even Aiko made a point of flying in from Hong Kong to offer her condolences . . .”

“I know . . . I just feel so badly that I’m not there,” Jillian mumbled.

“Oh, no . . . your flowers were lovely, and Nezumi smiled when she read the card. That really was something, you know . . .”

“Give her a big squeeze for me?”

Gin laughed softly. “Of course I will, Jillian. Now you have fun. It’s been awhile since you had a real, honest to goodness vacation.”

“Yes, Mama,” she agreed. “It’s probably late there, isn’t it?”

“Well, it’s a little after one a.m. here,” Gin allowed.

“I’m sorry . . . I should have checked the time converter,” Jillian grumbled.

“Don’t worry,” Gin assured her. “I’ve been having a little trouble sleeping anyway.”

Jillian smiled just a little. “You miss Daddy.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Okay . . . I’ll let you go, then. Love you, Mama.”

“Love you, too, sweetie.”

Jillian grimaced as she clicked off the cell phone and tossed the device onto the bed before pushing the sliding door open and stepping out onto the balcony. The fresh scent of sun-dried

Chapter 12
Good Deeds

Jillian yawned and snuggled closer to Gavin's side. The sun was just coming up, and the strong breeze blowing in the window carried the barest scent of rain. *'The perfect day for lounging in bed and cuddling,'* she thought with a little grin. *'Too bad Gavvie won't go for that . . .'*

Shivering as the wind took on a cooler edge, Jillian burrowed deeper under the covers, tucking herself even closer to Gavin. His breathing caught, but he didn't wake up. She smiled to herself, savoring the feel of his arm wrapped securely around her waist. He never had been much of a morning person.

As content as she was to simply snuggle with him, though, she was wide awake—and hungry. Leaning up on her elbow, she spared a few minutes to look at him as a gentle smile illuminated her gaze. She loved mornings. It was one of the few times that she could really indulge her desire to simply stare at Gavin. When he caught her doing that during the day, he'd blush and turn all bashful. Then she had to tease him out of his embarrassment before he could relax enough to be himself, and while she didn't mind teasing him, she didn't really like for him to ever feel self-conscious. It was something she'd never, ever understood. He'd always been her hero, hadn't he? He'd never had anything to be self-conscious *about*.

Then again . . .

Her smile widened. Last night they'd spent the evening with Moe and Natalie Jamison. They lived on the south border of the ranch in a small house that, according to Gavin, had been built just before he was born. Moe had never been a rancher, Gavin had said, so he'd never really wanted the ranch, either.

Funny, really. Gavin was so much like his father that it bordered on perverse. Both men tended to be fairly quiet, very serious. In the few hours that they'd spent at the Jamison house, Moe might have said a total of ten words, and yet he never came off as unfriendly, either. He had a way of staring directly into people's eyes, making it obvious that he was listening even if he didn't really have much to say. Right after the meal, both he and Gavin had disappeared into what Natalie had affectionately deemed, 'The Gadget Room' so that Moe could show off his latest intel-gathering devices.

"Sometimes I swear the only reason he likes hunting is because he gets all the state-of-the-art gizmos," Natalie said *as she carried the empty roast beef platter into the kitchen.*

Jillian laughed as she grabbed a cream-colored china bowl that had been heaped with garden-fresh green beans and baby onions and followed Natalie through the swinging taupe leather-covered door. "So that's where Gavin gets his affinity for electronics?"

Natalie rolled her bright green eyes and laughed. "Something like that."

Rolling up her sleeves while Natalie filled one side of the double-basin sink with rinse water, Jillian grabbed a clean, white dishcloth off the counter and started washing glasses. “He looks just like his father,” she went on, smiling to herself in a vague sort of way.

“Gavin? Yes, he does—a fact that Moe is constantly pointing out to me, you know.”

Jillian laughed. It was absolutely true. Natalie Jamison was a tiny woman with ash blonde hair and sparkling green eyes—eyes so green that they looked like she wore contacts to enhance the color. Gavin had always spoken of his mother in the highest of regard, and while Jillian had met Natalie a few times in the past, it was the first time she’d really spoken with her one-on-one. It was easy to see why Gavin loved his mother so much. She was absolutely charming.

It had occurred to her at the time, how strange it was that the two men—father and son—were fundamentally so similar and yet they’d chosen such vastly different professions. Gavin had said many times that he was eventually going to move to Montana and renovate the ranch, and though he’d mentioned before that his father had always hoped that Gavin would choose to be a hunter, too, Moe hadn’t ever tried to bully Gavin into doing it, either. It was just as well, in Jillian’s opinion. Gavin just wasn’t a hunter. Then again, maybe it wasn’t so odd. Her oldest brother, Sebastian—Bas to most; Bassie to her—was a hunter for a brief time. It was a matter of protecting what one believed in, wasn’t it? It was simply that protection, itself, could come in any number of ways. For Moe Jamison, it was by becoming a hunter and protecting the beliefs that he lived by. For her father, it was by conducting the business of the tai-youkai—something that Jillian knew her father did because it was his duty; not because he enjoyed it. For Gavin . . .

For Gavin, it was as simple as protecting her. Even if he never had to do it in a physical sense, he’d always been the one who made her feel safe; secure. He was the one she sought out when she needed comfort or when she was afraid. Maybe in that he was more like his father than he gave himself credit for . . .

Smiling gently as she carefully brushed Gavin’s bangs out of his face, Jillian let her fingertips trail along the roughened skin of his cheek. Unconsciously turning toward her touch, he sighed. Jillian bit her lips, pressing her free hand against her chest as her heart skipped a beat. His lips parted slightly, and he seemed to whisper something that wasn’t completely coherent, and for one brief, dizzying moment, Jillian thought she heard her name.

‘You’d better stop it,’ her youkai chided.

Jillian sighed, letting her hand drop away from his face as she carefully slipped out of the security of Gavin’s arm and off the bed. True enough, she spent every morning in much the same fashion—staring at Gavin while he slept. She was also very careful to be out of bed by the time he woke up since he’d probably freak if he caught her eyeing him like that . . .

Grabbing the keys to the truck off the bureau, she padded to the door and paused long enough to glance back at him. If she hurried, she’d have time to run to the grocery store in Hidekea for fresh fruit to go with breakfast before Gavin woke up . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“She can’t have simply disappeared.”

Gritting his teeth together as he tossed the tabloid paper aside, he flexed his fist tightly, stalking around the room like a caged beast. Saying the words out loud did little to dispel the absolute frustration that gripped him. He’d been so close, hadn’t he? So very, very close, and now . . .

Now he was back to square one.

“*Damn* it!” he gnashed out. She’d managed to slip through his fingers, making a mockery of him; making him look like a fool.

If the tabloids couldn’t even find her . . .

Well, that was saying something, wasn’t it?

Maybe she knew more than she ought to. The thought had occurred to him more than once since her disappearance. It was bad enough that she’d disappeared—worse was the feeling that her disappearance made him look completely inept.

Flopping into a chair in the nondescript hotel room, he drummed his claws on the ratty armrest, jaw ticking as he considered his options.

She was with that man, wasn’t she? He’d seen them together before. He escorted her all over New York City. If he could figure out who the man was, maybe he could find her, too—if the two of them were still together.

Digging a cell phone out of his pocket, he dialed the number of the airport.

“Cancun International,” a woman greeted.

“Yes, I need the next available flight out.”

“Okay,” she said, her fingertips clicking rapidly on a computer keyboard. “Destination?”

He leaned forward, glowering at the tabloid on the coffee table. “New York City.”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin stomped outside, jamming his hat onto his head as he strode down the porch and headed for the main stable, muttering dire invectives under his breath as he shot a fulminating glower at

the empty spot in the driveway where his truck should have been. Muttering about irrational women and car theft, he jerked the brim of his hat a little lower to shield the rain out of his face, grabbing the door handle with his free hand and giving it a good, hard yank.

It scared him, damn it: scared him more than he wanted to admit. Waking up to find out that Jillian had arisen long before he had wasn't uncommon, but normally he found her somewhere nearby unless she had a photo shoot. When he'd gotten up only to figure out that she had taken the truck and left, though, especially after the last picture that Mickey B. had sent . . . Well, it simply wasn't sitting well with him. He wanted Jillian where he could see her. She was just too friendly, too open, and it made her too much of a target . . .

"Mornin', Gavvie," Hank drawled over the rim of his coffee mug.

"Where's Jillian?" he demanded without preamble as he took off his hat and shook off the rain.

"No idea," Hank replied, draining his coffee in one long gulp. "Should I have one?"

Gavin snorted, hooking his hat over a nail beside the door. "I don't know," he grumbled. "I just figured you'd put her up to something."

"I ain't seen her today, if that's what you're asking."

Grabbing a reasonably clean mug off the stack beside the old coffee maker, Gavin grabbed the pot to fill it. "You're sure?"

Hank shrugged. "Hell, Gavin . . . it's raining fishhooks and hammer handles out there . . . you think I got nothing better to do than stand around getting soaked so I can keep an eye on your truck?"

"Yes," Gavin growled though the scowl on his face said otherwise.

Hank laughed. "Yeah, well, sorry . . . Figured I'd spend the day mending tack. The reports said we were in for it, so . . ."

"Wuss."

Hank grinned unrepentantly. "You're calling *me* a wuss?"

"Seems so, doesn't it?"

"In that case . . . absolutely."

Gavin finally chuckled though he kept glancing at the window toward the empty driveway outside. "Where are the guys?"

"Some of them are sleeping in. A couple others are taking the day off."

Gavin rolled his eyes. "Am I paying them for today?"

Hank nodded, taking the coffee pot and dumping the last of it into his cup before replacing it and turning off the machine. "Yup."

Gavin paused with the mug hovering near his lips. "Figures."

Hank chuckled and ambled back over to the tack table once more. "So you're telling me Jillian didn't leave you a note?"

"Nope."

"Maybe she ran off to find a *real* man . . . 'Course, she wouldn't have had to go further than the barn. I been out here all morning."

"In your dreams," Gavin snorted.

Hank chuckled. "Yeah, yeah . . . hand me that bridle, will you?"

Gavin shot Hank a glower but tossed the gear at him. It landed on the table beside him. Glancing back at the window, Gavin couldn't contain the relieved little sigh as the contorted beams from the truck's headlights cut through the dismal grayness outside. Striding over to the door without bothering to grab his hat, he stomped outside into the unrelenting rain but stopped short when the passenger side door opened, and a strange man stepped out.

"Hi, Gavvie!" Jillian greeted brightly as she ran over to give him a quick hug as though she didn't realize it was raining. "Sorry it took me so long . . . I got sidetracked."

"So I see," he grumbled without taking his eyes off the young man who stood beside the truck with his shoulders scrunched up looking completely miserable. Hair plastered to his head, ragged denim jacket dripping too much water for him to have been dry in the truck. "Who's that?"

Glancing over her shoulder, Jillian's mouth rounded in an 'oh' seconds before she darted over and grabbed the young man's hand, dragging him toward the stable and leaving Gavin behind to glower after them.

"Take that wet jacket off before you catch a cold," Jillian demanded as she hurried over to start a fresh pot of coffee. "Hank, do you have a dry shirt he can wear? I'll throw his in the dryer, but he's soaked to the skin."

Hank blinked and shot Gavin a questioning glance as he pulled off the flannel shirt he was wearing over a plain black tee-shirt. "Here," he said, tossing the shirt at the stranger.

"Thanks," he said, his voice quiet, unsure.

"He needs a job, Gavvie," Jillian went on as she measured coffee grounds into a clean filter.

Gavin carefully blanked his features as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Does ‘he’ have a name?”

“Oh . . . s-sorry . . . Cody . . . Cody Mitchell,” the man said.

Gavin slowly gave Cody the once-over. If the kid was older than twenty-four, Gavin would eat his Stetson. Not small, exactly, but very wiry, Hank’s shirt hung on Cody’s lean frame like a sheet, and he shivered slightly but didn’t look away. “You from around here, Cody?” Gavin asked.

Cody nodded. “Yeah . . . from Hidekea.”

Gavin shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t—”

Jillian turned on the coffee pot and hurried over, linking her arm through Gavin’s and pinning him with a meaningful glance. “Help me bring in the groceries, Gavvie? I left them in the back of the truck.”

He snorted but followed her back out into the rain. It didn’t show any signs of letting up, but Jillian didn’t seem to mind. “Jilli, do you know anything about that guy?” he demanded as she shoved soggy paper bags into his arms.

“Hold onto the bottom of the bags or they’ll rip,” she replied, raising her voice to be heard over the falling rain and rumbling thunder. She scooped up the last bag, carefully wrapping her arms around it so that it didn’t tear. “He was standing beside the road with a sign that said, ‘Will Work for Food.’”

Following her up to the house, Gavin rolled his eyes and waited while she bumped the door open with her hip. “That’s all you know?”

Jillian laughed as she trailed water through the house into the kitchen. “No . . . he’s got two little girls and his wife’s expecting . . . He said he worked at some car factory, but they shut down a few months ago . . .”

Gavin frowned. He remembered hearing something about that. His mother had mentioned that the Chrysalis plant in Helena had closed down without giving the employees any notice just after the start of the year, leaving over a thousand people out of work. Sure, some of them probably moved to find work elsewhere, but surely not all of them could have done that. Still, he didn’t know anything at all about this guy, and Jillian . . . He sighed. They didn’t have a clue who was stalking her. Giving this kid a job . . . well, Gavin wasn’t sure he could do that. “Jilli . . .”

She likely heard the reticence in his voice because she hurried to say, “You *have* to give him a job, Gavvie. He needs it in the worst way.”

He grimaced. Under normal circumstances, he'd believe the young man's story, hands down, but with Jillian's safety on the line, well, he just couldn't do that, could he? "We don't know anything about him," he said with a shake of his head. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"His wife is pregnant! You can't just send him away like that!"

Ignoring the sharp pang from his conscience, Gavin heaved a sigh. "He doesn't even look like he knows a damn thing about working on a ranch," he pointed out.

She shook her head and set a bag of red grapes on the counter. "At least find something for him to do today. I tried to give him money, you know. He wouldn't take it. He doesn't want a hand-out, Gavin. He wants to earn it."

He'd have been fine, he supposed, if he hadn't looked at her. As it was, one glance at her pleading expression was just a little more than he could stand. Coupled with the knowledge that the guy's wife was expecting and that they had two little ones at home already, Gavin couldn't say no so easily. "Let me go talk to him," he grumbled, "but I'm not making any promises."

Jillian clapped her hands and bounced up to kiss his cheek. "Thank you, Gavvie! You're such a sweet man!"

Heaving a long-suffering sigh, Gavin turned on his heel and headed back to the stable once more. So long as Cody checked out, maybe he could find something else for him to do . . .

He found Cody sitting at the table beside Hank with a cup of coffee clutched in his hands and looking around as though he were completely lost. It was quite obvious to Gavin that it was the first time Cody had ever been anywhere near horses, and the sinking feeling in his chest grew a little heavier. Yes, he'd promised Jillian that he'd see about putting the young man to work. Trouble was, he wasn't sure he had anything that Cody *could* do.

"You're not used to the animals," Gavin commented as he grabbed his mug and filled it with coffee.

Cody grimaced, cheeks pinking, and he looked like he wanted to argue that. "No, sir," he admitted at last.

"What can you do?"

Cody shrugged. "Not sure," he replied honestly—miserably. "I'm not so good with animals. More of a mechanic, really . . ."

"Mechanics?"

Cody nodded then winced. "Uh, yeah . . . I'm pretty handy with cars and stuff, but I don't have the certificate." He grimaced. "I was saving up the money to get certified, but the factory shut down."

“You know, Gav, you’ve got those trucks out back that could be fixed,” Hank commented neutrally, carefully keeping his gaze on the bridle he was retooling.

Gavin scratched his chin as he considered that. “True enough . . . you think you could take a look at those?”

“I could do that,” Cody blurted, obviously relieved to find something that he might be able to do and just as obviously eager to work, too.

“Why don’t you take a look at them when the rain lets up while I call some references . . . you have some references, right?”

“Oh, uh, okay . . . If you have a piece of paper . . .”

Hank dug one out and slapped a pen down on it, sending Gavin a knowing grin that Gavin summarily ignored.

Cody drummed the pen on the table, glancing around almost nervously before he cleared his throat to speak. “If you have a phone book . . . there’re some guys I worked with at the Chrysalis plant. Last time I tried to find an address for a reference from Chrysalis, the place told me that they couldn’t get a phone number . . . You need my social security number or anything?”

“Yeah,” Gavin agreed. He’d call Bas in a bit and ask him to run it through the system.

“I could look at the trucks now,” Cody offered as he leafed through the phone book Hank had given him. “I’m not worried about a little rain.”

Gavin grinned despite himself. “They’re not going anywhere, and with any luck the rain’ll let up sooner than later. You need to give your wife a call?”

Cody grimaced. “Ah, well . . . we don’t have a phone. She’ll be okay.”

“Is there someone nearby you can call? Was she expecting you home soon?”

“Not really . . . I went out to check on some applications and fill out a few more.” He sighed and shook his head. “Can you believe that McDonald’s isn’t hiring?”

Actually, it didn’t surprise him. Jobs were few and far between in these parts, he knew. “McDonald’s wouldn’t pay enough to help much,” Gavin mused.

Cody scratched his head with a thoughtful frown on his face. “Yeah, well, it’d pay something, and I’m not picky.” He narrowed his gaze as his cheeks pinked, but he didn’t look away when he admitted, “We don’t qualify for food stamps and stuff . . . we’d just got a loan for a house when the factory shut down, and since we’re not renting, the welfare won’t help.” He shrugged. “To start with, they wouldn’t help because we own a house and had some savings—”

“Your money you were saving to get certified?”

He nodded. “They’re covering my daughters’ medical, though, and Sherry—my wife—she’ll be covered for the baby. That’s about it . . . till the bank forecloses on the house.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

Cody shrugged again. “Not a big deal, right? My girls are healthy. We can start over. Just sort of sucks. All the money we’d been saving’s gone on the house and the bills . . . According to them, you have to lose everything before they can help at all, I guess.”

Gavin nodded, too. “Well, let me check your references then we’ll talk.”

“Okay . . . uh, thanks . . . Thanks a lot, even if it’s just for one day.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Gavin said, taking the paper and heading for the doors once more, hoping that Cody was being completely honest with him. Maybe it was Jillian’s influence, but he kind of wanted to help the kid . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin pulled into the narrow driveway, careful not to bump into the little pink tricycle with white and pink plastic streamers hanging from the glittery plastic handlebars. The toy was faded by the sun and rusted around the spokes in the tires, but Gavin smiled at the obvious care that had been taken with the little girl’s tricycle.

Bas had been happy to run a full background check on Cody, and Gavin had been relieved to find out that the young man had been more than forthcoming with his story. It was a relief, and in return for this honesty, Gavin had offered him a full time job at the ranch. Cody would be in charge of maintaining all the machinery on the place—a job that Cody had seemed genuinely thrilled with. It wasn’t a small task by any means, and certainly wasn’t a hand-out. Besides the regular vehicles, there was also a building of farm machinery that needed repaired, too. The goal was to utilize some of the land to grow feed, and the equipment sorely needed to be fixed before that could be possible.

“Sorry,” Cody muttered when he caught sight of the toy. “Been telling Minnie not to leave her bike there, but she’s been careless lately. Didn’t seem like a big deal after they came and repo’ed the car.”

“Minnie?” Gavin echoed, trying to hide his smile at the old-fashioned name.

Cody laughed a little self-consciously. “That’s what we call her. Her real name’s Justina, but she had really big ears and no hair when she was born . . . Reminded us of Minnie Mouse.”

“So long as it fits,” Gavin agreed with a chuckle. “I’ll probably send Hank after you in the morning, but days on a ranch start pretty early, so don’t be surprised if he’s here by six.”

“That’s cool,” Cody assured him as he let himself out of the truck. “Tell your wife, thanks . . . I appreciate everything she did for us.”

Gavin stopped short, unable to keep the instantaneous heat from filtering into his cheeks. “She’s not—we’re not—uh, we aren’t married.”

“Oh . . . I’m sorry,” Cody said with an apologetic shrug. “I just thought—I mean, you seemed like . . .” Shaking his head, he trailed off, obviously uncomfortable with the personal nature of the conversation. “Sorry.”

Shoving aside his acute embarrassment, Gavin got out, too, and pushed the bench seat forward to retrieve the huge basket of staple groceries that Jillian had packed up. Turning long enough to hand off the burden, Gavin shoved the seat back into place and closed the door before grabbing the ice chest out of the back of the truck. “Here’s some meat. The boys’ll be slaughtering a couple cows in a few weeks, so don’t worry about it. Where do you want this?”

Cody opened his mouth to reply when a high-pitched voice rang out behind them. “Daddy!” the little girl yelled as she practically flew out the front door and down the sidewalk to cling onto her father’s legs.

“Hey, Minnie . . . how’s Mommy doing?” Cody asked, shifting the basket so he could reach down and ruffle his daughter’s pale blonde hair.

“Mommy’s giving Karis a baff,” Minnie replied. “Look! I oft a toof!”

Cody laughed when his daughter pried her own mouth open with her fingers so that he could see the gap in her teeth. “So you did.”

“I’ll just, uh . . .” Gavin mumbled, setting the ice chest in the grass beside the driveway. “Just bring the cooler back tomorrow.”

Cody nodded, contorting his body in an effort not to dislodge his daughter, hold onto the basket, and shake Gavin’s hand. “I will,” he promised.

Gavin nodded as he dug one last thing from his pocket: a cell phone. Here.”

Cody frowned but slowly held out his hand. “But—”

Gavin shook his head and opened the door again. “No ‘buts’. Your wife’s pregnant, and you don’t have a vehicle, right? You call me if she goes into labor . . . besides, you’ll be working on those trucks, right? If she needs you, she should have a way to get a hold of you. Don’t worry about it. It’s a prepaid phone. I put a thousand minutes on it, but after that, it’s up to you for as long as you need it.”

Chapter 13
Fortune Cookies

“Have I told you lately how wonderful you are?”

Gavin peeked up from an email he was working on. His boss had misplaced one of Gavin’s files, and Gavin had spent the better part of the morning trying to explain to him how to retrieve the file, all via email.

He lifted an eyebrow before turning his attention back to his task. “Am I?”

Jillian nodded as she stepped over to the desk, setting a box on the corner.

“What’s that?” he asked without glancing at her again.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “It’s from Evan.”

He stopped; fingers poised over the keypad, and shot the box a distrustful look. “Is it a bomb?”

She laughed. “You really think Evvie would send you a bomb?”

“Well, it’s too small to be one of his groupies,” he allowed.

“Open it!”

Chuckling since he had half a mind to leave the box alone just to drive Jillian insane, Gavin leaned back in the groaning old chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t know, Jilli,” he began slowly. “I think I’ll open it later.”

She snorted and slapped his arm playfully. “You will not!” she exclaimed.

“Packages from Evan are scary,” he stated.

She grabbed his hand and wrapped her hands around his fingers, holding his hand so that his index finger was extended. He laughed as she used his claw to slit the stringy tape that was wrapped around the box. “Oh, look! You changed your mind! Now what’d he send?”

“Dunno, Jilli. You tell me.”

Giggling as she pulled the nondescript brown paper away from the box, she used her own claw to slice through the next layer of tape. A note rested atop the contents, and Jillian handed it to him impatiently before delving into the package once more.

Unfolding the paper, Gavin read the note.

:

'Gavvie,

'Sorry I missed your birthday. Hopefully these make up for that.'

'Ev.'

:

"Fortune cookies!" Jillian announced happily. "You're going to share, right?"

He wrinkled his nose as he snatched the plastic wrapped cookie out of Jillian's hand. "Think again, Jilli. These are mine." He nodded at the smaller box that Jillian had left on the coffee table. "What's that?"

"It's for me."

He rolled his eyes. "Then why didn't you open it?"

With a flash of the dimples that left Gavin staring for a moment, Jillian giggled. "Because I wanted to see what he sent you, silly!"

"He sent you that?"

She nodded as she opened the package with a razor sharp claw and pulled out a note.

:

'Jilli,

'Here's a cookie for you since Gavin'll probably hog all of his.'

'Love,

'Evvie.'

:

"See? Eat your own and leave mine alone," he told her.

She frowned at him, shaking her head as she crossed her arms over her chest. "But he only sent me one," she pouted.

"Tough cookies, Jilli," he shot back.

She wrinkled her nose. “Listen, mister, I’ve met your mama, and I refuse to believe that she never taught you how to share.”

“I’m an only child . . . what is there to have to share?” he countered with an unrepentant grin.

“But you know I love fortune cookies,” she argued.

“And you know that these are *my* present,” he retorted as a curt knock sounded on the front door.

“Gav-vie!”

“Jil-li!”

“Fine, fine . . . be stingy . . . see if I care . . .”

He laughed at her obvious lie as she wandered off to see who was knocking.

“Hey, Gavin . . . I got a better look at the trucks.”

Setting the box on the coffee table, Gavin turned his attention to the young man. “Oh?”

“Looks like the starter is fried in the blue truck,” Cody said, wiping his greasy hands on a work rag as he followed Jillian into the house. “There’re a few other issues, too, and it’s been sitting so long it might not run right without replacing a few other things. The tires are dry-rotted but they’re okay for a little while . . . You sure you don’t want to just junk that truck?”

“Can you fix it?” Gavin asked quietly as Jillian grabbed a new copy of *Energee* magazine off the coffee table along with her lonely little fortune cookie and headed for the sliding glass doors.

Cody shrugged. “Well, yeah . . . just take a bit of time, and a lot of parts, maybe.” He grimaced since he likely believed he was costing himself a job. “It’s just . . . when a vehicle sits that long, things go bad, and if certain things lock up, then it could ruin the entire engine if you try to start it without knowing. It’d be less hassle to junk it—and maybe less money, too.”

Gavin nodded. “What about the other truck? The black one?”

“Well, that one just has a problem with the fuel lines, I think. Shouldn’t be too tough to fix it. Could pull the lines and redo it with one of those hybrid systems. It’d be more cost effective in the long run, and they don’t seem too hard to put in.” He grimaced. “I’ve never done that, myself, but I’ve read up on it, and I’ve got a cousin in Helena who has. He said it was pretty simple.”

“And that one would be easier to fix?”

“Sure . . . Hank said that truck’s just been sitting for a month or so.”

“Tell you what . . . figure out how much it’ll cost to fix the blue truck and give me the estimate for parts and whatnot—at least the parts you know it needs. The black truck . . . you fix it up on your own time, and you can have it.”

“Come again?”

Gavin grinned. “It’s got the bench seat in the back, right? You need something to get your wife and daughters wherever they need to go, don’t you? Besides, most of the guys here have their own trucks, so it isn’t a big deal. If you want the truth, I was just going to get rid of one of them, anyway.”

“You sure?”

“Not like it’s the nicest looking vehicle . . . and what would you do if something happened? You need a vehicle, right?”

Cody broke into a hesitant grin. “Okay . . . thanks.”

Gavin nodded, turning the laptop computer on the coffee table since the late afternoon sunlight was reflecting off the monitor. “You’re welcome.”

“It’ll cost more if you buy your parts at the store,” he commented. “I know a few guys who own junkyards . . . I’ll bet I could get most of the parts there. They’d cost a lot less, I’m sure. They’d just make me get them, myself.”

“Make a few calls and see what you can come up with,” Gavin suggested. “If you order the new fuel system for the other truck, I’ll pick it up when it’s ready.”

“Hey, Gav, got a minute?” Hank asked as he strode into the house.

Gavin leaned back to peer around Cody. “Sure . . . why?”

“I’ll get back to work,” Cody mumbled as he headed for the door.

Hank pulled off his Stetson and wiped his forehead on his arm. “Couple cows got loose in the west field. Reeks of coyotes, and another cow was brought down, too . . .”

“And the cows that got loose?”

Hank sighed. “Tangled in a fence. One’ll have to be put down, but we might be able to save the other.”

Gavin sighed, too, closing out the email he’d been looking at. “Give me a minute, will you?”

“Kay,” Hank said.

The chime announced the arrival of another email, and Gavin grimaced. Dragging a hand over his face as he hovered the cursor over the email, he braced himself for whatever might be contained therein as the rustle of plastic registered in his mind in a vague sort of way.

:

‘Okay, Jillian. I’ve been very patient, don’t you think? Very calm, very good . . . but I’m getting irritated. You know that we cannot go on like this. I’ve let you play your little games. I want you to know, though, that you’d better be home by your birthday. I have special plans for us—very special plans. You don’t want to miss it, do you?’

:

Gavin stifled a low growl. At least this email didn’t have a picture attached to it. Still, the subtle threat was enough to set his teeth to grinding, and Gavin closed out the program before closing the lid of the laptop. He hated the feeling that he was lying to Jillian about the reason why they were in Montana, but the idea of telling her that some deranged psychopath was stalking her was completely out of the question. He felt like they were sitting ducks, and he loathed that, too. He’d spent far too much of his life protecting Jillian. Staying here while Bas and Gunnar tried to track down the bastard . . . well, it was enough to drive him crazy . . .

Hank’s indelicate coughing interrupted Gavin’s reverie. Blinking to dispel the lingering thoughts that plagued him, Gavin’s eyebrows knitted together as he cautiously eyed his foreman.

“Oh, damn . . . This is the best fortune cookie I’ve ever gotten,” Hank drawled with undisguised amusement lighting his gaze.

“What?” Gavin growled.

Hank cleared his throat, holding the broken cookie in one hand and the tiny slip of paper—his fortune—in the other. “The Great Oracle says, ‘Stop dicking around and dick Jill!’”

“Give me that!” Gavin snarled, snatching the fortune out of Hank’s hand. He could feel his face flaming, and he stifled a groan as he jammed the paper into his pocket before turning a murderous glower on Hank once more.

“I’d be more than happy to make that fortune come true,” Hank commented.

Gavin took a swing at him. Hank ducked out of the way, his grin widening. “The *hell* you will!”

“Yeah, but you said that you’re not interested, right?” Hank pointed out.

“Yeah, well, neither are you!”

The miscreant had the gall to laugh. “Oh, I think I am . . .”

“Forget it,” Gavin snarled, “and stay out of my cookies.”

“Your cookies?”

Gavin snorted, stomping over to shove Hank toward the door. “Yes, *my* cookies.”

Hank chuckled but let Gavin push him along. “So that was *your* fortune?”

“Yes!”

“You gonna do it?”

“No!”

Shaking his head, Hank sighed as he reached for the doorknob. “You’re pathetic, Gav; I swear to God you are.”

“Get *out*, Hank!”

“Yeah, okay,” Hank agreed. “You want me to take care of the cattle?”

“Yes, you do that,” Gavin growled impatiently.

Hank shot him a glance then chuckled yet again. “Nice shade of red, Gavvie. Clashes with your shirt, though.”

Gavin didn’t deign to respond to that. Giving Hank another shove, he slammed the door and pivoted on his heel, stomping over to snatch the box of cookies off the coffee table. ‘*Figures . . . bet Evan’s having a damn good laugh over this . . .*’ he fumed as he headed upstairs with the box to hide them until he had time to look at the God-forsaken fortunes Evan had so obviously planted. He was a friend, sure—one of the few people that Gavin really would consider to be a friend. He supposed he had it coming since Gavin and Evan tended to do little things to pick at one another. Still . . . He sighed. ‘*Evan’s going to get it this time; I swear he is . . .*’

It never occurred to him that he’d be better off to throw the cookies out.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“*He swears he’s not my mate, but he is . . .*”

Natalie Jamison paused with a wooden spoon in her hand poised just above the hearty stew she was stirring and sighed as Jillian’s words sounded in her ears. Ever since the two had come over for dinner a few nights ago, she’d been thinking about them.

How could she not? It seemed to her that Gavin had found his mate—everything about the way he took care of Jillian; the way he made sure she never wanted or needed a thing bespoke it. She could tell just from spending a precious few hours with them that their bond was real, and that it wasn't simply a bond of friendship. True, she was a little biased. What mother wouldn't want her son to be mated to the daughter of the North American tai-youkai? That aside, though, she could tell that there really was something between Jillian and Gavin, no matter what her stubborn son might say.

She sighed. The trouble was that Gavin, bless him, had always been a little too much like his father. Moe had been reluctant to ask her to become his mate in the beginning. He was proud of what he did, surely. Protecting humans as well as youkai—that was Moe's job—his *calling*, really, but Moe's reticence might have had something to do with Natalie's upbringing. Raised in the sultry heat of Louisiana in the late nineteenth century, she guessed she really had been the quintessential Southern Belle, and Moe . . . She smiled. The first time she'd laid eyes on Moe Jamison, she'd known. He'd been in the area on a hunt, and she'd been trying to escape a garden party—the first one of that summer, if memory served—and she'd very literally run smack into him as she darted out the wrought-iron gates. She'd spent the day with him—rather ridiculous since she'd been wearing hideously huge hoops under her skirts at the time, and she must have stood out like a sore thumb. Moe tended to dress in whatever was best to blend into the surroundings, and there she'd been in a bright yellow silk and lace confection more suited to the garden party she'd escaped than for following Moe all over the more unsavory areas of New Orleans . . .

Natalie sighed. Moe had resisted her from the start. He'd been so chagrined when he had discovered that she was following him that he'd looked as though he wanted to shake some sense into her. She'd kissed him, instead, but that only seemed to cement his ambivalence, and there were more than a few times when she'd been angry enough that she wanted to scream. Always more concerned with the idea of asking her to accept the fact that he was one of Cain Zelig's top youkai hunters, the man had given the word 'obstinate' a whole new meaning, and it seemed to her that Gavin might well be following in his father's footsteps.

If only she could figure out *why* . . .

And maybe Jillian reminded Natalie of herself. She'd heard the lighthearted banter that Jillian and Gavin shared, and yet she'd seen it, hadn't she? The sense of longing in Jillian's gaze whenever Gavin wasn't looking at her . . . Natalie had felt that same sort of desperation often enough, herself, and maybe that was the real reason she believed Jillian's softly spoken words . . .

Moe wandered into the kitchen and slipped his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder as he glanced down at the simmering contents of the stew kettle. "Mm, smells good," he remarked as he turned his head and buried his nose against her neck.

She laughed. "You're not talking about dinner, are you?"

"That, too," he agreed.

Natalie rolled her eyes but smiled. “Moe . . .” she began before he could succeed in sidetracking her.

“Hmm?”

Bending her head as she lifted her shoulder to thwart the man who obviously had other things on his mind, Natalie sighed, willing herself to concentrate on the bigger picture. “I think . . . you should go talk to Gavin.”

That stopped him abruptly, and he sighed, straightening his back though he didn’t let go of her. “Don’t meddle.”

“I’m his mother. It’s my job to meddle, Morris Jamison.”

He grimaced at the use of his full name. “That’s not really going to help, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t think. What I think is that he’s being stubborn and pig-headed for no good reason.”

“‘Stubborn’ and ‘pig-headed’ mean the same thing, Nat.”

She turned around to wave the spoon under his nose. “And don’t think that I don’t realize that you’re just trying to change the subject.”

He grinned rather self-consciously—another expression that looked exactly the same on her son’s face, too. “Was I being that obvious?”

“Yes.”

The grin widened. “Did it work?”

“No.”

“Damn.”

“Moe . . .”

He winced, realizing that she was changing tactics on him since the chiding didn’t seem to be working. The chiding he could have dealt with, she supposed, but he couldn’t stand up against her cajoling, and she knew it. “Natalie . . .”

“What if he really *is* her mate?” she asked, getting right to the point.

“He says he isn’t.”

“He says a lot of things, and he might well believe it, too . . . but what if he really is? What if he’s already accepted her somewhere deep down and just doesn’t realize it because he doesn’t *want*

to? Do you remember how unhappy he was when she ran off with Evan to New York City without so much as a ‘kiss my ass?’”

His grin resurfaced. “I love it when you say bad words, Nattie.”

Natalie rolled her eyes. “I’m being serious, Moe . . . Do you remember?”

“Damn near flunked out of college . . . hell, yes, I remember.”

She relented just a little, satisfied that he did, indeed, recall. “You know how mates are . . . he wasn’t affected then because he wasn’t old enough to be—or maybe because she wasn’t. Thing is, he would be this time. If Jillian leaves him again because he’s trying to drive her away—”

“Nat . . .”

“Do you remember when Gavin was trying to teach himself how to ride his bicycle?”

Rubbing his forehead, he sighed. “I’d hardly compare this to that . . .”

She pursed her lips, crossing her arms over her chest. “Yes, well . . . he wouldn’t let you help him then, and he was only four years old . . . He stayed outside until nearly midnight, and then he was so angry . . . so *mad* at himself for not being able to ride that damn bike . . .”

“I know.”

“Moe . . . this is a lot bigger than not being able to teach himself how to ride his bicycle.”

“I know,” he repeated.

“Do you? Do you really? If he’s lying to himself—”

Moe sighed again and stepped away, scratching the back of his neck in his thoughtful sort of way. “All right; all right. You made your point. I’ll go talk to him, but I don’t know what good it’s going to do. You know Gavin. If I push him, he’s going to be even more set against it, just because . . . kind of like his mama.”

“Oh, really . . .? So I was the one who kept saying that you weren’t good enough for me?”

He blushed but shot her a wan grin. “Yeah, that sounds about right,” he teased.

She snorted and rolled her eyes, waving the wooden spoon under his nose again. “He’s just like you, you know,” she complained.

“Like me?”

“Yes . . . stubborn as a horse’s—”

Chapter 14
Brotherly Love

Jillian twisted her body and leaned her head back, pulling her headphones off with one hand and shading her eyes with the other and squinted up into the darkened shadows of Gavin's face. Towering over her with his arms crossed over his chest, he looked like he just might be ready to kill—or at the very least, ready to unleash a dire string of condemnations. She couldn't see him very well. The sun was shining much too harshly behind him, and after having laid out on her stomach for the better part of an hour in an effort to boost her waning tan, her vision wasn't exactly at peak performance. Trying not to fidget since she had a good idea just what was eating at him this time, she shot him a brilliant smile and pretended that she was completely clueless. "Yes, Gavvie?"

He snorted, having none of her cock-and-bull bravado. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he choked.

She shook her head. "I'm working on my tan," she informed him in a tone that said plainly that he ought to know as much.

He sighed and hunkered down, grabbing the strings of her bikini top and tying them carefully. "I see that, Jilli. What I meant was why are you doing that here?"

"Where else would I lie out?" she countered.

"I'm sure you can find a tanning salon in town," he grumbled as he repeated the process with the neck strings. "Hidekea has one of those, I'm pretty sure."

She wrinkled her nose and rolled over, flopping back and adjusting her breasts as Gavin's head snapped to the side. It never ceased to amaze her, just how quickly the man's face could surge with embarrassed color. "You've seen these a thousand times," she remarked as she held out her hands and wiggled her fingers for him to pull her to her feet.

"Don't remind me," he grumbled, catching her hands and tugging.

"You have to be the cutest thing, ever, when you're blushing," she quipped.

"Entirely beside the point," he grouched, "and I'm not."

Rolling her eyes as she grabbed the long white tank top she'd been wearing over the bikini, she tugged it over her head and flipped her hair out of the neckline. "You are, and it isn't. I don't see how you can possibly complain. I'm in the back yard, and no one could see me."

That earned her a very loud snort. "*Ri-i-ight.*"

"Well, it's true. Unless someone snuck up in the trees—"

"Possible."

"—And I certainly would have heard them—"

“During the two second breaks between songs, you mean?”

“—Or smelled them—”

“If you could smell anything other than artificial coconuts.”

“Oh, Gavvie!” she laughed, throwing her arms around his neck and effectively rubbing suntan oil all over his shirt and arms.

He sighed, but didn’t push her away. “You’re going to be the death of me yet, Jillian Zelig,” he complained.

“Yeah, well, at least I’m not the only one, then,” she retorted as her smile widened.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She leaned back, pinning him with a dark look as she slowly shook her head. “You know very well what it means, Gavin Jamison. When are you going to admit that you’re my mate?”

She could see it in his face: he was going to argue with her. Of course he was. He always did. She sighed, letting her arms drop as she abruptly swung around and gathered her things. “I know; I know. You’re not my mate, right? Can’t you just agree with me? Just once?”

“If I ever agreed with you, even just to humor you, you’d latch onto it and try to hold me to it,” he complained.

She made a face that he couldn’t see since that was exactly what she *would* do, but she was getting tired of waiting, darn it. After all, she’d already been waiting on him for the last twenty years . . . “I think I’m going to go take a shower,” she informed him, unable to keep the clipped tone out of her voice.

He sighed. “Yeah, and now you’re mad at me.”

Jillian grabbed the magazine off the ground and blinked. The tiny box with the single fortune cookie . . . she’d forgotten about that . . . Picking it up, too, she stood slowly and sashayed toward the glass doors. “I’m not mad at you,” she argued, “but I am keeping track so that when we do become mates, I can remind you of just how long you’ve put me off when we could have been disgustingly happy for years now.”

Her words had the desired effect. Gavin chuckled and relaxed. “Sure, Jilli, sure . . . anyway, I’ve got to go check on a few things. Hank said a couple of the cows got tangled in a fence.”

She stopped short and glanced over her shoulder at him. “Aww . . . you can save them, can’t you?”

His grimace said it all.

Jillian shook her head. “Just untangle them, right?”

“It’s not that simple,” he said. “If they broke their legs or something like that, then we’ll have to put them down.”

“Why?”

The grimace deepened. “It’s too hard to set their legs. If they can’t bear weight on the leg and it doesn’t heal right, there’s a good chance it’d get infected, and we’d have to put them down, anyway. It’s more humane this way.”

She bit her lip as she considered his words. What he said made sense. It simply didn’t make her feel any better. “Oh . . .”

“Try not to worry about it, okay? You’re just going to get yourself all upset.”

She nodded. “Sure,” she forced herself to say in a calm, light tone.

He sighed, probably remembering how many animals Jillian had rescued over the years. It had always seemed like she was saving creatures all the time, and luckily, her mother never seemed to mind it too much. She winced. Well, Gin had minded it quite a lot when Jillian had brought home a pair of young raccoons. Jillian supposed that they were just too rodent-like for Gin’s comfort. Her mother was unreasonably afraid of anything that looked even slightly like a rodent. It was the only time that her mother had flat out refused to allow the creatures into the house, so Jillian, Gavin, Evan, and Madison had set up a makeshift pen to house the animals for the summer, and though she still wasn’t quite sure how she’d convinced Gavin to go along with it, she’d talked him into taking Rick and Rack home with him since his parents had decided to drive out to Maine to pick him up that year. He’d called her about a month later to tell her that Rick and Rack had been forced to live in a tree in the backyard because they were driving his mother insane. Between them, they had managed to knock over the garbage can a few times too many despite the trash can being located inside the latched cabinet. Apparently the raccoons had figured out how to unlock the baby locks . . . and worse, the two raccoons weren’t brothers, as she’d thought. Rack had managed to become pregnant, and Jillian, who had been subjected to far too much of her brother’s perversity over the years, hadn’t missed the irony in that, at all . . .

No, it simply saddened her; the idea that the cattle might not be saved. Bassie had always teased her for having too soft a heart. Maybe he was right . . .

“Why don’t you go take that shower? You’ll feel better. I shouldn’t be gone too long.”

Smiling wanly at the obvious concern in Gavin’s voice, Jillian shrugged as she pulled the sliding glass door open and stepped inside, dropping her towel and magazine on a chair before heading for the kitchen. “I will—after I eat my fortune cookie.”

She didn’t see Gavin stop dead in his tracks, and she didn’t see the color siphon out of his features. She did, however, hear his choked tone. “C-c-cookie?” he sputtered.

Shaking her head slightly, she glanced back at him and blinked at his odd expression. “Yes, my cookie . . .”

“You don’t want that cookie!” he blurted suddenly, gaze locked on the cookie in her hand.

She frowned. “Yes, I do . . . you’ve got an entire box of them. Stay away from mine.”

“W—I—You—Gimme that cookie!” he demanded, extending his hand as he strode toward her.

Jillian twisted her hand up behind her back, eyebrows disappearing under the fringe of bluish-silvery bangs that framed her forehead. “No way, cookie monster . . . you can forget it.”

“Hand it over, Jillian,” he demanded in a tone that she’d never heard him use before. Quiet, assertive, he looked dead serious, and for the briefest of seconds, her heart skipped a beat.

“Back off, Gavvie. You steal my cookie, and I’ll hurt you!”

He snorted, cheeks reddening slightly as he continued to stalk toward her. “Cute, Jilli. I’m scared to death. Now give me the cookie, will you?”

She shook her head, retreating a few steps without taking her eyes off Gavin. Unsure what could have brought about such a change in the man she knew, she shook her head yet again when words failed her. The ferocity in his gaze . . . the quiet sense of urgency . . . she’d never seen him look at her like that before. Breath catching in her throat, she swallowed hard, wondering in an absent sort of why just why she was backing away when all she really wanted to do was . . .

He moved deceptively fast for such a large man. Slipping his arms around her waist, he caught her hands and tried to pry the cookie out of her closed fist.

Dazed by the nearness of him, Jillian blinked, every one of her senses concentrated on him. Unable to comprehend just why he was so set on getting the cookie away from her, she tightened her grip, slipping her wrist out of his hand and cradling the cookie against her chest. “It’s mine!” she protested.

He shook his head slowly, lifting his eyebrows as he heaved a pronounced sigh. “All right, Jilli . . . you asked for it.”

She shrieked when his hands locked onto her sides. Throwing herself from side to side in an effort to elude his tickling fingers, she held onto the cookie with admirable tenacity. Pushing against his chest as she tried to retreat, Jillian shrieked all over again when she bumped into the arm of the sofa, throwing herself and him off balance. Tumbling onto the cushions in a tangle of limbs and laughter, Gavin pinned her down, catching her wrists in one of his hands and pinning them over her head as he continued to tickle her unmercifully. “Hand over the cookie,” he demanded moments before he broke into a grin.

“Make me,” she shot back, unable to control her laughter as tears welled in the corners of her eyes. “Stop . . . tickling . . . me!”

“What’s the matter? Can’t take it, Jilli?” he goaded but finally, mercifully, stopped tickling her in favor of trying to pry the cookie out of her hand once more.

“This isn’t very fair,” she whined, squirming in a vain effort to dislodge the bulk of his weight. “Gav-vie!”

“Give me the cookie, and I’ll leave you alone,” he countered.

She wrinkled her nose. “Fat chance, dog-breath.” She bucked her hips again. “Move it, you oaf!”

“You know, I’d take you more seriously if you weren’t giggling like a girl,” he pointed out as he tried to pry her fingers open.

“You’re . . . crushing . . . me . . .”

That earned her a decisive snort. “Sure, Jilli, sure . . . I think I’d know if I were crushing you.” All the same, he slipped his knee between her legs to alleviate some of the burden of his weight.

Jillian gasped as his thigh brushed against her. Her body's reaction was fierce, immediate. The unbridled need to arch against him assailed her, and she bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep from doing it. She craved the lure of his touch . . . "Oh . . ."

Gavin didn't seem to notice right away when her body stilled beneath his. So intent on the struggle to take her fortune cookie, he wasn't paying attention to much of anything.

"Gavin?" she murmured, eyes drooping closed despite her resolve to keep them open. His body was just too near, too warm . . . too inviting.

He paused in his efforts to snag the cookie, casting her a questioning glance that lingered after his gaze locked with hers. The playfulness that had punctuated his actions dissipated as emotion that he couldn't mask filtered into and out of his expression. The drastic shift in his youki blossomed around them, and she gasped, somehow knowing deep down that he felt it, too. Closing her mouth to swallow hard only to let her lips part once more, she had to concentrate just to remember to breathe.

His gaze dropped to her lips, his eyes brightening with a singular sense of urgency. He let go of her wrists, fingertips trailing down the length of her arms, and she arched her head back, eyes closing, moaning quietly as a riot of sensation shot through her. Gooseflesh erupted under the path of his touch and rippled outward, cascading down her body as an invisible force—the fiercest of desires—opened up deep inside.

"Jillian," he whispered, his voice an entreaty.

Forcing her eyes open again, she saw it in the depths of his stare: every single thing he'd ever denied. The raw longing in his expression tore at her very soul, and she gazed up at him, willing him to understand that all he'd ever had to do was touch her . . .

Leaning on his elbows, he leaned in closer, closer . . . She could feel his breath moist on her lips, could almost see the turbulence in his youki. Sooty eyelashes fluttering down as he closed his eyes, head tilting slightly to the side, he groaned softly as her breath caught, as her heart stopped . . . as the world spun around her yet time stood so very still . . .

His lips brushed hers—the whisper of a touch that drew a gasp from her. The incredible sweetness of his actions brought the sting of tears to her eyes; unleashed a bittersweet ache in her chest, and that curious sensation of falling was back with a vengeance . . .

"Gav? You busy?" Moe Jamison cleared his throat. "Looks like you are," he muttered.

Jillian didn't register the intrusion right away. So caught up in the moment, so befuddled by the touch of Gavin's lips, she didn't realize that his father had walked into the house.

Gavin, on the other hand, wasn't so oblivious. Moe's voice was like a dousing of ice water, snapping him back to his senses faster than anything else ever could. His head jerked up, eyes wild as he met his father's amused stare. The rest of his body, however, didn't want to cooperate as he opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water. "D-d-dad," he finally stammered after several failed attempts to form coherent words.

Moe slowly shook his head as his face reddened slightly. "Sorry," he mumbled as he turned on his heel and headed for the door.

“Ah, no! Dad, wait!” Gavin blurted as he hauled himself off the sofa and stumbled over the coffee table in his haste to stop his father.

Moe narrowed his gaze on his son before shifting his eyes to Jillian, who was pushing herself up with a dazed sort of look on her face. “If I’m interrupting . . .”

“Uh, no,” Gavin muttered, raking an unsteady hand over his face. “You need something?”

Moe shrugged. “Just wanted to talk to you.”

Gavin sighed. “I, uh . . . there was an incident with the cows,” he said, casting Jillian a nervous glance. She was curled up on the sofa, staring at her hands with an inscrutable expression on her face. “Hank said he could take care of it, but . . .”

“I could go with you,” Moe offered.

Gavin nodded. “Yeah.” Opening his mouth, he grimaced as he glanced at Jillian again. In the end, he couldn’t figure out just what to say to her, and he strode toward the door, instead.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

Jillian sat still long after Gavin had pulled the door closed after his abrupt departure. It took a long time to calm her body down. It felt as though everything inside her body was trying to crawl right out of her skin. Pressing her palm against her chest, she couldn’t contain the little smile that broke over her features.

‘He does feel it, too,’ she thought as her smile widened. ‘I knew it!’

‘And he ran, Jilli . . . he couldn’t get out of here fast enough, or didn’t you notice?’

She wrinkled her nose, determined not to let her youkai voice bring her down. *‘He’s shy . . . that’s not really surprising, I don’t think. He’s always been that way.’*

‘If you think that one near-kiss is going to change his mind, then you really are living in a fantasy world.’

‘It was a kiss,’ she argued. ‘At least it was the start of one.’

Her cell phone trilled, jarring Jillian out of her musings. Leaning forward to retrieve the device off the coffee table, she glanced at the number before answering the call. “Hello?”

“Jillian, baby! How’s your vacation doing?” Dan Lister’s voice greeted her.

“It’s doing very well,” she assured him. “You promised me a nice, long vacation,” she reminded him.

Her long-time manager chuckled. “I did; I did . . . In fact, I’m taking a short one, myself; heading up to Canada for the week to see my son . . . I just wanted to tell you: you got a new offer that you might want to consider.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, tell me then.”

“*Playboy* called. They want you to be their Valentine’s Day girl.”

She blinked and shook her head slightly. “*Playboy*?”

“Yep . . . they’re offering an absolutely obscene amount of money for it, too.”

The shock was quickly wearing off only to be replaced by a thoughtful scowl as Jillian brought up her knees and wrapped one arm around them. “I don’t know, Dan . . . This is a lot different from posing for *Oliveri* . . .”

“Yeah, it is,” Dan agreed mildly. “That’s why I figured you’d want to think about it.”

“Gavvie says I have a lot of money,” she went on slowly.

“You do. If you don’t want to do this, then that’s fine.”

She sighed. “What do you think I should do?”

Dan chuckled again. “You should do whatever you think is best, Jillian. If you’re not comfortable with posing for *Playboy*, then you shouldn’t do it.”

“I see . . .”

She could hear Dan’s fingertips drumming against the steering wheel—something he always did when he was considering things. “I would have told them ‘no’, straight out, but I figured I’d better ask you, first.”

She smiled. She was lucky, she supposed. Cain had introduced Dan to her when she’d first decided that she wanted to try modeling. He was an old acquaintance and happened to be one of Ben Philips’ good friends. Ben was Cain’s top general, and as such, he trusted Ben’s judgment implicitly, and with Dan’s guidance, Jillian had quickly become one of the most sought-after models in the world.

“I don’t know,” she hedged.

Dan grunted. “Think it over. If you’re not cool with it, that’s fine. I’ll tell the *Playboy* reps that you’re not interested. Just wanted to let you know that it was on the table, so to speak.”

“Thanks, Dan,” she replied. “How’s Denny’s new job going?”

“He’s enjoying it though I think entertainment management is a little more stressful than he thought it’d be. He’s got an up and coming actor he’s working with at the moment. A bit high maintenance, I believe Denny said . . .”

Jillian laughed. “Actors? High maintenance? Oh, please! Tell Denny he needs to try working with models sometime.”

“I’d hardly call you high maintenance,” Dan remarked dryly.

“Nicest thing anyone’s said to me all day,” she quipped. “Anyway, you have a safe trip, and give Denny a hug for me.”

Dan chuckled again. “Sure, Jillian, sure . . . Denny’s a little old for me to go around hugging him, but for you? Okay. Enjoy the rest of your vacation, and don’t hurry back too soon . . . at least, not without a mate, in any case.”

She giggled. She hadn’t had to tell Dan how she felt about Gavin. He’d figured it out easily enough on his own and had said more than once that he firmly believed that Gavin was being stubborn for no good reason—a belief that seemed to be prevalent amongst most of their collective acquaintances. “I’ll see what I can do,” she assured him.

“Good.”

The line went dead, and Jillian snapped the cell phone closed.

‘Playboy, huh?’

She wrinkled her nose. She’d never actually considered posing nude, and she wasn’t so certain that it was something she could do, anyway. ‘Yeah, Playboy . . .’

‘That’s really not a good idea . . . please tell me you’re not actually considering it . . .’

‘Well, yeah, I suppose . . . I’m not ashamed of my body . . .’

‘It’s not about being ashamed of your body, Jillian. You don’t honestly think that Gavin would be okay with that, not to mention your family . . .’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ she argued. ‘Mama’s always telling me that the human body is beautiful, and Daddy? He paints and sculpts naked women all the time.’

‘That’s completely different, in case you didn’t know. Your mother’s right, of course, but that doesn’t mean that posing for Playboy is a good idea. It’s not an art magazine, remember? It’s nothing but acceptable porn, and your father? If you really don’t see the difference between his art and posing for that magazine, then you’re nuts . . .’

besides that, it doesn't matter one way or the other. To your father, you're still his little girl, and what father really wants his daughter to be seen in that sort of light?

She sighed. True as that may be, Cain never actually told her what to do, either. He trusted her to make her own choices, even if he didn't like them. He'd told her shortly after the *Oliveri* incident that he would have preferred that she'd chosen not to pose topless, but he hadn't condemned her, either. No, Cain was definitely a more easy-going parent than most, and for that, Jillian was eternally grateful.

'Fine, then, if you won't listen to reason, then think about this: do you really suppose that Gavin will want you posing for Playboy? You're trying to convince the man that he wants to be your mate, and there aren't many men who would be all right with their potential mate posing naked for an international publication for any reason, whatsoever.'

'You're making it sound as though I've already decided to do it,' she complained. 'I haven't... I'm simply trying to make a rational decision based on the things I know.'

'Just think about it—really think about it. There's a good chance that Gavin won't be happy at all if you really wanted to do it.'

She frowned. It wasn't a question of what he would or wouldn't like. No, it was a question of what sort of advice he would give her. While she really didn't have any desire to pose nude, she had to wonder just what he'd say to her if she mentioned it to him. Would he play the non-committal route, as he had before? When she'd asked him what he thought of her posing topless for *Oliveri*, he'd just looked a little shocked but had told her that she should do whatever she was comfortable with doing. *'Typical Gavvie,'* she thought with an inward sigh.

Too bad his carefully constructed barrier was crumbling. He wasn't nearly as immune to her as he'd like to think he was. He showed his vulnerability today, hadn't he? As small as the crack in his defense against her was, it was there, wasn't it? The look on his face invaded her mind again; the seriousness in his gaze as he stared at her . . . as he leaned down to kiss her . . .

A new wave of delightful shivers raced up and down her spine as the recollection of the touch of his lips infiltrated her system. She'd known that kissing Gavin—really kissing Gavin—would be unbelievable. She hadn't really understood just how incredible it would be. She did now. The lingering memory not-quite-a-kiss was more than enough to unfurl a tremor in her body, a lethargy in her limbs, a clouding of her thoughts . . .

Jillian couldn't help the smile that turned up the corners of her lips. Gaze dropping to the cookie still held tightly in her fist, she laughed. *'All that over a fortune cookie?' she mused. 'Who cares? He kissed me...'*

The trill of the cell phone cut through her reverie. Jillian's smile widened when she checked the caller ID. "Evvie!" she gushed when she answered the call.

"Jilli!" he greeted brightly. "How's my baby sister?"

She giggled. “Just fine,” she assured him. “Where are you now?”

“Uh,” he hedged uncertainly. “I think we’re in Germany or something. Hey, Bone! Where the hell are we?”

“Mannheim,” Bone replied, his voice distant.

“Mannheim,” Evan repeated. “Wherever the fuck *that* is . . .”

“*In der Nähe von Heidelberg*,” Bone commented.

“Uh huh,” Evan agreed. “Whatever he just said.”

Jillian laughed. “I didn’t know Bone knew German.”

Evan chuckled. “Bone’s a bone of many talents.”

“Yes, he is,” she agreed. “Thank you for the cookies . . . too bad Gavvie won’t share.”

“I sent you a special cookie, Jilli. He take that one, too?”

“No . . . but you sent him a *box* of them! I’m your sister, and you only sent me *one!*”

“They’re his late birthday present,” he told her. “You’ll get yours on your birthday. Get it?”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s almost my birthday now,” she pointed out.

He snorted. “Keh! Your birthday ain’t for another two weeks. Did you read your fortune?”

“My fortune? No . . .”

“Damn, Jillian. It *is* a fortune cookie, after all,” he grouched.

She giggled. “Let me open it . . .”

Catching the cell phone between her ear and shoulder, she opened the clear plastic wrapper and pulled out the cookie, breaking it open and popping a piece of it into her mouth as she unfolded the slip of white paper. “*The Oracle says that the man you want fantasizes about Princess Leia as Jabba the Hutt’s captive*,” she read. “Does he really?”

“Are you kidding me? *All* geeks fantasize about that . . . I mean, come on! A metal bikini? What’s not to love about that?”

She rolled her eyes as her grin widened. “Really?”

“Absolutely. I’m tellin’ you: if you showed up in front of ol’ Gavvie in the metal Princess Lei-me bikini? He’d be done—finished—kaput.”

“I don’t know,” she mused as she slowly chewed a bit of the cookie. “I doubt that bikini is very comfortable.”

“Keh! Like comfort matters . . . you’d only be wearing it long enough for Gavin to pop the wood, you know.”

Shaking her head at her brother’s more colorful choice of words, Jillian couldn’t keep herself from laughing at Evan’s assertion. “True as that may be, I think I’d rather that our first time doesn’t have anything to do with fantasies or science-fiction characters.”

“As if that matters! The end result, Jillian . . . keep your eyes on his balls.”

“You’re just wrong, Evan,” she pointed out, her chiding tempered by the laughter that undermined the chastising tone in her voice.

“Yeah, I am,” he agreed readily enough. “That’s why you adore me.”

“If you want to think so,” she said with a mock-sigh.

Evan chuckled then cleared his throat. “Joking aside . . . how are things going?”

She couldn’t help but smile at the way Evan so easily changed the mood with whatever he was saying at the moment. Other people could try to do it. They somehow came off as fake and even a little condescending as they tried to meld from one topic into the next, running the gamut from joking and silly to serious in the space of a breath. Evan never did. No matter what he was saying, he always sounded sincere; genuine. It was one of the rare qualities that she loved in her brother. “What? You mean things between Gavvie and me?”

“Sure, that . . . anything.”

“Well, you know Gavin.”

He snorted. “You know, Jilli, I’d think you’d have given up by now.”

“I’ll never give up on Gavin,” she retorted. “We’re meant to be . . . and I’ll have you know he started to kiss me.”

“*Really.*”

“Yes,” she said, unable to keep the heat from infiltrating her cheeks at the simple reminder of the near-kiss.

“Well, damn . . . ‘bout time. Where is ol’ lover boy?”

“He had a cattle emergency,” she informed him.

“Wait . . . that dickhead blew off kissing *the* Jillian Zelig to fuck around with damn cows?”

“Something like that.”

“*Da-a-amm* . . . you’re hella near a bloody saint,” he grumbled. “You shoulda told him to hit his fucking knees . . . literally.”

“Now, now . . . if I did that, he’d run.”

“Maybe . . .”

“Hmm.”

He sighed. “I gotta go. Mike’s waving at me like a fucking woman. I can’t figure out if he wants me to get a move on, he’s trying to wave in an airplane, or he’s trying out for a place on the groupie bus. That’s just not happening. He’d make a hella-ugly woman . . .”

“Okay. Love you, Evvie.”

He laughed. “You, too, Jilli. If you need anything at all, you call me.”

She grinned. “Absolutely.”

The line cut off, and she snapped the phone closed, dropping it onto the sofa beside her as she re-read the fortune cookie with a little grin.

Too bad she’d never do that. Even if the metal bikini were something that Gavin couldn’t ignore, the fact remained that Jillian wanted their first time together to be simple: just him and her without fantasies or visions of something else marring the moment . . .

‘*Soon*,’ she told herself as her smile widened. Wrapping her arms around her ankles, she rested her cheek on her knees and sighed. ‘*It’s just a matter of time now . . .*’

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“Your mother wanted me to come talk to you.”

Gavin didn’t miss a step, but he couldn’t quite hide the grimace that contorted his features at his father’s admission. “About what?”

Moe shrugged, carefully taking in the southern horizon as the two strode through the field. “You’re really saying you don’t know?”

“Nope . . . not a clue.”

Moe chuckled at Gavin’s obvious lie. “Damn stubborn,” he muttered with a shake of his head. “You and Jillian looked like you were getting . . . close,” he commented a little too neutrally.

“Did we?”

“Yep, you did.”

“Hmm.”

“You, uh, sure she isn’t your mate?”

Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his jeans, Gavin scowled at the ground and concentrated on keeping his feet moving. “I told you, Dad,” he began. “We’re—”

“—Just friends; yeah, I know.” Moe shook his head. “Didn’t look like ‘just friends’ to me.”

Gavin snorted.

“It didn’t. Gotta tell you, Gavin . . . I’ve had lots of friends, and it never occurred to me to try and kiss none of them . . .”

“She . . . she’s not my mate,” he mumbled again.

Moe sighed. Gavin could feel his father’s ardent perusal despite the almost perverse resolve not to look at him. “You sure about that?”

“Course I am.”

Nodding slowly, Moe fell silent as they kept walking, though Gavin didn’t even attempt to convince himself that his father was going to let the subject drop. The reprieve, though, however brief, was welcome. Mind still reeling, his body was still berating him for leaving her so abruptly.

Trying to shove the thoughts of Jillian away, he quickened his pace, cursing himself for not having bothered to saddle a horse for the trek. His mind had been a little too addled with the lingering memory of the near-kiss; with the knowledge that it was his fault; the condemnations that rang in his ears. She’d just been too close, too inviting . . . to welcoming. Answering questions about his feelings for Jillian . . . it was almost more than he could endure.

“I ever tell you about the girl I met a long time ago?” Moe finally asked.

Gavin blinked and shot his father a questioning glance. “Girl? No . . .”

Moe nodded, narrowing his gaze as he scanned the horizon; as his expression seemed to cloud over as though he weren’t looking over the landscape at all, but over years and time and space.

“She was a pretty little thing . . . just seventeen at the time, wearing a yellow silk dress with all the lace and ribbons . . .”

Gavin shook his head. He couldn't recall hearing his father speak like that before. “Yeah?”

Moe smiled, a vague and rather dreamy smile surfacing on his face—an expression that Gavin couldn't recall having ever seen on his father before . . . “Yep . . . First time I saw her, I knew she was out of my league. Nice to look at, but she'd never belong with a guy like me.”

Gavin scowled. “A guy like you?” he echoed.

Moe shrugged. “Sure . . . I'm a hunter, right? She was . . . what do you call them?”

Gavin shook his head.

Moe chuckled, cheeks reddening slightly as he let his gaze fall to the ground. “A southern belle, I guess . . . yeah, that's what she was . . .”

“A . . . southern belle?”

Moe nodded. “Yup.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, she followed me around. I couldn't shake her. Every time I turned around, she was there. I told her to go away. She never listened. She was nothing but a pain in my ass, come to think on it . . .” He chuckled. “She kept saying that she was my mate, you see, and I . . . I kept telling her that she was wrong.”

“What's this got to do with me?” he asked, shifting uncomfortably and praying his father didn't notice.

Moe shot his son a sidelong glance. “You can't figure it out?”

“No . . .”

Moe sighed. “Well, son . . . she's your mama.”

“Mama . . .?”

“Don't repeat my mistakes,” Moe warned, shrugging even as a hint of a blush crept into his cheeks. “You, uh . . . you know, right? You know what happens when one mate rejects the other.”

“Yeah . . .”

“Good. I trust you have a decent head on your shoulders. Don't you hurt that girl; you got it?”

Chapter 15
Matters of the Heart

Jillian stomped across the yard, arms crossed over her chest as she made a beeline straight to the open garage where Cody was half-hidden under the truck that was suspended using a hydraulic lift. “Cody,” she demanded without preamble. “I want to ask you a question, and I need an honest answer.”

The clink of a wrench stopped abruptly. Moments later, he slid out from under the vehicle and sat up. “O-o-okay.”

“Is there something wrong with me?”

“Wrong with you?”

“Yes, wrong with me.”

“Well . . . like what?”

She sighed, slumping down on a cinderblock beside the rolling tool chest. Feet askew, knees together, shoulders slouched, she shrugged off-handedly but couldn’t hide the upset in her expression. “I don’t know . . . am I too fat?”

He blinked, pausing as he wiped his hands off on a grease rag. “Fat?” he echoed incredulously.

“Too skinny?”

“Skinny?”

“Are my eyes too close together?”

“Wha—?”

“Stinky breath?”

He shook his head slowly, obviously confused as to why Jillian would think any of those things. “I don’t—”

“A wart on the end of my nose?”

“Like a witch, you mean?”

She nodded emphatically.

“Uh, no . . .”

“Oh . . .” she sighed again. “Then what is it?”

Shaking his head slowly and looking as though he’d rather be anywhere but where he was at the moment, Cody dug a generic soda out of the small ice chest he brought with him every day. He brought his lunch in it—normally peanut butter sandwiches and occasionally, he’d have a small bag of chips to go with it. “I-I-I, uh . . .” he stammered.

She made a face. “You’re a guy, right?”

Cody blinked and scowled at the dirty concrete floor of the garage where they’d moved the trucks so that he could work on them, his cheeks reddening as a guarded expression masked his features. “Well, yeah . . .”

Jillian nodded. “How does your wife get you to kiss her?”

“Kiss her?” he repeated slowly, finally daring to peer into Jillian’s face. “What do you mean?”

Letting her breath out in a long, slow gust, Jillian hunched forward, hands resting on her knees as a definite air of rejection stole into her features. “He won’t, and I don’t know why.” She shook her head. “I’ve tried everything, you know . . . Tried showing him that I’d make a good wife; that I can take care of his home and all that stuff . . . just everything . . .”

“Gavin, you mean?”

She nodded again.

“He won’t . . . kiss you?”

Wrinkling her nose, she heaved a long-suffering sigh. “No.”

“Oh . . . well . . .” Trailing off, Cody scratched the back of his neck rather self-consciously and shrugged as the blush staining his cheeks darkened just a little more. “I don’t know that Sherry does anything in particular . . . I . . . I guess I just like to kiss her.”

“Gavin’s kind of shy,” she ventured, hoping that she didn’t sound as defensive as she thought she did.

Cody nodded quickly, and she grimaced. “Yeah, I got that . . . just . . . I dunno . . . sometimes when Sherry looks extra pretty . . . I mean, she’s *always* pretty, but sometimes . . . Like . . . when she stands in the kitchen? Sometimes the light comes through the window just right and sort of . . . shines in her hair? She looks real pretty then . . .”

Jillian smiled. “How long have the two of you been married?”

He smiled, turning the soda can in his hands. “Little over four years . . .” He blushed a little more, but his smile didn’t fade. “We, uh . . . we got married after we found out that Sherry was pregnant . . . I mean, I was gonna marry her anyway. We were just waiting till she finished school, but she got pregnant toward the end of her junior year.” He chuckled, shaking his head slowly as his grin widened. “She was the only girl at graduation with a husband and a baby girl . . .” Trailing off as a rather bashful smile surfaced, Cody chuckled softly, shaking his head as though he thought the entire affair was humorous. “I was real proud, you know? I mean, she’s smart—real smart; not like me. She finished high school. Graduated on time and everything. She even made the top ten percent in her class.”

“That’s so neat,” Jillian exclaimed softly. “You really love her.”

He ducked his head rather bashfully and shrugged again. “I love all my girls.”

Jillian smiled suddenly, rubbing her hands together as she leaned toward him. “Do you have any pictures? I’d love to see your daughters.”

“Oh, yeah? Sure . . .”

She waited patiently while he dug out his wallet, and he couldn’t help the shy little grin when he handed her the thick plastic photo pages. She laughed as she flipped through the images. Most were studio pictures of his daughters. The oldest one was quite a ham; smiling broadly in every picture. The youngest, though, didn’t seem to like to smile at all—at least not in the pictures. Both girls shared the same corn-silk blond hair and big brown eyes—a stark contrast to Cody’s dark hair and eyes. “Do they both look like their mama?”

Cody nodded. “Yeah. Good thing, too. I don’t think I’d be a very pretty girl . . .”

Jillian giggled. “Maybe not,” she agreed. “They’re just *adorable!*”

“Thanks . . .”

“You know, I’d love to take their pictures,” she remarked as she turned to the next picture. Both girls, side by side in red velvet Christmas dresses, complete with the requisite white tights and black patent leather shoes . . . the oldest girl had her hair pulled over to the right side in a little piggy tail while the younger girl’s hair was pulled to the left side. The overall effect was very cute, and she shot Cody a quick glance only to find him gazing at the picture with a proud-papa sort of smile on his face. “I’ve been dabbling in photography some . . . Do you think that your wife would bring the girls out here? I mean, I’d love to meet your wife, too . . . and I’ll bet the girls would enjoy the ranch. What little girl doesn’t want a pony, right?”

He laughed. “Well, I could ask her,” he agreed slowly. “If it wouldn’t be a nuisance. Karis ain’t a problem. She hides behind her mama most of the time, but Minnie . . . she’s kind of a handful.”

Jillian waved away his concern as though it was of no real consequence. “Don’t be silly! I’d love to meet your wife, and your daughters are absolutely precious . . . If any of my pictures come out, I can print them up in other sizes for you, too.”

“Yeah? That’d be great . . . I’m sure Sherry’d like that.” He grimaced as the blush resurfaced. “I, uh . . . I didn’t know you were famous,” he admitted.

Jillian laughed. “Who told you?”

Cody shrugged and scratched his ear. “Sherry . . . well, sort of. She said that there was a model with your name, and she showed me a picture in a magazine. She’s into that sort of thing. She was a cheerleader before we got married and stuff. I always wondered why she’d want to be with a guy like me, not that I’m complaining.”

“How’d you meet her?”

He grinned. “Her car broke down outside the station my dad used to own. She smiled at me, and I fixed it for her for free. I thought she was, uh, real pretty . . . Never did tell Dad about that . . .”

Jillian couldn’t help but smile, too. “Love at first sight?”

Ducking his head, he took his time wiping more grease from his hands. “Guess so. I just got out of school, and I was working for Dad to save some to get my mechanic’s certification. When the factories started closing down, though, everyone started moving out of here. Dad closed down. Didn’t have enough business. He and Mom moved to Iowa to be closer to my grandma. Sherry and I were going to go, but then she got pregnant with Karis, and I got hired on at the Chrysalis plant. Thought it’d be okay to stay here.” He sighed. “Then Chrysalis shut down, too.”

“I wish I could stay here,” Jillian admitted softly, turning her gaze at the fluffy white clouds meandering across the pale blue sky.

That got his attention quickly enough, and he shook his head. “Why would you want to stay in a bump in the road like Hidekea?”

“It’s nice . . . quiet . . . friendly . . . a good place to raise a family.”

“But you’re a model, right? Sherry said you’re one of the best models around.” He blushed a little more and shrugged self-consciously. “This sure ain’t New York City.”

Nodding almost absently, Jillian forced a little smile. “No, it’s not . . . but I never actually wanted to be a model . . .”

“Really?”

She finally shifted her gaze to meet Cody’s, her smile trembling precariously though she stubbornly held onto it. Staring at the young man for a couple minutes, Jillian nodded slowly. “I was supposed to marry Gavin, you know? That was my plan, anyway. I’d graduate from high school and marry him . . . and we’d have lots of babies and live in a big house with black shutters

and a little white picket fence—more like a decoration than anything else . . . Gavin had other plans.”

He shook his head. “I don’t get it. You’re really pretty and all . . . I mean, I’m not trying to hit on you or nothing. I just . . . well, you are, and . . .” He sighed and shrugged as he scowled at his work boots. “I thought you and Gavin were married at first,” he grumbled.

Jillian laughed. “Really?”

“Yeah . . . I felt kind of stupid when Gavin said you weren’t.”

Her smile widened, her spirits bolstered by Cody’s inadvertent blunder. “I’ve loved him forever . . . ever since the day he came to my father’s house.”

“You live close?”

She shook her head. “Nope. I’m from Maine. Gavin . . . his father is one of my father’s friends. Gavin spent his summers with us.”

Cody digested that in silence, sipping his soda as Jillian flipped through the pictures once more.

“I’ve tried everything to get him to admit that we’re meant to be together,” she admitted at length. “You name it, I’ve probably done it. Talked him into going swimming in the middle of the night—”

“Swimming’s not so bad,” he ventured.

She smiled. He didn’t see it. Cody likely didn’t realize that Jillian didn’t like to wear clothes when she swam . . . “I tried really hard in school . . . He’s smart, you know? So it stood to reason he’d want a smart woman, too, so I studied and studied . . .”

“Smart women are okay,” he agreed. “Sherry keeps me from making stupid mistakes a lot.”

“I followed him around like a baby for years,” she admitted. “Sort of like a lost puppy, I guess.”

He chuckled. “Nothing wrong with that.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Except he’s five years older than me. I’m pretty sure he thought it was a little un-cool at the time . . .”

“I used to do that with my brother. I always wanted to hang out with him.”

She nodded. “That reminds me of my brothers. Evan and I are ten years younger than our brother, and Evan . . . he used to drive Bassie nuts; always following him around . . . Bassie was pretty good about it, though. In fact, there were only a few times that I remember him losing his temper with us—or at least, he did with Evan. I don’t remember Bassie ever yelling at me . . .”

“Sounds like a good brother.”

She grimaced. “That was before . . . nowadays, Evan and Bassie can’t stand one another. I’m just not sure why . . .”

Cody shrugged. “Who knows? My brother and I haven’t talked in awhile . . . he moved out and went to college. Then he moved to Chicago . . . Guess we just lost touch.”

“Maybe,” Jillian intoned. “You should call him sometime. Family’s important.”

Cody nodded. “So you and Gavin . . . you’ve never even dated?”

He looked surprised when she laughed. “I guess you could call it dating. We’re together all the time. Just more like . . . friendly dating, I guess.”

“Yeah?”

She giggled. “Gavvie took me to the homecoming dance my junior year, but only after I guilted him into it.”

“You had to guilt him?”

She grimaced but nodded. “All the other girls kept asking me who he was. I was so proud, just to be seen with him.” She shook herself and sighed. “I think I’ve tried everything ever written in those stupid teen magazines; all that stuff about trying to get that special guy to notice you. None of them ever actually worked . . .”

“You should sue ‘em,” he joked.

Jillian laughed. “Maybe.”

“He’ll come around,” Cody said. In Jillian’s mind, she thought he sounded more like he was humoring her than anything else.

“I could strip naked in front of Gavin Jamison, and I doubt he’d notice,” she grumbled.

Cody choked on the sip of soda that he’d been trying to drink. Coughing and sputtering mingled with his embarrassed laughter, and he shook his head, wiping his eyes with a balled-up fist. “If Sherry did that, I’d pay attention sure enough,” he mumbled.

Jillian laughed, too, then stood abruptly, handing back the sleeve of pictures and brushing off her hands. “You’ll bring them out here?”

It took a moment for Cody to register the change in topics, but he nodded. “Uh, yeah . . . Sherry would really like that, I think.”

“Would tomorrow be too soon?”

He blinked. "Tomorrow? Sure, I think . . ."

She smiled. "Good! Tell me, what do your girls like to eat?"

"Oh, uh . . . they're not too picky," he replied.

"Hmm, candy . . . they like candy, don't they?"

He laughed as he spun around on the creeper in preparation to work on the truck again. "Yeah, they do."

"Okay," Jillian replied. "I'll run to town and pick some up, then! And film . . . I can't forget film . . . and something nice for lunch."

Careening around on her heel, she bounced out of the garage, spotting Gavin standing near the main stable, hands on hips as he scowled up at the roof. Faltering for just a moment, she squared her shoulders and drew a deep breath, pasting on a bright smile before she ran over to slap her hands over his eyes. "Guess who," she said, deepening her voice quite admirably, even if she did say so, herself.

"Oh, geez . . . Evan. Gotta be Evan," he deadpanned.

"Close," she quipped. "If I'm Evan, then I have to say, I've gone and grown a right nice rack, don't you think?"

"J-J-Jilli!" he gasped, face flooding with instantaneous and violent color as he jerked away when she pressed her breasts against his back.

Jillian giggled. "You're wicked cute when you blush, Gavvie," she countered in her best impersonation of Evan at his leering best.

"Yeah, and you're just plain wicked, Jillian," he grumbled.

Her laughter spilled over like a thousand silver bells ringing in the early morning sunshine. Gavin smiled despite himself. "Give me your keys, Gavvie," she demanded, holding out her hand, palm up, and wiggling her fingers.

"Right, Jilli. Suppose you tell me why you need them?" he asked, quirkling an eyebrow in an entirely endearing sort of way.

"I want to go to the grocery store," she informed him.

"Grocery . . . There're plenty of groceries in the house," he reminded her.

She wrinkled her nose and reached into his pocket for the aforementioned keys.

“Jilli-an!” he growled, trying to twist his body to dislodge her hand. She reacted by digging her hand in deeper. Her hand brushed—something—and he uttered a sound caught somewhere between a gasp and a hiss as Jillian’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Oh, my, Gavvie . . .” she commented, her voice a little breathless. “Impressive . . .”

His face contorted sharply as he pulled her hand out of his pocket and retrieved the keys, himself. “Here,” he grumbled as his cheeks reddened even more. “Be careful, will you? And no picking up men who need jobs, all right? I’m running out of work for the ones who already work here.”

The last part of his sentence was aimed at Hank and Dax, who were leaning back against the fence nearby. Neither was trying to hide his amusement over the situation, and worse, they were both laughing at Gavin.

Jillian laughed, tossing the keys into the air and catching them as they came back down again. “Why were you staring at the roof?” she asked, taking pity on the poor man.

Gavin snorted but looked rather relieved at the abrupt change of topics. “I think I should put a new one on . . . that one’s looking pretty shabby.”

She shook her head and blinked in confusion. “You sound like that’d be a horrible thing.”

He made a face and turned around to slouch against the fence. “Yeah, well . . .” Dragging his hand over his face in a defeated sort of way, he slowly let out his breath and shrugged. “The stock’ll have to be moved to another stable for the duration, which wouldn’t be a bad thing. It’s just that Waterspell is likely to throw a hissy fit over the relocation, but that roof won’t last another year, I’d bet . . .”

“If you have to do it, you have to do it,” she stated matter-of-factly.

He sighed but smiled. “Yeah . . . so why do you think we need groceries?”

Spinning around in a circle as though she couldn’t quite contain her excitement, Jillian giggled and clapped her hands. “Cody said he’d bring his wife and daughters with him tomorrow so I can take pictures of them.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. “Yes. You think they’d like popsicles?”

He chuckled. “Of course . . . you always did.”

“I did, didn’t I?”

“Yep,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck and pondering the question at hand. “Those red, white, and blue ones . . . bomb pops or something like that.”

“I remember those!” she exclaimed softly. “I haven’t thought about those in ages . . . You didn’t like them, did you?”

Gavin smiled and shook his head. “I liked them just fine. You always took mine, though.”

“And here I thought you let me have yours,” she said, her lips turning down in an exaggerated moue.

“It was fine,” he assured her. “I didn’t mind.”

She smiled, rising up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “I’ll buy extra ones so you can have some, too,” she promised.

“That’s okay.”

Stepping back, she narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. “Gavin . . . Do you think you could take the girls on a horseback ride? If it’s okay with Cody and his wife?”

He seemed surprised by her request but nodded slowly. “Oh . . . Sure . . . I’ve got a horse that’d do well with them.”

“I just hope some of my pictures turn out,” she confessed.

Her quiet worry drew a marked frown from Gavin, and he narrowed his eyes as he stared at her in a thoughtful sort of way. “Jilli, you spend way too much time belittling your abilities. You have a real eye for photography, you know.”

She managed a bashful little smile. “You’re sweet, Gavvie.”

He snorted as his cheeks reddened.

“Why don’t you come with me?” she said suddenly, grabbing his hand and tugging.

“I was going to call and get a few quotes on a new roof,” he said slowly. “I could do that this afternoon, I suppose . . .”

“Yes, you can!” she decided. “Do you think we could rent a few movies, too?”

Rolling his eyes as she dragged him toward the truck, he grinned. “You win, Jilli. Whatever you want.”

She stopped for a moment to peer over her shoulder at him, a mysterious little smile turning up her lips as a wicked light danced in her eyes. “Be careful what you say, Gavvie . . . I might decide I want a lot . . .”

He groaned and blushed darker. She tossed him the keys and hopped into the passenger side of the truck.

Cody stepped out of the garage, lifting a hand to shield his eyes against the bright sunshine. Wiping his hands as he shuffled over to Hank and Dax, he glanced back at the old truck that rattled toward the road. "That thing needs a tune up," he mused as he leaned against the fence.

"Probably," Hank drawled. "We don't drive it much when Gavin's away."

Cody nodded. "Hey, Hank? Can I ask you something?"

Hank shot him a questioning glance but nodded. "All right."

Scowling at the packed gravel under his feet, Cody slapped the grease rag against his palm, willing himself not to blush. Ever since Jillian had left the garage, though, he hadn't been able to stop wondering, and from what he had gathered, Hank was one of Gavin's best friends, so he ought to know . . . "Is, uh . . . well . . . Is Gavin . . . uh . . . y-y-you know . . . *that way*?"

Hank's eyebrows disappeared in the shadows of the brim of his hat. "*That way*?" he repeated.

Cody shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah, you know . . . uh . . . gay . . ."

Hank guffawed. "Nah, he's just got his head up his ass, if you know what I mean," Dax drawled.

Cody grimaced. "Well, I don't care, really, if he is, but . . . it's just . . . Jillian, you know? She really likes him."

"Yeah, she does," Hank allowed with a sigh.

"He ain't gay," Dax muttered, spitting on the ground. "He's *stupid*; that's all, and you can't fault a man for being stupid."

Cody tried not to grin. He really did. "That's what my mom used to say," he admitted as his smile broke free.

"No, no . . . Cody's got a point," Hank said slowly. "Maybe you should ask him."

Cody blinked and quickly shook his head. "Oh, no . . . I-I-I didn't think he was . . . It's just . . . Jillian's pretty and all that . . . I just don't get why Gavin don't notice."

"Yeah, I don't think it's about noticing, Cody. Gavin's just got some really stupid notions. Sooner or later, though, she'll get him. She's been after him for years," Hank assured him then sighed. "Don't think she's the kind of woman to take 'no' for an answer."

Cody wasn't sure what to say to that. In the end, he just nodded. They did belong together, didn't they? They belonged together as much as he and Sherry always had.

Chapter 16
Cody's Girls

“Thanks a lot for letting me bring Sherry and the girls out,” Cody said for the tenth time in the hour that Gavin had been in the garage to check on the progress he was making on the truck. “Minnie wouldn’t stop talking about it last night . . . she was all excited to see the horses.”

Gavin grinned and shrugged. “It’s fine. Jilli’s been looking forward to it, too.”

Cody groped around for the socket wrench beside him. Gavin bent down and handed it to him. “Even Karis said she wanted to see the horses, and she don’t talk too much.”

“I’ve got a very nice little horse that’ll do well with the girls,” he assured Cody. “Figured I’d let Jillian take some pictures first, though.”

“Sherry was really excited, too. She’s a big fan of Jillian’s, I guess.”

Gavin’s smile tightened just a bit. He hated being reminded that Jillian was ‘famous’. With those reminders always came the inevitable feelings of inadequacy; the deep-seeded knowledge that no matter what he tried to do, he’d never be quite good enough for Jillian Zelig . . .

And he’d started to forget that, hadn’t he? Out here where they were so far removed from the insanity that was her life back in New York City, it had been easier to forget. Simpler just to think of her as Jilli, the girl he’d known since childhood. Outside the scope of the flashing lights of a million photographers vying for the next big story, she’d become a bit more approachable to him; never mind that things would be the same as always when they returned to the city. It had struck him once as he carried her on his back over the rooftops of the New York skyline in an effort to elude the paparazzi who had tracked her down at a small café that she liked to frequent. They sneaked out the back doors of the restaurant with the owner’s blessing, and he dragged her onto his back for the jaunt home, and all the while, he thought about how unnatural it was to do that just to escape the press . . .

‘Don’t forget that,’ he reminded himself as he held her close in the night. *‘My job—my only job—is to protect Jillian. Don’t be stupid . . . she’d never be happy with a fool like me . . .’*

Yet he’d still stroked her hair, touched her cheek, smiled when she sighed happily, snuggling closer against him in her sleep. Running the pad of his thumb ever-so-gently over her lips, only to catch his breath when she smiled . . . The moonlight tumbled through the glass doors, illuminating the bedroom in a mellow sort of way, and it seemed to him that Jillian glowed in the darkness: his light, his salvation, and ultimately, his demise.

The fiercest ache welled up inside him—a million stabbing pains in the center of his chest as the faintest whisper in his head showed him images of what should have been. He’d wanted to bring her back here, hadn’t he? Those first years of their separation while he was attending the University of Montana, he’d thought—he’d hoped . . . “I want to see the ranch someday, Gavvie . . . you’ll take me there, won’t you?”

And he'd wanted to. God, he'd wanted to. He wanted her to love the ranch as much as he did. She paused for a moment, long enough to smile at him. She was tiptoeing across a shallow creek atop a fallen tree. Arms stretched out on either side, she carefully turned around, feet bent down over the rough tree bark, toes curled under to keep herself from falling, and she crooked a finger at him as her smile turned a little wicked. "Will you catch me if I fall?"

Blinking away the dazed feeling that always assailed him when she shot him one of those smiles, Gavin nodded. "Y-yeah."

She laughed. "We belong together, you know, like red beans and rice . . . like peanut butter and marshmallow fluff . . ."

"I'd have said 'jelly,'" he mused quietly.

She shook her head staunchly. "Like mashed potatoes and gravy . . . like summertime and thunderstorms . . ." Trailing off, she giggled softly, hopping off the log and straight into Gavin's arms. "Me and you."

"You and I," he corrected automatically, stepping back to brace himself against the exuberance in Jillian's silly display. "If you say so . . ."

She wrinkled her nose. He always thought she was adorable when she did that . . . "Stuff, stuff, stuff, Gavin Jamison. One day you'll make me your wife, won't you?"

He'd laughed despite himself, cheeks pinking as the autumn leaves fell around them. "W-we'll see, Jilli," he mumbled. "You'll be bored with me long before then."

"I'll never be bored with you," she promised.

Gavin grimaced. But she had, hadn't she? Abruptly, unexpectedly, she had . . . What else could he think when she up and disappeared in the middle of his senior year of college? Maybe he'd waited too long . . . maybe he should have told her sooner. Would that have changed anything? No, it probably wouldn't have. She would have realized sooner or later that he was nothing but a big old geek; about as socially backward as he could possibly be. Sure, he could deal with people in the confines of his office. That was different. Discussing someone's stocks and money wasn't nearly the same as having a personal relationship with them, and in that, he was comfortable enough.

Jillian's defection was hard on him. All too often, he sat around, staring at the textbooks he was supposed to be studying without seeing a thing—staring at the solitaire diamond ring he'd bought earlier that year. Nothing big or fancy, it was just a quarter carat, but the cut and clarity made up for the lack of size, or so he was told. He'd been saving his money ever since he could remember—money he'd earned doing odd jobs for his father or mother . . . allowances . . . mowing yards in the spring and fall . . . an afterschool job at the local McDonald's in Hidekea . . . He'd even participated in a couple junior races at the county fair, and the prize money . . . He'd

saved all of it until he'd earned enough to buy the ring for her, and all he had to do was bide his time until she turned eighteen—a promise he'd made to Cain. She'd gotten tired of him six months too soon.

Still he had the ring box in the pocket of his inexpensive suit jacket as he'd been presented with his degree. As he stood there, scanning the assembly of proud families, he'd spotted the silvery hair of Gin Zelig right away. She sat between Cain and Evan. Bas and Sydnie sat behind them. Jillian was nowhere to be seen, though, and the understanding that she hadn't come . . . it tore him up inside. He'd hoped—*really* hoped—that she'd at least come to his graduation. Sure, it was still almost two months until her eighteenth birthday, and he didn't doubt for a second that Cain would be more than a little irked with him, but he hadn't seen her in nearly six months, and one thing was certain: he *couldn't* let her slip away, even if it meant displeasing her father, the tai-youkai. It wasn't until that day that Gavin really understood that she already had . . . and then . . .

And then he'd slowly come to realize that the girl he adored would never be his. The first images of her in the magazines . . . they'd solidified the knowledge in his mind. He'd never be able to give her that sort of life, and how could he possibly compete with the glitz and glamour that she'd grown accustomed to? He couldn't, and it wouldn't be fair of him to ask that of her, would it? Even then, it was just a matter of time, wasn't it, until she found herself bored with him as she had before, and if she disappeared out of his life again?

This time, he wasn't so sure he'd be able to get over it . . .

“Gavin? You okay?”

Blinking rapidly to clear his addled mind, Gavin was slow to focus on Cody's face. He'd emerged from under the truck and was sitting on the creeper with his arms locked draped around his raised knees, staring at Gavin as though he'd sprouted an extra head or something. Gavin shrugged. “Sorry . . . I was thinking about calling someone to start on the roof,” he lied, fighting the color that rose in his cheeks.

Cody nodded though he didn't look like he was buying Gavin's reasons. “I was just saying that this truck could do with a good oil change and all that, too. You know; might as well do all that stuff, right?”

“Yeah, sure . . . I made arrangements with Denton's Auto . . . just tell them who you are, and I'll pay for all of it later.”

Cody looked like he wanted to say something. In the end, he nodded again. “Will do.”

Gavin tried to smile. It felt more like a grimace. “Yeah . . . I need to get some stuff done before I take your girls out on the horse.”

He didn't wait for an answer. Striding out of the garage, he lifted his head, unconsciously seeking out Jillian. She was sitting under the spread branches of a black cottonwood tree in the front yard beside Sherry Mitchell. Minnie was standing on the bottom rung of the fence, staring

at the horses in the paddock nearby while the youngest, Karis, peeked out from behind her mother. Jillian was fussing with her camera—a Narcosis 3000 Platinum series—the best on the market, or so the man at Jade Electronics had insisted when they’d stopped there after arriving in Helena. She’d purchased a couple extra lenses, too, and she was thrilled to get a chance to play with her new ‘toy’. He’d rolled his eyes when she’d grabbed ten rolls of special film for the camera, and he’d spent the better portion of the evening hunting down the supplies she’d need to create her own darkroom in the basement of the house. Most of the chemicals would be delivered in a couple days, but there were a few things that they could likely find locally, which saved him on the ungodly cost of shipping . . .

Heaving a sigh, he turned on his heel and headed for the barn. He’d yet to check the northern border of the ranch, and he had time to do it before lunch. He trusted Hank’s judgment, of course, and Hank had said that they’d just redone the fences along the northern perimeter in the spring. Still, the time away would do him some good, he was certain. Maybe he’d be able to clear his mind so that he didn’t feel as though he were falling apart at the seams . . . Besides, he wasn’t exactly in the mood for company. A nice, long ride . . . that was exactly what he needed . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“Gavin Jamison . . .”

The name meant absolutely nothing to him; one of the straight-laced types that he wouldn’t have given a second glance if he passed him by on the streets. Somehow, this man—this Gavin Jamison—had managed to thwart him but good.

Glancing down at the folder in his lap, lips curling up in an unpleasant little grin, he scowled at the first page. ‘*Age: twenty-nine . . . Profession: stock broker . . .*’ he read. “Geez, what a stiff . . .”

Of course, that ‘stiff’ had given him the slip, hadn’t he? “Damn it . . .”

‘*Address: 203 Rivington, Apartment 10A . . . graduated from the University of Maine School of Finance in June of 2058 . . .*’ His lip curled up in an angry sneer. “A regular fucking boy scout . . .”

The file contained everything he’d ever wanted to know about Gavin Jamison’s connection to Jillian Zelig. The only thing it didn’t contain was their current whereabouts. As loathe as he was to try it, he was tempted to venture out to the family’s stronghold in Maine to see if she’d gone there. It was a long shot, and something told him that she hadn’t done any such thing . . .

Pushing out of the chair, he stomped across the room to glower at the city laid out before him. He’d procured a cheap room down near the docks—good enough for what he needed in a neighborhood that asked no questions and noticed nothing. Close enough to Rivington to get into and out of Gavin Jamison’s apartment, anyway.

Good enough . . .

There had to be something in the man's home, didn't there? A clue as to where they'd absconded to . . .

He'd already scoped out the apartment; the neighborhood. A quiet building that looked completely unassuming on the outside, he'd read enough of the names arranged on the brass plate beside the door to know that Gavin Jamison's apartment was on the tenth floor of the historic building.

Grinding out his cigarette in the battered tin ashtray, he gritted his teeth and glowered at the sun setting behind the harsh lines of New York City. He'd get his answers, damned if he wouldn't, or he'd die trying . . .

"The game's on, Jillian Zelig," he murmured into the stilted silence as he reached for the Gilamonster skin gloves lying on the window sill. "The game's on . . ."

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

"I can't believe how darling your daughters are!" Jillian exclaimed. Minnie ducked behind a tree to hide from Karis, who had finally emerged out from behind her mother. At nearly fourteen months old, Karis still walked on the balls of her feet with her hands held up at her sides.

It had taken the better part of the morning to get the child to come out of hiding though Jillian had caught her peering at her a few times. Whenever she saw Jillian looking at her, she ducked behind the safety of her mother's back . . . but she had heard the child's soft giggles.

She'd taken nearly three rolls of film, pictures of Minnie, who had announced that she was a model, too. True enough, she'd delighted in posing with wildflowers she'd picked in the spotless pink sun dress, in her white nylon socks with the crisp white lace trimming the cuffs and shiny white patent leather shoes that didn't look new but did look as though Sherry Mitchell had taken a lot of care in cleaning them up for her daughter to wear for the occasion.

"They've not had this much fun in a long while," Sherry commented as she sipped her ice water.

Jillian smiled. "Are you feeling all right? I can get a more comfortable chair if that one's bothering you . . ."

Sherry waved off Jillian's concern with a gentle smile and a flick of her delicate wrist. "No, this is fine. I'm just glad to have one day that I do not have to tell the girls that they're too close to the road and stuff."

"I have to tell you: Cody brags on you and the girls all the time."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Yes . . . he's a really nice guy."

"He is."

"Jillian! Take another picture of me!" Minnie hollered. Sitting on the edge of an old brick retaining wall, she smiled brightly as Jillian lifted her camera. After adjusting the lens and snapping a couple shots, Jillian laughed as Minnie hopped down and sped off once more. She'd tried unsuccessfully to get a couple of pictures of Karis. Whenever the girl saw the camera, though, she ran to duck behind her sister or her mother: whoever was closest at the time.

"Mama, fower," Karis said as she toddled over with a half-crushed star lily in her hand.

"Oh, how pretty!" Sherry gushed, taking the flower from her daughter and kissing her cheek. Karis giggled and leaned against Sherry's arm.

Jillian knelt down before the girl. "Do you think I can take your picture, Karis? You can stand there with your mama."

For a moment, Jillian thought that the girl was going to run to hide again, but she glanced at her mother then back at Jillian once more before slowly nodding.

Jillian snapped a few pictures of Karis huddled against her mother's side. Sherry said she hadn't dressed to have her picture taken, but she looked really cute in the light blue maternity dress. It hung like a sack from her otherwise small frame, but her rounded baby-belly was too inviting not to photograph. Her pale blonde hair had been caught up in a ponytail, but the strands were so fine that they didn't want to stay back. With her hair blowing in the soft summer breeze, she looked so sweet that Jillian could see exactly why Cody adored his wife so much.

"I'm pwetty, too?" Karis asked, tugging on Jillian's skirt as she changed the roll of film in her camera.

Jillian stopped what she was doing long enough to smile at the little girl. "Absolutely, sweetie . . . you and your sister are gorgeous!"

"I look like my mama," she ventured.

Jillian couldn't help the tender little smile that quirked her lips. "Yes, you do! Your mama and daddy are lucky to have such cute little girls, you know."

Karis giggled. "You can take my picture," she offered at length.

Jillian snapped the camera closed. "I'd love to."

"I heard there were a couple girls who wanted to ride a horse?"

Minnie squealed and Karis took off as Gavin rode around the side of the house on a pretty little white horse that Jillian hadn't seen before. "Me, me!" Karis yelled.

"I'm bigger, so I should get to go first," Minnie argued.

"Minnie, why don't you let Karis go first?" Sherry said as she wandered over. Hands bracing the small of her back, she was smiling as she approached.

"Aww," Minnie complained but stepped back to take her mother's hand. "I get to go when she's done?"

Gavin chuckled. "Absolutely."

Jillian lifted Karis and handed her up to Gavin, who settled her securely in front of himself. "I'll just take her around the yard," he told Jillian. "I won't go far."

"Okay," she agreed with a smile.

Gavin let Karis hold onto the reins just below his hands. "You ready?"

"Yeah," Karis giggled.

Nodding at Jillian, he nudged the horse with his knees, and they started away.

Turning around in time to see Minnie's face contort in a pout, Jillian smiled. "You know, I think I have some popsicles in the freezer . . . would you like one while you're waiting?"

Minnie's expression lifted just a little. "Popsicle?"

Jillian nodded. "Why don't you come inside and help me with them? I think it's time for an afternoon snack, anyway."

"I like snacks," she agreed, slipping her hand into Jillian's. "We'll be back, Mama. You sit down, okay?"

"I can help you," Sherry insisted.

Jillian waved her away with a smile. "Don't you worry about it. Just relax. You're our guest."

Sherry nodded though she looked like she wanted to argue it. Jillian had a feeling that she wasn't used to just sitting around doing nothing, but that was just too bad. Cody hadn't been kidding when he said that she was due any time. As tiny as she was, she had to be uncomfortable with her distended belly. Still Jillian had to smile. To have another life growing inside her . . . How would that feel?

After handing Minnie three popsicles, Jillian retrieved the platter of fruit that she'd prepared earlier out of the refrigerator and followed Minnie back outside.

"Here, Mama . . . want one?" Minnie asked, holding out the popsicle to her mother.

“Thank you,” Sherry replied with a laugh as Jillian set the platter in the center of the small glass table.

“One for you?” she said, offering one to Jillian.

She took the popsicle and tore off the paper. “Thank you, Minnie.”

Minnie nodded once as she carefully pulled back the paper on her frozen treat.

“Why don’t you see if your daddy is ready to take a break?” Jillian suggested.

“Okay!” Minnie exclaimed, carting around on her heel and taking off at break-neck speed for the garage.

Sherry giggled. “Thanks again for inviting us over.”

Jillian shook her head as she bit the end of her bomb pop. “Don’t thank me . . . I just hope the pictures come out all right. If they do, and if you like them, I’d be happy to print them up for you.”

“That’d be nice,” she replied with a happy smile. “We haven’t gotten the girls’ pictures taken lately. Cody feels bad, and I hate that . . . He’s a good man, you know?”

“Of course he is,” Jillian agreed.

Sherry’s smile faltered slightly, but she uttered an almost embarrassed little chuckle. “Everyone said he’d leave me when he found out . . .”

Jillian shook her head in confusion. “Leave you? Because he lost his job at Chrysalis?”

“Chry—Oh, no!” She shook her head and waved her hand. “Sorry . . . They say your mind goes when you’re pregnant, and they’re not far wrong. I was just remembering . . . I was seventeen when I got pregnant with Minnie . . . still in school and everything. It was March of my junior year of high school . . . Cody was nineteen and was working for his father. Didn’t make much money, and we were both really young . . . All my friends said that he’d take off when I told him. I was scared to death.”

“But he didn’t.”

Sherry smiled. “No, he didn’t. He . . .” She drew a deep breath as her eyes took on a suspect brightness, and she dashed her hand over her eyes before she went on. “He hugged me; told me that everything would be all right. His parents paid for a small church wedding. My dad died when I was small, and Mom was working three jobs. She didn’t have enough money to pay for one. I’d have been happy with a civil ceremony, but Cody’s mom and dad insisted . . . We spent our honeymoon weekend at his uncle’s cabin up on Canyon Ferry Lake. I think I slept most of it away. Cody never complained.”

Jillian giggled softly. “I don’t suppose he did.”

Sherry sighed as she glanced at her youngest daughter. “It makes me so mad that we had to use our entire savings just to keep our chins above water. He was so good about taking care of Minnie so I could study and finish high school, and all he’s ever wanted was to get his mechanic’s certification . . . and he’s been so worried about . . . well, everything . . .”

“But that’s not your fault.”

“Maybe not . . . Still . . . Cody’s so happy about this job and stuff . . . He’s so excited to go to work, and he talks so highly about you and Gavin. I haven’t seen him this happy since before the factory closed down—”

“The last thing you both need to worry about is a job,” Jillian cut in. “You’ve got a baby on the way, and . . . wow . . . I envy you.”

Sherry blinked, her brown eyes opening wide in genuine surprise at Jillian’s quiet admission. “Why?”

Jillian shrugged. “That’s all I ever really wanted . . . to get married and have a family.”

“Yeah, but I’m sure your life is a lot more glamorous than mine.”

Jillian’s smile faltered, and she looked at her hands for a long moment before shrugging in what she hoped was a nonchalant manner and forcing her smile to brighten once more. “Glamorous? Maybe . . . I mean, I’m not complaining. It’s just kind of lonely sometimes.”

Sherry fell quiet as she thought that over, and when she looked at Jillian again, she smiled. “I guess it isn’t so bad. One thing about having kids: I don’t have time to be lonely.”

“Do you know if this one’s a girl or a boy?”

Shaking her head, she smiled as Minnie dragged her father by the hand out of the garage. “No . . . we sort of wanted to be surprised this time.”

“You know . . . if you need anything—anything at all—you can call me,” Jillian offered. “I mean . . . I’d be happy to watch the girls for you when you’re having the baby . . . but I guess you probably already have someone lined up . . .”

“Really?”

“Sure.”

Sherry smiled a little shyly. “Well, it’s just . . . we sort of do . . . one of my neighbors offered to watch them, but . . . but Karis doesn’t really like her, but she’s *talked* to you. Karis never talks to strangers. I don’t know why . . .” Shaking her head, her smile widened. “She really took to

Gavin. It's surprising. She even gets shy with her daddy sometimes. Must be the horse. She loves horses. Drives me crazy. She was beside herself when Cody told her that Gavin has horses out here. I didn't think we were ever going to get her to bed last night. She kept asking if it was morning yet . . ."

Jillian laughed, recalling her own excitement when her parents had taken her to Disney World for spring break when she was six. She supposed it was something rather like that. "Doesn't every little girl want a pony?" she quipped.

Sherry nodded. "Yeah, I guess we did," she admitted. Her gaze shifted away, across the open lawn to light on the man on the horse holding onto the child, and even at that distance, she could discern Karis' happy laughter. "He's good with children," she remarked.

"Yeah . . . Gavin's got a way with creatures," Jillian said with a laugh. "He's been my hero since I was a little girl, too, but I digress: I'd love to have them . . . I'm sure Gavin wouldn't mind, either."

"Yeah, except Sherry has a bad habit of having babies in the middle of the night," Cody remarked as he kissed his wife's cheek. Minnie tugged her father's hand and giggled happily.

"You make it sound like I do that on purpose," Sherry grumbled.

Jillian stuck the used popsicle stick in the discarded wrapper and giggled as Cody nabbed a small bunch of grapes and fed one to his wife. "She does. Waits till after I'm sleeping to tell me she's been in labor for a couple hours."

Sherry blushed but giggled. "If you're sure you wouldn't mind . . ."

"I wouldn't mind," Jillian reiterated.

"Would you like that, Minnie? Would you like to come stay with Gavin and Jillian while I'm at the hospital?"

Minnie hopped up and down. "Can I ride a horsie?"

Jillian laughed. "If it's during the day, you can."

The soft whinny of a horse announced Gavin's return. Cody scooped up his daughter and planted a huge kiss on her cheek before setting her on her feet. Minnie held up her arms, and Gavin laughed as Cody handed her up. "I'll be back," he called over his shoulder as Minnie fired off questions about the horse.

"Did you have fun?" Jillian asked Karis.

The little girl nodded. "Gavin said he would take me 'gain," she said.

"I think they'll keep Gavin busy all afternoon," Cody remarked with an exaggerated grimace.

Chapter 17
Midnight Walks

“You going to tell me why you’ve been so quiet this evening?”

Pasting on a bright smile, Jillian drew a deep breath and turned around to meet Gavin’s troubled gaze. Aqua eyes filled with a sense of apprehension, he stood, leaning against the short, decorative wooden fence. “Have I been?”

He nodded slowly, crossing his arms over his chest. “Yeah . . . you’ve barely said two words since I got back from running Cody’s brood home.”

“Just thinking about how cute you were . . . and how patient . . . The girls kept you on that horse all afternoon.”

Shaking his head, he broke into a sheepish grin. “Karis wants to change that horse’s name to ‘Marshmallow’.”

“Marshmallow? Are you going to?”

He raised his eyebrows and cocked his head to the side as his grin widened. “Well, she’s only been ‘Willow’ for about seven years . . .”

She giggled. “Is that a ‘no’?”

He chuckled. “I’ll let *them* call her Marshmallow . . . how’s that?”

“Ah, and more hero points for you.”

“How many does that make?”

“Too many to count.”

“And what are these hero points good for?”

Her smile widened, and she stood up, brushing off her skirt and wandering over to wrap her arms around his waist. “Whatever you want them to be good for,” she replied, resting her cheek against his shoulder for a long moment.

She half expected him to push her away. Though he didn’t mind when she hugged him, it always seemed that the hugs ended far sooner than she wanted. To her surprise, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her just a little closer as he heaved a long, slow sigh. “You’re really not going to tell me what’s bothering you, are you?” he asked quietly.

“Nothing’s bothering me; I swear,” she insisted with a little smile as she closed her eyes and savored the feel of Gavin’s body so close to hers.

He sighed but didn’t argue with her. “Seemed like you made another friend,” he commented. She could hear the smile in his voice.

“Sherry, you mean? I really like her . . . but I daresay that the girls are trying to steal you away from me.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, okay . . .”

Content enough just to be near him, she pushed aside the nagging feeling of foreboding; a whisper in her heart that told her that this one moment wouldn’t last nearly long enough for her. “You think I’m joking,” she murmured.

He snorted and changed the subject. “In any case, I’m glad you had a good time today.”

“Cody and Sherry . . . they’re really cute together, don’t you think?”

Gavin smiled. “I suppose.”

“*Almost* as cute as you and the girls . . . I didn’t think you’d ever get them off the horse.”

He made a show of grimacing though his smile remained intact. “Yeah . . . I didn’t think so, either. Bet they sleep really well tonight.”

She laughed at the hint of smugness in Gavin’s tone. “You did all that on purpose?”

“No . . . but I figure it’s probably an added bonus. They sure are cute, though . . .”

Jillian snorted playfully. “Are you saying I have something to worry about?”

“I’ve only got one Jilli,” he mumbled.

She leaned away in time to see the tell-tale blush staining his cheeks. Still, he didn’t let go, and she certainly wasn’t going to remind him that he was still holding onto her . . . “I’ll *always* be your Jilli,” she whispered. Reaching up to touch his cheek, she caught her breath as his gaze slowly shifted to meet hers. Eyes darkening to a hazy shade of azure, he stared at her as though he were trying to read her mind. “Gavin . . .”

His kiss came quickly, descending on her before she could think, before she could understand just what was going on. Hesitant, gentle, his muscles were tense under her fingertips. The tension in his kiss eased slowly. The awkwardness in the gesture touched her somewhere deep inside. The sweetness of his lips against hers sent a shiver down her spine; a subtle reverberation that swelled in her chest. He let go of her waist to bring one hand up, sinking his fingers into her hair as she threaded her arms around his neck, holding him close, reveling in the strength of him that enveloped her. He smelled like sun-dried grass, like the calm before a

storm. Her thoughts skittered away from her before she had a chance to collect them, and she sighed: clinging to him, unwilling to let him go . . .

Delicious tremors churned in her belly. Gavin uttered a low groan when she flicked her tongue out to caress his bottom lip. There was something entirely magical in his kiss; emotion that he didn't try to hide. As clumsy and almost awkward as it was, the sweetness of it dispelled the tentativeness in his actions. He held onto her as she clung to him; as the birds in the trees sang their song to welcome the descending evening. He felt so perfect to her; he was everything she'd ever wanted, and in those moments, in the stillness, she felt as though nothing in the world could ever touch her: just Gavin—just him—just as it had always been . . .

Seconds ticked away unmarked. The safety of his arms around her was enough—more than enough—to shelter her. His lips pressed against hers, danced over hers in a gentle caress. His indecision seemed to melt away, and Jillian sighed happily, content in the protection he offered her; lost in the surge of pure sensation . . .

Whimpering quietly when he pulled back, Jillian buried her face against his chest, breathing ragged, harsh in her own ears as his heart thundered beneath her cheek. He cleared his throat but didn't speak. She laughed unsteadily when he kissed her forehead. "It's, uh, s-starting to c-cool off," he stammered. "You ready to go inside?"

"In a minute," she replied, snuggling a little further under his chin.

He sighed. She supposed it was his way of protesting. He didn't try to shove her away, though, and that, in her mind, was some progress. "You rented a couple movies, didn't you?" he reminded her.

"Yes, I did," she said, stifling a sigh. He was trying to get her to let go, she knew. After one last moment, she did. It was enough for her that he'd given in on some level. '*He's coming around*,' she decided with a self-satisfied little grin. '*Soon, Gavvie . . .*'

"So what did you rent?" he asked as she turned away and started back toward the patio.

"*Stealing Heaven*," she replied.

He groaned. "The castration movie?"

"No . . . the story of Abelard and Heloise," she retorted.

"Yeah . . . the castration movie . . ." he reiterated.

"Yes, well, you can actually watch it with me this time," she informed him.

"I watch it with you *every* time," he grumbled.

"Hmm, you *start* to watch it with me every time," she allowed. "Then you end up snoring on the sofa."

He quirked an eyebrow at her contention. "I don't snore."

"It's okay, Gavvie," she assured him, pausing long enough to pat his cheek in mock consolation. "You do, but I still love you."

He blushed. She knew he would. "You're not *really* going to make me watch that movie, are you? It's like . . . a million years old."

"It isn't a *million* years old," she chided. "It was filmed back in 1988."

"Close enough," he grumbled as he followed her into the house. "Almost a hundred years old."

"Do I gripe about your *Star Wars* movies? No, I don't think I do, and they were made earlier than that, so stop complaining, will you?"

"That's *completely* different," he remarked as he veered off toward the kitchen to get a soda.

"How do you figure?"

His snort drifted back to her, and she smiled as she knelt before the video receiver and keyed in the access code for the movies she'd rented for the week. She'd figured that the local rental store had the old fashioned DVDs. It turned out that they'd recently switched over to the more standard digital media system. All one had to do was pay for the movies one wanted to rent and give them the land line telephone number. The movies were accessed through a regular satellite television receiver after punching in the ten digit numerical code, and the first day of the actual rental term—in this case, a week—didn't activate until one entered the access code.

"George Lucas was a genius—well ahead of his time. I doubt you can say the same about whoever directed *Stealing Heaven*—and there's no castration in it, either."

Laughing at his affected shudder, Jillian shook her head at his lack of romantic thought. "Timeless love stories don't need directorial genius," she informed him. "Now be quiet and hurry up . . . the movie is starting."

Stomping back into the living room with a soda in one hand and a glass of iced tea in the other, Gavin sat down and handed Jillian the glass before wrinkling his nose and glancing around the room. "Grab the geek mag, and I'll hurt you," she stated mildly enough when his gaze lit on the *Computers Monthly* magazine on the chair across the room.

"But I'd stay awake," he told her. She bit her lip to keep from laughing outright at the pleading tone in his voice.

"You'll stay awake anyway, Gavvie," she countered.

"I'll *try* to stay awake," he grumbled then sighed.

“Keep trying, big boy. I’m not feeling sorry for you.”

“Didn’t figure you did,” he admitted. “I let *you* sleep through *Star Wars*.”

“But I’ve seen them all and can recite most of the lines by heart,” she shot back.

“I’d really rather not see the guy lose his parts for falling in love with some wack-o’s niece.”

Jillian laughed. “Just once, Gavin Jamison.”

He sighed again. “All-l-l ri-i-i-ight.”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

Jillian sniffled and wiped her tear-dampened cheeks as the end credits rolled over the television screen. That movie never failed to make her cry. The ending seemed sad, and yet it wasn’t. It was one of Gin’s favorite movies, and Jillian loved it, too. Her father had much the same reaction as Gavin, though, and that had always amused her. One of her favorite memories was lying in bed between her parents while they watched movies—or at least while Gin watched movies. Cain was given more to the role of heckler during the movies than anything else, and *Stealing Heaven* was one of the movies that Cain dearly loved to add his warped brand of commentary to . . .

Reaching forward to nab the remote, Jillian keyed in the access number for the movie Gavin had picked out. She didn’t know anything about it, but judging from the title, alone, she wasn’t so sure she wanted to, either: *Parallel Atomizer*. It was bound to be a sci-fi flick, and probably a cheesy one, at that . . .

Shaking her head, she shook his shoulder to wake him up. He’d tried to stay awake; she had to give him that. Maybe it was something about the male psyche, because her brothers were about the same when faced with an obvious ‘chick flick’. He’d managed to stay awake through the Christmas Eve scene, and that was something. Normally Gavin was entirely incoherent ten minutes into the movie.

“Uh? Wha . . .? Jilli?” Gavin mumbled as he jerked upright and wildly glanced around.

“Your movie is about to start, sleepy-head,” she said with a smile.

He grimaced when he noticed the unnatural brightness in her eyes. “Why do you have to watch movies that make you cry?” he grumbled, pulling her into his lap and tucking her head under his chin.

“It’s a beautiful story,” she insisted, sniffing again as fresh moisture gathered. Just thinking about the movie that soon after watching it had the ability to draw tears, she supposed.

He sighed. "I'll never, ever, *ever* understand you women."

"That's okay," she murmured, smiling as she wiped her cheeks. "You don't have to."

Rubbing her back with a clumsy hand, Gavin slowly shook his head. "This is supposed to be a decent movie," he told her.

"It looks kind of silly."

Grimacing as a giant ant-like alien-thing cantered across the screen, Gavin let out a deep breath. "Okay, yeah . . . that looks bad . . . They built a mechanical alien for the movie for the sake of realism, or so I read. They thought that they'd test out that new hydro-anamorphic technology, but . . . Maybe they should have stuck with CGI, instead . . ."

Jillian didn't understand half of what he'd said, but she nodded anyway, knowing that he was trying to distract her from crying. "Do you think Sherry will have the baby soon?" she asked abruptly.

"Oh . . . uh, probably . . . She's as big as a house. I don't think she could get much bigger and still be able to move."

"Gavin Ryan Jamison!" she chided, sitting up straight and smacking Gavin's arm playfully. "You take that back!"

Gavin dragged his eyes off the movie long enough to pin her with a goofy grin. "Cody said that it'd probably be simpler just to roll her around."

"You're both awful!" she giggled.

"I don't know," he drawled. "She's probably bigger around than she is tall."

"Ga-vin!"

His laughter preempted any rebuttal he could have made. Jillian shook her head and crawled off his lap, trying her best to look completely stern but failing miserably when she broke into a smile. There was just something about his laughter that was entirely infectious . . .

"Sorry, sorry," he muttered, looking anything but contrite.

Jillian giggled. "You're not."

"No, really . . . I am." He coughed.

"How do you suppose it feels to be pregnant?" she ventured, grabbing a throw pillow and wrapping her arms around it.

That sobered him up quickly enough. “No idea . . . can’t say I’ve ever been pregnant.”

Jillian rolled her eyes. “Of course you haven’t! Belle said that it was amazing, but I remember Mama said that Aunt Nezumi was always horribly sick . . .”

He looked completely ill at ease, and he shrugged off-handedly as he turned his attention back to the movie again. “Never really asked about it, myself,” he mumbled.

“I want babies,” Jillian went on, more to herself than to Gavin. “Lots of babies . . . twenty, at least . . .”

Breaking into a fit of coughing, Gavin shook his head when Jillian shot him an odd look and leaned forward to thump his back. “*Twenty* babies?”

“Or more.”

He swallowed hard. “*More?*”

“Sure.”

He snorted. “You’ll have to write their names down and carry it around with you,” he grumbled, “or get them tattooed on your hand.”

She tossed the pillow at him. “Very funny, Gavvie,” she intoned. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting lots of babies.”

“You’d better marry a millionaire.”

“Well, you know, making the babies is pretty nice—or so I’ve heard.”

The blush that stained his cheeks was immediate and intense. Jillian laughed softly. “Yeah, this movie stinks,” he grumbled, staring doggedly at the plasma screen television.

Jillian leaned forward, crawling closer to Gavin. “You want to give it a try?” she whispered, her lips brushing his ear.

He shivered, body stiffening as he clenched his fists and darted a quick glance out of the corner of his eye. “T-t-try wh-what?” he choked out.

She laughed huskily, leaning in even closer. “We could practice making babies,” she ventured.

He swallowed hard. “Uh . . .”

“Come on, Gavvie . . . be my mate? The father of my twenty or more babies?”

“W-wh-what . . .?”

Heaving a sigh, she sat back on her haunches and slowly shook her head. “All right,” she allowed. “You win . . . for now.”

He grimaced, slumping forward, elbows on knees to glower at his hands. “Jilli . . .”

Twisting her fingers in a distracted sort of way, she watched him for a moment. He looked as though he were trying to figure out how to tell her just what was on his mind. Wincing—how was it that she knew what he wanted to say? She drew a deep breath and mentally braced herself.

“Th-that . . . kiss . . .” he began slowly, face reddening while he carefully avoided looking at her. “It shouldn’t have happened.” He cleared his throat. “I’m . . . sorry . . .”

She closed her eyes. She’d figured it was something like that. Biting back the pain his words inspired, Jillian managed what she hoped was a bright smile. She felt it trembling on her lips. “Of course,” she forced herself to say, inflicting a light tone in her voice that she just wasn’t feeling. “Don’t be sorry.”

He saw right through her bravado. With a grimace, he raked his hands over his face. “W-w-we aren’t mates,” he said quietly. “You know it, and I know it, too. I-it’s not funny anymore, Jillian. It stopped being funny a long time ago.”

The finality in his voice couldn’t be ignored. It cut her deep, hit her hard. She had to swallow a few times to force the fist-sized lump back down, and she blinked quickly as she stumbled to her feet. The house seemed to be closing in on her, and she desperately needed to escape. Summoning all the dignity she could muster—it wasn’t much, considering—she straightened her back and lifted her chin, jaw clenched tightly as she angrily told herself not to cry.

For once, he didn’t try to stop her as she reached for the door handle. “Where you going, Jilli?” he asked quietly.

Flinching at the undertones of concern in his voice, she paused for a moment before pushing the sliding door open. “For a walk, Gavin. I . . . I just want to be alone.”

“Don’t go far,” he told her. “It’s getting pretty late.”

She didn’t answer him as she stepped outside. A brisk wind blew off the mountains, and she shivered, rubbing her bare arms as she wandered toward the trees . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

‘Bastard . . .’

Gavin winced, staring out the glass doors into the night; looking for Jillian; trying to discern just where she’d gone.

'You damn bastard . . .'

Watching her slip out the door . . . why did it remind him of the last time she'd disappeared from his life?

'What was I supposed to do?' he bit out viciously. *'I don't think she knows what she wants . . . she certainly hasn't ever needed me . . .'*

'And I'm telling you that maybe she does . . . maybe—just maybe—she's serious. Have you stopped to think about that, Gavin?'

Letting his forehead fall against the cold pane of glass, he sighed. She'd said it so many times over the years. The first time she'd said it was the evening after he'd caught her when she'd fallen out of the tree. She was four years old then. Four . . .

'It's just a habit for her to say it. She doesn't mean it. How could she mean it?' Shaking his head, he pushed himself away from the door and slowly looked around the living room. A glass vase stood in the center of the coffee table. Overflowing with fresh cut flowers that she'd found in the yard and forest, she'd arranged them in a simple display—a woman's touch that the house hadn't felt in the years since his grandmother's death . . . An antique lace doily that had been carefully washed and starched adored the table by the front door . . . a simple tatted thread runner tumbling off the sides of the rough river rock mantle over the fireplace . . . things that Jillian had found stuffed in bags in closets and drawers . . . things that added a gentle touch to the rustic place . . . Things as classic and beautiful as Jillian, herself, was . . .

'Stop blaming it all on Jillian, will you? It's not the truth, and you know it! Just admit what you know is true: you're the one who can't deal with any of it. You're the one who's always pushed her away.'

'I . . . haven't . . . I . . .'

'Yeah, you wanted to marry her. If you'd be honest with yourself, you'd know that's all you've ever really wanted.'

To be with Jillian . . . Gavin flinched, pushing himself away from the door and shuffling toward the stairs. Yes, it was all he'd ever wanted, and for a time, he'd believed that maybe she'd wanted that, too.

Why had she disappeared? Walked away from him for so very long? The nearly four years that they were apart the second time . . . the memory of that time was enough to stop Gavin dead in his tracks. Leaning against the wall, he groaned softly. The desperation he'd felt back then was still as fresh and close as ever. How many nights had he laid in bed, staring at the ceiling while he wondered just what she was doing? Was she thinking about him? Did she *ever* think about him? Did she have any idea how badly he missed her?

And why did it feel like it was happening all over again? The forced smiles, the uncertainty in her gaze . . . the unhappiness he'd sensed . . . it was all coming back again, wasn't it? Her restlessness . . . her boredom . . . and her stubborn insistence that everything was just fine . . .

He didn't really think about what he was doing. Pushing open the closet, thumping around for the one loose floorboard . . . It wasn't until he was sitting on the foot of the bed with the black velvet box nestled in his hand that he blinked and sighed, staring at the miserable thing as though it possessed a life all its own.

The quarter-carat diamond reflected the pale moonlight filtering through the window, casting a hundred little stars on the ceiling as the light refracted off the stone. It was a good thing that he'd never given the ring to her, wasn't it? That's what he'd told himself that summer, when he'd retreated to the ranch after college graduation. Better to figure it out before it was too late, right?

'Right . . .'

Snapping the lid of the ring box closed, Gavin tried not to think about what could have been. It was impossible. He'd been too close to her for far too long. To be honest, he wasn't sure what he'd do if Jillian walked away from him again, but she . . . She was the important one. She was the one who mattered. He'd do whatever he had to do to keep her safe, to make her happy. Thing was, he knew deep down that no matter what she said, she'd never, ever be truly happy with him . . .

Pushing himself to his feet, he paused long enough to slip the ring box back into the hiding place in the closet. Better for it to remain there forever, he supposed, hidden away with the rest of the things that he'd never be able to tell her.

Striding through the empty house and out the glass doors, Gavin picked up Jillian's scent easily enough. He could only hope she'd had enough time to herself because he didn't like leaving her alone. The ranch hands never ventured into the forest, which was the only reason that he had let her go by herself. Stuffing his hands into his pockets as he tracked her, he sighed. '*It's better this way,*' he told himself yet again. '*She's unhappy now, but she'd be miserable later . . .'*

And that kiss . . .

That single kiss was enough to wring a long-suffering moan from the depths of him. He wasn't sure how it had happened. It must have had something to do with the look in Jillian's eyes. She'd seemed so content to be near him, and somehow he'd lost control of his powers of reason. For that one moment, it was simple to believe that she wanted to be with him. It was a little too easy to let himself be lost in her, wasn't it?

Maybe if he knew exactly why she'd left him before—maybe if he could understand the things that had driven her away . . . Had she really grown bored of being with him? How often had he wondered about that before? The trouble was, there wasn't a simple answer, either. As often as he'd thought it over, he'd never understood what had made her run away. Jillian never had been

one to carry a grudge, even when she wanted to, and yet she'd avoided him for nearly four long years . . .

Wandering through the trees in the forest, he blinked suddenly when he stepped into the small clearing. A large pond stretched out before him. He'd known it was there, certainly. Off to the right, he could hear the rush of flowing water as liquid coursed over the small waterfall from the higher ground. It shouldn't have surprised him—maybe he shouldn't have looked—and yet he gasped sharply when he spotted her, floating on her back in the cold pond. In the pale moonlight, he could see the expanse of her skin glowing above the surface of the water.

He thought she had her eyes closed but was too far away to tell for sure, but even across the distance, he could see the gentle rise of her hips, the upturned peaks of her breasts. Stifling a ragged groan, he forced his gaze away. It didn't matter that he knew—*knew*—that she wasn't skinny-dipping for his benefit, just as he knew that the reason she was swimming in the middle of the night had nothing at all to do with trying to annoy or upset him. It soothed her. It always had. Whenever she was overly upset about something, he invariably would find her swimming. She was a water-youkai, after all. Being in water completely naked . . . it was all relative in her mind. In all the years he'd known her, she'd never once condescended to wearing a bathing suit when she went swimming, and she hated whenever he'd try to wear one. When they were pups, it wasn't such a big deal. Stealing a glance at her as the wash of guilt warred with the need to appreciate how truly beautiful she really was, he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep himself from whining.

It was safe to say that she wasn't a pup anymore, and damn it, neither was he . . .

It took several agonizing minutes for him to regain control over his body. Careful to keep his gaze averted, Gavin stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets and stepped over to the water's edge. "It's getting late, Jilli . . ." he called.

She didn't answer him right away though he didn't doubt for a moment that she knew very well that he was there. He heard the rhythmic splash and gurgle as she swam a little longer. "You didn't need to come after me," she finally said, her voice taking on a slight echo. There was no anger, no animosity, no hurt in her tone. In fact, there was no emotion at all, really.

He winced. "Come on . . . I'll make you hot cocoa," he offered.

"Why don't you swim with me?" she countered.

He shot her a glance before he could think better of it. Luckily for him, she was submerged up to her shoulders. "I don't think so," he remarked in what he hoped was a nonchalant fashion.

She sighed. "Yeah . . . you're too old to play anymore, aren't you?"

"It isn't . . . I . . . uh . . . Jilli . . . come on. You're normally in bed by now."

She didn't answer, but she started to swim toward the shore. His head snapped to the side as she started to rise. The last thing he wanted or needed to see was the way the water sluiced down her body . . .

Turning around to glare at the forest, he tapped his foot impatiently as he willed himself not to blush.

"Guess I'm just not tired," she admitted. Her voice came from directly beside him, and he glanced over to see her sitting on the ground with her legs drawn up against her chest. Still completely naked, of course, but everything he shouldn't see was covered or veiled well enough in shadows.

With a sigh, he unbuttoned his shirt and tugged it off, draping it around her shoulders before he knelt down beside her. "I didn't mean to upset you," he muttered.

"I know," she said.

"It's just . . . I can't . . ." He drew a deep breath then exhaled in a loud gust. "You'd hate being my mate," he told her. "I'm boring, remember?"

"I've never thought that."

"Sure, you have," he replied. "It's okay. Don't worry about it."

She stared at him for a moment. He couldn't discern the expression in her eyes in the darkness. "Gavin?"

"Hmm?" he asked, skimming a rock over the surface of the pond. It skipped five times then sank. He scanned the pebbly shore for another good, flat stone.

"I was thinking . . ."

"Yeah?"

She nodded, pulling his shirt a little closer around her shoulders and resting her chin on her knees. "Is it because I'm not very smart?"

"What?"

She shrugged. "I mean, you're smart, so it stands to reason you'd want a woman who was as smart as you are, and I tried in school . . . I really did . . ."

"Don't put yourself down," he growled, his voice sharper than he intended. "I mean it."

Jillian sighed. "It's all right, but . . . but you know, I guess I can understand, if that's your reason."

Chapter 18
Despite

'This is a really bad idea.'

Jillian bit her lip as she ran the brush through her hair and tried to ignore the nagging voice of her youkai blood. It was the only thing she could do. Bad idea or not, it didn't matter when she knew deep down that she was living on borrowed time, so to speak.

'It has to work,' she argued. *'There's nothing else I can do.'*

'Yeah, well, the only reason Gavin agreed to this little charade is because you stooped to all new lows.'

'All new lows, huh?'

'What would you call it when you cried to get your way?'

Setting the brush aside, she reached for the butterfly necklace that she'd removed before she took a shower. *'Okay, so I'm not particularly proud of that,'* she admitted as she turned the butterfly over in her fingers. To be honest, she hadn't meant to cry, but she'd felt so desperate that she couldn't help it. Sure, she cried in front of Gavin often enough. Somehow she didn't think that crying over a movie or play was quite the same as tearing up because he said, 'no'. Normally she'd lock herself away somewhere if she really needed to let go. She'd known ever since she was little that Gavin just didn't know what to do when she cried.

Sometime during the restless night she'd spent huddled against Gavin's side with an ache so deep that it threatened to engulf her, she'd come to a few realizations. Firstly, she'd never truly be able to move on so long as she thought that there was any chance—even the tiniest one—that Gavin might one day realize that he belonged with her. Secondly, she'd never be able to reconcile herself to anything if she saw Gavin every day. He'd been her world for so long that she'd forgotten exactly what it meant, to live without him—if she'd ever known how to do that, in the first place.

She'd loved him too long, hadn't she? Was it true, as Gavin seemed to think, that she'd somehow managed to convince herself that she loved him when she really simply relied on him as a friend? Could it possibly be that all of her emotions had been tricked into believing that Gavin was the one when he really wasn't?

She sighed, letting the necklace fall from her fingertips onto the dresser once more. Maybe she had. She'd heard crazier things. Maybe she'd relied a little too much on Gavin to provide the sense of security that she'd so desperately wanted. Sure, she loved her parents; her family, but Gavin was the one she'd always gravitated toward. Never as happy as she was when she was with him, he'd been too big a part of her life for so long that the idea of being without him scared her half to death.

Still she knew. It was time. If not now, then she'd never be able to do it, would she? And she owed him. Of course she did. He'd spent so long taking care of her and watching out for her that the least she could do was help him overcome his shyness with women. If she could do that—if she could convince herself that he'd be fine without her . . . maybe then she really could walk away.

Telling herself for the hundredth time that all she had to do was get through one day at a time, she forced a smile then heaved a sigh. If she couldn't convince herself that her smile was sincere, how on earth would she ever convince Gavin?

'Enough of that,' she told herself sternly. 'I can sulk and pout my last few days, or I can make sure that our time together is something that Gavin will always remember . . . Mama always says that it's best to smile, especially when you don't feel like doing it . . .'

She started to turn to leave but stopped short, glancing back at the glittering butterfly lying on the dresser. Biting her lip, she grabbed it and hooked it around her neck as she hurried out of the room.



'You're a sucker, you know that?'

Gavin grimaced and peered over the top of the menu, casting a surreptitious glance at the young woman seated across from him. Thoughtfully staring at the menu in her hands, she didn't seem to notice his ardent perusal. What he'd intended to simply be a quick glance lingered, though. Captured in the ambient light of the fake candle's flame, her eyes were darker, more mysterious; her skin a tawny hue. Hair drawn back away from her face, her eyelashes fanned down to kiss the skin of her cheeks, she bit her rouged lip as she carefully considered her options. It struck him once more, just how beautiful she was, not that he'd ever actually forgotten. It was simply another reminder of just how close she was, and yet . . . and yet she felt so very far away.

'If you're so set on not being her mate, you should have told her that going on a date wasn't a good idea,' his youkai voice pointed out.

'I did,' he insisted, dragging his attention back to the menu once more.

'Sure, you did . . . you told her that you didn't want to go then caved the moment you smelled those tears, didn't you?'

He heaved an inward sigh and ran his finger along his neckline. "You, uh, know what you want?" he finally asked, breaking the companionable silence that had fallen after the waitress had given them the menus.

Jillian glanced up and smiled. "I don't know . . . what would you suggest?"

He shrugged, willing himself not to blush. Her smile was just too potent. "Well . . . um . . . it depends on what you're in the mood for. Their steaks are excellent . . . their seafood is okay, but since you're from Maine, it's not nearly as fresh as what you're used to."

Her eyes glossed over as her smile took on a dreamy quality. "Mm . . . lobster . . ." she sighed. "Or thick, creamy clam chowder . . ."

He chuckled. "Yeah, well . . . you might want to stick with the steak," he pointed out.

"I like steak," she decided. "Sounds good."

"Okay, Jilli," he said, raising his hand to summon the waitress.

"You brought your cell, right?"

Narrowing his eyes, he nodded slowly. "Yeah . . . why?"

She shrugged. "Just making sure. Cody said that Sherry was feeling a little under the weather today . . ."

"Yeah . . . her doctor said that she could go at any time."

"Maybe you should check, just to make sure you're getting full signal," she prompted.

Gavin grinned and pulled the phone from his pocket. "All right," he agreed as he glanced at the signal indicator. "Not perfect, but it's good enough," he told her.

"All right," she said, smiling at the waitress who had returned with their drinks.

Gavin made short work of ordering their meals and sipped the soda he'd ordered as Jillian stirred her iced tea. "You look nice," he finally remarked.

Jillian's cheeks pinked though her smile didn't falter. "You . . . you think so?"

"Well, yeah . . . you always look nice."

Her smile widened. "You're so sweet, Gavvie."

He blushed at her praise. "You, uh . . . you spent all day in the basement?"

She nodded. "I got most of the pictures printed out. I'll show you later, if you want."

"Okay."

He could feel the underlying tension beneath her calm façade. She wasn't happy; he knew she wasn't, and while he knew it had a lot to do with his abrupt insistence that the kiss they'd shared shouldn't have happened, he had a feeling it went much deeper than that. What he didn't know was how to make everything all right again . . .

She'd been carefully polite since that night by the pond. She'd smiled and laughed and tried to pretend that she was fine, and he couldn't help the feeling that nagged him deep down; the feeling that she was slowly slipping away from him again.

"Earth to Gavin . . . are you okay?"

Snapping out of his abysmal thoughts, Gavin forced a wan smile and turned his full attention on Jillian once more. "Of course," he insisted. "Why wouldn't I be?"

She shook her head slowly and shrugged. "I don't know . . . you looked like you were a million miles away."

"Nope," he lied, praying she didn't see right through him.

With a sigh, her smile diminished, and she shrugged almost nervously. "I got a job offer," she said, her tone carefully light.

"Yeah?"

She nodded, fiddling with the salad fork beside her plate. "Yeah . . . Danny called to tell me about it. He said it'd be a lot of money . . ."

"As if you don't normally make a lot of money," Gavin grumbled.

"More than normal, he said."

"Yeah? Swim suits?" he asked, unable to keep the hint of irritation out of his voice since he hated—absolutely loathed—that she modeled swimwear, and normally skimpy swimwear, at that.

"No," she drawled slowly, fiddling with the thin straw in her iced tea.

"Then what?"

It seemed to Gavin that Jillian was hesitating a little too much for his comfort. "Jilli?" he prompted again when she still didn't answer.

"*Playboy*," she finally admitted, careful to keep from looking him in the eye. She seemed calm enough, and yet he didn't miss the way her shoulders straightened just a little; the way her chin lifted a notch as the barest hint of a flush entered her cheeks.

“P-P-Playboy?” he sputtered, unable to mask the incredulity in his voice. “As in, the *magazine*, *Playboy*?”

She nodded.

“You’re not going to do it, are you?”

“Well . . . it’s not much different from posing for *Oliveri*,” she said slowly.

“The *hell* it’s not!” he snarled, realizing a moment too late that he hadn’t kept his voice down at all. People at the surrounding tables were eyeing them, and Jillian glanced around with a nervous sort of smile as Gavin heaved a sigh, dragging his hand over his face in sheer exasperation.

“I told Dan I’d think about it,” she said, leaning forward and murmuring her words, likely in an effort to remind him that he needed to do the same.

“You can’t—I mean, you shouldn’t—*Damn* it!” Gavin growled.

“I value your opinion, Gavin,” she said quietly.

He grimaced, opening his mouth then snapping it closed a few times. The last time she’d said something like that, he’d told her that she should do what she was comfortable doing, and it had backfired on him. As much as he hated the idea of coming off sounding like he was trying to tell her what to do, he wasn’t entirely sure she’d decide against posing nude otherwise. Jillian had been brought up in a home where being naked was a natural thing; where the physical body could and should be viewed as a work of art, in and of itself. As much as he hated to swallow his pride, he just couldn’t trust that she’d come to the conclusion that she needed to keep her clothes on, for God’s sake . . .

“I don’t think . . . you should do it . . .” he forced himself to admit.

“You don’t want me to?”

He shrugged. “I . . .” he sighed, flinched, then shook his head slowly. “N-no, Jilli, I don’t.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“I mean, your father would flip,” he went on, furiously fighting down the color that was rapidly rising in his cheeks.

“Daddy wouldn’t,” she said with a little giggle. “He paints Mama nude all the time.”

“Yeah, and you’re his daughter, not his mate,” Gavin grumbled.

“Daddy isn’t like that,” she maintained.

“The hell he’s not! Besides that, if you try to tell me that you honestly think that men buy *Playboy* for the aesthetic beauty of the models, then you’re sadly mistaken. I—”

“You, what, Gavvie?” she teased.

He shot her a dark glance. “No!”

“Then why don’t you tell me why men *do* buy that magazine?”

“They buy it to look at while they . . . they . . . while they . . .” Shaking his head furiously as Jillian dissolved in gales of laughter, Gavin couldn’t help the little growl of frustration that slipped from him as he jerked the cloth napkin off his lap and tossed it down on the table. “Anyway, I don’t feel like running all over New York City to buy out the magazines again while—”

Jillian sat back, eyebrows disappearing under the fringe of her bangs in an entirely amused sort of way. “You did?”

Snapping his mouth closed a moment too late, Gavin made a face as the waitress slipped plates of salad greens on to the table. He’d never told her that he’d done that, had he? Jillian hadn’t known that Gavin had set out at midnight in order to buy every copy of *Oliveri* magazine off the newsstands before anyone else could get one. Cain had done the same where he was after finding out that he couldn’t pay to stop the issue from being printed, and while it hadn’t actually stopped the publication, between Gavin, Cain, Bas, and Gunnar, they had managed to buy out about five thousand copies of the damn thing . . . “What do you think?” he mumbled.

“I’m not ashamed of my body,” she told him.

“I know. You, uh . . . you shouldn’t be.”

“You really don’t want me to do it?”

He couldn’t meet her gaze. Hearing the wealth of hope rising in her voice was hard enough to reconcile. The last thing he needed to do was see the emotion lighting her eyes. Still, if it kept her from posing for the magazine in question . . . “No,” he forced himself to say. “No, I don’t.”

It seemed to Gavin that her answer was long in coming. As though she really had to think about it, she poked at her salad as she seemed to consider his words. “All right,” she agreed at last. “I won’t do it.”

Letting out a deep breath that he hadn’t realized he was holding, Gavin relaxed just a little. “Good,” he replied with a tiny smile, satisfied that she wasn’t going to do anything that she’d regret later—or that he might. “Good . . .”

She cast him a bright smile just before she launched into what amounted to a list of things that she ticked off on her fingers, one by one. “Well, let’s see . . . You opened the truck door for me . . . You held my chair while I sat down . . . You helped me decide what I wanted to order . . . You’ve even made nice table conversation, Gavvie . . . I’d say you’re just about ready.”

“Ready?” he echoed, arching an eyebrow as he leveled a suspicious look at her. “Ready for what?”

Her laughter was soft, as gentle as a summertime rain shower. “To try getting a date again,” she said in a tone that implied that he ought to have known as much.

He choked on a sip of water and quickly dabbed his mouth with the napkin as he coughed and sputtered. “Jillian—” he began in a warning tone.

She waved a hand in jaunty dismissal. “Oh, Gavvie! What’ll you ever do without me?”

Eyes narrowing as he dropped the napkin onto the table, he slowly shook his head. “Why would I be without you?”

Her smile dimmed, faltered, and he couldn’t shake the nagging idea that she was hiding something from him, after all. “Well . . .” she shrugged, her smile brightening though her eyes didn’t shine the way they normally did. “I can’t be with you all the time, now can I?”

Silence fell between them, as thick and solid as a brick wall. Jillian toyed with the butterfly charm on the gold chain that hung around her neck, and Gavin . . . He wasn’t sure what to say or do. Unused to such mercurial changes in her mood, he could only sit, could only stare helplessly. He felt like he was twenty years old all over again; the same feeling that he’d gotten back then, when he’d first returned after their two and a half year separation . . . when he’d first come to realize that Jillian would always be just a little out of his reach.

Swallowing hard, fighting back the sudden swell of panic that swept through him, Gavin stifled a sigh. *‘She’s Jilli . . . she’ll always be around,’* he told himself.

Too bad his thoughts lacked any real sense of conviction. Too bad he could feel it in his heart: in those moments, in that silence . . . Jillian had just slipped a little further out of his grasp.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Plugging in the decoding device, he glanced down the hallway of the nondescript apartment building. It only took a few seconds for the gadget to do its job, and with a soft beep, the LCD display flashed green. The knob gave with a click and a whisper as the door swung open. Pulling the jack from the decoding device, he wound the cord around his hand and stowed it away in his pocket before stepping inside.

The apartment was neat and tidy; almost disturbingly so. Even the Glaxter video game system controllers were neatly arranged on the shelf beside the unit. Two old movie posters—one for *Star Wars: A New Hope* and the other for *Return of the Jedi*—hung on the wall over the sofa in thick frames with floodlights that were currently running on a lowered setting trained on the matte

glass. Shaking his head as he leaned down to swirl the clear glass marbles in the shallow stone dish in the center of the coffee table, he scanned the room for some sort of clue.

'Holy hell, this guy really is hopelessly boring,' he thought with a grimace as he ran his gloved finger along the spine of the books lining the shelf—all painstakingly alphabetized by author's last name, of course. *'Complete Spreadsheets . . . Expanding SHTML . . . Star Wars: The Making of the Myth . . . For the love of Christ . . . what the hell's he doing with a supermodel?'*

Stepping over to the half-closed door, he pushed it open and peered into the room. It was obviously the man's study. The state of the art computer stood silent and still, and he narrowed his gaze when he noticed the assorted picture frames lining the mantle over the faux fireplace. Photos of Gavin Jamison and Jillian Zelig . . . various snapshots taken over the years . . . Obviously, they'd known one another for a long while. The expensive frames didn't go unnoticed, either, and he narrowed his eyes as he considered that. *'She must have bought those,'* he mused. *'Men don't care about picture frames—not even dead damn boring ones . . .'*

Another picture caught his attention, and he reached behind the carefully arranged tableau to retrieve it. It was the only picture that wasn't of Gavin and Jillian. No, this one was much more interesting, and he slowly broke into a lazy grin. *'I see . . . that makes sense . . . perfect sense . . .'*

He stared at the image for another long moment before stuffing the picture, frame and all, into the pocket of his black leather jacket . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

It took a minute for Jillian to make sense out of the sound that roused her from a peaceful slumber. Whimpering slightly as she buried her face deeper against Gavin's chest, she squeezed her eyes closed and tried to block out the sound.

Gavin grunted and jerked awake, his hand flailing around almost wildly as he groped around for the offending apparatus. "Lo?" he said, smashing the button that connected the phone call.

Jillian sat up, rubbing her eyes and struggled to clear her sleep-clouded mind. Wincing as she glanced at the clock, she heaved an inward sigh: one-thirty in the morning. She was about to lie back down when Gavin's words stopped her.

"What? Oh, uh, okay . . . yeah . . . Give me five minutes, and I'll be right there."

Rolling out of bed, Gavin tossed the cell phone down on the coverlet as he dragged a pair of jeans out of the dresser drawer.

"What's going on?" she asked, stifling a yawn with the back of her hand.

Gavin shot her an apologetic glance and then broke into a wide grin. “Sherry’s in labor,” he told her. “Why don’t you go back to sleep? I’ll run over there, take them to the hospital, and bring the girls back here.”

“I could come with you,” Jillian ventured.

Gavin shook his head. “There’s probably not enough room in the truck,” he told her. “It won’t take long.”

“Okay,” she said though she scampered out of bed as Gavin headed for the door. Following him through the house, she turned on the lamp beside the sofa as he smashed his feet into his shoes. “I’ll get things ready for the girls,” she told him.

He shot her a sheepish grin and hurried out the door.

Laughing softly to herself, Jillian ran over to the closet and pulled out a stack of thick fleece blankets. Though she doubted that the girls would be interested in sleeping, she figured that if she made it seem like a slumber party, maybe they’d be less inclined to worry about their mother. It didn’t take long for her to scoot all the furniture to one side of the room and even less time to spread all the blankets on the floor. After retrieving all the pillows off Gavin’s bed and grabbing the ones in the guest rooms, too, Jillian ran back down to the living room and giggled at the overall effect before hurrying off to the kitchen to make some popcorn and pile a few juice boxes onto a tray.

She was just scanning the satellite channels for cartoons when Gavin opened the door and strode into the house with Karis in his arms, sobbing against his chest and a rather befuddled-looking Minnie trailing along behind him. Casting Jillian a panicked sort of glance, he tried to set the girl on her feet. She hung on tight. Standing up straight, he patted her back rather clumsily and stifled a sigh.

Jillian bit her lip and grimaced, knowing that Gavin was probably close to losing his composure, too. He’d just never been good with crying girls, she supposed. Stepping over to rub her back, Jillian cast Gavin a worried look. “It’s okay, sweetie . . . your mommy’s going to be just fine,” she crooned.

That only made Karis cry harder.

Gavin shot Jillian a helpless little wince. “Hey,” he said just loud enough for Karis to hear him. “You . . . you want to go check on the horses with me?”

Karis stopped wailing though tears continued to course down her cheeks, and she sniffled, her bottom lip trembling precariously. “H-hors-sies?” she repeated between hiccups.

Gavin nodded. “Sure . . . I always check them at this time of night.”

Turning away before the girls could see Jillian’s smile at Gavin’s lie, she knelt down when Minnie tugged her hand. “Can I see the horsies, too?” she asked.

"I'm sure you can," Jillian answered, tweaking the end of the girl's pert little nose.

"Yeah, and tomorrow, I'll take you both for a short ride," he promised. "Come on."

Moonlight streamed down, illuminating the crisp Montana night. Minnie let go of Gavin's hand to speed up in her haste to reach the horses. Gavin glanced over his shoulder and shot Jillian an amused little grin that she returned. The promise of seeing the horses seemed to have done the trick . . .

Karis sighed, snuggling against Gavin's shoulder as Minnie ran over to slip her hand into his. Jillian followed along behind. "How's Sherry?" she asked quietly as Gavin set Karis down inside the main stable.

"She looked pretty uncomfortable, but she said it was fine."

"They'll call when there's word?"

Gavin nodded. "Cody said he would, yes," he replied without taking his eyes off the girls. They were running down the aisle between the rows of stalls and peering in at the horses. The creatures did little more than glance at them, and the girls giggled softly as they inspected the livestock. "Amazing how quickly she recovered when I asked if she wanted to see the horses," he commented with a grin.

"Well, of course," Jillian teased. "Then again, you've always had a way with women, haven't you?"

He blushed. "You mean ones under five?"

She laughed. "Something like that."

His blush darkened, but his smile widened, and he looked entirely pleased with the idea that he'd managed to distract Karis from her obvious upset.

"She misses her mommy?"

Gavin grinned. "Actually . . . she's more afraid that she's not going to be the baby anymore," he said.

"She's such a cutie," Jillian said with a sigh as she watched the girls. Karis giggled at one of the horses—a great gray mare everyone called Apple Jack.

Gavin let them visit the horses for another few minutes before clearing his throat to get their attention. "Come on, girls . . . let's leave the horses alone for awhile, okay?"

They didn't look like they wanted to do any such thing, but they finally wandered back over to Gavin and Jillian. Karis dragged her fuzzy pink slippers as she slowly moved toward them. "I can ride in the morning?" she asked hesitantly.

Gavin nodded. "Yes, you can," he told her, holding out his hands in a blatant invitation to pick her up.

Karis glanced back at the horses then held up her hands to Gavin. "Oka-a-ay," she drawled.

Gavin chuckled as he scooped her up. "You know, I could've sworn I saw that Jillian made a nice little bed for you in the living room. Want to go watch cartoons?"

"I like cartoons!" Minnie exclaimed as she stuck her hand into Jillian's.

"Good," Gavin said as he opened the stable door and waited for Jillian and Minnie to step outside before shutting off the light.

The girl chattered on about her favorite cartoons all the way back to the house, and with a happy little shriek, she ran over to the nest of blankets and flopped down on the pillows.

"You stripped all the beds of pillows, did you?" Gavin asked as he set Karis down. She didn't run over to the blankets, though, wrapping her arms around Gavin's leg instead and hanging on tight.

"Yes, I did," Jillian admitted.

Gavin chuckled as he kicked off his shoes, carefully unwinding Karis' hand and leading her over to the blankets while Jillian headed back to the kitchen to retrieve the tray of popcorn and juice. It seemed that the girl had claimed Gavin as her own, and it was a good thing that Jillian didn't mind sharing too much. Something about him had always possessed the power to soothe her, hadn't it? It stood to reason that Karis would sense it, too. Gavin was safety, security, lending Jillian an unwavering belief that despite things that changed around her, some thing would forever remain the same.

Laughing softly, she stopped short, leaning in the archway that led into the living room. Gavin lay in the midst of the blankets with a smile on his face and his hands behind his neck and the two girls climbing all over him. Karis was sprawled across his chest with her little rump up in the air and her hand stuffed into her mouth while Minnie was content to lie beside him, cradled in the crook of his arm with her head on his shoulder. He chuckled softly as Karis tried to shove her sister away. Minnie whined and jerked away from her sister's persistent pushing but refused to relinquish her spot beside Gavin.

"Be nice," Gavin murmured, pulling a hand from behind his head to stroke Karis' downy hair. "Look . . . the cat's chasing the dog," he pointed out, waving his hand in the general direction of the television.

Chapter 18
Despite

'This is a really bad idea.'

Jillian bit her lip as she ran the brush through her hair and tried to ignore the nagging voice of her youkai blood. It was the only thing she could do. Bad idea or not, it didn't matter when she knew deep down that she was living on borrowed time, so to speak.

'It has to work,' she argued. *'There's nothing else I can do.'*

'Yeah, well, the only reason Gavin agreed to this little charade is because you stooped to all new lows.'

'All new lows, huh?'

'What would you call it when you cried to get your way?'

Setting the brush aside, she reached for the butterfly necklace that she'd removed before she took a shower. *'Okay, so I'm not particularly proud of that,'* she admitted as she turned the butterfly over in her fingers. To be honest, she hadn't meant to cry, but she'd felt so desperate that she couldn't help it. Sure, she cried in front of Gavin often enough. Somehow she didn't think that crying over a movie or play was quite the same as tearing up because he said, 'no'. Normally she'd lock herself away somewhere if she really needed to let go. She'd known ever since she was little that Gavin just didn't know what to do when she cried.

Sometime during the restless night she'd spent huddled against Gavin's side with an ache so deep that it threatened to engulf her, she'd come to a few realizations. Firstly, she'd never truly be able to move on so long as she thought that there was any chance—even the tiniest one—that Gavin might one day realize that he belonged with her. Secondly, she'd never be able to reconcile herself to anything if she saw Gavin every day. He'd been her world for so long that she'd forgotten exactly what it meant, to live without him—if she'd ever known how to do that, in the first place.

She'd loved him too long, hadn't she? Was it true, as Gavin seemed to think, that she'd somehow managed to convince herself that she loved him when she really simply relied on him as a friend? Could it possibly be that all of her emotions had been tricked into believing that Gavin was the one when he really wasn't?

She sighed, letting the necklace fall from her fingertips onto the dresser once more. Maybe she had. She'd heard crazier things. Maybe she'd relied a little too much on Gavin to provide the sense of security that she'd so desperately wanted. Sure, she loved her parents; her family, but Gavin was the one she'd always gravitated toward. Never as happy as she was when she was with him, he'd been too big a part of her life for so long that the idea of being without him scared her half to death.

Still she knew. It was time. If not now, then she'd never be able to do it, would she? And she owed him. Of course she did. He'd spent so long taking care of her and watching out for her that the least she could do was help him overcome his shyness with women. If she could do that—if she could convince herself that he'd be fine without her . . . maybe then she really could walk away.

Telling herself for the hundredth time that all she had to do was get through one day at a time, she forced a smile then heaved a sigh. If she couldn't convince herself that her smile was sincere, how on earth would she ever convince Gavin?

'Enough of that,' she told herself sternly. 'I can sulk and pout my last few days, or I can make sure that our time together is something that Gavin will always remember . . . Mama always says that it's best to smile, especially when you don't feel like doing it . . .'

She started to turn to leave but stopped short, glancing back at the glittering butterfly lying on the dresser. Biting her lip, she grabbed it and hooked it around her neck as she hurried out of the room.



'You're a sucker, you know that?'

Gavin grimaced and peered over the top of the menu, casting a surreptitious glance at the young woman seated across from him. Thoughtfully staring at the menu in her hands, she didn't seem to notice his ardent perusal. What he'd intended to simply be a quick glance lingered, though. Captured in the ambient light of the fake candle's flame, her eyes were darker, more mysterious; her skin a tawny hue. Hair drawn back away from her face, her eyelashes fanned down to kiss the skin of her cheeks, she bit her rouged lip as she carefully considered her options. It struck him once more, just how beautiful she was, not that he'd ever actually forgotten. It was simply another reminder of just how close she was, and yet . . . and yet she felt so very far away.

'If you're so set on not being her mate, you should have told her that going on a date wasn't a good idea,' his youkai voice pointed out.

'I did,' he insisted, dragging his attention back to the menu once more.

'Sure, you did . . . you told her that you didn't want to go then caved the moment you smelled those tears, didn't you?'

He heaved an inward sigh and ran his finger along his neckline. "You, uh, know what you want?" he finally asked, breaking the companionable silence that had fallen after the waitress had given them the menus.

Jillian glanced up and smiled. "I don't know . . . what would you suggest?"

He shrugged, willing himself not to blush. Her smile was just too potent. "Well . . . um . . . it depends on what you're in the mood for. Their steaks are excellent . . . their seafood is okay, but since you're from Maine, it's not nearly as fresh as what you're used to."

Her eyes glossed over as her smile took on a dreamy quality. "Mm . . . lobster . . ." she sighed. "Or thick, creamy clam chowder . . ."

He chuckled. "Yeah, well . . . you might want to stick with the steak," he pointed out.

"I like steak," she decided. "Sounds good."

"Okay, Jilli," he said, raising his hand to summon the waitress.

"You brought your cell, right?"

Narrowing his eyes, he nodded slowly. "Yeah . . . why?"

She shrugged. "Just making sure. Cody said that Sherry was feeling a little under the weather today . . ."

"Yeah . . . her doctor said that she could go at any time."

"Maybe you should check, just to make sure you're getting full signal," she prompted.

Gavin grinned and pulled the phone from his pocket. "All right," he agreed as he glanced at the signal indicator. "Not perfect, but it's good enough," he told her.

"All right," she said, smiling at the waitress who had returned with their drinks.

Gavin made short work of ordering their meals and sipped the soda he'd ordered as Jillian stirred her iced tea. "You look nice," he finally remarked.

Jillian's cheeks pinked though her smile didn't falter. "You . . . you think so?"

"Well, yeah . . . you always look nice."

Her smile widened. "You're so sweet, Gavvie."

He blushed at her praise. "You, uh . . . you spent all day in the basement?"

She nodded. "I got most of the pictures printed out. I'll show you later, if you want."

"Okay."

He could feel the underlying tension beneath her calm façade. She wasn't happy; he knew she wasn't, and while he knew it had a lot to do with his abrupt insistence that the kiss they'd shared shouldn't have happened, he had a feeling it went much deeper than that. What he didn't know was how to make everything all right again . . .

She'd been carefully polite since that night by the pond. She'd smiled and laughed and tried to pretend that she was fine, and he couldn't help the feeling that nagged him deep down; the feeling that she was slowly slipping away from him again.

"Earth to Gavin . . . are you okay?"

Snapping out of his abysmal thoughts, Gavin forced a wan smile and turned his full attention on Jillian once more. "Of course," he insisted. "Why wouldn't I be?"

She shook her head slowly and shrugged. "I don't know . . . you looked like you were a million miles away."

"Nope," he lied, praying she didn't see right through him.

With a sigh, her smile diminished, and she shrugged almost nervously. "I got a job offer," she said, her tone carefully light.

"Yeah?"

She nodded, fiddling with the salad fork beside her plate. "Yeah . . . Danny called to tell me about it. He said it'd be a lot of money . . ."

"As if you don't normally make a lot of money," Gavin grumbled.

"More than normal, he said."

"Yeah? Swim suits?" he asked, unable to keep the hint of irritation out of his voice since he hated—absolutely loathed—that she modeled swimwear, and normally skimpy swimwear, at that.

"No," she drawled slowly, fiddling with the thin straw in her iced tea.

"Then what?"

It seemed to Gavin that Jillian was hesitating a little too much for his comfort. "Jilli?" he prompted again when she still didn't answer.

"*Playboy*," she finally admitted, careful to keep from looking him in the eye. She seemed calm enough, and yet he didn't miss the way her shoulders straightened just a little; the way her chin lifted a notch as the barest hint of a flush entered her cheeks.

“P-P-Playboy?” he sputtered, unable to mask the incredulity in his voice. “As in, the *magazine*, *Playboy*?”

She nodded.

“You’re not going to do it, are you?”

“Well . . . it’s not much different from posing for *Oliveri*,” she said slowly.

“The *hell* it’s not!” he snarled, realizing a moment too late that he hadn’t kept his voice down at all. People at the surrounding tables were eyeing them, and Jillian glanced around with a nervous sort of smile as Gavin heaved a sigh, dragging his hand over his face in sheer exasperation.

“I told Dan I’d think about it,” she said, leaning forward and murmuring her words, likely in an effort to remind him that he needed to do the same.

“You can’t—I mean, you shouldn’t—*Damn* it!” Gavin growled.

“I value your opinion, Gavin,” she said quietly.

He grimaced, opening his mouth then snapping it closed a few times. The last time she’d said something like that, he’d told her that she should do what she was comfortable doing, and it had backfired on him. As much as he hated the idea of coming off sounding like he was trying to tell her what to do, he wasn’t entirely sure she’d decide against posing nude otherwise. Jillian had been brought up in a home where being naked was a natural thing; where the physical body could and should be viewed as a work of art, in and of itself. As much as he hated to swallow his pride, he just couldn’t trust that she’d come to the conclusion that she needed to keep her clothes on, for God’s sake . . .

“I don’t think . . . you should do it . . .” he forced himself to admit.

“You don’t want me to?”

He shrugged. “I . . .” he sighed, flinched, then shook his head slowly. “N-no, Jilli, I don’t.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“I mean, your father would flip,” he went on, furiously fighting down the color that was rapidly rising in his cheeks.

“Daddy wouldn’t,” she said with a little giggle. “He paints Mama nude all the time.”

“Yeah, and you’re his daughter, not his mate,” Gavin grumbled.

“Daddy isn’t like that,” she maintained.

“The hell he’s not! Besides that, if you try to tell me that you honestly think that men buy *Playboy* for the aesthetic beauty of the models, then you’re sadly mistaken. I—”

“You, what, Gavvie?” she teased.

He shot her a dark glance. “No!”

“Then why don’t you tell me why men *do* buy that magazine?”

“They buy it to look at while they . . . they . . . while they . . .” Shaking his head furiously as Jillian dissolved in gales of laughter, Gavin couldn’t help the little growl of frustration that slipped from him as he jerked the cloth napkin off his lap and tossed it down on the table. “Anyway, I don’t feel like running all over New York City to buy out the magazines again while—”

Jillian sat back, eyebrows disappearing under the fringe of her bangs in an entirely amused sort of way. “You did?”

Snapping his mouth closed a moment too late, Gavin made a face as the waitress slipped plates of salad greens on to the table. He’d never told her that he’d done that, had he? Jillian hadn’t known that Gavin had set out at midnight in order to buy every copy of *Oliveri* magazine off the newsstands before anyone else could get one. Cain had done the same where he was after finding out that he couldn’t pay to stop the issue from being printed, and while it hadn’t actually stopped the publication, between Gavin, Cain, Bas, and Gunnar, they had managed to buy out about five thousand copies of the damn thing . . . “What do you think?” he mumbled.

“I’m not ashamed of my body,” she told him.

“I know. You, uh . . . you shouldn’t be.”

“You really don’t want me to do it?”

He couldn’t meet her gaze. Hearing the wealth of hope rising in her voice was hard enough to reconcile. The last thing he needed to do was see the emotion lighting her eyes. Still, if it kept her from posing for the magazine in question . . . “No,” he forced himself to say. “No, I don’t.”

It seemed to Gavin that her answer was long in coming. As though she really had to think about it, she poked at her salad as she seemed to consider his words. “All right,” she agreed at last. “I won’t do it.”

Letting out a deep breath that he hadn’t realized he was holding, Gavin relaxed just a little. “Good,” he replied with a tiny smile, satisfied that she wasn’t going to do anything that she’d regret later—or that he might. “Good . . .”

She cast him a bright smile just before she launched into what amounted to a list of things that she ticked off on her fingers, one by one. “Well, let’s see . . . You opened the truck door for me . . . You held my chair while I sat down . . . You helped me decide what I wanted to order . . . You’ve even made nice table conversation, Gavvie . . . I’d say you’re just about ready.”

“Ready?” he echoed, arching an eyebrow as he leveled a suspicious look at her. “Ready for what?”

Her laughter was soft, as gentle as a summertime rain shower. “To try getting a date again,” she said in a tone that implied that he ought to have known as much.

He choked on a sip of water and quickly dabbed his mouth with the napkin as he coughed and sputtered. “Jillian—” he began in a warning tone.

She waved a hand in jaunty dismissal. “Oh, Gavvie! What’ll you ever do without me?”

Eyes narrowing as he dropped the napkin onto the table, he slowly shook his head. “Why would I be without you?”

Her smile dimmed, faltered, and he couldn’t shake the nagging idea that she was hiding something from him, after all. “Well . . .” she shrugged, her smile brightening though her eyes didn’t shine the way they normally did. “I can’t be with you all the time, now can I?”

Silence fell between them, as thick and solid as a brick wall. Jillian toyed with the butterfly charm on the gold chain that hung around her neck, and Gavin . . . He wasn’t sure what to say or do. Unused to such mercurial changes in her mood, he could only sit, could only stare helplessly. He felt like he was twenty years old all over again; the same feeling that he’d gotten back then, when he’d first returned after their two and a half year separation . . . when he’d first come to realize that Jillian would always be just a little out of his reach.

Swallowing hard, fighting back the sudden swell of panic that swept through him, Gavin stifled a sigh. *‘She’s Jilli . . . she’ll always be around,’* he told himself.

Too bad his thoughts lacked any real sense of conviction. Too bad he could feel it in his heart: in those moments, in that silence . . . Jillian had just slipped a little further out of his grasp.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Plugging in the decoding device, he glanced down the hallway of the nondescript apartment building. It only took a few seconds for the gadget to do its job, and with a soft beep, the LCD display flashed green. The knob gave with a click and a whisper as the door swung open. Pulling the jack from the decoding device, he wound the cord around his hand and stowed it away in his pocket before stepping inside.

The apartment was neat and tidy; almost disturbingly so. Even the Glaxter video game system controllers were neatly arranged on the shelf beside the unit. Two old movie posters—one for *Star Wars: A New Hope* and the other for *Return of the Jedi*—hung on the wall over the sofa in thick frames with floodlights that were currently running on a lowered setting trained on the matte

glass. Shaking his head as he leaned down to swirl the clear glass marbles in the shallow stone dish in the center of the coffee table, he scanned the room for some sort of clue.

'Holy hell, this guy really is hopelessly boring,' he thought with a grimace as he ran his gloved finger along the spine of the books lining the shelf—all painstakingly alphabetized by author's last name, of course. *'Complete Spreadsheets . . . Expanding SHTML . . . Star Wars: The Making of the Myth . . . For the love of Christ . . . what the hell's he doing with a supermodel?'*

Stepping over to the half-closed door, he pushed it open and peered into the room. It was obviously the man's study. The state of the art computer stood silent and still, and he narrowed his gaze when he noticed the assorted picture frames lining the mantle over the faux fireplace. Photos of Gavin Jamison and Jillian Zelig . . . various snapshots taken over the years . . . Obviously, they'd known one another for a long while. The expensive frames didn't go unnoticed, either, and he narrowed his eyes as he considered that. *'She must have bought those,'* he mused. *'Men don't care about picture frames—not even dead damn boring ones . . .'*

Another picture caught his attention, and he reached behind the carefully arranged tableau to retrieve it. It was the only picture that wasn't of Gavin and Jillian. No, this one was much more interesting, and he slowly broke into a lazy grin. *'I see . . . that makes sense . . . perfect sense . . .'*

He stared at the image for another long moment before stuffing the picture, frame and all, into the pocket of his black leather jacket . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

It took a minute for Jillian to make sense out of the sound that roused her from a peaceful slumber. Whimpering slightly as she buried her face deeper against Gavin's chest, she squeezed her eyes closed and tried to block out the sound.

Gavin grunted and jerked awake, his hand flailing around almost wildly as he groped around for the offending apparatus. "Lo?" he said, smashing the button that connected the phone call.

Jillian sat up, rubbing her eyes and struggled to clear her sleep-clouded mind. Wincing as she glanced at the clock, she heaved an inward sigh: one-thirty in the morning. She was about to lie back down when Gavin's words stopped her.

"What? Oh, uh, okay . . . yeah . . . Give me five minutes, and I'll be right there."

Rolling out of bed, Gavin tossed the cell phone down on the coverlet as he dragged a pair of jeans out of the dresser drawer.

"What's going on?" she asked, stifling a yawn with the back of her hand.

Gavin shot her an apologetic glance and then broke into a wide grin. “Sherry’s in labor,” he told her. “Why don’t you go back to sleep? I’ll run over there, take them to the hospital, and bring the girls back here.”

“I could come with you,” Jillian ventured.

Gavin shook his head. “There’s probably not enough room in the truck,” he told her. “It won’t take long.”

“Okay,” she said though she scampered out of bed as Gavin headed for the door. Following him through the house, she turned on the lamp beside the sofa as he smashed his feet into his shoes. “I’ll get things ready for the girls,” she told him.

He shot her a sheepish grin and hurried out the door.

Laughing softly to herself, Jillian ran over to the closet and pulled out a stack of thick fleece blankets. Though she doubted that the girls would be interested in sleeping, she figured that if she made it seem like a slumber party, maybe they’d be less inclined to worry about their mother. It didn’t take long for her to scoot all the furniture to one side of the room and even less time to spread all the blankets on the floor. After retrieving all the pillows off Gavin’s bed and grabbing the ones in the guest rooms, too, Jillian ran back down to the living room and giggled at the overall effect before hurrying off to the kitchen to make some popcorn and pile a few juice boxes onto a tray.

She was just scanning the satellite channels for cartoons when Gavin opened the door and strode into the house with Karis in his arms, sobbing against his chest and a rather befuddled-looking Minnie trailing along behind him. Casting Jillian a panicked sort of glance, he tried to set the girl on her feet. She hung on tight. Standing up straight, he patted her back rather clumsily and stifled a sigh.

Jillian bit her lip and grimaced, knowing that Gavin was probably close to losing his composure, too. He’d just never been good with crying girls, she supposed. Stepping over to rub her back, Jillian cast Gavin a worried look. “It’s okay, sweetie . . . your mommy’s going to be just fine,” she crooned.

That only made Karis cry harder.

Gavin shot Jillian a helpless little wince. “Hey,” he said just loud enough for Karis to hear him. “You . . . you want to go check on the horses with me?”

Karis stopped wailing though tears continued to course down her cheeks, and she sniffled, her bottom lip trembling precariously. “H-hors-sies?” she repeated between hiccups.

Gavin nodded. “Sure . . . I always check them at this time of night.”

Turning away before the girls could see Jillian’s smile at Gavin’s lie, she knelt down when Minnie tugged her hand. “Can I see the horsies, too?” she asked.

"I'm sure you can," Jillian answered, tweaking the end of the girl's pert little nose.

"Yeah, and tomorrow, I'll take you both for a short ride," he promised. "Come on."

Moonlight streamed down, illuminating the crisp Montana night. Minnie let go of Gavin's hand to speed up in her haste to reach the horses. Gavin glanced over his shoulder and shot Jillian an amused little grin that she returned. The promise of seeing the horses seemed to have done the trick . . .

Karis sighed, snuggling against Gavin's shoulder as Minnie ran over to slip her hand into his. Jillian followed along behind. "How's Sherry?" she asked quietly as Gavin set Karis down inside the main stable.

"She looked pretty uncomfortable, but she said it was fine."

"They'll call when there's word?"

Gavin nodded. "Cody said he would, yes," he replied without taking his eyes off the girls. They were running down the aisle between the rows of stalls and peering in at the horses. The creatures did little more than glance at them, and the girls giggled softly as they inspected the livestock. "Amazing how quickly she recovered when I asked if she wanted to see the horses," he commented with a grin.

"Well, of course," Jillian teased. "Then again, you've always had a way with women, haven't you?"

He blushed. "You mean ones under five?"

She laughed. "Something like that."

His blush darkened, but his smile widened, and he looked entirely pleased with the idea that he'd managed to distract Karis from her obvious upset.

"She misses her mommy?"

Gavin grinned. "Actually . . . she's more afraid that she's not going to be the baby anymore," he said.

"She's such a cutie," Jillian said with a sigh as she watched the girls. Karis giggled at one of the horses—a great gray mare everyone called Apple Jack.

Gavin let them visit the horses for another few minutes before clearing his throat to get their attention. "Come on, girls . . . let's leave the horses alone for awhile, okay?"

They didn't look like they wanted to do any such thing, but they finally wandered back over to Gavin and Jillian. Karis dragged her fuzzy pink slippers as she slowly moved toward them. "I can ride in the morning?" she asked hesitantly.

Gavin nodded. "Yes, you can," he told her, holding out his hands in a blatant invitation to pick her up.

Karis glanced back at the horses then held up her hands to Gavin. "Oka-a-ay," she drawled.

Gavin chuckled as he scooped her up. "You know, I could've sworn I saw that Jillian made a nice little bed for you in the living room. Want to go watch cartoons?"

"I like cartoons!" Minnie exclaimed as she stuck her hand into Jillian's.

"Good," Gavin said as he opened the stable door and waited for Jillian and Minnie to step outside before shutting off the light.

The girl chattered on about her favorite cartoons all the way back to the house, and with a happy little shriek, she ran over to the nest of blankets and flopped down on the pillows.

"You stripped all the beds of pillows, did you?" Gavin asked as he set Karis down. She didn't run over to the blankets, though, wrapping her arms around Gavin's leg instead and hanging on tight.

"Yes, I did," Jillian admitted.

Gavin chuckled as he kicked off his shoes, carefully unwinding Karis' hand and leading her over to the blankets while Jillian headed back to the kitchen to retrieve the tray of popcorn and juice. It seemed that the girl had claimed Gavin as her own, and it was a good thing that Jillian didn't mind sharing too much. Something about him had always possessed the power to soothe her, hadn't it? It stood to reason that Karis would sense it, too. Gavin was safety, security, lending Jillian an unwavering belief that despite things that changed around her, some thing would forever remain the same.

Laughing softly, she stopped short, leaning in the archway that led into the living room. Gavin lay in the midst of the blankets with a smile on his face and his hands behind his neck and the two girls climbing all over him. Karis was sprawled across his chest with her little rump up in the air and her hand stuffed into her mouth while Minnie was content to lie beside him, cradled in the crook of his arm with her head on his shoulder. He chuckled softly as Karis tried to shove her sister away. Minnie whined and jerked away from her sister's persistent pushing but refused to relinquish her spot beside Gavin.

"Be nice," Gavin murmured, pulling a hand from behind his head to stroke Karis' downy hair. "Look . . . the cat's chasing the dog," he pointed out, waving his hand in the general direction of the television.

Chapter 19
Realities

“These are amazing, Jillian,” Sherry said for the fifth time in as many minutes as she slowly flipped through the proof prints.

Jillian glanced up from the sleeping bundle in her arms. “No, those are just pictures. *She* is amazing,” Jillian argued. Gently stroking the infant’s tiny fist with the pad of her thumb, Jillian couldn’t help the little sigh that escaped her.

As if she knew that she was being scrutinized, the newest addition to the Mitchell family, Raina Melissa yawned wide and pursed her little lips. So named because of the tremendous showers that were blanketing the area when Sherry had found out that she was pregnant, the infant was quiet, content to be held.

Gavin and Cody had taken the girls down to the hospital cafeteria for lunch, but Jillian had opted to stay and visit with Sherry, instead. Sinking into the chair beside the bed without jostling the baby, she laughed softly, completely enamored of the child in her arms. “She’s beautiful,” Jillian said again.

“Thanks,” Sherry replied with a happy little smile. She looked tired, certainly, but she looked completely content, too. “Three girls . . . Cody swears that something must be broken.”

Jillian giggled since she just couldn’t feature shy Cody saying any such thing. Still, she found it sweet that the young mechanic was such a devoted family man. “I don’t think anything’s broken,” Jillian replied.

“This picture is so good,” Sherry said, holding the picture so that Jillian could see the one she was referring to. The girls were sitting in the grass surrounded by tiny white butterflies. Karis held a lily in her hand while Minnie was sitting on her knees sticking the end of a bomb pop into her sister’s mouth. Jillian laughed. It was a cute image; one of her favorites.

“I can’t believe you got some pictures of Karis smiling,” Sherry went on. “She hates having her picture taken. You’ve really got a knack for this.”

Blushing under the praise, Jillian shook her head and shrugged. “I enjoy it,” she allowed. “I’d love to take pictures of the baby, too.”

“Would you?” Sherry asked. “These are just fantastic!”

“I like the one of you and Cody,” Jillian said.

Sherry’s smile turned a little shy. “Me, too,” she confessed.

“Just write down the numbers off the back of the proof and what sizes of prints you’d like, and I’ll do them up for you.”

“Mama! Mama! I brung you bawoon,” Karis said as she ran into the room and straight to her mother. Cody laughed and picked her up, settling her on the bed beside Sherry.

“Oh, that’s pretty,” Sherry remarked, taking the string of the bright pink balloon and hooking it around her fingers. “Are you sure you don’t want to keep it, sweetie?”

“I bought it for you,” Karis insisted, sticking her bottom lip out in a marked pout. “I used my pennies.”

“Aww, you used your pennies to buy me a balloon?”

Karis nodded slowly.

“I gave her a few more pennies,” Cody mumbled. Sherry smiled at him, and he blushed.

“I got to ride horsies this morning,” Minnie said, pulling her hand away from Gavin and running over to her mother’s side.

“Yeah?”

Minnie giggled. Gavin stopped beside Jillian, leaning to the side so that he could get a better look at the baby’s face. “Hey.”

Jillian shot him a smile before turning her attention back to the infant in her arms again. “Hi.”

“Jilli can have the baby,” Karis decided with a little nod.

Sherry laughed. “I’m sure that Jillian will have her own babies eventually.”

Karis frowned. “But I don’t want the baby,” she complained. “I’m the baby!”

“Yep, you’re the baby,” Cody agreed, scooping his daughter up and soundly kissing her cheek. “The *big* baby.”

“You want to hold her?” Jillian asked.

Gavin blinked then grimaced slightly. “I don’t—”

“Just make sure you support her head,” Jillian instructed, carefully settling the baby in Gavin’s arms. He opened his mouth to protest but smiled instead when Raina yawned wide and uttered a contented little sigh.

“She’s . . . tiny,” he murmured, carefully cradling her head in the crook of his elbow as he smiled a little bashfully.

“She is,” Jillian agreed. “She’s pretty.”

“Very.”

A sense of absolute awe filtered over his face as he gazed at the sleeping baby in his arms, and Jillian smiled, brushing aside the dull ache that just never seemed to go away. It didn’t matter, did it? Nothing she could say or do would change his feelings on the matter, and it was high time she faced that fact.

No one seemed to notice that she’d fallen silent. Content to sit back and listen as Sherry, Cody, and Gavin talked, she made sure that she had a bright smile on her face whenever anyone happened to glance at her. If they noticed the slight tightness around her eyes or the way her lips trembled the tiniest bit, they didn’t remark on it, and maybe that was for the best, too.

‘*Maybe I should have been an actress,*’ she thought with a wry little smile. It seemed to her that everything she had been doing for the last few months—maybe for the last few years or even longer came down to this. Maybe all she’d really been doing was playing a part in some farce of a satirical comedy. All she was doing now was waiting for the final curtain to drop . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“We still don’t have anything concrete, but Gunnar thinks we might be close.”

“Close? How close?”

Bas Zelig sighed. “We think he may have worked for the contractor Jilli hired to renovate her condo.”

“Really?”

Bas grunted. “We think so. Apparently, the contractor said that one of her guys had a cousin who was in town during that time, and she gave him a part time job as a favor or some such. The woman’s not being very cooperative at the moment, though.”

“Afraid of being sued?” Gavin mused, running a hand through his hair.

“Something like that. She told Gunnar that if he wanted answers, he’d have to get a court injunction to get them, but that doesn’t really seem right, either. I mean, if she was just doing a favor for her employee . . .”

“Right,” Gavin added. “Then she wouldn’t really have anything to gain by trying to cover up for him.”

“Yep . . .” Bas let out a deep breath. Gavin could hear his claws drumming on the desk. “Myrna suggested that maybe the guy the contractor’s talking about was in the country illegally or something . . . nothing else really makes any sense as to why she won’t spill her guts about it, but if that’s the case . . .”

“I don’t know about that, Bas,” Gavin replied, shaking his head slowly. “I mean, if this guy were an illegal alien, then how did he get the money to chase Jillian down to Mexico?”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking, too.”

“Gotta be something more to it, then, unless it’s just not the guy you’re looking for.”

“This guy . . . I swear to God I’ll kill him when I get my hands on him,” Bas groused.

Gavin nodded. “Unless he’s human.”

Bas grunted. “Thanks for reminding me, Gav.” He sighed. “You know, it’d be one thing if the bastard was youkai or hanyou, but all indications are that he isn’t. If he were, Gunnar would have smelled him in Jillian’s condo, and he didn’t. All he smelled were humans. It’d be simple, otherwise, but you know how the human authorities are . . .”

Stifling a sigh since Gavin knew exactly what Bas meant, he slowly shook his head and leaned back in his chair, glancing up the stairs and listening for any sounds indicating that Jillian might still be awake. “I got it. Just keep me informed.”

“Not a problem,” Bas said. “How’re things going there?”

“Depends on what you’re asking about.”

“Sounds cryptic.”

Waving off Bas’ concern with a tired sigh, Gavin slowly shook his head. “Nothing.”

“You sure?”

“Yup. Let me know what’s going on, will you?”

“Sure. Take care of my baby sister.”

“Absolutely.”

Closing the phone with a little snap, Gavin dropped it onto the sofa beside him. ‘*Thank God,*’ he thought with a heavy sigh. Hopefully they’d be able to nab the guy fast. He loved being back on the ranch, surely, but he hated keeping anything from Jillian.

Standing up, he shut off the lights and checked the doors to make sure they were locked before heading for the stairs. Jillian had gone to bed early—not entirely surprising since she tended to

be a morning person. Gavin had been preoccupied checking his email and replying to the contractor he'd asked to come out to get an estimate for the roof on the main stable, and by the time he'd finished up, Bas had called . . .

She was curled up in the middle of the bed with a solitary white sheet pulled up over her body. Hair fanning out around her like silken ripples dancing over the water, she seemed so small in the midst of the silvery strands. Wearing the threadbare University of Montana shirt that she insisted on using for a nightshirt, she seemed somehow diminished in the expanse of the bed where she lay. Eyelashes fanned over her dusty rose cheeks, her lips were slightly parted in the bluish shadows of the night. Gavin sat on the edge of the bed, pushed her hair out of her face with the gentlest of touches as a wan smile broke over his features.

'God, she's... gorgeous...'

He winced, his hand stalling in mid-stroke. That was the trouble, wasn't it? The entire world knew that Jillian was gorgeous, and while he didn't have a problem with her fame, he knew in his heart that she was just too damn far away for a guy like him to reach.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes, letting his hand drop away from her. He'd thought that maybe she could be his, once upon a time. He'd held onto that belief for such a long time, hadn't he? The years fell away—melted like snow in the springtime, and the memories . . . well, they were just too hard to ignore . . .

Stepping off the escalator onto the ground level of the airport, Gavin hitched his carry-on bag over his shoulder and scanned the lobby for the Zeligs. Spotting Cain was simple enough. The youkai stood head and shoulders above most men, and it struck Gavin that in the length of time he'd known him, Cain really hadn't changed all that much. Gin stood on her tiptoes, trying to see over the milling crowd. Gavin smiled absently, gazing past them all in search of the one face he desperately wanted to see . . .

She wasn't there. Jillian wasn't there. Tamping down the painful surge of disappointment, Gavin negotiated the masses, slowly making his way over to Gin and Cain. "Hi," he said, hoping his feelings weren't showing in his expression too much.

Gin gasped, eyes widening as she glanced up at Gavin. "Oh, my!" she exclaimed. "You... grew!"

He grimaced as Cain chuckled softly. "Uh, yeah," Gavin agreed. "Over a foot and a half since I visited the last time."

"He's almost as tall as you, Cain," Gin giggled, reaching up to touch Gavin's cheek.

"Stop that, Gin. You're embarrassing him," Cain remarked though his smile was anything but sympathetic, "and it has been over two years since we've seen him . . ."

"Where's Jillian?" Gavin asked, trying his hardest to sound nonchalant.

He didn't miss the strained little look that passed between the Zelig's. "I'm sorry, Gavin . . . Jilli had a pep rally she couldn't miss today," Gin said, casting Cain another nervous sort of glance. Gavin didn't really understand it, but the upset that Jillian would miss his arrival must have registered on his face because Gin grimaced and quickly pulled him into a warm hug: the kind that never failed to remind Gavin of his mother. "She'll be in later. She'll probably rush right home, actually. She's been looking forward to your arrival ever since the night you called and told her you were coming . . ."

"Y-yeah?" he stammered, nearly tripping over his feet as he quickly turned to shake Cain's hand. He'd grown so fast, he supposed, he hadn't really had time to become acquainted with his height and the other changes that had come with it, like ungodly large feet . . .

"Whoa, Gavin . . . you all right?" Cain asked, quickly steadying Gavin with a hand on his shoulder.

Gavin blushed. "Uh, yeah," he mumbled.

"My balance isn't the greatest after a commercial flight, myself," Cain went on though Gavin didn't doubt for a moment that Cain knew very well that his clumsiness had nothing at all to do with the flight, in general.

"Let's go," Gin said brightly. "We'll stop for lunch . . . you didn't eat on the plane, did you?"

"N-n-no," Gavin replied, trying not to look too upset that Jillian hadn't thought enough to come with her parents. He'd been looking forward to seeing her again. It hadn't occurred to him that she might not feel the same way . . .

And she hadn't come right home from school, either. Gavin spent the afternoon on the phone with the admissions office of the University of Maine to set up a time for his testing. They wanted him to take a placement test since he was applying for transfer and since he had yet to establish his full time residence in Maine. Giving half-hearted answers and trying to tell himself that it really wasn't too late, Gavin had floundered through the phone calls and made arrangements to drop off his transcripts . . . and still Jillian didn't come home.

"You know, maybe she went to the pond," Gin suggested as she set dishes on the table. "She goes there sometimes after school . . . You know where it is."

Gavin nodded. "Yeah . . ."

Grabbing his coat, he headed for the door only to be intercepted by the tai-youkai. "A moment, Gavin?"

"Uh, okay . . ."

He followed Cain into the office and sat, tamping down the urge to fidget as he restlessly waited.

"Listen, Gavin, I'm sure Jillian will be happy that you've come back," Cain began, a thoughtful scowl marring his brow as he slouched back against the floor to ceiling windows that lined the end of the study. "But I wanted to remind you that she's only fifteen. You know, in case you've forgotten."

“I-I-I didn’t forget,” Gavin stammered.

Cain nodded. “Good, because you’re a grown man, but she’s still just a little girl—my little girl—and while she might still believe that you’re meant to be together, she’s far too young to make that sort of decision. Don’t you agree?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Crossing his arms over his chest and leveling a look that bespoke a very painful and instantaneous death, Cain nodded again. “See that you remember it. She thinks the world of you . . . and so do I. Don’t you dare disappoint me, because if you do . . .”

Gavin flinched visibly. Cain didn’t have to finish that threat. Gavin knew exactly what the tai-youkai was telling him. No, maybe it wasn’t the tai-youkai. Maybe at that time and in that place, he was speaking as nothing more than Jillian’s father, and maybe that threat held far more significance . . . ‘How was it that one simple look from Cain Zelig can make me feel like a pup?’ he wondered. “I understand.”

“Go-o-o-od . . . now go find my daughter. It’s getting late.”

Swallowing hard and offering a curt nod, Gavin stumbled to his feet and hurried out of the study without bothering to pull his coat on until he was outside the mansion and striding toward the forest. The overcast November day was fading as he moved through the trees, along the path he knew as well as he knew the back of his own hand. He could sense Jillian’s presence coming closer with every step he took, though he might have been imagining that. It was difficult to say. Quickening his pace as a sudden, vicious need to see her surged through him, Gavin was almost running as he broke through the last of the trees and into the clearing beside the little pond where Jillian loved to swim.

She wasn’t swimming, and in hindsight, that was probably a really good thing. Sitting atop a huge boulder where she sunned herself in the summertime, Jillian sat with her feet dangling in what had to be frigid water, her back straight and proud, the jaunty ponytail in her hair swinging in the harsh wind. She seemed a little lost in the copious folds of the black wool letterman’s jacket she wore. Letters for cheerleading and for track and field were sewed to the sleeves. The hat was unzipped, lying flat against her back. Embroidered into the bright red fabric was the name that made him smile: Jilli.

She was the girl he knew, wasn’t she? The two and a half years of their separation hadn’t changed that at all . . . or had it? Narrowing his gaze as he stuffed his hands deep into the pockets of his baggy jeans, Gavin bit his lip and stared at her. She was a little taller, maybe . . . her hair was a little longer. Letting her chin drop, she seemed to be gazing at her hands, and he didn’t miss the gentle arch of her neck; the delicate sense of an almost regal air in her movements. She’d developed a certain grace in his absence; a quiet calm that drew him. “Jilli . . .” he murmured, more to himself than to her.

She stiffened, stilled, her body tensing at the sound of his voice though she didn’t turn to look at him.

Forcing himself to approach her, he climbed onto the boulder beside her and sat down, unable to comprehend the strange distance in her reactions. “Your mom said you were probably out here.”

She swallowed hard, keeping her gaze trained on the water. “I’m a cheerleader,” she said quietly. “I couldn’t miss the pep rally today.”

“I-I know,” he blurted. “I thought . . .” He sighed and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter what I thought.”

“How long will you be here?” she asked suddenly, almost desperately, as though she wanted the reassurance that he wasn’t going to take off on her again.

‘Or maybe,’ he thought, frowning at the water rippling away from her toes. ‘Maybe she needs that . . .’

“Well, that’s the thing,” he admitted. “I might be here awhile.”

“O-oh?”

He nodded. “I’m transferring to the University of Maine. It’s too late to get housing on campus, though, so your father said I could stay here for the semester and commute.”

“Transferring?” she repeated slowly. “Here?”

Willing himself not to blush, he nodded again, trying not to be unaccountably pleased that his legs extended a good bit further than Jillian’s did. He had to keep them stretched out to keep them out of the water. “Uh . . . yeah.”

“. . . For . . . me?”

“W—I—you—” he stammered.

“Gavvie?” she interrupted, finally daring to meet his gaze. His breath caught for a dizzying moment as he stared at her in mute fascination. The signs had been there all along. Somewhere in his mind he’d known she was going to be a beautiful woman one day. Seeing the changes, though, were hard to process. The delicate curves of her face . . . the high cheekbones . . . the blood red lips—she’d been chewing on them, hadn’t she? Nervously, anxiously . . . and that realization lent him a stuttering sense of hope . . . “Are you transferring here for me?” she asked quietly.

His cheeks exploded in a violent wash of crimson color as he quickly looked away, unable to reconcile the girl before him with the gangly youth he’d said goodbye to in what seemed like a lifetime ago. Her face had lost the rounded softness of childhood. The long, thin limbs had gained a womanly fullness, and he cleared his throat as he tried to form coherent words. “The University of Maine has a really good school of finance,” he argued weakly as the already dark color deepened just a little more.

For reasons he didn’t want to think about, the stark changes in her appearance set off a dull ache that pulsed with the beat of his heart. He’d come so far, or so he’d thought. No longer the scrawny youth he’d been two and a half

years ago, he'd hoped that maybe this time . . . What he hadn't expected was that she would have flitted out of his grasp yet again . . .

"You did, didn't you?" she whispered, her tone full of incredulity, and he could tell that she was smiling. "You missed me . . .?"

He scowled, gaze shifting between her suddenly diminutive hand to his and back again. "Of course I missed you, Jilli. You're my best friend . . ."

She digested that in silence, flicking her feet back and forth in the frigid waters below. "Gavvie?"

"Yes?"

"I think I'd rather believe that you're transferring for me."

He sighed then grinned, pushing himself to his feet and offering her a hand of assistance. "If that's what you want," he told her, his gaze skittering away before she could discern the absolute truth. He had come back for her . . .

Cain's words came back to him, and Gavin's grin faltered. "Good, because you're a grown man, but she's still just a little girl—my little girl—and while she might still believe that you're meant to be together, she's far too young to make that sort of decision . . ."

She slipped her hand into his and let him pull her to her feet, a bright smile lighting on her face at last. Gavin blinked and stared, holding onto her hand without a word. "Welcome home, Gavvie," she said. "I really, really, really missed you."

"I . . . well, I . . ." He swallowed hard, mouth suddenly bone-dry in the wake of her obvious happiness. "I, uh . . . missed you, too . . ."

Blinking away the lingering remnants of the memory, Gavin sighed as his gaze fell on Jillian's sleeping form once more. He'd thought—he'd really believed—that it was just a matter of time . . . it had been a beautiful dream, even if it didn't last that long.

Constantly reminded of his inadequacies, the dream was too hard to hold. Meeting Jillian's friends was interesting enough. The beautiful clique—the one he'd never actually fit into when he was in school—they seemed to regard Gavin as viable, likely because he was so much older than they were, or maybe it was because he was with Jillian. He wasn't overly keen on the idea of spending Friday nights running around with her friends, but if that was what she wanted to do then he did it . . .

Sometimes, though, they'd follow Evan if he had a gig at one of the local digs. That wasn't as bad. Sitting at a table toward the back of a bar while the bouncers eyed Jillian and Madison, Gavin was always careful to only allow them non-alcoholic beverages, which was likely the reason that Cain never complained about Gavin escorting Jillian to those sorts of places. The bar owners didn't make a fuss over it since the legal drinking age had been lowered to eighteen

years ago, especially since they were close to a university, Gavin supposed, and especially since neither Jillian nor Madison, for that matter, looked like true teenagers . . .

Staring at her in the filmy half-light, he slowly shook his head. She was the same girl, wasn't she? The girl he'd known and . . . and loved . . . for so long . . . and yet . . .

And yet he wasn't certain he could really dare to believe . . . If she hadn't disappeared nearly two years after he'd come back to Maine to finish school, absconding from his life completely; totally . . . maybe . . .

Why did she run away?

'Ask her if you have to know . . . maybe it wasn't at all what you thought.'

Or maybe he was fooling himself. Wasn't it better to know that she would never be satisfied in the boring life he'd have to offer her before he made the colossal mistake of taking her as his mate when she'd never be truly happy with him?

Grimacing, Gavin shook his head, stretching out on the bed beside her, careful not to disturb her. As though she sensed his movements, she scooted closer to him in her sleep. Rolling onto his side, he propped his temple on a raised fist. Tracing her cheek with his folded knuckles, he smiled wanly in the darkness. Her skin was so smooth, so soft, so delicate . . . It was the only time he felt free enough to touch her, and as cowardly as it was, he couldn't quite help himself, either. As he drank in every detail of her, he realized that the nights were kinder to him than days ever were.

Jillian sighed in her sleep, nestling closer to him, and he felt the first strands of his iron will unravel. Breathing in the clean, fresh scent of her, leaning in closer to bury his nose in her hair . . . Something in her scent always reassured him, and in the night . . . sometimes he almost believed her, too.

"Gavvie . . ." she mumbled softly, her voice more of a whisper than a word.

"Jilli, *why?*" he asked, unsure what he was asking but desperately needing an answer.

She sighed, slowly opening her eyes though she seemed to have trouble focusing on his face. "Why?" she repeated as her eyebrows drew together in a slight frown.

It was that frown that sealed his fate, he supposed. God, he hated to see her upset, and knowing that he was the cause of it . . . well, that had never set well with him, either. Her moods were a palpable thing to him—they always had been, hadn't they? So attuned to her that the slightest shift in her emotions had the power to hurt him in an almost physical way . . .

He sighed. "You're pushing me away . . . I can feel it . . . I . . . Jilli . . ."

She didn't reply right away. Eyes slipping closed as a gentle little smile surfaced on her face, she shook her head slightly. "You . . . don't . . . want . . . that?" she asked slowly, haltingly—carefully.

She wasn't asking if he wanted distance, and he knew it. What she was asking was so much deeper than that. "I . . . I . . ." He swallowed hard, unsure what he could possibly say that could overcome the gulf that was widening by the second. "I . . . don't know . . . I just . . . you can't . . . don't leave me again . . ."

She grimaced at the raw honesty in his voice. "Gavin . . ."

Staring at her in the moonlight with the clock on the nightstand ticking the seconds away, Gavin felt the hold on his resolve slipping away. The pleading in her gaze wrenched his heart, dug at his soul. She was asking for things that he didn't really want to comprehend. Pale blue eyes glittering in the dim light, she scanned his face for any sort of emotion she could find. He could smell the salt in her tears as her gaze glossed over. Nostrils quivering, lips trembling, she didn't look away as he ran his knuckles along the rise of her cheek once more. She closed her eyes, leaned into his touch as a single tear slipped down her cheek to dampen his fingers . . . to break his heart.

A strange emotion washed over him, the fiercest need to protect her; to dispel the things that hurt her. Reacting on a purely instinctive level that he didn't completely understand, he leaned down, brushed his lips over hers in a whisper of a kiss, in a breath of sensation before returning with a deeper pressure that she returned. Hands slipping around his neck, she held onto him as though her very life depended on it. The gentle crush of her lips against his, of her body against his . . . it was enough to wrench a low groan from him.

Caught up in the tangle of rioting sensation, he leaned down, supporting his weight on his forearms as the scent of her wrapped around him. Beautiful, magical, the kiss blossomed around him, driving away the lingering inhibitions that plagued him every hour of every day. In the night . . .

Sighing softly against his mouth, Jillian's lips fluttered like a butterfly unfurling its wings. Languorous touches, brushes of the sweetest dew opened around him: a morning flower. She rose against him, as vibrant as the swirling tide, and somewhere in the haze, he heard her whisper his name. The gentle entreaty was a palliative on his soul as indecision floated away. She was so perfect in his arms, her body molded perfectly against his. Everything he'd ever wanted, everything he'd ever dreamed . . . in those precious moments, he knew. She was the one—the only one—if only . . . if only . . .

Dragging his mouth away from hers, he gasped for air, his body trembling. Jillian's breathing rasped in his ears, echoed in his head, as his heart pounded against his ribs. Rolling onto his back, he pulled her into his arms. She giggled softly, nestling close to him; as close as she could possibly be. "My Gavvie," she murmured, her voice as breathless as he was feeling.

"Go to sleep, Jilli," he murmured, kissing her forehead and wrapping his arms tighter around her.

"Okay . . ."

Chapter 20
The Mists of Morning

'Cain . . . ?'

'Cain? Oh, come on. You can do better than Cain . . . ?'

Winching at the taunting tone of his youkai's voice, Gavin tried to concentrate on something—anything—that could take his mind off his current predicament.

The proverbial cold shower hadn't worked. Thinking about entirely un-sexy things hadn't worked. Even trying to meditate hadn't worked. Working out complex mathematical algorithms hadn't worked. Playing *The Empire Strikes Back* in his head hadn't worked, either. Now was Ground Zero: crunch time, and Gavin . . . well, he was getting desperate.

The painful ache deep inside was kept alive and kicking by the incessant memories of that one lingering kiss coupled with the warmth of Jillian's entirely too-close body crushed against his. Gavin hadn't slept at all, and worse, it was nearly dawn, and she tended to wake early . . . If she woke up and realized that near frenzied state he was in, there was simply no telling what she would do, especially after he'd given in to the urge to kiss her.

Shifting in her sleep, her upper thigh brushed against him, and he squeezed his eyes closed tight. 'Oh . . . God . . . ?' He moaned softly, unable to stave back the sound. He was so hard he hurt, literally. 'God, God, God, God, God . . . ?'

'Evan in makeup . . . God, he makes a damn ugly woman . . . Why he's let Madison put makeup on him, I'll never know, and Jillian . . . ?'

That didn't do it. Gavin tried again.

'Bas . . . Bas Zelig . . . Huge . . . tall . . . always scowling . . . intimidation, at its best, and he'd kill me if Jillian and I . . . ?'

He groaned. Trying to concentrate on the male members of the Zelig family wasn't working . . . They all invariably led back to thoughts of Jillian.

'Then again, her grandfather is InuYasha . . . and he really would kill me, I think . . . without batting an eye . . . ?'

He almost whined. These kinds of mind games normally worked to distract him. Over the years, he'd become a master of distraction techniques. He sighed. There was no sense in gilding the lily here. He'd also become a master of the masturbation technique . . . It was damn near impossible to sleep with a woman like Jillian Zelig every night and not be forced to practice both on a regular basis. She was too alluring for her own damn good, as far as Gavin was concerned. 'Damn it . . . ?'

'Umm... Mom and Dad having sex... something I wish I'd never actually seen...'

His mind locked onto the word, 'sex', and Gavin sighed. Jillian's hand slipped around his neck and into his hair—he never bothered to catch it back in a ponytail at night—and her fingers grazed the nape of his neck, sending shivers racing up and down his spine. Her touch shot through him straight to his groin, forcing out the harsh whine that he'd been fighting to contain.

'I... I have to get out of here...' he thought in a dazed sort of way. *'I... shit...'*

Carefully untying Jillian's hand, he managed to extricate himself from her without disturbing her sleep. The first gray fingers of pallid daylight were filtering across the sky as he grimaced, groping for his jeans. Stifling another low groan as he jerked the pants on and fastened them, he winced again. The chafing material was entirely too constricting, doubling the pain in his groin, and worse: escalating the scalding ache into a near-dizzying throb that ripped through him with every step he took as he headed out of the room.

He couldn't stand it. He simply couldn't stand it. Staggering along the hallway and down the stairs, he paused for a moment, leaning against the wall for support. Drawing ragged breaths, he grabbed the front of his tee-shirt with a shaking hand.

'You know, Gavvie, you're forgetting one key thing...'

Pushing himself away from the wall, he stumbled down the stairs and through the living room toward the back doors. *'What?'* he growled.

'Given the circumstances, do you really think Jillian would turn you away?'

And that, in Gavin's estimation, didn't even deserve an answer. Groaning softly, he shoved the sliding glass door open and slipped outside. As true as it might have been, there wasn't any way he could really do that. He shouldn't have given in to the impulse to kiss her, damn it. He'd burn in everlasting hell before he'd even consider marching back into the house and taking advantage of Jillian Zelig.

'I think... I might... die,' he gasped as he lurched across the patio and down the steps. Breaking into a lunging gait, he headed for the forest, casting a nervous glance over his shoulder to make sure Jillian wasn't following him. *'Running... running's good...'* he told himself, flinching as the ache in his body reached a painful crescendo.

It didn't take long for him to realize that running wasn't actually helping in the least. If anything, it was making things worse. All the rubbing and the rhythmic cadence of his steps was simulating movement, and it didn't take long for him to realize that *any* kind of motion was just plain bad. *'God,'* he thought as he dropped to a staggering walk, trudging onward with no real destination in mind. *'Oh, hell...'*

He'd been lying in that bed all night with *her* scent wrapped around him, with *her* hands on him, with *her* body snuggled against him. It was simply too much for him to endure. After kissing her

and feeling her easy acquiescence, it was just too much to think that he'd be able to rid himself of thoughts of her, of memories of the touch of her lips, of the way her body molded to his . . .

It was just too much—so much more than he could possibly endure without going mad. He couldn't take it—just couldn't. Jillian was impossible to ignore . . .

Stumbling out of the forest and into the open beside the pond, Gavin blinked and licked his lips. A fine sheen of perspiration had broken out on his skin, and the water looked awfully inviting. Ignoring the voice in his head that told him that the water was bound to be colder than he'd bargained for, Gavin stripped off his tee-shirt and fought with the button on his jeans as he kept moving toward the shore.

A sudden image of Jillian, floating on her back in the same pond assailed him, and he stopped cold. Bathed in the hateful light of the nearly full moon, she'd been, and he'd seen a little too much of her body, hadn't he? The soft rise of her breasts . . . the flushed peaks of her nipples . . . the gentle curve of her hips protruding above the rippling current . . . the moonlight had reflected off the surface of the water only to catch in glimmering sparkles of moisture in the tangled curls between her legs, and he hadn't realized fast enough that he shouldn't have been watching her . . .

The memories tumbled over him, one right after another. He'd seen her so often over the years . . . In the beginning, she'd been able to talk him into skinny dipping with her. It hadn't seemed like such a big deal at the time. They were just pups back then, and it hadn't ever occurred to Gavin that he ought not to be swimming naked with the tai-youkai's daughter . . .

The thing was, Jillian had grown and changed over the course of time, and while he'd grown a little, it was nothing in comparison to the changes in her body. Granted, he'd been warned at the start of his fourth year of training with Cain Zelig that he'd better keep his hands off Jillian if he knew what was good for him—ridiculous, in his opinion, since he might have been thirteen at the time, but Jillian was not quite eight . . . Cain told him later that he thought it best to start instilling the fear of God at a young age. Well, he'd succeeded in doing that, Gavin supposed, and now, staring at the pond, he just couldn't bring himself to get into the water, either . . .

"Damn it," he muttered, turning away from the pond and heaving a long-suffering sigh. Maybe he could get a cold shower at home—not that it had worked in the night, because he'd tried that, too. *'It's the boner from hell, and I think it's going to kill me . . .'*

Nope, nothing had worked, and therein laid the problem. Somehow kissing Jillian had unleashed a torrent of uncontrollable hormones that were wreaking havoc on his system, and he had a feeling that it was the culmination of the last twenty years and every sexual frustration he'd ever experienced was manifesting itself now and in the worst way possible. If something didn't give soon, he'd be dead by noon. Either he'd die of the unendurable ache in his groin or he'd die of sheer humiliation when someone—and with his luck, it'd be Jillian—caught him with the full-on woody he just couldn't seem to get rid of. Wondering absently if his parents still carried life insurance on him, he staggered back toward the forest . . .

'You know, Gavin, there's one thing you could do . . .' his youkai pointed out with a heavy sigh.

Grimacing—he had a good idea just where his youkai was heading with this one—Gavin kept moving, smashing his hand against his throbbing penis in an effort to keep movement to a minimum. ‘No.’

‘Yeah, well, you’re running out of time, and you’re running out of options. Jilli gets up early, remember? You know she’ll come looking for you if you’re gone when she wakes up.’

He stopped short. Yes, he knew that, too.

Gritting his teeth, he shot a fevered glance around the forest. For one dizzying moment, he thought he smelled Jillian, but he couldn’t see her. *‘Just my imagination,’* he told himself as he dropped his tee-shirt and fumbled with his jeans. Pushing the fly of his pants open wide, he pulled himself free from the confines of his underpants, gasping loudly as his hand closed around the thickness of him. “G-God,” he rasped out, eyes squeezing closed as his head fell back. Mouth slack, breathing harsh, he couldn’t fight the waves of sensation that rolled over him as he stroked himself with twitching motions.

He felt the warmth of Jillian’s body press against his back moments before her arms slipped around his waist, her hands gently pushing his aside as she gripped his penis firmly. “J-Jilli . . . n-n-no,” he grunted as his hands fell away. Her touch was like a bolt of lightning slamming straight through his body as he slipped. She caught him, braced him, uttering words that made no sense as she gently stroked him.

It was more than he could stand. The tingling in his balls tightened; constricted as he jerked involuntarily in her hands. A flash of fire erupted in his mind as he gritted his teeth, bit out a fierce groan. His orgasm came hard and fast as Jillian’s hands pumped him. A ragged cry, a guttural moan, and she let go of him as he stumbled back, landing hard on his ass before flopping flat on his back, his breathing harsh and ragged—completely at odds with the morning song of the birds . . .

Eyes flashing wide open, he struggled to sit up only to fall back once again when something entirely too hot, too wet, too *nice* wrapped around his penis. “N-n-no . . .” he managed to hiss before his body jerked of its own volition. Jillian was straddling his legs with her mouth clamped down on him, her hand wrapped around the base of him while her other hand carefully massaged his balls. “Oh . . . God . . .”

He wanted to tell her to stop, but he couldn’t. Her jerky motions were clumsy at best, her teeth scraping over him in an entirely unsettling almost painful way. He gasped and bucked his hips in an effort to diffuse the unbearable tension in his body. She seemed to understand, though, and he groaned loudly when she rolled her lips to cover her teeth. Stroking the length of him with her tongue, she sighed as she increased the speed of her actions.

Forcing his eyes open, he couldn’t help but look at her. Breasts heaving against the flimsy fabric of the faded old tee-shirt, she had her eyes closed with a rosy blush staining her cheeks. They caved in as she sucked him harder, and he fell back with a loud moan. The sensations coursing

through him bordered on painful, and he shivered as the cooler air of the early morning hit the hot moisture on his body.

It was too much for him to contain. The rapid tightening in his balls . . . the thickening of his penis . . . he could feel it all in one dizzying moment, and with a ragged cry, he pushed himself off the ground, shoving Jillian aside as he rolled onto his hands and knees, body trembling as every muscle in his being contracted, as his orgasm spilled on the decaying leaves on the forest floor.

He stayed that way for several minutes as he fought to get his breathing back under control; as he fought to get his mind back under control. Finally heaving himself backward, he let his head fall back as he sat on his knees, his body rioting insanely. He felt Jillian's hands on his cheeks seconds before her lips covered his. With a soft groan, he wrapped his arms around her, shifting slightly to the side before lowering her onto the ground.

Traversing the threadbare fabric of her nightshirt, he uttered a low growl as he slipped his hands under the hem. The taut flesh of her belly jerked under his perusal. Her knees fell apart, and he slid over her, his lips seeking out the soft hollow in her throat where her pulse fluttered precariously; the wings of a butterfly . . .

Silken skin combusted under his touch, scalding hot as she whimpered. His hands closed over her breasts, and with a sharp gasp, she arched up to meet him. She was perfect to him; absolutely perfect. Her soft entreaties beckoned him, and he slipped down, pressing wet kisses against the conflagrant flesh of her belly. She trembled under him, her body quaking as she keened softly; as she kneaded the muscles on his shoulders. Turning his head long enough to spit out a mouthful of his hair that had fallen in the way, he grimaced at the unwelcome intrusion of an entirely too-familiar voice calling his name somewhere in the distance.

"Gavin! Gavin! Where the hell are you?"

"Fucking Hank," Gavin snarled, jerking his hands away from Jillian and rolling off her.

She looked completely dazed, and she blinked a few times as a decidedly pouty moue turned her swollen lips in a frown. "Wha . . .?"

Reaching out with a shaking hand, Gavin quickly tugged Jillian's shirt down. "Hank," he stated again as he hurriedly tried to correct his jeans.

"Hank . . .? Why are we talking about Hank?" she demanded.

"Ga-a-a-avi-i-i-in . . ." Hank called out again. His voice was coming closer.

Snatching up his abandoned shirt, Gavin thrust it under Jillian's nose as she slowly got to her unsteady feet. "Put this on . . . it'll cover more than that," he grumbled, cheeks pinking as he realized that she really hadn't bothered to grab a robe or anything. The shirt she wore barely reached her belly button, and while he was used to seeing Jillian in her panties and that God-forsaken shirt, he'd be double damned if he'd let Hank see the same.

She didn't argue with him, tugging the shirt over her head. She barely had time to straighten the hem when he grabbed her hand to hustle her away from the spot before Hank arrived and the ribbing that Gavin knew would be forthcoming commenced.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

"Have another sandwich."

Gavin grunted but took the sandwich Jillian offered him. "Oh, wow . . . another peanut butter and marshmallow fluff . . ."

She giggled. "They're your favorites, right?"

"Well . . . no . . ." he admitted with a grimace.

Jillian blinked. "They're not?"

His lopsided, apologetic grin was completely endearing, and she couldn't help smiling as she watched the breeze ruffle his hair. "Uh, no . . ."

"But you always said they were!" she protested though her tone lacked any real irritation.

"That's because you always looked so proud of yourself when you made these things," he admitted, staring at the sandwich in his limp hand.

"And you've eaten them for years without complaining?"

He blushed. "Something like that."

She laughed. Sitting on a blanket in the shade of a row of fir trees, they'd stopped beside a small stream for lunch. The soft nicker of the horse tethered to a stout tree branch nearby mingled with the trickle of the water, and Jillian sighed happily. The feeling that she was going to burst if she didn't share her contentment swelled, and without stopping to think about it, she leaned forward and kissed him.

"Wh-what was that for?" he mumbled, cheeks reddening a little more.

"For being you," she said simply enough.

He shook his head but grinned sheepishly. "Yeah?"

She nodded, digging a half-frozen bottle of water out of the insulated knapsack and handing it to him before retrieving one for herself, too. "Yes," she insisted with an impish smile. "I'm glad you agreed to bring me out here or I might have had to do something drastic."

“Drastic?”

“Yes, drastic.”

“Like what?”

“Like kidnap you.”

He chuckled. “Really.”

She nodded again, scooting closer and resting her temple on his shoulder. For one brief moment, she'd thought he meant to shut her out again. They'd returned to the house, somehow managing to elude Hank. She hadn't questioned the idea that Gavin would want to retreat, and it hadn't surprised her that he'd strode straight through the house and into the bathroom to wash off any lingering scents that might give him away. She understood that, she supposed. Gavin tended to be a little too shy for his own good sometimes, and the last thing he wanted or needed was the unmerciful teasing that the ranch foreman would doubtless supply.

When she woke up and found him gone, she'd worried. Gavin wasn't a morning person, and it was a common thing for her to act as his alarm clock when they were in New York City, to the point that she'd make sure she called to rouse him out of bed whenever she was on location, and it never failed to amuse her that her dear, sweet Gavvie could be an absolute bear in the mornings when he was forced out of bed before he was ready. Stumbling out of bed and glancing out the window, she'd seen him disappearing into the trees, and for some reason, she was compelled to follow him.

She hadn't understood just why he seemed so panicked. Keeping a cautious distance since it was obvious to her that he was trying to hide something from her, she'd been stunned to see what had caused his turmoil. When he'd freed himself and started stroking, she'd come forward. In her mind, it had seemed like the most natural thing on earth to do. Slipping her arms around his waist, she leaned against his back, closing her eyes as she gently pushed his hands away and helped him with his dilemma.

She'd loved the way his body had reacted to her. Every straining muscle rippled, undulated under his skin. Driven by the need to touch him, it seemed, and touch him, she had . . . She'd ended up so frazzled by his hands on her, by the unrestrained passion in his kisses that she hadn't heard Hank calling out to them at all.

After his shower, Jillian had asked him to take her on a horseback ride and picnic. He'd looked completely unsure of himself, and he'd stammered something about having to check the eastern pasture. He must have seen the upset in her expression—she'd tried to hide it from him—and in the end, he shot her an uncertain little smile and told her that it should only take an hour or so to ride out and have a look around.

So she'd packed up a nice little lunch of fluffer-nutter sandwiches and potato chips, and then she'd waited patiently for Gavin's return.

He'd blushed and stammered when she insisted on riding on his horse with him. He'd been firing off reasons why she'd be better off on her own horse when Hank, rolling his eyes and chuckling softly, strolled over to grasp Jillian

around the waist and lift her up onto Gavin's lap where she'd cuddled against him for the better part of the morning until he'd suggested that they stop for lunch . . .

He did want her, didn't he? He'd never have let her do those things with him if he didn't. She'd almost given up, and that thought made her grimace. Wild hope surged inside her, coupled with the joy that she could barely keep inside. *'Maybe . . . maybe he's ready to admit it . . .'*

"Jilli . . ."

The rapid clanging of an instant alarm bell rang in her head as his smile faded and his gaze fell away. Dropping the sandwich onto the plastic baggy she'd packed the food into earlier in the day, he cleared his throat and licked his lips as he scowled at the blanket.

"Yes?" she forced herself to ask, hoping that she didn't sound as reluctant as she felt inside.

He grimaced, sitting up and draping his forearm over his raised knee. "I-I don't know how this works," he admitted quietly.

"How what works?"

He shrugged. "Any of this . . . it's just . . ." He winced. "I-I-I . . . I have to know . . ."

"Know what?" she asked, unable to make sense of his claims.

He swallowed hard and shook his head, but he slipped his arm around her waist. "Why'd you leave me?"

His question was so soft that she almost missed it. Craning her neck to look up at him, Jillian's eyes met his and lingered. "I never left you," she began slowly.

"You did," he countered quietly. "Just before Christmas my last year of college . . ."

She stiffened and tried pulled away from him. He'd never asked her that before, and to be honest it was something that Jillian didn't like to think about. "Gavin . . ."

He held onto her, his arm tightening around her waist just enough to keep her beside him. "I . . . I have to know, Jilli." Grimacing, he licked his lips and caught her chin, forcing her to meet his stare. "Please."

The confusion in his expression was enough to tear at her heart. Still the pain that the memory of that time was entirely too fresh, too sharp, and she felt her gaze slip away. To talk about all of that . . . could she? "But . . ." she whispered, her voice cracking, breaking as the word came out a little squeak. "You know why."

"Maybe," he said, flinching as he let his hand fall away from her face. "That's the thing, Jillian. I . . . I need to hear you say it."

Chapter 21
Her Reason

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

University of Maine—Orono, Maine.
Two And A Half Years Ago.
December 5, 2055.
Jillian, age 17.5 Years Old.
Gavin age 22.5 Years Old.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Positive?”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely positive?”

Gavin heaved a sigh. “Yes.”

“You’re lying.”

Casting his roommate a decisive glower, Gavin growled and reached over to snatch the framed picture of Jillian out of Brandon’s greedy hands. “I’m not lying,” he bit out, stuffing the photo into his underwear drawer.

Brandon snorted and rolled his eyes, crossing his meaty arms over his chest and drawing himself up to his full height. He was still a good five inches shorter than Gavin—a fact that never went unremarked, at least in Gavin’s mind. Brandon Sutherland thought that he was the big man on campus, and Gavin figured that maybe he was. Captain of the football team, top honors student in the University of Maine School of Science, Brandon was the premier running back in the Atlantic 10 Conference as well as front runner for the Heisman Trophy. There was little doubt in anyone’s minds, especially Brandon’s, that he was going to play professional football. “She says you are.”

“I’m not her boyfriend,” Gavin grumbled. “Get out of here, will you? I’ve got to study.”

Brandon laughed, flexing his biceps then clasping his hands as he performed what he called, ‘The Pectoral Shuffle’. “Not her boyfriend; just her bitch.”

Gavin didn't bother to respond to that. Digging a textbook out of his backpack, he flopped into the chair at his desk and set about ignoring his irritating roommate.

"It's true, you know," Brandon went on, raking his fingers through his sun-streaked blond hair. "All she has to do is bat her eyes at you, and you jump . . . not that I blame you. She's *da-a-amn* hot . . ."

"Shut up, Brandon," Gavin stated flatly.

"Bet she's wild in bed, isn't she? It's those long legs of hers . . . I'd love to get a-hold of her sometime—sink her the Brandon-Sutherland-Long-Bomb, if you know what I mean."

"She's *seventeen*," Gavin pointed out quietly, clenching his fists so tightly that he could feel his claws sinking into his palms, one by one. "You know—*jailbait*."

"Oh, come on!" Brandon pressed. He didn't know just when to leave things go. "You can't *possibly* tell me that you're not fucking her every time she comes up here!"

Gavin shot out of his chair and caught Brandon by the throat, shoving him up against the wall. "You don't talk about her like that!" he snarled.

Brandon—the ass—simply laughed, grabbing Gavin's wrist and feebly tugging on it in a mock effort to gain his freedom. Gavin's fingers tightened. "Okay, okay," Brandon choked out between chuckles. "No harm; no foul, right?"

It took everything in him to make himself let go. Brandon rubbed his neck but didn't stop grinning like an idiot. "I don't see what your hang up is, man . . . Jillian's hot for you. So she's not quite legal . . . do you really think she'd tell her daddy?"

"I *know* her daddy," Gavin growled. "It doesn't matter whether or not she'd tell. Her father and my father . . . work together. Anyway, it's none of your business, don't you think?"

"Yeah, yeah . . . you know, Gavin, as sweet as it is that some girls stay virgins till the day they marry, the same can't really be said for a guy. If you're fumbling around on your wedding night, you'll look like a damn fool. You don't want to look like a damn fool, do you?"

He refused to answer though he could feel his face explode in a wash of crimson flames as he kept his gaze trained on the blur of words in the textbook that he wasn't really reading. Grabbing an ink pen out of the coffee mug on his desk, Gavin shook his head and tried to block out Brandon's voice.

Grabbing an apple out of the bowl in the center of Gavin's dresser, he wiped it on his shirt and bit into it with an obscenely loud crunch. "You can't possibly believe that a prime piece of ass like your little friend is still a virgin, can you? I mean, come on, Gav! A girl that looks like her? She's been popped; I guaran-damn-tee it."

Gavin's pen halted over the paper, and he clenched his teeth together until his jaw ached. "Get out of here, Brandon. Just get out."

Brandon chuckled and pushed himself away from the doorway. His laughter carried back to Gavin as he sauntered down the short hall toward his room. "Whatever, Gavin, but don't forget."

"Forget what?" Gavin called back, thankful that his annoying roommate had finally given up.

"Shelly'll be here in ten minutes or so."

And that reminder only served to make Gavin grimace.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Jillian flipped her hair back over her shoulder and rapped on the door, giggling with the anticipation of seeing Gavin a day sooner than she normally did. Smoothing the skirt of the cream colored sweater dress she'd bought earlier in the week, she knocked again and waited.

She'd gotten out of school a day early this week—teachers' in-service day or something of the sort. It hadn't taken much to sweet-talk her father into letting her come up to visit. It never did. Gavin had been a friend for so long that Cain trusted him completely, which was both a blessing as well as a curse since Gavin took it to be his responsibility to make certain that Jillian behaved herself completely—not a bad thing, but when it was becoming harder and harder to ignore the proximity of Gavin's body beside hers at night, it often made her want to scream.

In the beginning, it hadn't been so difficult to talk Evan into bringing her up to see Gavin. Using various excuses, most of them being that Evan had gigs up near the university, they'd gone up to see Gavin most every weekend during the last school year. When Evan moved to New York City, transferring to Columbia University to get his degree in music theory and appreciation, Jillian had to resort to telling her father the truth: that she wanted to go visit Gavin. Cain had simply nodded when she asked—begged, actually. His normal line of questioning revolved around whether or not she had homework, and she did, but she assured her father that Gavin would help her with it. He always did. With an indulgent little smile and the prerequisite, "Drive carefully, okay?" he'd let her go, and she'd packed her weekend bag, thrown it into the back seat of her pastel pink Chrysalis Buzz convertible—her sweet sixteenth birthday gift from her sister, Bellaniece—and she'd set off on the hour long trek from the Zelig estate on the outskirts of Bevelle, to Orono, Maine, where the campus of the University of Maine was located.

After what seemed like forever but was likely only a few minutes, she heard the click of the ancient padlock that Brandon insisted on keeping on the door. "Hey, baby! What a pleasant surprise," Brandon greeted, flashing his infamous California boy smile as he lounged casually against the doorframe. "You look good enough to eat . . . can I have a bite?"

Giggling softly, she wrinkled her nose and shoved Brandon away playfully when he leaned down to kiss her. “Is Gavvie here?”

Brandon sighed and shrugged off-handedly, scratching the center of his chest in an almost idle way. “Nope, can’t say he is.”

Undaunted, Jillian followed Brandon into the dorm, veering off to the left, heading for Gavin’s room. “So why are you here on a school night?” he drawled.

Jillian smiled. “No school tomorrow,” she told him. “I came up early to surprise Gavvie!”

“Surprise him, huh?” Brandon mused. “If you really want to surprise him, you should go meet him.”

“Oh?”

He nodded. “Yup. He’s at Burrow’s Pizza House—with another *girl*.”

Jillian slowly turned around to frown at Brandon. “What do you mean?”

Brandon chuckled. “Well, you know . . . He meets with her all the time—at least, he does when you’re not around.” He shot her a sly grin. “Kind of like he’s *cheating* on you, wouldn’t you say?”

“Gavin . . . wouldn’t . . .”

“Yeah, but you know Gavin. He—” The ringing telephone cut Brandon off, and he held up his index finger to tell her that he’d be right back before he jogged down the hallway to his room.

Jillian bit her lip as she glanced around the familiar surroundings. *‘That . . . that can’t be . . . Gavin wouldn’t . . . would he . . .?’*

Of course he wouldn’t. He was Gavin, after all. Gavin told her everything, and he would have told her if he was seeing someone . . . wouldn’t he?

She grimaced. Hadn’t she talked about something similar on the phone Evan while she was driving up to Orono?

“Denise Saylor broke it off with Darius Stern, did you hear?” she’d asked as she carefully buffed her claws.

Evan snorted. He’d been out of school for over a year, but between Jillian and Madison, he was entirely up to date with the juiciest dirt from home. “What happen? She finally figure out he’s been fucking around on her?”

“You knew about that?”

“Shit, Jilli . . . everyone knew about that . . . everyone except Denise, apparently . . . and she cried for an hour after she banged me, begging me not to tell her big, dumb jockstrap.”

“Darius isn’t a jockstrap, Evan,” Jillian pointed out and made a face, “and you know better than that.” She was referring to the idea of going after another guy’s girl more than his propensity for sleeping around, and he knew it, too.

“Oh, hell, no lecture! She flashed me her tits at the movies a couple years ago. Before I knew it, she was on her knees sucking me off and fingering her pussy while I sat back and enjoyed the show. I barely got a condom on before she took a ride on the Heaven Express in the middle of the movie. Good thing it was one of those thrillers . . . no one thought it was strange that she was screaming her damn head off . . .”

“You’re horrid,” Jillian said in a tone that lacked any viable conviction.

Evan chuckled and covered the receiver. “In a minute,” she heard him say though his voice was muffled by his hand. “Let me see those tits you’ve been bragging about, baby . . .”

“Ugh, you know, I think I’ll let you go,” she said when he uncovered the phone.

“Nah, she’ll wait. She can’t get enough of me, you know.”

“Uh huh . . .” she drawled dubiously then sighed, deciding that Evan was absolutely unredeemable but in an entirely endearing sort of way. “You know, it’d be so much easier if men were just up front with women. You are. At least no one can say you’re not.”

“I am, sure,” he agreed. “Girls know it’s just sex, and they’re fine with that, but I’m the exception, not the rule. I’m one of the few who doesn’t give a fucking rat’s ass about something permanent, and they know it. I’m the fun guy . . . with the big, fat, fun cock.”

“Oh, my God . . .”

“That’s what they say, Jilli . . .”

She bit her lip and glanced around Gavin’s bedroom. Everything was orderly, almost anally so. He tended to be so obsessive about the way things were arranged. Scowling as her eyes lit on the desk where the framed picture of her normally stood, she bit her lip and let her gaze sweep the room once more. The photograph was nowhere to be seen.

“Well, you know . . . He meets with her all the time—at least, he does when you’re not around . . .”

Jillian frowned. ‘Burrow’s Pizza House . . .’

Hurrying out of the dorm room, Jillian ran down the hallway toward the stairwell.

‘Gavin wouldn’t . . . he wouldn’t be seeing someone; not like that . . .’

He wouldn't, right? He'd tell her if he was. He was Gavin; of course he would . . . Gavin told her everything . . . didn't he?

'He'd tell me . . . We're best friends. If you can't tell your best friend something, then who can you tell?'

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was off as she wandered across the campus to the small pizzeria near the student union. Absently noting that some of the guys she passed would smile or turn to watch her pass, she grimaced when the first flakes of snow started to fall.

Burrow's Pizza House was starting to get busy when she stepped inside. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim light inside the restaurant, and she blinked quickly as she looked around.

It didn't take her long to find him. Sitting in a booth at the back of the restaurant, he was leaning in close, whispering to the girl beside him. The bottle blonde was staring up at him with an entirely worshipful expression on her face, completely engrossed in whatever he was saying to her.

He sat up a little straighter and grabbed a slice of pizza. The cheese strung out before finally pulling apart. It snapped back and stuck to his chin, and Jillian couldn't contain the little growl of indignant rage when the girl wiped his face with a cheap paper napkin. He blushed but didn't try to get away from her. Widening her eyes into one of those expressions that Jillian had seen other girls of her acquaintance use on unwitting boys, the girl leaned in closer, saying something that made Gavin smile.

A foreign emotion surged in her; one that she didn't fully comprehend. Anger, certainly—how *dare* that girl touch *her* Gavvie's face? But the feeling was darker than that: infinitely more painful. Twisting her stomach, erupting in an ache so deep that she thought for a moment that she was going to be physically ill, she shook her head, narrowed her eyes—tried desperately not to believe what she was seeing. Gavin shot the girl a shy little grin—one that Jillian tended to believe was reserved for her, alone—and he inclined his head to say something to the girl. It was lost in the din of the restaurant. She laughed, strategically laying her hand on Gavin's forearm, and while he blushed a little darker, he didn't try to pull away. *'Wh . . .? But . . .'* Shaking her head in an effort to deny what she was seeing, she backed up against the door, unable to take her eyes off the oblivious couple.

"Do you want a table?"

"Huh?" Jillian uttered, casting a cursory glance at the girl—the restaurant's hostess—who had spoken.

"Do you want a table?" she repeated.

"I, uh . . . no . . ." Jillian shook her head, swallowing hard as her mind slowed to a crawl. "I just . . .?"

The hostess turned to follow the direction of Jillian's gaze. "Oh . . . Gavin and Shelly? They're cute, aren't they?"

"They . . . come here a lot?"

She didn't seem to notice Jillian's upset, and she nodded. "All the time. We've started holding that booth for them on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but they come in all the time."

"Oh . . ."

"Are you waiting for someone?"

Jillian gulped at the innocent question. Was she waiting on someone? Sure . . . she'd been waiting on him for the better part of her life. "I . . . I thought I was . . ." she muttered. The girl—Shelly—held up Gavin's soda. He leaned forward and sipped through the straw. Jillian had seen enough. Careening around on her heel, she shoved the glass door open and stumbled outside. Wrapping her arms over her stomach, she hunched her shoulders, hurrying away from the restaurant and across the campus to the parking lot outside Gavin's dorm where she'd parked her car.

She had to get out of there. She had to put some distance between herself and what she'd seen.

Ignoring the strange looks she was garnering as she dashed her hand across her eyes and kept moving, Jillian waved away a tissue from a guy who stepped into her path.

The memory of Gavin's lopsided, shy little grin flashed before her eyes, and she winced, breaking into a jog as she tried to get away from the sounds of laughter. Unsure whether the noise was all in her head or not, she felt as though everyone who saw her knew. They'd known all along, and they were laughing at her: the stupid little country girl who didn't know better than to fall in love with her very best friend . . .

The car door wouldn't open. Hands dampened by the tears that she'd wiped away, her fingers kept slipping off the smooth handle. Unleashing a frustrated growl, she dashed the back of her hand over her eyes and wrenched the handle. It finally, blessedly popped open, and she slipped into the driver's seat. Shaking her head miserably, she heaved a tumultuous sigh, gripping the steering wheel and letting her forehead drop onto her bent wrists as a loud sob choked her. She felt as though her heart was breaking; shattering into a hundred thousand pieces. The pain that twisted her stomach felt like a razor-sharp knife, unmercifully shredding her soul from the inside out.

'*Why, Gavvie?*' she repeated in her head, waiting for answers that just didn't come. Snow clung to the windows, a thin veil that protected her from the prying eyes of passers-by. '*I thought . . . I wanted to believe . . .*' Trailing off as the unwelcome feeling that she was a complete and utter fool ebbed over her. '*I . . . I want to go home . . .*'

Sniffing loudly, she fumbled in her purse for her keys, jamming them into the ignition as she swatted furiously at her eyes. The engine started up with a low hiss of air and gasoline, and she

flinched when frigid air blasted her tear-streaked face. She couldn't see to drive, and she swallowed hard as she switched the heat control from vent to defrost. She couldn't make it home like this. 'Evan . . .' she thought suddenly, the sound of his name offering her a level of calm that eased her pain.

Still the tears rolled down her cheeks unbidden, and she craned her neck to the side, wiping her cheek on her shoulder as she fished around for her cell phone. Dropping it into the docking station on the dashboard, Jillian had to say Evan's name four times before the voice recognition system registered the number she was asking for. Hitting the intercom button that switched the car speakers from radio to cellular, she choked out a quiet sob as she fished for a tissue in her purse.

"Hey, Jilli . . . did you make it okay to Orono?"

"Evan?" she squeaked as she turned on the front and rear windshield wipers. "Are you busy?"

"Never too busy for you," he assured her, his tone dropping into a soothing timbre. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing," she lied with a wince as more tears spilled over. "Everything . . ."

Evan sighed softly. "You want to tell me about it?" he coaxed.

"I just . . . Gavin, he . . . I want to go home," she said.

"All right. Calm down . . . maybe you should have Mom come get you . . ."

"No," she bit out, wiping her tears away once more as a stubbornly determined expression filtered over her face. Jamming the car into reverse, she blinked to clear her vision and pulled out of the parking space.

"Where is Gavin?" Evan asked cautiously.

"Gavin . . ." she repeated, closing her eyes for a second while she willed away the pain inspired by the simple mention of his name. Drawing a deep breath, she negotiated the intersection at the exit of the parking lot. "I wasn't interrupting anything, was I?"

Evan snorted. "Keh! Just a paper I have to write on Renaissance music."

Jillian smiled half-heartedly at the complete disgust in her brother's voice. "And your girl?"

"My girl?"

"The one that was there earlier."

"Oh, her . . . I fucked her and she left with a smile."

Jillian rolled her eyes, smiling despite the pain that nagged her deep inside. “I’ll bet she did.”

Evan sighed again. She could hear the creak of the chair he was sitting in and knew he was tipping back in it with his ankles crossed over each other atop the desk near his window at the family’s condo in New York City. “So . . . tell me what Wonderboy did?” he finally asked as she turned onto the highway that traversed Bangor, Maine and ultimately led to Bevelle.

She sniffled, fishing another tissue out of her purse to wipe her eyes with one hand while she tightened her grip on the steering wheel with the other. “He’s seeing someone,” she admitted. “He’s *been* seeing someone.”

“Wait . . . you *are* talking about Gavin, right?”

She nodded, hating the ugly surge of anger that gripped her yet again. “Yeah.”

Evan was silent for a long second as though he were trying to make sense of it, himself. “He can’t be,” he insisted. “Gavin can’t even talk to his own shadow, let alone another girl.”

“I *saw* them,” she admitted, rubbing her forehead as she tried her best to suppress the images that just wouldn’t leave her alone. “She . . . she was touching him—his face, and he *let* her.”

Evan sighed. “I’ll talk to him, Jilli. Don’t get all upset.”

“No,” she blurted, shaking her head quickly. “No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

She straightened her spine and shrugged. “No . . . That’d be humiliating, wouldn’t it? No . . .” With a heavy sigh, she bit her lip and wiped her eyes again. “I should have known, you know? When he came back from Montana, and he was so different . . . Of course he wouldn’t want a stupid little girl like me. God, I’m so *stupid!*”

“You’re not stupid,” Evan growled. “Don’t you *ever* think you are. Gavin’s stupid, you got that? If he’s too damn dumb to know what’s right in front of his face, then he’s a fucking idiot.”

And why did it hurt to hear Evan put Gavin down, too?

“I . . . I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Jillian said weakly. “I just want to go home . . .”

He sighed, and Jillian didn’t doubt for a moment that Evan would rather be heading the other way to rip Gavin a new one. “Don’t give up, Jilli. Maybe it’s not what you think.”

She didn’t reply. Letting her temple fall against the doorframe, she stared at the darkening sky, at the snow sticking to the cold glass only to linger for a moment before liquefying and slipping down the window. The pain deep inside her hurt more than anything else ever had, and every time she remembered the image of Gavin and Shelly, the pain grew a little worse, cut a little deeper. As much as she desperately wanted to believe that it was all a misunderstanding, she

couldn't. The two had been too close, too familiar, and the look on Shelly's face had been too awestruck . . .

Panic surged inside her: vicious, ugly, uncontrollable. She couldn't stand it, could she? She'd never be able to smile and pretend that she was happy for Gavin. In all the time she'd known him, the idea that he'd find someone else just hadn't really occurred to her, had it? So sure that he would be her mate one day, Jillian hadn't stopped even once to consider that he really didn't believe or want that for himself. *'Selfish,'* she realized as another pang tore through her. *'Selfish and stupid... and... naïve...'*

And there it was. Recalling every single time she'd ever told Gavin that he was going to be her mate; that it was all just a matter of time, she whimpered, closing her eyes for a moment. Gavin—strong, reliable Gavin—he'd just never had it in him to hurt her . . .

That made it all the worse, didn't it, and as much as she wanted to be around him, maybe it was time to let him go, to grow up and stand on her own two feet . . .

But why did it have to hurt so badly?

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

Jillian stared at the cell phone in her slack hand with a dull sort of disbelief writ in her expression.

She wasn't sure what to make of it. To be completely honest, she wasn't sure what to make of anything anymore.

Shifting her gaze around the tidy living room of the Zeligs' New York City condo, she couldn't help the completely disjointed feeling as she tried to comprehend how she'd gotten there.

In the days that followed her unceremonious return home, she'd been unable to process everything she knew. Waking up in the mornings only to discover that the dreams she had of spending endless summers with Gavin Jamison were nothing more than the comfortable oblivion of sleep, she'd forced herself to get out of bed, forced herself to go through the motions of being alive.

Insofar as she could tell, Gavin had to have been seeing Shelly for awhile. His roommate had implied as much, and the girl in the restaurant had, too. All in all, the knowledge left Jillian feeling like even more of a stupid little girl. The day after she'd found out about them, she'd thrown her cell phone into the pond. Unable to consider trying to face him, she'd opted instead to tell her father that she'd lost the phone, and he hadn't done more than stare at her somewhat curiously when she'd suggested changing her number, as well.

Her parents didn't ask questions, and while she was a little upset that they didn't, she was thankful, too. Gin and Cain made a habit of letting their children know that they could and

should tell them things, but they rarely pressed for information that wasn't forthcoming. Jillian supposed that they figured she'd tell them when she was ready. Trouble was, she wasn't sure she'd ever really be ready to tell anyone.

It still hurt.

She was lost. Her focus had been completely altered; the thought of her future used to make her smile seemed frightening now. Trying to convince herself that she didn't need Gavin Jamison was nearly impossible. She'd spent too long believing that it was only a matter of time; that surely by the time she graduated from high school, he'd have admitted that he wanted to be her mate. Never once had she thought that she'd really need to find a job. Marrying Gavin and starting a family . . . those were the things that she'd truly believed.

Evan had called her on Wednesday to tell her about a model search he'd heard talk of. *"If nothing else, you can hang out with me a few days,"* he'd explained, *"and who wouldn't want to hang with The Heaven? Besides . . . you're gorgeous! You've got the height, the looks . . . the rack . . . you could totally be a bitchin' model—a supermodel, even!"*

She'd never really considered doing any such thing. Madison, who had been over visiting at the time, had smiled and said that Jillian should try it.

Gin and Cain had taken her to New York City. Since Jillian was technically underage, one of her parents would have to sign the consent forms for the model search. They'd spent the entire day on Friday waiting in the posh office of *Entice!* magazine, and the photo shoot they'd done had only taken about fifteen minutes. Head shots, the photographer had said they were.

Gin and Cain had gone over to visit with Jillian's oldest brother, Sebastian. Bassie and his mate, Sydnie had moved to New York City about a year ago to set up another office for their Youkai Special Crimes unit. After considerable debate, it had been decided that they'd rather have the main office in a bigger area such as New York City, thereby keeping a little distance between the family's domain in Bevelle and the more unsavory characters that were often involved in the cases.

Evan was at an afternoon class.

Jillian was alone, having just woken up from a fitful nap when her cell phone rang. It was Milla Cantese, the representative she'd met at the model search. She wanted to tell Jillian that she'd been contacted regarding a modeling job for Dima jeans. Jillian still wasn't sure whether or not the call had been a hoax, but she'd written down the information about the assignment to discuss with her parents.

So lost in thought when the door opened and Cain and Gin stepped inside, Jillian didn't even notice until her mother kissed her temple.

"Oh, Mama," she began, blinking to clear her scattered thoughts.

"Something wrong?" Gin asked as she eyed Jillian and sank down on the sofa beside her.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Jillian insisted, pasting on a weak smile solely for her mother’s benefit. “Ms. Cantese called.”

“Ms. Cantese? You mean from the model search?”

Jillian nodded. “She said that Dima wanted me to model their jeans for one of their summer ads.”

“Really?”

Jillian shrugged, gaze falling back to the phone in her hands. “I suppose I could do that, couldn’t I?”

Cain sighed. “Is that really what you want to do?”

She shrugged again. “I guess so . . .”

“That’s so exciting!” Gin exclaimed, giving her daughter an exuberant hug.

“Let me make a few phone calls,” Cain drawled. “Maybe Ben knows someone who can represent you—at least in this.”

Gin hopped up to follow Cain into the study just off of the living room.

Jillian sighed and set the phone onto the coffee table as Evan breezed into the condo. “Hey, baby! Welcome to The Heaven!” he said, dropping his book bag onto the floor and holding his arms out wide.

Jillian giggled despite her bleak thoughts. Evan sauntered over and scooped her up, settling down on the sofa with Jillian on his lap, her head tucked neatly under his cheek. “I got a job offer,” she ventured.

“Yeah?”

She nodded. “Dima jeans.”

“Swe-e-et,” he intoned. “My baby sister, the Dima jeans girl!”

“It’s just one ad,” she corrected. “I suppose it’d be all right.”

“Better than all right, Jilli. Gotta be better than modeling brighty-whities.”

Jillian smiled, remembering that Evan had, indeed, modeled men’s briefs at one time. The ads were amusing to her, partially because in all her life, she couldn’t recall having ever seen Evan in any such things before, and partially because not one of the actual ads that ran in magazines and newspapers for months actually showed his head: just his crotch and the aforementioned stark white underpants. “Did you ever tell Daddy you did that?”

Evan wrinkled his nose. “Hell, no! Call it a part of my teenage rebellion.”

She shook her head and closed her eyes, grateful for the modicum of comfort she derived from her brother. “How did you get permission, then? They said that Mama or Daddy have to sign releases for me to model.”

“I got my ways, Jilli; I got my ways . . .”

“If they ever find out, they could sue you.”

He shrugged. “Hell, they were just glad they found a guy that they wouldn’t have to stuff a sock down his shorts to make him look like he had a decent sized wang.”

Snapping her mouth closed on her retort, she sat back long enough to cast her brother a suspect glance. “Do they really do that?”

He grinned. “I don’t know . . . they did give me this cup-thingy though . . . something about smoothing out the ridges . . .”

Giggling softly, Jillian snuggled against her brother’s chest once more. She adored the fact that he invariably tended to say things that made her smile, even when she didn’t particularly feel like doing it. “Smoothing out the ridges, huh?” she repeated.

“Yep . . .”

“Was the cup big enough?”

“Sure . . . it was stretchy. I still have it if you want to see it . . . guess they didn’t want it back after the shoot.” Smoothing her hair back out of her face, Evan sighed and kissed her forehead. “Come to think of it, they didn’t want the underpants back, either. They’re probably in the drawer with the cup . . .”

Jillian broke into a wry grin.

“You know . . . Gav called me earlier,” he slowly stated, his tone noncommittal.

Jillian’s back stiffened for a moment before she willed herself to relax. “Oh?”

“He wondered if I knew where you were. Wanted to know if everything was all right.”

She swallowed hard. “What’d you tell him?”

Evan shrugged. “Nothing much . . . you asked me not to, didn’t you?”

“I suppose I did.”

Chapter 22
Just a Kid

“Wait . . . you left . . . because you thought . . .?” Trailing off with a grimace, Gavin couldn’t help the completely stricken expression on his face. Stomach tied in angry knots, unable to comprehend the idea that what he’d believed for so long was so obviously not the case at all. “But . . . I never . . . Shelly wasn’t—”

Jillian flinched. “Why did you think I ran away, Gavin?” She shook her head slowly, miserably. “I never would have left you otherwise, you know,” she whispered, shoulders slumping. “I saw you . . . *I saw you . . .*”

“N-n-n-no!” he insisted, grabbing her hand before she moved away from him. “Jilli, no!”

“I *know* what I saw, Gavin!” She gulped and closed her eyes for a moment as though she were trying to gain control over her flaring emotions. “I know what I saw,” she repeated quietly.

“I-I-I . . . it wasn’t what you thought you saw,” he mumbled. Cheeks darkening to crimson, he couldn’t meet her gaze. He couldn’t stand to see the pain in her pale blue eyes. He couldn’t stand the aching surge in her youki.

Closing her eyes, she buried her face on her raised knees and smashed her hands over her ears, and he grimaced. She didn’t do that often, but whenever she did, it meant that she really wasn’t going to listen to anything anyone had to say. “I saw you!” she said, her voice little more than a whisper and muted by her legs. “I don’t want to talk about it . . . I just don’t want to talk about it.”

And he could understand that, couldn’t he? Things that hurt her once had the power to hurt her time and again, every time she thought about those things. He needed her to understand, didn’t he? He needed her to know. “Jilli,” he began, hesitantly reaching out to stroke her back in a clumsy, jerky fashion. “I . . . I thought you’d gotten bored with me,” he admitted. “I thought . . . Jilli . . .”

“Bored?” she echoed, her tone rising in pitch to a high-pitched squeak. “Bored?”

He forced himself to nod as the sickened feeling in his stomach churned worse. “I’m . . . sorry . . .”

She moved so quickly that he gasped in surprise. Whipping around on her knees, she grabbed his face between her hands, smashing her mouth against his in a fluid motion that took his breath away. The earth quivered below him; the rise of passion simmering below the surface of her actions melted away any fleeting protest he might have otherwise come up with. As though the pain that the memories rekindled was dictating her actions, she kissed him for all she was worth, slinging one leg over his to straddle him, to force him back, and somewhere in his Jillian-

clouded mind, he understood. She needed to touch him, needed to reassure herself that he was there with her; that he wasn't going to push her away, and as desperately as he wanted to tell her that the things she'd thought were untrue, the need to give her whatever reassurance he could offer far outweighed the base desire to make her understand.

Slipping his arms around her, he pulled her down, closer to him. She whimpered softly—he could discern the hint of lingering tears. The smell dug at him, goaded him, and he tightened his hold on her. The warmth of her lips was a heady thing. The rush of her youkai stroking his was just a little more than he could bear. Everything he'd ever wanted to be; everything he'd ever dreamed was wrapped up in her. Her hands dug in tight around fistfuls of his shirt, and she held to him as though she would be lost if she had to let go.

With a ragged groan, Gavin let his hand trail up her back to sink into her hair. She felt so very perfect to him. The scent of her tears subsided, only to be replaced by a more wanton wash of something thicker, far more intoxicating. His body responded to hers, igniting in a painful swelling; in an ache that rivaled anything he'd ever felt before. The heat of her body wrapped around him as she flicked her tongue along his lower lip. He returned the gesture, the desire to taste her almost overwhelming him. She melted against him with a sigh, her heart thumping against his chest in a harsh, grasping cadence.

Grazing teeth against the softest flesh of her lips elicited a weakened sigh, and she let go of his shirt in favor of slipping her hands around his neck. Reveling in the touch of her body against his, Gavin could feel the gentle shift of the breeze in the beauty of the summer afternoon.

She tasted sweet, so very alive; so vibrant, so precious to him that the idea of losing her frightened him more than he wanted to consider. He needed her near him; wanted to be with her, and maybe—*maybe*—he could believe that she wanted that, too . . .

Jillian dragged her mouth away, trailing kisses all over his face. Closing his eyes, rubbing her back, Gavin uttered a soft moan, a ragged chuckle. She cuddled against his chest, nudging her head under his chin. "I'd never get bored with you," she said quietly, her voice thick with emotion.

"Jilli, it wasn't what you thought," he said.

She stiffened against him, and he grimaced. "I don't want to talk about that right now, Gavvie," she told him. "Please."

"But—"

She pushed herself up far enough to peer down at him as she smashed her finger against his lips. "It's in the past, right?" she said, a hint of panic tingeing her voice.

He didn't want to let it drop. He had to make her understand. Staring into her eyes, though, silenced him on the matter, at least for now. Being forced to talk about their separation was as painful to her as it was to him, wasn't it? And worse, because she'd honestly believed that there had been another girl . . .

In the end, he heaved a sigh but didn't press the issue. He'd tell her later, when she wasn't so agitated. Trying to make her listen now wouldn't work. She never listened when she was that upset over things.

'There'll be time enough to tell her,' he thought with a sheepish little grin. Besides . . . he really needed to think about a few things. He had to figure out just how this whole thing worked. Gavin yawned. Remembering absently that he hadn't slept at all the night before, he forced his eyes open then chuckled. There was just something about having Jillian close made him feel too damn good to credit . . . For now, though . . .

Jillian's breathing evened out as she relaxed in his arms. She was sleeping, and as he stared up at the lengthening shadows of the early afternoon sky, he felt the absolute lethargy of drowsiness seep into his very bones.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin glanced down at the sleeping woman cuddled against his chest with a thoughtful smile. They'd ended up napping in the shade of the trees all afternoon, and no sooner had they started back for the ranch after another bout of mind-boggling kissing than Jillian fell right back to sleep again after he'd finally managed to coax her onto the horse for the return trip.

'You ready to admit it now, Gavvie?' his youkai piped up.

He made a face. It had been suspiciously quiet all day. He figured it was about time for the nosy voice to talk. *'Admit what?'* he countered, unable to control the perverse desire to needle his youkai voice just a little.

'Oh, ha ha . . . you know what I'm talking about.'

Yes, he supposed he did . . . Casting a glance at the sleeping woman cuddled against him, Gavin smiled.

'She . . . she didn't get bored of being with me . . .'

The little smile on his face widened as he considered that. He'd believed that for so long . . . it was difficult to understand that he didn't really have that to worry about anymore. Sure, she was a supermodel, but he had to admit that the biggest concern he'd had was that she simply wouldn't want to be with him because she'd eventually get bored, as he'd thought she'd done once before.

True enough, he wouldn't ever be comfortable enough to even try to do the things she normally did. Attending red-carpet events and rubbing elbows with the rich and famous wasn't something he'd ever be able to do, and he knew it . . . but maybe . . . maybe she didn't really care if he couldn't do things like that. She took Evan with her from time to time, and sometimes he'd

talk her into going with him. Evan thought it was hilarious that people didn't realize that the two were brother and sister, and it always amused Jillian when she'd read somewhere that her impending wedding to rocker Zel Roka was imminent.

Still, he wanted to do things right with her—things he hadn't gotten right yet. She deserved to be taken on dates, deserved to be courted the old-fashioned way. He could do that for her, couldn't he? Another stolen glance strengthened his resolve. 'Yeah,' he thought as he pushed her hair out of her face and ran his knuckles along her cheek. 'I can... do that...'

'You need to tell her, Gavin... you need to explain things to her.'

Gavin nodded sagely, lifting his gaze to scan the trail that was thick with evening's falling shadows, and he sighed. He *did* need to explain everything to her. As much as she said she forgave him, he hated that she'd think for even a second that there had been someone else. There hadn't been. There never was.

Shelly...

He sighed. Shelly Stanhope was the daughter of Gavin's advanced calculus professor, and Gavin had started tutoring her shortly after he'd transferred to the University of Maine. He'd never mentioned her to Jillian because there wasn't anything to tell her. It was just a job that had come in handy to supply him with spending money. Sure, his parents sent him a monthly allowance, but Gavin liked the idea that he worked, too. He used the money that his parents sent to pay for basic necessities like food and clothes. He'd saved his earnings to spend on Jillian...

He'd let his mind rule his heart for so very long. Unable to allow himself to love her completely, telling himself that he was doing it for her... perhaps it was true, at least at the time. So afraid of seeing her make a mistake that she'd regret later just because he desperately wanted it to be so... it was something that he just couldn't do. Coming to terms with the idea that he had been wrong all these years had taken away part of the fear, surely. Still, he couldn't quite shake the worry that she really would wake up one morning and stare at him with something akin to horror on her face; horror that she'd ended up with the wrong guy, after all...

'That... that's not true, is it?' he asked himself as he tried to brush off the nagging thought.

'It might be true if you keep thinking it. Ever heard the saying, 'You make your own destiny'? There's a measure of truth in that, don't you think?'

Gavin grimaced but had to concede that logic. 'You make your own destiny...' he repeated in his head. 'Maybe I do... or maybe...' he trailed off, adjusting Jillian slightly to make her more comfortable. 'Maybe I can, in a completely different way...'

Maybe... maybe he could make his own destiny by accepting the idea that Jillian really did want to be with him—just with him. The idea both thrilled and frightened him. That was all

he'd ever really wanted, after all, and yet . . . and yet the idea that she would really love a guy like him . . . Why was that so difficult for him to believe?

'Because,' he thought idly as the horse rounded the curve in the path that led to the stable, 'she's so . . . beautiful . . . because everyone wants her . . . Why in the world would she want a geek like me?'

Why, indeed? He shook his head and reigned in the horse, stopping in front of the stable. Jillian always laughed at his computer magazines and sci-fi obsessions. She giggled when he droned on and on about the newest video game that he just couldn't wait to get his hands on. She smiled and told him to have a good time when he left to drive five hours or more to whatever sci-fi convention was in the area. He'd thought about asking her to go to one with him before, but he'd thought better of it. Jillian Zelig, the supermodel, just didn't strike him as the kind of girl who would enjoy the finer points of seeing hundreds of Luke Skywalkers or Trons running around . . . "Jilli," he murmured, giving her a little shake that didn't wake the girl at all. He chuckled softly. Jillian could probably sleep through an earthquake, if it came down to it . . . The sudden urge to kiss her struck him, and he carefully smoothed her bangs back before leaning down to brush a kiss over her forehead.

"Get lost, did you?"

Grimacing as his face shot up in flames, he shot Hank a withering glare as he tightened his hold on Jillian reflexively. "Don't sneak up on people, Hank," he growled.

Hank rolled his eyes and laughed, stepping over to hold up his arms. "Give her here so you can get down," he said, ignoring Gavin's surly demeanor.

Gavin summarily ignored Hank's offer of assistance, tossing his leg over the horse's back and sliding off, lighting easily enough without disturbing Jillian at all.

"So where were you all day, Gavvie?" Hank asked as he stroked the horse's nose.

"None of your business," Gavin grumbled. "Take care of the horse?"

"Sure, yeah," Hank agreed. "Dax said something interesting."

Suppressing his irritation, Gavin peered over his shoulder at the ranch foreman. "What?"

Hank shook his head and carefully avoided meeting Gavin's gaze. "Those coyotes were messing with the cattle again, so he tracked them into the forest behind the house."

Gavin wasn't entirely certain he was going to like where this conversation was going. "And?"

"And he said that he smelled . . . something . . . in the forest. Said it weren't no coyotes."

"Shut up, Hank," Gavin growled.

“So that’s why you were in the forest early this morning,” Hank went on with a snort of laughter. “Damn, Gav . . . you’ve got a bathroom for shit like that.”

Stifling the desire to growl, Gavin turned on his heel and started away again, resolved to ignore his insufferable friend, even if it killed him.

“Want my advice?”

“No,” Gavin stated flatly.

“Yeah, well, I’ll give it to you, anyway,” Hank drawled as he sauntered over.

Gavin sighed. Hank would probably follow him straight into the house if he tried to ignore him.

“Make her your mate, Gavin. You ain’t never going to find another girl like her.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

Hank shrugged. “Hard telling what you know and don’t know. You playin’ with her ain’t gonna help.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I? I know damn well you weren’t alone in the forest this morning. If you’re not careful, she’s going to slip right through your fingers, and that’d be a damn shame, don’t you think?”

“Hank . . .”

“Seriously, Gavin . . . you used to come home every fall with your chin draggin’ the ground because you had to leave her behind.”

“It’s not—”

“—Like that. Yeah, I know. You’ve said that for years, too, but you know, you’re being stubborn for no good reason. She—”

“Will you let it go, Hank? Let me handle it!” Gavin growled, his voice low despite the obvious irritation in his tone.

Hank shook his head stubbornly, pushing back his Stetson as he reached for the horse’s reins. “Someone’s got to tell you when you’re being a damn fool!”

“Let me handle this!”

“Like you have so far?” Hank challenged.

“It’s none of your business.”

“The hell it ain’t.”

“How do you figure?”

Hank snorted. “Because I’m your friend, you stupid jackass!”

“Look, just leave it alone! Let me figure this out, will you? I don’t want or need anyone telling me what I should do or what I should know!”

“Then stop screwing it up, damn it!” Hank hissed, glancing down at Jillian. Gavin did, too. She was still sleeping, which really had to be a wonder in and of itself. “She wants you,” Hank went on through clenched teeth. “God only knows why, but she does.”

“She doesn’t know what she wants,” Gavin bit out.

Hank narrowed his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned back and slowly shook his head. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

Gavin snorted. “She’s never, ever known what she wanted!”

Hank leaned back, eyebrows shooting up to disappear in mock surprise. “And you have?”

“Hell, yes, I have!” Gavin shot back. “I’ve always known! She’s just a . . .”

“A what?” Hank prompted.

Gavin shook his head. “Forget it.”

“A what?” Hank repeated.

“Drop it.”

“A. What?”

“A pup!” Gavin snarled quietly.

Hank rubbed his forehead with a tired hand and heaved a sigh. Taking a moment to glance at Jillian, he narrowed his eyes as he lifted his gaze to meet Gavin’s once more. “Right . . . a pup. Well, then, maybe you ought to consider letting her go.”

That earned him a fulminating glower, and Gavin brushed past him as he headed toward the house.

Heaving a sigh as he turned around, using his back to push open the gate, he stepped out of the stable yard and sighed. He hadn’t meant that; not at all. He hadn’t thought of Jillian as a pup in years, if he ever really had, that was. Maybe it was just too soon after all the things that had

Chapter 23
Confusion

“What about her?”

Gavin shifted uncomfortably in his seat and shook his head. “N . . . not my type,” he muttered, tightening his grip on the cold bottle of beer in his hands.

Jillian stifled a sigh. “Okay . . . her?”

Following the direction of Jillian’s curt nod, Gavin quickly lowered his eyes to the table once more. “Too short,” he grumbled.

‘You’re being entirely unfair, don’t you think?’

Wrinkling her nose at her youkai blood’s question, Jillian tried not to feel guilty as she willed her resolve to stick. *‘Maybe I am.’*

‘Maybe you are? You’re being a bitch; that’s what you ‘are’ . . .’

Jillian bit her lip.

Okay, so she was being completely bitchy; sure she was. She knew it, just as she knew that Gavin never would have agreed to tonight’s little excursion if she hadn’t blocked him out all day. After having heard his hateful words the night before when he was arguing with Hank, though . . . after spending a sleepless night huddled against his side while he slept, she’d realized a few things—ugly things—things she hadn’t really thought about before—at least not like she had in the night . . .

“She’s just a . . . a pup . . .”

That’s what he’d said. After everything she’d told him, he’d said it. She laid everything out for him in black and white; told him things she’d never said to him—to *anyone*—before, and he . . . He’d thrown it all back in her face, hadn’t he? He thought that she was little more than a child. He’d said as much . . . and that had hurt more than she could stand.

“I want to go out tonight, Gavin,” she said quietly, her voice a controlled mask of calm as her heart hammered painfully against her ribcage. “We . . . we need to find your mate. That’s what we need to do . . .”

Gavin had been in the middle of sorting through mail. The stack of envelopes dropped from his fingertips onto the desk, scattering like dust in the wind. “W-wh-what?” he stammered as he turned around to face her.

She shrugged nonchalantly, slowly lifting her chin to meet his gaze with a steadiness that should have been commended. “Your mate,” she stated once more. “You’ll never find her if you’re not out there looking.”

“My...? Jilli...?”

She frowned. Did he have to look so stricken? How dare he look like she hurt him when he was the one who had said time and again that she wasn't his mate; that he didn't want her... and yes, it had taken a long time for her to fully grasp that he really wasn't joking, but she finally had, and he... Biting back the guilt that riddled her insides, she squared her shoulders and forced a smile that she was far from feeling. “Yes, Gavin, your mate.”

“W...but...I thought...”

Turning away before she caved in to the stricken expression on his face, she slowly, deliberately, headed for the stairs. He seemed completely baffled—he had been all day—and he sighed in a completely defeated sort of way. “She won't like me, you know,” Jillian ventured.

“Who won't?”

“Your future mate.”

“Why would you say that?” he demanded. “Everyone likes you... don't be ridiculous.”

Jillian had to struggle to keep her tone even. “Of course she won't, Gavin,” she insisted. “How could she? You really think that your mate will like the girl you've slept with for years?” Shaking her head slowly, Jillian swallowed hard, forcing down the thickness that choked her; that brought tears to her eyes that she blinked away. “It's okay,” she said when he didn't answer. “I... I don't think I'll like her much, either.”

He grimaced. “You think I'd... I'd be with someone who didn't like my friends?” he demanded though his tone lacked the conviction that it should have had. “Don't be... don't be ridiculous,” he grumbled.

“It's inevitable, Gavin. We've been together for most of the last twenty years. She's going to hate me. I'd hate me, if I were her...”

“Jilli... don't say that...”

She shrugged in what she hoped was a casual manner. “So maybe... maybe if I help you find her... maybe she won't hate me quite so much.”

He uttered a sound—almost a gasp, a soft little grunt—and she knew that her words had struck home. She didn't dare look at him, and she steeled her resolve as she turned toward the stairs. “I'll be ready in an hour, okay? You get ready, too...”

That said, she headed out of the living room and up the stairs to change in the room. She wasn't sure whether she should be happy or hurt that he had been standing by the door having obviously showered and changed when she came back down awhile later. He'd looked completely perplexed, but he hadn't complained as they headed toward the truck...

She supposed that he just wasn't sure what to say to her. When had she ever been this determined? He was used to her joking and smiling, laughing and teasing. She'd never, ever been this . . . formal with him, not even that day when he'd found her sitting on his apartment steps in the pouring rain . . .

Stifling a sigh as he turned the beer bottle between his fingertips, Jillian reached up to touch her throat—to touch the butterfly pendant that's she'd always worn since the day he gave it to her. Trying not to grimace, she rubbed her arms. She'd left that necklace on her dresser in the spare room where she'd moved all of her things earlier, and if Gavin realized that she'd done it, he hadn't remarked on that, either. *'Grow up, Jillian,'* she'd told herself as she stared at the necklace. *'He thought of me as nothing more than a little girl then, and he still does . . . nothing I can say or do will ever change that. It's time to grow up and leave the fantasies of that little girl in the past . . .'* Then she'd turned her back, leaving the necklace where it was as she hurried out of the room.

Blinking to clear the remnants of the unpleasant memories from her mind, Jillian pursed her lips and scanned the bar once more. Eyes lighting on a decently tall woman standing near the counter with a glass of soda in her hand, she shrugged. "What about her?" she said, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had fallen.

Gavin jerked upright as though she had startled him, and he shot her a confused glance. "Jilli . . . Why are you doing this?"

Deliberately ignoring Gavin's softly uttered question, Jillian started ticking things off on her fingers out loud. "She's blonde—you said you like blondes . . . tall since you'd rather have a tall woman—makes sense, doesn't it? You're tall . . . I can't really see her eyes from here, but she looks nice enough . . . and smart—she looks smart. You can't discount brains in a woman, can you?"

"But I . . . I . . ."

She tried to smile her encouragement at him. "Go on, Gavin. Now's your chance. Go talk to her. You can do it, you know. You just think you can't."

He sighed. "Jilli . . ."

Shaking her head stubbornly, refusing to hear what it was that he wanted to say, she pinned him with a fierce scowl, and he sat back, blinking in confusion. "No . . . you *have* to. Don't you see? You have to do it."

He shook his head. "Why?"

"I'll never ask you for another thing, Gavin, so long as I live if you'll just do this," she said without trying to hide behind a coquettish smile or a falsely bright façade. Swallowing hard when he flinched, Jillian tightened her grip on her purse under the cover of the table top. "Please."

“I don’t . . . want . . . I . . .” Scowling across the table at her, he must have sensed her resolve. “Yeah . . . o-okay . . .” he agreed slowly. “Whatever you want.”

“So . . . what about her?”

Heaving a sigh, Gavin slowly shook his head again. “She . . . she’s a-a-all right . . .”

“Just ask her out,” Jillian prompted, managing a weak smile that was solely for his benefit. “Go on . . .”

Casting her a pleading glance that she saw out of the corner of her eye despite her resolve not to look at him, Gavin finally nodded, glaring down at the table; at the rings of condensation that had dripped off the cold beer bottle. Standing up slowly, he squared his shoulders and walked away.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

‘*Why is she doing this?*’ Gavin asked himself for the hundredth time since he’d gotten up this morning only to find Jillian gone, which wasn’t unusual but was unsettling nonetheless.

He simply didn’t understand. She didn’t seem angry, exactly, but he couldn’t quite make sense of her mood, either. After serving him breakfast with a wide smile, she proceeded to tell him that she wanted to go shopping—not unusual for her, either, but when they got to Helena and the mall, she’d proceeded to tell him that they were shopping for him, which really should have set the alarm bells to ringing in his head but somehow didn’t.

No, it wasn’t until they were standing in the living room while he was shifting through the day’s mail that she dropped the bomb on him: she wanted him to find a mate.

And that . . . He sighed. It hit him like a ton of bricks. Sure, she’d been a little distant, a little *too* polite all day. He’d written it off as nervousness since he was suffering the same sort of thing. Coming to terms with the vast change in their relationship would take some getting used to; he knew that. Still when she said that she wanted him to look for a mate . . .

He’d felt as though someone had jerked the carpet out from under him, bringing him down hard on his pride, and as he’d gotten a more thorough glimpse into the steely resolve in her gaze, he didn’t have any clue what to do . . . or what he had done to trigger it.

‘*Unless she figured out that being with me really would be a huge mistake . . .*’

Slamming the door on those thoughts, Gavin stuffed his hands into his pockets as he slowly approached the woman in question. ‘*I . . . I can’t do this . . .*’

So why had he agreed to?

He knew damn well why he'd agreed to do it. For once in his life, he didn't have any clue what Jillian was thinking. Her determination was apparent—obvious. He just wished he could figure out why she was doing all of this . . . and he'd done the only thing he could do, at least until he could get her to admit what was bothering her. Add to that the absolute shock of her accurate assessment—he had to give her that. As much as he wanted to deny that any other woman might well have issues with Jillian, he had to admit that she had made a good point, and the guarded, tense air of her youki . . . it hurt even now, just remembering it . . . Going along with her . . . that really was his only recourse at the moment.

'She was dead damn right, Gavin. No woman would be okay with the idea that Jillian's slept with you forever—that she's always been the girl you've molded your entire existence around . . .'

Heaving a sigh, Gavin shook his head stubbornly, forcing his feet to move as he slowly approached the bar—and the woman. *'Yeah, well, anyone who can't accept Jilli isn't someone I want to be around, anyway,'* he snorted.

'Don't be stupid, Gavin . . . Why are you even thinking about another woman when the one we both want is sitting right there?'

'Sure, but . . . but why the cold shoulder? I mean, she's been acting weird all day . . .'

'Maybe she heard the idiotic things you said to Hank,' his youkai ventured, stopping Gavin dead in his tracks. *'It makes sense, you know. Just because you thought she was asleep doesn't mean she really was, now does it?'*

'Oh, shit,' he mumbled to himself as he turned around to look at her. Staring down at the table, she rubbed her arms in an idle sort of way. *'Jilli . . .'*

"Hey, there, cowboy."

Whipping around, Gavin couldn't staunch the flow of blood that shot into his cheeks as he came face to face with the girl that Jillian had wanted him to talk to. "Uh . . . um, m-m-me?" he stammered.

The woman laughed. "Sure . . . I don't see anyone else around here that I'd call a real cowboy," she said, giving Gavin a playful wink. "I'm Cicily. What's your name?"

"G-Gavin," he choked out, stealing a peek over his shoulder. Jillian still wasn't looking.

"Why don't you buy me a drink?" Cicily suggested.

"Wha . . .? Oh . . . okay," he agreed. "Sure . . ."

She laughed again, waving at the bartender to bring her another drink. Gavin grimaced. The last thing he wanted to do wanted to talk to this woman, and he could feel the throbbing of a massive headache starting right behind his eyes.

“She won’t like me . . . How could she? You really think that your mate will like the girl you’ve slept with for years?”

And he hadn’t thought of that before, either. Unfortunately, it made perfect sense. *‘I wouldn’t . . . I’d never . . .’*

‘Of course you wouldn’t because she’s the one you want to have as your mate, stupid.’

Gavin winced inwardly as the bartender set down a drink. He dug a five dollar bill out of his pocket and slapped it onto the counter.

“You look like you’re from around here,” Cicily commented, narrowing her eyes as she regarded him carefully. “But I swear I don’t remember seeing you before . . .”

“I, uh . . . I live in New York City, but I’m from here originally,” he supplied.

Her smile widened as her gaze traveled slowly from his face down and back up once more. He couldn’t hide the blush that stained his features at the blatant perusal, and all told, he felt like a side of beef being shown at auction . . . “Vacation?”

He nodded, stealing another glance over his shoulder. Jillian was rummaging around in her purse, and he grimaced when he noticed the decidedly melancholy tone in her youki. Radiating from her in somber waves, he could tell she was trying to hide her emotions, and that hurt him more than anything else could. “Yeah . . . vacation,” he murmured, forcing his gaze away from Jillian once more.

“Are you going to be around here much longer?” she pressed.

“Oh, uh . . . I-I-I don’t know . . .”

She laughed in such a way that told Gavin plainly that she thought his stammering was all part of the pick-up line. “Well, maybe I can see you again before you leave to go back to the big, bad city . . .”

He opened his mouth to answer as he glanced over at Jillian again. She wasn’t at the table anymore. Skirting the edge of the milling crowd, she was trying to slip out the door unnoticed. “Can you excuse me?” he said, grimacing apologetically and not waiting for a reply as he hurried after Jillian.

He caught up with her outside on the sidewalk. Arms crossed over her chest, shoulders slumped forward in what seemed to be a purely protective manner, she was scanning the street as though she were expecting someone. “Jilli?” he said, reaching out, catching her elbow and gently pulling her around to face him. “W-where are you going?”

Sniffing softly, she dashed a hand across her eyes, likely hoping that he wouldn’t notice, and when she looked up at him, she had an overly bright smile in place. “Oh, you . . . you looked like

you were doing well enough without me,” she said, waving a hand in a dismissive manner as the smile on her face widened; as her eyes took on a suspect glow. Glittering in the harsh lights of the electric street lamps like a thousand diamonds misting her eyelashes, she smiled despite the tears in her eyes . . . tears that tore him wide open . . .

“Don’t—but—Wait, will you?” he said, tugging her back when she tried to pull her arm away. “Jilli, tell me what’s wrong?”

She laughed. The sound grated on him, rubbed him raw as she tried to convince him that she was all right. “Don’t be silly, Gavin . . . Everything’s fine; just fine.”

“You can’t just leave by yourself,” he insisted. “I’ll . . . I’ll take you home, if you want.”

She shook his head, barking out a terse laugh that made him grimace. “No, no . . . you . . . you need to get back inside and ask her out.” Narrowing her eyes, she shot him a fleeting smile that melted as quickly as it had quirked her lips. “I’ll be okay . . . I called Hank . . .”

As if on cue, Gavin glanced up in time to see Hank’s rusty, faded red pickup truck pulled to a stop beside them. Jillian pulled her arm away and ran over to the vehicle, and he stood, glued to the spot, unable to do more than watch as she tugged at the handle—Hank leaned over to release the door—and climbed inside. She really was slipping away from him, wasn’t she? She . . . she was walking away again . . . “Don’t you come back without a date, Gavin Jamison!” she called, her voice cracking as her smile resurfaced. She waved jauntily before turning to say something to Hank. The ranch foreman nodded, the truck’s gears grinding as he shifted into drive and pulled away from the curb.

Gavin wasn’t sure how long he stood there watching the road where they’d disappeared from view. Jostled slightly as people wandered into and out of the bar, he couldn’t stand the surging pain that threatened to engulf him. If he could understand why she was doing this, maybe he could come to terms with it. The trouble was, he couldn’t, and the feeling that he’d gambled and lost nearly choked him.

“Don’t you come back without a date, Gavin Jamison . . .”

He winced. *‘Just what the hell does she want from me?’*

For once, his youkai remained conspicuously silent, and after a few more minutes, he slowly turned and pushed back into the bar . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Expelling his breath in a loud hiss, he flopped back in his chair with a frustrated growl. She was still toying with him, damn it. It didn’t sit well with him, either—she and that overstuffed shirt that she’d taken to spending way too much time with . . .

Pushing himself out of his chair, he strode over and sloshed whiskey into a grimy glass, downing the liquor and refilling it before stumbling back to his chair once more. Anger simmered just below the surface, and he drained the glass then slammed it down on the table. She was forcing his hand, damned if she wasn't. Two could play that game, couldn't they?

Well, it wouldn't be happening much longer, would it? She was out of time, he was out of patience, and she'd learn that playing with him just wasn't a good idea, wouldn't she? He had everything planned out, but first he needed a few more things to set his plot into motion. Shoving himself to his feet once more, he grabbed the gloves off the table and strode toward the door . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

"You want to go back to the ranch?" Hank asked as he pulled away from the curb in front of the bar.

Jillian watched as Gavin grew smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror. "Uh . . . no . . . could you just . . ." she trailed off with a sigh, blinking furiously to keep her tears in check. "Would you mind just driving . . . anywhere?"

She could feel his gaze on her though she didn't look to verify it. "Okay," he agreed. "Whatever you want, Jilli."

She tried to smile at him but failed when more tears filled her eyes but didn't spill over. Concentrating on keeping herself from crying, she turned her attention out the window and stared at the illuminated town streets.

"You tell Gavin that you were awake last night?" Hank finally asked, his tone gentle and his eyes fixed on the road.

Jillian drew a deep breath, letting her temple rest on the door frame. "No."

He sighed. "Yeah, I didn't think so."

She shrugged. "I've always been a little slow on the uptake, I guess," she admitted quietly.

"No . . . Gavin's just stupid," Hank replied.

"No, he's not," she said automatically. So used to defending Gavin that it had become second nature, she couldn't help the surge or irritation that Gavin's so-called friend would turn on him behind his back. "Gavin's not stupid," she went on. "He's unbelievably smart! He graduated with honors, you know, and he just got that promotion at work! He's *not* stupid! He—"

"He's *damn* stupid when it comes to you," Hank clarified. "Book smart don't mean shit when all he ever does is hurt you."

Snapping her mouth closed on her retort, Jillian sighed, deflating a little in the face of Hank's obvious calm. "He doesn't hurt me on purpose," she said.

"But he still hurts you."

Jillian didn't respond to that. Trying not to think about her Gavin, walking back into that bar to ask that girl on a date was hard enough . . .

"There's a saying my dad told me when I was just a cub," Hank went on as he turned off on the road that ran around the perimeter of the lake. "A wolf will do what a wolf will do. You can either let him keep doing it, or you can kill him."

Jillian didn't reply to that, either. Everything kept looping in on itself in her head, over and over until she felt as though she was going to scream. Not even the sight of the moon reflecting off the water soothed her, and she had to wonder if she would ever feel like smiling again. "I don't know how to be without him," she admitted softly as a tear spilled over to course down her cheek. "I never have."

"Jilli . . ."

She sniffled and sighed, wishing that the soothing air could make her forget, even if it was only for a moment. "You know, I remember . . . Everyone else treated me like a baby for so long . . . Bas and Daddy . . . Mama . . . Belle . . . even Evan sometimes, but Gavin . . . He'd listen. I never thought . . . I never thought that I'd ever have to tell him goodbye . . ."

Hank digested that in silence. "Is that what you have to do?"

Wiping a tear away with the back of her hand, Jillian nodded as the first crack in her composure widened. "I . . . I think I do."

"Is that what this is all about? You making Gavin go on a date?"

Jillian nodded. "I guess so. I realized last night, you know? I can't—" Breaking off for a moment, she took the kerchief Hank offered her and wiped her eyes. "I can't do it. I can't move on if I know that he's still available . . . so long as I think that maybe . . . maybe . . ."

Hank shook his head. "Aw, Jillian. He's a damn fool."

"He's not. He's always been honest with me. I'm the fool, Hank, always just two steps behind . . ."

Hank sighed and shook his head, tightening his grip on the steering wheel. "He said that he doesn't deserve you. I'm starting to think that he might be right."

"It's not about deserving someone," she muttered. "It's about loving them."

“I know. I agree.”

“You can take me back to the ranch now,” she said with a sigh. “Tell me something?”

“Anything.”

She managed a weak little laugh. “What time is it?”

Hank glanced at her quickly then held up his hand, holding in the button on the side of his watch so that he could check the time. “A little after midnight. Why?”

“After midnight,” she repeated. “Could you stop at that gas station?”

“Sure.”

He pulled into the parking lot, and she hopped out of the truck without a word. Hank waited for her, which was fine. She knew exactly what she was after. After a curious look from the cashier, she paid for her purchase and hurried out of the building. Hank opened the door for her, and she climbed back inside.

Pulling open the twin pack of chocolate cupcakes, she dug a safety candle out of the box she'd bought and stuck it in the middle of one cake before offering it to Hank. “Here.”

He stared at the cake for a moment, shaking his head in confusion. “What's this?” he asked, holding the cake in one hand as he turned onto the highway that led back to the ranch.

She shrugged, staring at the other cupcake in her hand though she made no move to eat it. “It's my birthday,” she whispered.

“Happy birthday!” Hank said, his voice more hearty than it should have been, and she knew that it was solely for her benefit.

Her wan smile faltered as a teardrop fell onto the crusted over icing on the cupcake in her hand. “Gavin and I do this every year,” she said. “He never forgets . . . Never.” She choked out a little laugh just before her face crumpled into a pained contortion. “One year,” she forced herself to say, “we ran around for an hour or more, just trying to find these stupid cupcakes. We couldn't find any. I swore it was a conspiracy.” Hank chuckled, and Jillian rasped out another laugh. “He bought those Sno-Ball things—you know, with the colored coconut? They sort of look like earmuffs . . . they were pink . . .”

“Maybe you should save this cupcake for him?” he suggested quietly.

She shook her head, wincing as the pain in her chest threatened to shatter her completely. “He didn't remember this year,” she whispered. “He didn't remember . . .”

Chapter 24
Jillian's Birthday

“A moment, Gavin.”

“Shove it, Hank,” Gavin stated as he stomped past him and headed toward the house.

“No, listen. You—”

“Not now,” Gavin tossed over his shoulder. He barely stopped long enough to get the door open before closing it and striding toward the stairs. He’d worked himself up into a nice froth of righteous indignation on the drive home that he had every intention of confronting Jillian over her unorthodox behavior, damn the consequences.

Stopping short at the top of the landing, he narrowed his gaze at the closed door on one of the guest rooms. *‘Jilli...?’*

If he hadn’t known that something was bothering her before, he certainly did now. That Jillian had decided to sleep in another room . . . it spoke volumes, didn’t it?

“Jilli?” he called, quietly tapping on the door with his knuckles. It was late but he rather doubted that she was sleeping. “Jilli, can I come in?”

“I’m tired, Gavin,” she called, her voice muffled by the door. It wasn’t enough to hide the little snuffle that came afterward, and he grimaced as he realized a moment later that he could faintly smell the salt of her tears.

Scrubbing his face with his hands in a show of complete exasperation, Gavin stifled the nearly overwhelming desire to growl and drew a calming breath, instead. “Come on . . . I . . . I need to talk to you.”

He didn’t think she was going to answer him. Seconds ticked away, and he lifted his hand to knock again when she unlocked the door and pulled it open just a crack. “Can’t this wait till morning?” she asked plaintively.

“Why are you in there?” he asked before he could stop himself.

Jillian shook her head, her gaze falling away as her shoulders bobbed in a little shrug. “I don’t know, Gavin . . . I figured I had to grow up sometime.”

“Wh—what—I . . .” He sighed. All of his irritation melted away in the face of her quiet resolve, and he understood. She had been awake, after all, and his thoughtless words . . . “A-about last night,” he forced himself to say, “I didn’t mean that . . . I-I just—”

“It’s okay, Gavin,” she broke in. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not! I didn’t . . . I wasn’t thinking. Hank startled me, and . . . Jilli . . .”

“So how did it go?” she asked, ignoring his bumbled apology.

The bittersweet smile that touched her lips was too much for him to tolerate. The ache that had been tormenting him all evening warred with the absolute panic inspired by the very idea of losing her. He’d do anything to make her laugh—really laugh. Desperate to fix the hurt he’d caused her, he racked his brain for something that she might listen to, for some way to explain that he hadn’t meant the things he’d said to Hank . . . Latching onto the first thing that popped into his mind, he didn’t think about how bad it was going to sound until it was out of his mouth. “I-I-I got a date,” he blurted.

Her chin snapped up, eyes widening in surprise—at least, he thought it was surprise. A flicker of a painful emotion surfaced on her face before she managed to cover it with an overly bright smile. “Good, good,” she agreed neutrally. “When?”

He grimaced, asking himself for the hundredth time why he’d even bothered to ask Cicily to go out. Stifling a long-suffering sigh, he shook his head. That wasn’t true; not at all. He’d done it in the hopes that he could somehow pacify Jillian. “Uh, tomorrow . . . err, tonight . . . I guess it’s after midnight.”

Why did she suddenly look like he’d said something far worse than he’d intended? “O-oh . . . right . . .” Abruptly turning away from the door, she crossed her arms over her chest in a purely protective sort of way and shuffled back over to the bed. For reasons Gavin didn’t quite understand, he couldn’t bring himself to step into the room, watching miserably as she crawled under the blankets and huddled in the middle of the bed with her back to him. “I’m tired,” she muttered.

Gavin shook his head. “I-isn’t that what you wanted?” he asked quietly. He’d be more than happy to cancel the date, if that would make her happy. He only wished he could figure out what *would* make her happy, damn it all . . .

He stood there for another minute before pushing himself away from the doorframe. “I’m sorry, Jilli,” he murmured. Then he turned and walked away.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

Evan Zelig slouched lower in his seat and stared out the window at the endless sky. Smashing a hand against his ear, he cocked his head to the side and grimaced. Air travel wasn’t so horrible, he supposed, but he wasn’t sure he’d ever grow completely accustomed to it. Most of the time, he preferred to ride in busses, but that hadn’t really been an option since he was heading to Japan to officially kick off his first headlining tour since the Megalo-Monster Rock Festival had wrapped up the day before.

He chuckled, wrapping his arm around Madison's shoulders. She was sleeping—the only youkai he'd ever met that could actually do such a thing on an airplane.

The trill of his cell phone interrupted his thoughts, and he grinned as he checked the caller ID. “Jilli, baby!” he greeted warmly. “Happy birthday to you; happy birthday to you . . . happy birthday, darling Jilli . . . happy birthday to you . . .” he crooned.

She breathed out a little laugh. “Thank you, Evan.”

“Isn't it late in Montana?”

“I couldn't sleep,” she replied.

Evan's smile dimmed. He could hear the upset in his sister's voice. “Something happen?” he asked, deliberately trying to keep from sounding overly worried. So far as he knew, Jillian had no idea about the stalker, and he would be damned if she found out from him, but in the off chance that she had found out, he needed to know . . .

She sniffled and heaved a tumultuous sigh. “I guess you could say that,” she allowed.

“Tell me,” he demanded in a tone that left no room for argument.

Jillian sighed. “Do you think . . . would you mind if I flew out and hung with you and Maddy for awhile?”

Evan's scowl darkened, but he chuckled for her benefit. “What? Are you kidding me? Hanging out with a classy chick like you could only add to the mystique that *is* Zel Roka. Hell, an interviewer asked me yesterday whether or not the rumors I was going to marry you were true . . .”

Jillian laughed. It sounded strained, stilted. “What did you say?”

He snorted. “What do you think I said? I said, ‘hell, yeah,’ of course.”

“That'd be about as wrong as the idea of you marrying Maddy,” she commented.

Evan laughed at that. Jillian was one of the few people who actually understood Evan and Madison's relationship. They enjoyed each other's bodies, certainly, but neither of them was interested in anything more permanent. It was difficult to understand to most, he supposed. They'd always been the best of friends, much like Jillian and Gavin, but where Jillian was convinced that she was Gavin's mate, neither Evan nor Madison ascribed to such beliefs. They loved each other, sure, but they weren't *in* love with each other, and therein lay the difference . . . “Yeah . . . Maddy's the marrying kind—too bad I'm not,” he quipped.

“So where are you?” Jillian asked.

“Heading for the Land of the Rising Sun . . . seemed like a good place to really start the tour, and they love me there, you know,” he joked.

“I could stop in and see Grandma and Grandpa . . . and everyone else,” she mused.

“Yep . . . trying to talk Granny K. into coming to one of my concerts, but the old man says it’s all just noise to him, so I don’t know . . . He is just not a fan of the drums and smokin’ guitars . . .”

She laughed weakly. It sounded to his ears like she was trying not to cry. “Yeah . . . that’d be weird, wouldn’t it? InuYasha Izayoi at a rock concert . . .”

“All right,” he said with a long, drawn out sigh. “Tell me what’s going on, and don’t try any of your subversive tactics with me, baby sister. I’m immune to your Jedi mind tricks.”

She sniffled again. “It’s over, Evan,” she admitted quietly. “I know that now.”

“Over?” he echoed, sitting up and disturbing Madison’s sleep. She moaned and curled up on her side but didn’t open her eyes. “What do you mean, ‘over?’”

“He . . . he thinks I’m just a pup,” she said. “I guess maybe I am . . .”

“What’d he say?” he asked gently.

Jillian heaved a shaky sigh. “He told Hank that I was just a pup, that I’ve never really known what I wanted,” she whispered. “That’s not true, but . . .”

“Yeah,” he said when she trailed off. He could feel the pain in her voice resonating through the phone, and he grimaced. “He’s a fucking idiot.”

“Don’t be so harsh, Evan,” she chided.

“Harsh, nothing . . . if I were there, I’d show him how harsh I can be . . .”

“He . . . he forgot my birthday,” she mumbled. “He’s got a date for tonight, too . . .”

“A *what?*” Evan hissed. “That dirty little cocksucking son of a—”

“Evan!” she cut in. “Don’t call him that!”

He snorted indelicately, making no bones about whether or not he was actually sorry for the slight. “Let me make a few calls, Jilli,” he finally allowed as he slumped back in the seat and rubbed his temple. “I’ll get a ticket for you.”

“Thanks,” she said with a tired sigh.

“I’ll call you back in a few,” he said.

Hanging up the phone, he glowered at it for a minute before dialing information and asking for Helena Regional Airport. Drumming his claws on the armrest, he gritted his teeth. Leave it to Gavin to screw up something as simple as claiming his mate. He sighed, waiting for the operator to connect the call for him.

It pissed him off, damn it. All Jillian had ever wanted was to be that doofus' mate. That Gavin was too dense to understand it was something that had always pissed Evan off. Seeing Jillian being hurt time and again . . . it just didn't sit well with him. Over the years, he'd always been the one that Jillian sought out when she was missing the fool she was in love with. Evan was the one that had hugged her and told her that Gavin would be back at the end of every summer after she'd held it together long enough to see the bastard get onto the plane that took him back to Montana. Evan was the one that had to come up with viable reasons why the idiot didn't return for over two years after he'd finished school. Evan was the one she'd called on that day—the last time Gavin had royally fucked up—and though he'd completely blown off a potentially big gig, he'd stayed on the phone with her until she reached the Zelig estate, too. He'd always left things alone, trusting that eventually Gavin would manage to work his head out of his ass, but forgetting Jillian's birthday and making a date with another woman? Was he really *that* stupid?

Evan sighed. Yeah, maybe Gavin really *wasn't* as smart as everyone believed him to be. In any case, it'd be a cold day in hell before Evan let him get away with his ration of bullshit this time . . .

It didn't take long for Evan to book a flight for Jillian from Helena, Montana, to LAX, and from there, he got her a connecting flight that would take her straight to Tokyo. Calling Jillian back long enough to tell her that her tickets would be waiting for her at Helena Regional Airport first thing in the morning and that her flight out was scheduled to depart at ten in the morning, Evan forced himself not to give voice to his true feelings on the matter.

"Jilli's flying out?" Madison asked drowsily.

"Yeah," Evan said with a disgusted snort. "Damn idiot's blown it for real this time."

Madison sighed and reached over to rub Evan's back. "What about the stalker?"

He shrugged. "You think I can't protect her from that bastard, too?"

Madison laughed and shook her head. "You know I don't think anything of the sort, Zel Roka. I thought you all wanted her to stay in the dark about it."

"God, he pisses me *right* off," Evan growled, flexing his claws, as he shot to his feet and stomped the length of the privately chartered plane. "He's got to know that she's his mate. If he's stupid enough to take chances like that with my baby sister, I swear on all that's holy, I'll make him wish he'd never been born."

"It does seem like he's being a little short-sighted, doesn't it?"

Evan snorted and kept pacing. "Short-sighted, nothing. He's hurt Jillian for the last damn time."

Narrowing her violet eyes, Madison watched him for a moment. “What are you going to do about it?” she finally asked.

Evan shot her a level look as he unfolded his cell phone and scanned the numbers stored in memory. “I’m gonna give him one last chance to fix it,” he growled.

Madison nodded then shrugged. “And if he doesn’t?”

Sapphire eyes darkening dangerously, Evan draped his hand on his hip as he dialed the number and lifted the device to his ear. “Then heaven help him,” he muttered. “I swear to God I’ll rip him to shreds, myself, if he fucks this one up, too.”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin stepped outside onto the porch with his hands jammed into his pockets and a scowl on his face as he struggled to comprehend exactly what was happening and how to stop it before it got worse.

He hadn’t meant to hurt her. Hell, he *never* meant to hurt her, and yet it seemed like maybe that’s exactly what he’d done, time and again, because he’d panicked; because he was so used to denying things he felt and thought, even to himself, that it had somehow become second nature for him to say those things to Hank when he hadn’t really meant any of it; not at all. It was just another of the excuses he had used over the years to convince himself that Jillian wasn’t being serious, and why?

‘Why . . .?’ he repeated, shaking his head as he sank down on the porch steps with his elbows on his knees and rested his forehead on his raised fingertips.

It’d be simpler if he knew how to deal with her. He didn’t. The underlying feel that something was wrong that he’d had when he woke up in the morning had gotten worse as the day had progressed, and like a pawn in a chess game, he kept going through the motions without actually being able to figure out just what was happening. ‘*She . . . she hasn’t called me ‘Gavvie’ all day—not even once . . .*’ he suddenly realized. ‘*She . . . damn it . . .*’

And she’d moved out of his bedroom? He winced. That bit of knowledge struck a little harder than the dropping of a pet name she’d used for him ever since they’d met. He’d wondered off and on if she had somehow come to the understanding that he really didn’t deserve her, after all, but no . . .

He sighed. No, instead, she’d overheard him saying stupid stuff yet again, only this time she’d taken what he’d said to heart. She honestly believed that he thought she was no more than a pup, didn’t she?

The jarring sound of his cell phone jerked him out of his mire of self-loathing, and with a grimace, he dug it out of his pocket only to scowl at the number on the caller ID. “Hello?” he said after connecting the call.

“Hey, *Gavvie* . . . what’s the haps?” Evan greeted casually—a little *too* casually.

“Evan . . . what’s going on?”

Evan chuckled almost nastily. “Funny you should ask that, Gavin. I was just going to ask you the same damn thing. Care to fill me in?”

Gavin grimaced. “I’ve got everything under control,” he lied.

Evan wasn’t buying. “Cut the crap, will you? Unlike my sister, I don’t always believe everything you say.”

“Jillian doesn’t—”

“The *fuck* she doesn’t. She thinks you damn near walk on water. She always has, hasn’t she, and that got you off for years. You’re an idiot, Gavin—and complete and utter idiot.”

“It’s not what you think! I didn’t—”

Evan snorted derisively. “Of course you didn’t! If you had . . . well, then you’d be a bastard, too. Come on! You’ve been in love with Jilli for years, and you know it! You think I didn’t know you moved to the city for her? You think I don’t realize that every time you called me over the years, you were really searching for any news on her? Fuck, Gavin! Open your eyes, will you? She’s just been biding her time until you deigned to notice her—until you deigned to take her seriously!”

Gavin winced as Evan’s barbs struck dead-on, one by one. “Look . . . you know, maybe she’s better off without me,” he growled. “You and I both know that she deserves someone much better than me.”

“It ain’t about what she deserves, damn it! Don’t you dare fucking play with her life because you’re too juvenile to get over yourself.”

“Get over myself? What the hell does that mean?”

Evan snorted. “You know damn well what that means! You’re so stuck on the ‘poor me’ crap that you’ve forgotten to look in the mirror. You’re not the same scrawny little fucker you were when you were a pup. Don’t you think it’s about time you started acting like a man and stop hiding behind those ‘I’m not good enough’ excuses?”

Snapping his mouth closed on the retort that was forming in his mind, Gavin grimaced when he realized that Evan was right. Maybe somewhere deep down, he still was that wiry little pup who hadn’t managed to grow up despite what he looked like on the outside . . .

When he didn't reply, Evan heaved a sigh. "Look, man . . . Just fix it, okay? Stop making her smile when she feels like crying. Take her down off that pedestal where you've worshipped her for years and get it through your fat fucking head: if she leaves you now, she won't come back. You know that, don't you? Even if she wanted to . . . even Jilli can only stand so much."

"Yeah," Gavin rasped out, his throat suspiciously tight. His eyes were hot, grainy, and he blinked fast. "Yeah."

"Fix it, Gavin," he stated again. The line went dead, and Gavin sighed, dropping the phone onto the step beside him as he buried his face in his hands.

"You talk to her?"

"Not really," he admitted without looking up.

Hank sighed and shuffled his feet, his boots scuffing against the sidewalk. "Gotta tell you, city slicker, you've really stuck your foot in it this time."

"More than just my foot, Hank," he grumbled, cheeks pinking furiously. "I think I'm in up to my neck . . ."

"Better start digging, then," Hank mused.

Gavin rubbed his eyes, scowled into the darkness, stubbornly refusing to meet Hank's gaze. "I've spent my life doing things that went against my better judgment because Jillian wanted me to," he admitted at length, "and now . . ."

"Now, what?"

Gavin sighed. "I . . . I made a date with a woman at the bar because Jillian wanted me to look for a mate. That woman . . . she isn't my mate! She's just some woman I wouldn't have given a second look otherwise, but Jilli . . . damn it . . ."

"A date?"

Gavin rested his elbows on his knees, letting his hands dangle between his legs as he slouched forward and shook his head. "Yeah, a date for tonight . . . hell if that made her happy, either . . ."

Whistling low, Hank shuffled his feet. "Shit, Gavin . . . for being so book smart, you'd think you'd be able to remember a few small things."

"Like what?"

Hank snorted. "Here."

Finally lifting his gaze, Gavin blinked at the cupcake with the single white candle that Hank shoved under his nose. “W . . . what’s this?”

“Something you forgot,” Hank replied, setting the cake in Gavin’s hand before tipping the brim of his Stetson and ambling back toward the bunk house.

“Shit . . .” Gavin mumbled, staring at the cupcake and slowly shaking his head. “Jilli’s . . . birthday . . .” During the upset of the day, he’d forgotten that tomorrow—today—was her twenty-fourth birthday. The stricken look on her face flashed through his mind, and he grimaced. How many times had he felt that way when Jillian said she was going here or there with so-and-so? Sure, she only went places where he wouldn’t be caught dead: all the gala events that comprised her life, and she’d always told him that she’d be happy to stay home with him if he’d rather. All he had to do was say the word . . .

He’d always believed that she was simply saying that to make him feel better, but was she? The strain that he’d noticed in her very aura lately seemed to be gone since she’d been on the ranch. Could it really be that she’d been telling him the wholehearted truth all these years? Had he put her on that proverbial pedestal where she was unable to commit any wrongdoing? It was that same pedestal that also held her just out of his reach . . . He had, hadn’t he? Somehow he’d built her up in his mind, his perfect Jilli, his shining star. Maybe . . . maybe it was possible . . . and maybe he really had been nothing but a fool from the start . . .

He grimaced again as the feeling that he was a complete and utter ass loomed larger and larger. Yes, he supposed it was entirely possible. The sickened churning in the pit of his stomach grew steadily worse, and with a low groan, he grabbed his cell phone, catching the device in his teeth as he stood up to fish the number Cicily had given him out of his pocket.

He had to fix things, didn’t he? He could start by cancelling the God-forsaken date he never should have made . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Jillian snapped the clasps on her suitcase and bit her cheek, wondering absently why she wasn’t crying anymore. Maybe it was true, what they said: maybe it was possible to cry oneself out of tears . . .

‘Get a hold of yourself, Jillian. Sitting here feeling sorry for yourself just won’t do you any good . . .’

She nodded as she hauled the suitcase off the bed and stuck it in the closet. Evan said her flight was slated to depart at ten in the morning. That meant that she needed to be at the airport no later than eight, which in turn meant that she needed to leave the ranch by six-thirty. Placing a call to the only cab company in Hidekea, Jillian requested a taxi be there to take her to the airport. She almost set the phone aside when a sudden, vicious need to hear her father’s steady voice drew a gasp from her, and she dialed the number without stopping to think that it had to be around three or four in the morning back home in Maine.

“Jilli? Baby? What’s wrong?” Cain’s voice came over the line. He didn’t sound sleepy, no, but he did sound overly concerned.

“Hi, Daddy . . . sorry for calling so late—early—whatever.”

“It’s okay. You sound upset.”

“No, I’m . . . fine,” she replied. “I just wanted to hear your voice; that’s all. Were you still up?”

Cain sighed. “Yeah. Your mother is having trouble readjusting to the time difference since she got back yesterday . . .”

“I miss you all,” Jillian admitted.

“Miss us? You’re on vacation . . . you aren’t having a good time?”

“Of course I am,” she lied.

“Oh, happy birthday,” Cain said.

“Thanks,” she said with a small smile. “Thanks a lot.”

“Hold on. I’ll get Gin. She’ll want to wish you a happy birthday, too.”

A knock on the door drew her attention, and Jillian bit her lip. “It’s okay, Daddy. Gavin’s knocking on the door, so I’m going to go. Give Mama a huge hug and kiss for me?”

Cain chuckled. “Anytime, Jilli, though I have very little doubt that she’ll call you in the morning, anyway.”

“Okay,” Jillian said as a second knock—this one a little bit louder—rang out. “Love you both.”

“You, too,” Cain replied.

She hung up the phone and set it on the nightstand before sticking her feet under the blankets and burying her face in the pillows.

“I know you’re still awake,” Gavin called out. “I can see your light under the door . . .”

Grimacing at her own lack of foresight, Jillian opted to try the next best thing. “I’m tired, Gavin . . . I was just going to go to sleep.”

“This will only take a minute, I swear,” he assured her. “C-can I come in? Please?”

She sighed and sat up, hating the pleading tone in his voice. “Okay,” she agreed reluctantly.

The door opened with a soft click, and Gavin slowly met her gaze. His face was full of a sad reluctance, and she tried her hardest not to crumble. “I, uh . . . I cancelled that date,” he admitted then grimaced. “Well, I called and left a message on her voicemail . . . that’s probably one of those dating faux pas, isn’t it?”

She didn’t even try to smile at his lame attempt at a joke.

He drew a deep breath and dug into his pocket, pulling out a small burgundy velvet jeweler’s box as he came to her and sat on the edge of the bed. “H-happy birthday, Jilli.”

“You . . . remembered?”

He made a face. “When have I ever forgotten?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow in an awful affectation of a leading man in a cheesy soap opera. “Okay,” he admitted, “I kind of forgot, but I bought your present back in New York City . . . I saw them one day while I was walking to work . . . I thought . . . I *hoped* . . . you’d like them . . .”

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” she said softly, quietly, her voice lower in pitch than normal and tinged with a harshness that bespoke unshed tears.

She stared at him for a moment. He scowled at the box before placing it in her hand. After another second, she carefully flipped the box open. Her free hand lifted, her fingers fluttering over her lips as she blinked the wash of tears that sprang to fill her gaze. The tiny filigree gold butterfly earrings blurred in her vision as she tried in vain to swallow her tears. “Butterflies,” she murmured, “because I’m still a little girl.”

“Ah, no! No!” he blurted. “It’s just . . . I thought . . . They matched your necklace, you see? I thought you’d like them . . . I . . . I can take them back. I’ll exchange them for something better,” he grumbled, reaching for the box as his cheeks exploded in color.

She jerked the box away from him, cradling it against her chest with a territorial little growl that she had never made before. Gavin blinked in surprise but pulled his hand away. “No! These are beautiful,” she countered. “You can’t have them back.”

“Okay, okay,” he agreed. “I thought they matched . . . y-your necklace . . . Jilli?”

“Yes?” she replied absently, staring at the delicate butterflies as she quickly wiped her eyes.

“Where is your necklace?”

Reaching up to touch her neck, she couldn’t hide the guilty expression that filtered over her face.

Gavin grimaced and recoiled. “I see . . .” he said stiffly, rising to his feet and turning away from her, the pain in his youki sharp and unsettling. “I guess you’re tired . . . I’ll . . . goodnight.”

Staring at the butterfly earrings that glittered on the bed of burgundy silk inside the box, Jillian couldn’t contain the tiny whimper that escaped her. Standing up, she wandered over to grab the

necklace off the dresser where she'd left it earlier before slipping back into bed with the necklace and the earrings held close to her heart.

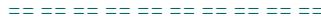


Author's Note:

Evan's Underwear Ad!

I'm not sure what I was thinking. I did actually draw it out and posted it on Deviant Art. The URL is here: <http://www.deviantart.com/vicu/35342847/> but please pay attention to this: you must be logged in to see it, and you have to have a DA account since it does have adult content. Evan is Evan, after all . . . Anyway.

um . . . there it is . . .



Final Thought from Jillian:

Butterflies . . .

Chapter 25
Ultimatums

'... Six... seven... eight ...'

Grimacing when the old step under her foot groaned, Jillian leaned down to peek under the rafter beams to see where Gavin was since she could tell from his youki that he wasn't in his bedroom. Letting out a deep breath after an anxious moment, she renewed her grip on the suitcase handle and started down the stairs once more.

'Nine... ten... almost there ...'

Stepping down off the last step—the twelfth step—Jillian bit her lip and slowly shifted her gaze around the tidy ranch cabin. The painting of Rose and Roger Jamison that hung over the hulking stone fireplace seemed to be saying goodbye to her, and she managed a wan little smile. She'd been so hopeful when they'd gotten there, hadn't she? He'd invited her to come with him to his ranch—something he'd never done before, and that had lent her a measure of confidence.

She sighed. What was it her sister-in-law, Sydnie said sometimes? Ah, yes . . . *'No sense crying over spilled milk, kitten . . .'* Jillian supposed there was a certain level of truth in that . . .

She hadn't decided if she wanted to tell Gavin that she was leaving or not. She'd been of two minds about it all night. Up until the time she'd opened her door and crept into the hallway, she'd still not been completely decided. What did she expect, after all? Of course he'd try to stop her. It was in the hero's job description, wasn't it? That didn't mean that it would change anything, and Jillian . . . Closing her eyes for a long second, she willed away the ache, the pain, that tore at her heart. She just couldn't hold on to hope anymore, only to be crushed time and again. Maybe it really was better this way.

With one last glimpse around herself, she drew a deep, steadying breath and grasped the doorknob as she turned to leave.

"J-Jilli?"

Grimacing, she squared her shoulders and slowly glanced back at him. He'd come from the kitchen with a cup of coffee in his hands still wearing the same clothes he'd worn to the bar the night before, and it didn't take a genius to figure out that he'd been awake all night. "I . . . I'm leaving, Gavin," she said softly, unable to look him in the eye.

"Wh-wh-what?" he stammered.

She turned away, eyes trained on the doorknob where her hand still rested. "I'm leaving," she repeated.

“B-but you *can't* leave!” he blurted. The thud of the coffee mug on the table cracked like gunfire in her ears, and he strode across the room, smashing his hand against the door to keep it closed. “You *can't*!”

“Don’t make this more difficult for me than it already is,” she replied. “Please, Gavin . . . please?”

“Jilli . . .”

“I can’t do this anymore,” she whispered, closing her eyes against the angry wash of tears that threatened to spill over. *‘Don’t you dare cry, Jillian Zelig! Don’t you do it!’* Biting back the emotions that choked her, she shook her head. “I can’t, and you . . . you can’t ask me to.”

“But . . .”

“Excuse me.”

He didn’t move. “N-no . . . You can’t leave. What . . . what would I do without you?”

She couldn’t stand the raw quality of his voice. She couldn’t stand to look into his eyes and see the turmoil in his gaze. Biting her cheek, she shook her head again, tamped down the desire to drop her suitcase and throw herself into his arms, to beg him to love her or at least to say that he did, even if it was all a lie . . . “You’ll be fine, you know,” she forced herself to say, “and I’ll . . . I’ll be fine, too.”

“Don’t do this!” he pleaded. “Jilli . . .”

The beep of a car’s horn sounded outside, and Jillian jerked the door open when Gavin moved to the side to look out the window. She was out the door and down the steps before he managed to catch up with her, and when he did, he grasped her arm, pulling her around to face him. The unbridled panic in his eyes cut her deep as she met his gaze. She could feel her lower lip quivering as she blinked to stave back the tears. “Where would you go?” he asked quietly.

Jillian cleared her throat, shifting her eyes to the side in an effort not to look at Gavin. Looking at him would make her cry, and that was really the last thing she wanted to do. “I’ve got a ticket waiting for me at the airport,” she said. “Evan’s flying me out to Japan.”

“Japan? But you . . .” He winced. “P-p-please don’t go.”

“Goodbye, Gavin,” she replied, pulling away from him and hurrying to the waiting cab. Tugging the door open, she gasped in surprise when Gavin shoved the door closed once more.

“Get out of here,” he snarled at the driver.

“Gavin!”

“She’s changed her mind,” he went on.

“I have not!” she shot back, eyebrows drawing together as she scowled at the stubborn youkai.

“Yes, she has,” Gavin barked, face reddening as he dug a wad of money out of his pocket and tossed it through the open passenger side window. “Get out of here. Now.”

The driver picked up the money and eyed it with a grin before raising his fingers in mock salute and putting the vehicle in reverse.

“But . . . No!” Jillian gasped as she watched incredulously as the taxi turned around and took off down the long driveway. “Ga-vin!” she hissed, rounding on him and pinning him with a fulminating glower.

He reacted in kind; chin lifting a notch despite the heightened color in his face. “I told you, Jillian . . . y-y-you can’t leave,” he stammered. “I mean it. I-I-I said, ‘no’.”

Narrowing her eyes dangerously, she snatched up her suitcase with one hand and slung her purse over her shoulder with the other before stomping over to the assembly of ranch hands who had come out side when they’d seen the cab. Jillian could feel her own color rising, but that didn’t stop her as she mustered as much dignity as she could—not much, given the circumstances—and stopped in front of Hank. “Hank, could you please give me a ride to the airport?” she asked.

“Do you like your job, Hank?” Gavin snarled as he strode up behind Jillian.

“You’d *fire* him for giving me a ride to the airport?” Jillian demanded.

Gavin made a face. “Yeah . . . yeah . . . I think I would.”

“Of all the low-down, nasty things . . .” She trailed off and drew a deep breath meant to assuage her rapidly rising temper. “Fine . . . May I borrow your truck, Hank?” she asked instead.

Hank opened his mouth and shuffled his feet as he leaned on the fence, glancing from Jillian to Gavin then back again. “Sorry, Jillian,” he mumbled. “Technically speaking, it ain’t my truck.”

It didn’t help that the man truly *sounded* sincere. Jillian squelched the urge to growl and shifted her gaze onto the rest of the ranch hands, none of whom would look her in the eye—including Cody, who seemed the most uncomfortable with the collective attention they were gathering. Not one of them would go against Gavin’s direct orders, she supposed, and while she could appreciate their loyalty, at the moment, she wanted to kick each and every one of them square in the shin.

“All right,” she stated flatly, shooting Gavin a withering glare. “I’ll walk.”

That said, she turned on her heel and stomped away from the gaggle of gaping men.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin blinked and watched Jillian's retreating back, unable to comprehend just what was going on. Sure, he knew she was irritated with him, and yes, he had to allow that he completely deserved that, but for her to leave? Just like that? He couldn't believe it . . .

After tossing and turning in his empty bed for a couple hours, he'd given up a little before four in the morning and had gone downstairs to make a pot of coffee and check the email account. Mickey B. had been conspicuously quiet for the last few days. Bas had said that he didn't like it, and Gavin was inclined to agree. It brought to mind the proverbial calm before the storm, as far as he was concerned, but since there really wasn't a thing he could do about it, he'd spent the rest of the time before dawn sitting at the kitchen table, trying to concoct a plan to get Jillian to listen to him; to get her to forgive him.

Hank cleared his throat indelicately and shot Gavin a sidelong glance. "You just gonna stand there catching flies, Gavvie, or are you gonna go stop her?" he finally asked.

That got his attention well enough. Casting Hank a dark look, he ran after Jillian and caught her hand to stay her. "Will you wait?" he growled, his conflicting emotions culminating in an irritated snarl.

"No," she stated flatly, "I won't! My plane leaves at ten, and you're trying to make me miss it!"

"Hell, yes, I'm trying to make you miss it!" he shot back. "You can't leave! Do you hear me? You *can't!*"

"Why can't I?" she demanded, her voice dropping to a whisper.

He grimaced, trying in vain to block out the chortles and sniggering that carried over the distance from the ranch hands. "Because . . . we're on vacation, right? You can't leave when we're on vacation . . ."

"No, Gavin, *I'm* on vacation. You're here to take care of the ranch, remember?"

"I know you're mad, but—"

"Mad?" She choked out a sad little laugh that made him wince. "Actually, I'm not mad. I just finally figured things out; that's all. I'll be fine." She shrugged. "I have to grow up sometime, don't I?"

"I didn't mean that," he blurted, desperate to make her understand. He could sense the finality in her resolve, the conviction in her stance. It was now or never, and he knew it. If he didn't act fast, she'd leave him for good. "I didn't mean any of that . . . I was just . . . Hank's always sort of teased me, you know? I just . . . I didn't . . ." He sighed and slowly shook his head. "That's not an excuse . . . I'm sorry."

The look in her eyes made her seem so much older than her twenty-four years—sadder, more miserable than he could ever remember seeing her before . . . “I thought I could do it, you know? I thought I could sit there and watch you . . . but I couldn’t . . . I *can’t* . . . It kills me to see you with someone else. I can accept that you don’t want to be my mate . . . but I can’t watch it happen, either. I couldn’t watch you with her—Shelly . . .”

Shaking his head, momentarily forgetting that Jillian still believed that he’d dated Shelly so long ago, Gavin grimaced. “Shelly? I-I never dated her, Jillian . . . Never . . . I-I would have told you if I’d dated anyone. I swear to God, I didn’t.”

Jillian grimaced, setting the suitcase down and crossing her arms over her chest as she scowled at him. “Then why were you with her, Gavin? The girl at the restaurant told me you went there with Shelly all the time . . .”

“Sure I was . . . I was tutoring her. I tutored her the entire time I went to school there.”

Jillian’s head snapped up at that. He didn’t miss the flicker of hope light her eyes just for a moment before she smothered it. “Tutoring . . .?”

Gavin nodded. “Well . . . yeah . . . I’ve never been any good with girls. You know that.”

She swallowed hard, and he smelled the salt of tears seconds before he saw one slip down her cheek, and as much as he wanted to wipe it away, if he reached for her, she’d run . . . Wiping it away with her nimble fingers, she sniffled and rubbed her arms as though she were cold. “But it doesn’t change anything, does it?” she murmured. “I mean, not really . . .”

“But that’s not—I don’t—I—you . . .”

She shook her head as the obduracy in her gaze solidified just a little more. With every second that ticked by, he could feel her slipping further away, and he knew that he was powerless to stop it. “Jillian, if you go . . . If you leave . . .”

“What do you want from me, Gavin?” she demanded.

He blinked and reached for her only to stop, to draw his hand back, when she shied away from him. “I want . . . what’s best for you . . .”

“What’s best for me?” she repeated. “Okay, so tell me. What is it that *you* think is best for me?”

She was challenging him, and he knew it: testing him to see if she could get him to answer her honestly. Jamming his hands into his pockets, he understood that she needed—no, she *deserved*—nothing less than the complete truth. What she did with it was her choice, but Gavin . . . maybe he should have told her how he felt a long time ago. Rubbing his eyes with a weary hand, he heaved a sigh and tried to figure out the best place to start. “You . . . deserve . . . to be with someone who . . . is better than me. I mean, I’m not . . . I’ll never be able to take you to those parties and things; never be comfortable fitting into your lifestyle. I’m not . . .” He barked out a terse laugh—more of a lamenting sound than one of actual amusement. “I’m a . . . sci-fi geek . . . a

nerd . . . I play . . . video games and read books without pictures . . . Hell, I have a five year subscription to *Star Wars Collector* magazine . . .”

Her gaze narrowed, iced over, and the memory of her, freezing the pond over while he stood in it, flitted through his mind. He might have been ten at the time, and he'd just told her that it was too chilly to indulge in a morning swim, and in retaliation, she manipulated the water, freezing it around his feet. He'd thought for sure that he was going to lose a toe or two by the time Cain was able to convince Jillian to release the water spell . . . Shaking his head to clear the memory away, he waited for the gauntlet to fall.

“And you think that those things about you bother me?” she asked quietly. “You think that I judge you because you go to sci-fi conventions? Because you collect dolls—”

“—*Action figures*,” he couldn't help grumbling.

“You think that I'm so shallow that those things make you any less of a man in my eyes? Go to hell, Gavin Jamison! Just go to hell!”

Whipping around on her heel, she grabbed her suitcase and started stomping away once more. Gavin grimaced and gave chase, catching her elbow and pulling her back despite her best efforts to extricate herself from his grasp. “Jilli, wait!”

“Why do you have to be such a *jerk*?” she yelled, wrenching her arm away from him. “Why?”

“Because!” he retorted, responding to her rising tone in kind. “Because I don't want you to make a mistake that you'll regret one day because you *think* you're in love with an idiot like me!”

“Idiot, huh?” she went on, eyes flashing, nostrils flaring, body quivering with her overwhelming emotions. “I suppose you are! I suppose that's all you've *ever* been!”

“Why *would* you want to be with someone like me?” he challenged. “You could have anyone—anyone in the world, and you think you want to be with me? Come on, Jillian! I'm . . . I . . . you deserve better! You deserve—”

The crack of her hand against his cheek resonated in the morning quiet. Gavin's head snapped to the side. Choking back a sob, she shot him a mutinous glower. “I *hate* you, Gavin! I . . . hate you . . .”

He might have believed her if she hadn't said it in a whisper. As though she couldn't quite stand the pain that was eating away at her, she clutched her stomach and struggled to control her tears. “I . . . I don't mean that,” she murmured as the tears spilled over, slipped down her cheeks. “Don't you know?”

A soft sound—more of a whine than anything else—escaped him, and he took a step toward her, holding out his hands in a defeated sort of gesture. “Jilli . . . Don't cry . . . *Please* don't cry . . .”

She sniffled and hiccupped, willing herself not to cry. It didn't work, and that somehow made him feel even worse. "Why are you doing this?" she whispered.

He flinched, stuffing his hands into his pockets and shuffling his feet in the gravel. "You're a *supermodel* . . . how could ever you be happy with a . . . a loser like me?"

That earned him a decisive glower before she slowly shook her head and turned her face away, and he had the distinct impression that she was trying her hardest not to slap him again. "You think that I wanted to be a model?" she gritted out from between clenched teeth. "It's your fault—all your fault!"

"M-my fault?" he stuttered. "How?"

Angrily swiping away her tears, her sniffles ruined the overall effect. "What else was I supposed to do? You were supposed to marry me when I finished high school—marry me and start a family with me! I never thought I'd need to do anything but be your wife and raise your children . . ."

Gavin frowned at Jillian's cryptic answer, unable to comprehend just what she was telling him. "You . . . you became a model because . . . I . . . because you thought I was . . .? But—"

She nodded miserably. "I didn't know what else to do," she admitted. "I didn't have anything I *could* do . . ."

"Jilli . . . you could do anything . . . you always could . . ." Uttering a terse, sad little laugh, he slowly shook his head. "You could probably fly if you really wanted to . . ." Heaving a sigh, he shrugged, wishing he knew just what to say to make her stop crying; to make her smile again. "I didn't know . . . I'm sorry . . ."

His apology made her wince, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "You know, I tried," she said, glaring through her tears at the empty horizon. "I really did . . ."

"Tried?"

She nodded. "I tried to forget about you . . . I thought it'd be better that way . . ." Wiping her cheek, she bit her lip and sniffled again. "I dated . . . all these guys . . . Evan set me up with all his friends, and I . . . I *did* try; I swear I did."

Gavin didn't know what to say to that. The reminders of Jillian's string of boyfriends were things that Gavin didn't need. He'd followed all of those romances, such as they were, through the endless stream of gossip magazines. None of them had ever lasted more than a couple weeks, if that.

"They were nice enough; they took me places and bought me stuff, but you know . . . not one of them was you. Not one." Uttering a terse little laugh, she shook her head in quiet disbelief. "I thought if I tried . . . but they weren't." Drawing as deep a breath as she could manage, she

wiped her cheeks once more and picked up her suitcase again. “I can’t stay here, Gavin. It hurts too much.”

The savage jolt of panic that swelled inside him threatened to burst as he opened and closed his mouth, racking his brain for something to say that would stop her, that would make her want to stay. Desperation choked him with every step she took. He couldn’t let this be the end, could he? Couldn’t let his last memory of her be her tears—tears he’d caused, all because of his stupid, stubborn pride . . .

Evan’s prophetic words came back to haunt him, and he grimaced, understanding completely, even if he hated to see the truth in it: the truth in himself . . . “*Stop making her smile when she feels like crying. Take her down off that pedestal where you’ve worshipped her for years and get it through your fat fucking head: if she leaves you now, she won’t come back . . .*”

He’d done exactly that, hadn’t he, and while it wasn’t horrible, really, he knew deep down that the underlying truth was that in doing so, he’d also managed to elevate her above such base feelings as pain and sorrow . . . and by doing that, hadn’t he done to her exactly what every single man who’d ever bought a magazine just to ogle the face and body of Jillian Zelig—always her face, her body, but never, ever the woman—did to her? Only in his case, it was much worse. He was the one she . . .

He recoiled as the understanding of that one simple word permeated his skull. Eyes widening in a quiet sense of wonder, he slowly shook his head as he forced himself to say it, at least in his head.

‘I’m the one she . . .’

Watching in mute disbelief as she started away yet again, Gavin stood, frozen to the spot, as a more encompassing understanding started to sink in. It started out as a whisper; little more than a breath of an idea in his mind. It grew louder and louder until he had no choice but to listen, and when he did, he winced. She was leaving—*really* leaving. She’d had enough, and she was leaving. More than that was the understanding that if he let her go . . . The truth of it that he’d tried so long to ignore . . . If he let her walk away, he wouldn’t make it, and if he couldn’t live without her then that meant she couldn’t do it, either . . .

‘I’m the one she . . . loves . . .?’

‘Move it, stupid! Move it before she gets away!’ his youkai cut in.

Grimacing as he ran after her, he tried to tamp down the sense of desperation that was almost overwhelming him. “You!” he blurted, not bothering to clarify, at least not yet.

Jillian stopped and turned to face him, her questions awash in her gaze. “Me?” she asked reluctantly.

He nodded, skidding to a stop in front of her. “Yeah,” he breathed. “You . . .”

“What about me?”

He tried to smile. It felt more like a grimace. “M-m-my dream girl,” he mumbled, face reddening with the admission.

“I . . . I’m your . . . dream girl?”

He grimaced. “Y-yeah.”

“But . . . I don’t have blonde hair,” she remarked.

“Close enough,” he grumbled. “Platinum blonde . . . it says blonde on your driver’s license.”

She wrinkled her nose. “They didn’t have a better choice, I suppose,” she ventured.

He nodded miserably, hoping—praying—that she understood just what he was trying to say. “Don’t leave me, Jilli . . . I’ll . . . if . . . if you stay, I swear . . . I swear I’ll make you happy . . . I’ll try, anyway. If you go . . . if you go, I’ll . . . die.”

A cautious sense of wonder filled her eyes, and she went dead still for a full minute. “I need to hear you say it, Gavin,” she said slowly. “I need you to say *exactly* what you want.”

Fair enough, he figured. Too bad the words seemed to be stuck in his throat along with a fist-sized lump that didn’t want to be dislodged. His entire life had come down to this one moment, with Jillian standing there staring at him as though she was expecting to hear something—anything—that would renew her faith in him, just one last time. Whether he deserved her or not didn’t matter, after all. The only thing that did was the unrelenting understanding that if she left him now, he would die; absolutely would die. He needed her more than he needed to breathe, more than he needed anything else in the world, and if she wasn’t there with him . . . “I-I . . . I want . . . I mean, will you . . .? I . . . Y-y-you are . . . m-m-my . . . mate.”

Dropping her suitcase and purse on the ground, her hands flew up to cover her mouth as her eyes glossed over with a new sheen of tears. In a blur of motion, she flew at him, throwing herself into his arms as she pulled him down into a desperate kiss that slammed through him like thunder as she rose up on her toes to hold him close. He stood, dumbfounded, for a long moment before slowly slipping his arms around her, returning the kiss she readily gave, and all-too-aware of the wolf-whistles and cat-calls coming from the audience of ranch hands. Breaking the contact with a shaky chuckle, Gavin smoothed Jillian’s hair out of her face, rubbing her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. “Is that a ‘yes’?”

A quiet sob escaped her and she started to nod, only to stop just as suddenly, and she let her hands drop away as a strange expression slammed over her features: a completely stubborn expression that was tinged with a stranger sense of complete and utter determination. “J-Jilli?” he questioned as she grabbed his hand and started dragging him back down the driveway toward the ranch house. “What . . .?”

She didn't reply. She just kept walking. He grimaced, entirely too aware of the laughter that his employees weren't even trying to hide. "Jillian," he tried again.

"Come on, Gavvie," she said without stopping. "You're not going back on your word."

"I wasn't going to!" he exclaimed, face exploding in what had to be a violent red hue. "It's just—"

"Move it, cowboy . . . it's mating season at the OK Corral."

He groaned at Jillian's choice of words.

"Hey, Jilli . . . decide to stay?" Hank called out as she dragged a crimson-faced Gavin past the gaping men.

"Yes, I did," she said pleasantly enough though she didn't stop walking. "Can you bring up my suitcase?" she tossed over her shoulder as she passed.

"Sure thing," Hank said with a laugh. "We'll leave it on the front porch . . . how's that? Why don't you stay out here and visit a spell?"

"Sorry, Hank. Maybe later. Right now, I'm going to go claim my mate!" she announced with a brilliant smile and a jaunty wave.

The ranch hands guffawed as Gavin's face shot up in flames. Trying in vain to tug away from her, he stumbled but kept moving. "Jil-li!" he hissed, ignoring the teasing banter that was being spewed behind them.

"Claim her mate?" Cody echoed with a confused shake of his head.

Hank chuckled, resting his forearms on the high fence railing. "They're going to go have sex, Cody," he clarified. "Get back to work," he ordered, glancing back at the rest of the hands who were still standing around, grinning like complete fools.

"O-oh," Cody replied as a deep blush crept over his features. "Just a strange way to put it, I suppose."

"Not if you knew them better," Dax drawled, pushing himself away from the fence.

Cody still looked confused. "Why's that?"

Dax chuckled as he pushed open the gate and started away to retrieve Jillian's suitcase and purse. "Jillian's dad's one of the biggest mutts there is," he replied.

Hank choked on a sip of soda. "Guess that's one way to put it," he agreed.

"Daddy's not a mutt," Jillian tossed over her shoulder.

Chapter 26
Jillian's Way

Gavin backed away from Jillian, a little worried about the uncanny light that burned behind her pale gaze despite the low burn that he could feel creeping over him as he watched in mute fascination while she slowly, methodically stepped toward him. “We can’t—I mean, I should—”

“Twenty years, Gavin Jamison,” she said softly, kicking off her sandals and reaching up to slowly unbutton the white blouse she wore.

Gavin gulped, willing himself not to watch as she worked the buttons. He couldn’t look away. He was doomed. “I know,” he said, his tone tinged with a husky quality as his eyes widened. ‘*Oh, God . . .*’ He swallowed again. “It’s just that I should ask your father . . .”

“I’ve been telling Daddy for years that you were going to be my mate. It’d be rather anticlimactic to ask him now, don’t you think?”

The blouse dropped on the floor. The sound of the zipper on the side of her skirt rattled through him, and he watched in mute fascination as that fell away, too.

“B-but everyone knows,” he insisted weakly, backing away slowly as she sauntered toward him. Reaching up behind her back, she opened the clasps on her bra and shrugged it off. Her breasts sprang free—those incredibly high, deep pink nipples contracted under his scrutiny, and he’d almost forgotten exactly why he was protesting at all . . .

“And they’re very happy for us,” she intoned, reaching up to run her hands down her sides, over her breasts, into the waistband of her little white panties. A little sound not unlike a soft purr escaped her, and her eyes closed for a moment. Her scent hit him hard, and when she opened her eyes, he could see the brightness of passion awash in her gaze. Hooking those panties with her thumbs, she pushed them over her hips, past her knees, down the length of her legs, letting them fall to the floor before she stepped out of them and kicked them aside with her toes.

“*Damn,*” he breathed, dropping to his knees before her, wrapping his arms around her waist, burying his face against the taut flesh of her belly. Her skin burned him, but he didn’t let go. Pressing wet kisses everywhere he could reach, he groaned as her scent infiltrated his very pores; as the essence of her twined with him. Kneeling in front of him, she tugged at his shirt, allowing their bodies to separate just long enough to pull his shirt over his head before she yanked at his jeans impatiently.

“I . . . I’ve never done . . . this sort of thing . . . before,” Gavin rasped out as Jillian leaned away to tug on the fly of his jeans.

“That’s okay,” she said with an impish little grin just before she jerked the button open and slid down the zipper. “Neither have I.”

“Y-you haven’t?”

She shook her head. “When I was supposed to do that when all the while I was waiting for you?”

“You—*God!*” he hissed, head falling back when she slipped her hand into his pants and squeezed him gently. “J-Jilli . . .”

She didn’t let up. Shifting her hand, she stroked him, stuffing her other hand down his jeans to massage his balls. “My mate,” she nearly purred as she let her eyes drift closed. His body trembled uncontrollably, and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep from coming completely undone.

Pulling her hand away, she rose up on her knees to push against his shoulders. He fell back on the floor, unable to do more than stare at her as she slipped her fingers into the waistband of his jeans, catching his underpants, before sliding them down his legs. He lifted his hips to help her—at least, he thought he did. There was just something out seeing Jillian completely naked and kneeling between his legs . . .

She crawled up over him, her body caressing his as her hair dragged over his overheated skin. The sensation was more than he could stand. Grabbing her by the shoulders, he rolled to the side, pinning her down and kissing her soundly before she got a chance to protest. Her lips opened to him, inviting him, and he flicked his tongue out to taste her. She shuddered under him; her knees parted. Slipping between her thighs with a ragged groan, he felt the heat of her body beckoning him. Lifting her hips against him, she moaned softly, asking for things that he understood because he wanted them, too.

Her baby soft skin fired with his touch. Running his hands up and down her sides, he couldn’t repress the slight growl of ownership that slipped from him as he rose up on his elbows to take in the sight of her. She whimpered at the loss of his body heat, and he gasped when she stared up at him through her heavily-lidded eyes. Lips slack, breath coming in short little gasps, she blushed lightly under his scrutiny before reaching down, slipping her hands between their bodies to latch onto him once more.

With a low groan, he let his forehead fall against hers, squeezing his eyes closed as he struggled for a semblance of control. “God,” he gritted out as he jerked involuntarily in her hands, “stop . . . You’ve got to stop . . .”

She squeezed him a little tighter, unleashing a sharp constricting of his muscles. Every part of him craved her, and yet . . . and yet he wanted to take his time, too.

The need to taste her, to kiss her, warred with the animalistic lust that raged through his veins. Lowering his lips, nuzzling against her neck, he licked her skin, pressing open-mouthed kisses all over her throat and shoulders; along the ridges of her collar bones, into the shallow vales of her flesh. Letting go of him with a sharp gasp, she arched her back, smashing her breasts against his chest, holding tight to him, unwilling to let him go.

He'd fantasized about this far too many times to let himself go. Too many nights spent in sleepless wonder as she cuddled so very close to his side, and she'd always been just a little out of his reach . . . Now that he was there with her—really with her—he desperately had to know everything about her—everything he'd never allowed himself to find out before . . .

She slipped a delicate claw under the rubber band that secured his hair at the nape of his neck, and with a deft little tug, his hair tumbled over his shoulders; startling against the backdrop of her paler skin. Sinking her fingers into his hair, she clung to him as he trailed kisses down the center of her chest, up the rise of her breasts. Her heart hammered so loudly against her ribcage that he could hear it resounding in his ears, mingling and merging with his own heartbeat until he couldn't tell where hers ended and his began. She tasted like the rain on his lips; she surged against him like the waves on the ocean rolling onto the shore.

Lowering his mouth over one hardened nipple, he drew her deep, swirled his tongue over the swollen flesh as a guttural moan slipped from her lips. Breathing in the scent of her, he concentrated on the feel of her skin, the nuances of her, trying in vain to ignore the rhythmic throbbing of his own body as he stubbornly forced himself to take his time.

"Please, Gavin," she sighed, almost a whimper, as she tugged on handfuls of hair.

Gavin broke away long enough to kiss her gently. She caught him and held on, running the tip of her tongue over his teeth, caressing his tongue with hers as she shifted her hips under his. He groaned softly, the sound of it muffled by her lips, her mouth, as the heat of her body coiled around him. The throbbing surged into a painful ache that was nearly his undoing. "I-i-it's okay," he murmured, kissing the outline of her lips with the gentlest of touches, "I'm not going anywhere, Jilli."

She uttered a sound of protest, running her hands up and down his chest. Closing his eyes, he shivered as her claws dragged over his skin. Leaning up to kiss his neck, she suckled on his flesh with a low moan. With a half-sigh, half-moan, she fell back, her body trembling as he ran his hands up and down the length of her. She rose to his touch, begged him silently for the relief she craved. Swelling, blossoming, she reached out to pull him closer, her rapid, panting breaths goading his passion, straining his already shaky control. Running her fingers over his back, squeezing his shoulders, holding him close, she writhed under him, her body racked with delicious quivers that radiated from her to him in the stillness.

Gavin gasped as the rioting sensation sent shivers racing up and down his spine. Every muscle in his body constricted as she nipped at his chin, bathed the roughened skin with her tongue. Undulating her hips against him, she whimpered as though she was in pain, and he sucked in a harsh breath when he slipped into her.

Jillian gasped and cried out softly, arching even further off the floor, her head falling back as her body convulsed. The consuming fire, the intense heat precluded every rational thought that he might have summoned. He couldn't help the ragged growl that escaped him as he thrust into her. His passion was overriding everything, and the need to take what she was offering was too powerful to ignore. He felt the trace resistance in her body, but it released as quickly as he felt

it. With a loud groan, he pushed himself up on his elbows as she lifted her pelvis to capture him completely. Forcing his eyes opened, he stared with a clouded sense of wonder as she struggled to breathe, as a pretty flush of absolute passion suffused her face with a rosy glow.

Closing his eyes again, he trembled, rocking his body against hers in a stunted, almost clumsy cadence that she welcomed. It was too new, too powerful, and the sensations that coursed through him were far too powerful. Her body tightened and released around him. The hot wetness of her was too welcome and far too heady.

The fluidity of motion evened out. She lifted her hips off the floor only to be driven back with a hard thrust. Her passion matched his as emotions tumbled upon one another, shifting and changing, ebbing and flowing. Growing and retreating, the give and take blossomed and swelled as he reveled in the wonder of Jillian, as his best friend evolved into his mate.

Teetering on the edge of a near-painful orgasm, he gritted his teeth and tried to slow down. The lure of her body was too hard to ignore. Matching the fevered tempo of his stunted movements, she panted, gasped, drew him deeper, held him closer.

One last thrust sent him careening off the precipice into the hazy brightness that exploded behind his eyelids. With a groan, a gasp, a ragged entreaty, he collapsed against her: his friend, his lover, his mate . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin opened his eyes and heaved a long, self-satisfied sigh as a tiny grin turned up the corners of his lips. Idly stroking Jillian's bare shoulder as she cuddled against his chest, he couldn't help the soft chuckle that escaped him as he concentrated on the altogether nice feelings that were coursing through him instead of some of the other things that had occurred to him over the last few hours since they had officially become mates. "You're bad, Jillian Zelig," he mused as his grin widened.

Wiggling around to sit up and look at him, she wrinkled her nose and smiled unrepentantly. "You should realize by now that I *always* wake up when you get up, Gavin," she pointed out.

"Okay," he allowed. "Point taken."

She nodded once and rolled to her feet, pausing a moment to stretch while he gaped at her, unable to help the faint hint of a blush that crept over his skin since reminding himself that it was quite all right to ogle one's mate was completely acceptable never seemed to actually work. Maybe he'd get used to that someday. He doubted it, though. "I'm going to get a bottle of water. You want something, my mate?" she asked.

The blush that he'd been fighting shot to the fore, but he smiled at the endearment that she'd used quite often since she'd so unceremoniously dragged him inside. "Water's good," he agreed.

She giggled at his reddened face and kissed his cheek before sauntering off toward the kitchen.

He watched her go with a chuckle, shaking his head slightly just before he grimaced and uttered a low groan. It was entirely nice, he decided as a rueful grin resurfaced.

'Too bad you're going to get clobbered.'

'Don't I know it?' Gavin agreed with a heavy sigh.

After the first time they'd made love, he'd carried Jillian upstairs for the second round. After that, they'd both fallen asleep with their bodies still tangled together. Since neither of them had slept very well the night before, it wasn't surprising that they'd exhausted one another. He'd woken up just as the sun was starting to set, and with Jillian still sleeping with a contented smile on her face, he'd slipped out of the bed, pausing long enough to grab his underpants and pulling them on before kissing her cheek and heading downstairs to make 'The Call'.

And that hadn't been so bad, either, really. After spending ten minutes rehearsing a good way to tell Cain Zelig that he'd claimed Jillian as his mate without asking permission first, he wiped his hands on his shirt that was still lying in the middle of the living room floor and proceeded to call the tai-youkai.

Unfortunately, he'd barely gotten out more than, "Good evening, sir . . . I hope I'm not disturbing you," when Jillian wandered down the stairs only to lower her chin when she spotted him with the telephone plastered to his ear. To make things just that much worse, she'd shot him a devious little smile before dropping to her knees and wrapping her hands and mouth around his . . . parts. Rasping out a very choked, "I'll call you back, sir," Gavin had dropped the phone—he might have remembered to shut it off—before grabbing Jillian and hauling her into his lap to kiss her soundly, among other things.

Cain called back two minutes later. Jillian had gotten to the device before Gavin could reach it, and in customary Jillian-fashion, she giggled and told her father that she'd claimed her mate and was about to claim him again, ending with a very jubilant, "Bye, bye, Daddy!" before she hung up the phone, and effectively guaranteeing that Gavin's next encounter with the tai-youkai would probably result in some form of maimage inflicted upon Gavin's person . . .

In fact, they'd just finished Jillian's re-claiming, which was why Gavin was trying desperately not to think about the imminent carnage that was going to befall him the next time he ventured onto Zelig land . . .

He heard the trill of Jillian's cell phone in the distance. Running through the living room, she stopped long enough to hand a bottle of water to her gaping mate before bouncing away and up the stairs to find and answer the call.

Gavin flopped back against the sofa with a ragged groan. Seeing her darting through the house like that was going to take some getting used to, he figured though he couldn't rightly say that he minded her state of undress very much. Every single part of her moved with the grace and fluidity of water, which wasn't entirely surprising, but watching her do that in the nude was

almost more than he could stand. He had a feeling that keeping Jillian in clothes was going to be something that was more difficult than keeping his hands off her for twenty-four years had been.

Sighing as he pushed himself to his feet, he headed off after her after retrieving his underpants and pulling them on. As comfortable as she might be in the buff, he couldn't quite say the same for himself. Besides that, he needed a shower in the worst way. Making a face, he trudged up the stairs and down the hallway. Jillian was lying on her stomach with her feet kicked up, legs crossed at the ankles. She wiggled her fingers at him, and he smiled, pausing long enough to kiss her forehead before heading off to the bathroom.

"Evan says congratulations," she said, covering the receiver with her hand.

Gavin chuckled. "Uh . . . yeah. Thanks," he replied."

She giggled, and he glanced over his shoulder in time to see her leaning to the side, unabashedly watching his retreat.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

"So he finally got his head out of his ass, huh?"

"Yes," Jillian replied with a self-satisfied smile. "He's officially my mate."

"About fucking time," Evan grumbled. "I was starting to worry for a minute."

"Sorry to get you all worried," she said.

"Nah . . . I'm happy for you."

"So when will you be back stateside?" Jillian asked, propping her cheek on the heel of her hand.

Evan sighed. "Soon enough," he replied. "Mike's all pissed off, though. Guess he didn't like that I canceled the first concert."

"Why'd you do that?"

Evan snorted. "You were supposed to fly in, remember? I wanted to be free for you if you needed me."

She smiled. "You're such a sweetie, Evan. I love you."

"Of course you do," he quipped. "You're a woman. Women *always* adore me."

"Do we?"

“Yes.”

She laughed. “You know why?”

“Because I’m hung?”

She rolled her eyes and laughed. “No, silly . . . because you sensitive and sweet.”

“Gah! Don’t say that kind of shit, Jill!” he grumbled.

“Well, you are,” she informed him. “Get over it.”

He snorted again. “The hell!”

“You’re going to make some woman very happy one day,” Jillian predicted.

“Fuck, yeah, I will! We’ll just stay in bed all the time,” he stated. “Nothing but fuckin’ fucking, twenty-four-seven—three hundred and sixty fucking five days a year . . .”

“I swear there’s something wrong with you,” she giggled.

“Keh! Nothing wrong with me . . . I just have a very healthy respect for all things deviant in nature.”

“You mean that you’re just plain bad,” she remarked.

“Same thing,” he agreed. “Anyway, I just wanted to make sure Wonderboy wasn’t fucking up all over again.”

“No . . . he’s made me a very happy Jill,” she assured him.

“Good . . . go-o-o-od.”

“Bye, Evan . . . love you.”

“Love you, too,” he replied.

The line went dead, and Jillian clicked it off with a happy little sigh. She could hear the steady drone of the shower in the bathroom just off the master bedroom, and she rolled over onto her back, debating whether or not she should sneak in there and surprise her new mate. Rolling off the bed, she sauntered over to the door and slipped inside.

Gavin was letting hot water stream into the tub while he used the shower stall beside it. With a giggle, she slipped the frosted glass door open and let her eyes roam over Gavin’s physique, completely appreciating every line, every hard plane of his body. “Damn, Gavvie . . . Any idea how badly I want you right now?”

Whipping around, he shot her a startled glance as his cheeks reddened despite the bashful, lopsided grin he shot her. “W-I . . . I-I’m drawing a bath for you,” he told her as he reached out to shut off the shower taps.

She giggled at his stammering. “So I see. Thank you.”

He took the towel she held out to him and wiped his face. “There was something I wanted to give you,” he said before he pushed the stall door open a little further and stepped out onto the threadbare old rag rug spread on the floor in front of the shower. “Why don’t you get into the bath, and I’ll get it.”

Jillian giggled and stepped into the steaming water. “Okay,” she told him.

Gavin blushed when he realized that she was staring at him quite unabashedly again. Snatching up his underpants, he started to pull them on.

“You know, Gavvie,” she began, raising her eyebrow meaningfully, “if you don’t stop putting those on all the time, I’m going to start shredding ever pair of brighty-whities you own.”

“W—I—you—Jilli!” he grumbled but let the underpants drop from his fingers. “You . . . you can’t go around shredding my underpants.”

“I could,” she argued pleasantly, crossing her arms on the edge of the tub and resting her chin on her nestled hands. “If you want to preserve the underpants . . .”

Snorting at her blatant threat, he strode out of the room, painfully aware that Jillian’s perusal, if his darkening blush meant anything. She supposed that after a lifetime of telling himself that he wasn’t really that much to look at that it might well take her awhile to get him accustomed to the idea that he certainly should be proud of the way he looked . . .

She leaned to the side as far as she could, craning her neck as she tried in vain to watch what Gavin was heading off to do. Opening the closet and hunkering down, she couldn’t make out his actions, and it was driving her crazy.

After what seemed to be an inordinately long time, he thumped the floor with the heel of his hand and stood up, pausing for several seconds to stare at—*something*—in his hands with a thoughtful frown on his features before he squared his shoulders, a strangely stubborn expression adding a heightened sparkle to the depths of his gaze as he strode back toward the bathroom. Jillian’s breath caught as he approached her. His wide shoulders . . . his undulating muscles . . . everything about him bespoke quiet strength, and she knew—just *knew*—that it wouldn’t matter how often she watched him: she’d never, ever grow tired of looking at that man—her *mate*.

Kneeling down beside the tub, he shot her a distinctly nervous little grin as a trace of his familiar reluctance infiltrated his expression. Swallowing hard, he had trouble meeting her gaze, and he cleared his throat a few times before he could manage to speak. “I-I-I . . . I got this for you, and . . .” He grimaced. “It’s not much. I-I’ll get you a better one—a *bigger* one—later . . .”

Chapter 27
Rash Decisions

Jillian snuggled against Gavin's chest and smiled into the darkness with a contented sigh. She was drowsing just a little since they'd just spent the seventh consecutive day in bed, or at least inside since Jillian adamantly refused to share him with anyone; at least, not yet. Gavin had grumbled sometime around noon that the ranch hands were never going to let him live this down later but he hadn't complained too much when she'd grabbed his hand to drag him back off to bed once more, either.

Running his claws lightly in small circles on her bare shoulder, he had his eyes closed but was smiling in that bashful sort of way that she adored. "I love you, Jilli," he murmured, as though he were afraid of breaking the silence.

That got her full attention, though, and she wiggled around to lean on his chest, gazing down at him as suspect moisture filled her eyes; as a telltale tingling prickled her nose. "Really?"

Gavin blushed and popped an eye open. "Well . . . yeah . . . did you think I didn't?"

She shook her head and squeaked out a little laugh. "No, but . . . really?"

"Of course I do," he mumbled.

Grasping his face between her hands, she peppered kisses all over his cheeks, his eyes, his lips. "I love you, too, Gavvie," she murmured between kisses.

He chuckled, slipping his arms around her to hold her just a little closer. "I'm sorry, Jilli. I . . . I really screwed everything up, didn't I?"

"No," she argued stubbornly, "and it doesn't matter now . . . but if you *want* to, I wouldn't be averse to hearing you say that every day . . ."

"Okay," he agreed with a warm laugh. "I'll . . . I'll tell you every day that I love you. How's that?"

She smiled, brushing her lips over his in a soft whisper of a kiss. "And I'll tell you that I love you, too."

"Yeah, you'd better love me all you can now, Jillian Zelig. When your father gets his hands on me, I think he'll kill me, for sure."

Jillian giggled since she'd been spending the better portion of the day trying to reassure the man that her father wasn't going to do any such thing. He obviously wasn't ready to believe that for himself, though . . . "Daddy wouldn't do that," she assured him. "Besides, you're my mate now. Daddy wouldn't kill you if it meant that I'd be hurt, too."

“Maybe not death, then,” Gavin agreed slowly. “Dismemberment, though . . . that’s entirely a possibility.”

“Oh, Gavvie . . .” Jillian sighed then giggled.

He heaved a sigh designed to let her know that he didn’t entirely subscribe to her belief that Cain wasn’t really interested in causing Gavin bodily harm. She snuggled against him again, nestling her temple against his shoulder, burying her face against his neck.

Cuddling with him was just too nice, she decided. Gavin kissed her forehead and held her tight. The feeling that she was completely protected cosseted her, and she couldn’t help the satisfied smile that twitched on the corners of her lips. “We’ll be together forever, right?” she mused.

Gavin nodded. “Yes.”

She giggled. “Good. I like the sound of that. I was thinking though . . .”

“Hmm?”

“Well, I know I said I wanted twenty babies—”

“Or more,” he added.

She giggled again. “Or more,” she agreed. “Anyway, I still want to have all those babies, but . . .”

“But?” he prodded.

“But . . . I mean, it *did* take *twenty* years to get you to agree to be my mate, after all, and while babies would be wonderful, maybe we should concentrate on each other for awhile.”

He chuckled. “So you’re saying you want to have me all to yourself?”

She nodded. “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying, Gavvie.”

He kissed her forehead again. “Okay, Jilli. Whatever you want.”

She laughed. “I’d also like to raise them here, on the ranch,” she admitted. “New York City isn’t really a place for children.”

“Yeah?” he questioned. He seemed surprised by her assessment, but he didn’t seem displeased by it, either.

Jillian sighed, toying with a lock of Gavin’s hair that had fallen over his shoulder. “I keep thinking about my childhood and how much fun it was to wander the forests and the beaches . . . I’d imagine you remember stuff like that, too?”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “I do.”

“So whenever you want to do it, we could move here, permanently.”

“Hmm, yeah . . . well, I still want to save money so that we can get this place going the way it should be,” he told her. “Besides, you have your modeling, and you can’t really do that from here.”

She wrinkled her nose and leaned up again to look him in the eye. “I thought I told you, Gavvie: I only became a model because you wouldn’t have me.”

He grimaced at the reminder despite the playfulness in her tone. “I’m sorry, Jilli,” he mumbled, cheeks pinking in the wan light of the moon filtering through the windows.

She shook her head and kissed his nose. “You’re lucky I adore you,” she informed him. “I do, you know.”

His smile dimmed just a little as a scowl stole over his features.

“Gavvie?”

Blinking quickly as though he’d been lost in thought, he shot her an odd, somewhat belligerent glance as his eyebrows drew together in a marked frown. “I-I . . . well, I just thought . . . you’re not *really* considering doing that *Playboy* thing, are you?”

It was Jillian’s turn to blink in surprise, and she slowly shook her head. “I thought you said you didn’t think I should do that,” she said slowly.

The stubborn look on his face became a little petulant as he snorted indelicately—an entirely foreign noise for him to make. “Yeah, I did,” he grumbled, his cheeks reddening just a little more. “Now I’m telling you, though . . . you’re not doing that, and if you do, I swear I’ll . . . I’ll kill someone . . .”

Gavin’s uncharacteristic show of high-handedness made Jillian laugh. She couldn’t help it. It was so strange to hear the man trying to be so tough, so domineering. His expression darkened as her giggles escalated into full-blown laughter, and every time she peeked at him only to see the mulish expression on his face growing steadily more irritated, she laughed harder. “Okay,” she choked out between fits of giggles. “I promise,” she went on.

He sighed, his scowl shifting into a clear show of disgruntlement. “I mean, you can model if you want. I don’t care if you do that, but . . . Jilli . . . no nudes, and . . . and I don’t really like the swimsuits, either.”

She wiggled closer, rubbing her cheek against his as she slipped her arm around his neck and buried her fingers in his hair. “Whatever you say, Gavvie,” she agreed.

“They treat you like crap,” he grumbled. “They treat you like you’re just an object . . . a mannequin or something.”

“It’s not as bad as all that,” she chided. “If you don’t like it, though, I’ll stop.”

“You could concentrate on your photography,” he suggested. “You’re really good at that.”

“I could,” she mused. “I’ve thought about it. I have lots of money already, right?”

Gavin sighed and smoothed her hair out of her face with a gentle hand. “Yes, you do,” he agreed.

“We can use it for the ranch, can’t we?” she asked, struck by the sudden inspiration that maybe they wouldn’t have to remain in New York City that long, after all.

“That’s your money,” he told her. “I make more than enough to take care of you and all that . . . just . . . put the money away and save it for your army of pups.”

“Army?” she echoed with a little giggle. “Army . . . I like that . . .”

“Go to sleep, Jillian,” he said with a wide yawn and a quiet chuckle. “You’re enough to kill me.”

She laughed, stifling a yawn with the back of her hand and effectively ending the protests she’d been thinking about spouting. As wonderful as her new mate was, she supposed he had to have his limitations . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

“I’m surprised you got a chance to get away,” Kagome said as she smiled sweetly and poured a cup of tea for her grandson.

Evan grinned unrepentantly when his grandmother—Granny K to him—tweaked the platinum stud earring he sported in his right nostril, scowling in mock irritation at the adornment. “Well, sure . . . You think I wouldn’t have time for my best girl?” he deadpanned.

“Your best girl, huh?” Kagome queried, cocking a black eyebrow at him.

“Yep . . . You . . . Mama . . . Jilli . . . Belle . . . I don’t discriminate. I love *all* my women.”

Kagome laughed. “You’re horrible, you know.”

“So I’ve been told,” Evan intoned with a lazy grin. “Where’s the old man?”

Slipping into a chair across from him, Kagome laughed. It really was amazing, he supposed. At over eighty-two years of age, the miko of legend still looked like a high school girl—maybe a college girl . . . ‘*The youkai fountain of youth*,’ he mused with a chuckle.

“He had a board of directors meeting,” she replied. “Hates them, but he really loves the school . . .”

Evan laughed outright at that. The idea of seeing InuYasha Izayoi in anything even closely resembling a business meeting was just a little more than he could rightfully think about without being vastly amused. “Does he wear a suit?”

Kagome rolled her eyes but giggled. “Kami, no,” she laughed. “He only dresses nicely for weddings.”

“Yeah, well, speaking of weddings . . . guess Gavin finally got off his ass and made Jillian his mate.”

“Really?” Kagome exclaimed, her gaze lighting up as her smile brightened. “That’s so wonderful!”

“Sure,” Evan drawled. “Just took him long enough.”

“Yes, well, he’s always been a very serious young man,” she mused. “A little *too* serious, if you ask me.”

“There’s that, too,” he allowed. “How’s Aunt Nezumi?”

Kagome sighed, her smile fading but not disappearing despite the marked tightening around her lips and eyes. “She’s all right: as well as could be expected. She wants everyone to treat her normally, but Ryomaru is still walking on eggshells around her.”

“Why’s that?”

Kagome shrugged, standing up to refill the tea cups. “He thinks she needs to be babied, I guess. It’s like he thinks she’s going to break . . . She doesn’t like it, though, and they’ve been disagreeing on it a lot. Morio’s been rather upset by everything, too, but he understands why they both feel the way they do.” She sighed, rubbing her temples in such a way that made Evan wonder just how much of the stress his grandmother was feeling. “It puts him in the middle, and I think it makes him feel even worse for it.”

“Ryomaru needs to do whatever it is that Nezumi wants,” Evan said simply, knocking back the tea that his grandmother had just refilled.

“As true as that may be, this is Ryomaru we’re talking about. He’s just as headstrong as your grandfather, and that means that it doesn’t matter, what someone tells him is best. He’ll still go by whatever he feels in his heart is the right thing, even if it isn’t what Nezumi needs or wants.”

Evan’s eyebrows disappeared under the fringe of his bangs. “Sounds like you and the old man have been facing off, too?”

Kagome wrinkled her nose and sat back with a sigh. “Something like that,” she ventured.

The soft click of the front door sounded, and moments later, Mikio slipped into the kitchen as he tugged on the necktie he wore. Casting Evan a curious glance, he shuffled over to kiss his mother’s cheek before bowing slightly to Evan and sitting down in one of the empty chairs. “Nice to see you, Evan,” Mikio said.

Evan blinked, snapping his mouth closed on the question that had been forming since he’d clapped eyes on his uncle. Pale and drawn, the hanyou looked like he was feeling somewhat ill. Reaching up to finger his twitching left ear, Mikio drew a deep breath and swallowed hard. Whether Kagome noticed or not, Evan wasn’t sure. He had a feeling that she didn’t since she didn’t start fussing over her youngest son, which was the norm whenever Kagome sensed that Mikio wasn’t feeling quite up to snuff. “You, too . . . holy damn, Mik, did you grow another foot or something?”

That brought some color back to Mikio’s pale cheeks. Scowling at the mug of tea that Kagome set before him, Mikio made a face, grumbling something akin to, “Aww, shut up, will you?” under his breath.

Evan chortled. He knew as well as anyone that Mikio wasn’t overly fond of being as tall as he was. Now as tall, if not taller, than Bas and Gunnar, Mikio was still on the lean side, which was probably the main reason for his irritation. Since he hadn’t been taught how to fight, he hadn’t quite developed the same sort of musculature that the rest of the men in the family had; not that Mikio was scrawny. Hell, no, not by any means. He simply wasn’t even close to being as brawny as Bas, and while he possessed muscle enough, it wasn’t in quite the same way that the rest of them did . . .

“I smell one of Gin’s pups,” InuYasha stated as he stomped into the house.

“Evan’s here!” Kagome said, hopping up to retrieve yet another tea cup from the cupboard.

InuYasha stepped into the dining room with a slight scowl on his face and his arms tucked together despite the missing fire rat haori that Evan was told used to be everyday wear for his grandfather back in the old days while he and Kagome were hunting down the evil hanyou, Naraku back in Sengoku Jidai.

“Oi, old man,” Evan greeted, slowly rising to his feet and offering his grandfather a respectful bow.

“Mikio, are you feeling all right? Maybe you should go lie down awhile,” Kagome suddenly said.

“I’m fine, Mama,” Mikio insisted, cheeks pinking a little more, though Evan had the distinct feeling it was caused more by irritation over his mother’s perceived fussing than over any sort of embarrassment.

“Are you sure? You’ve been rather peaked all week . . .”

“It’s nothing,” Mikio grumbled.

Kagome reached over to smooth Mikio’s hair then gently turned his face for her inspection. “You’ve got dark circles under your eyes. Are you sure you’ve been sleeping?”

“It’s fi—”

“Leave the pup alone,” InuYasha growled. “If he *says* he’s fine, he *is* fine, wench.”

“He doesn’t *look* fine, dog-boy,” Kagome shot back with a shake of her head.

“How was your meeting?” Mikio interrupted before his father could respond in kind.

“It was a meeting,” InuYasha stated, leaving no doubt in anyone’s minds as to what, exactly, the hanyou thought of those sorts of meetings. He snorted and sank down in the last chair at the table. “Keh! Thought you were off makin’ noise or whatever it is you call it,” he grouched, his steady gaze falling on Evan.

Evan laughed as he slipped back into his chair. “Yeah, I cancelled a couple shows. Jillie was going to fly in, but it seems that Gavin finally figured out what goes where, if you know what I mean.”

“Evan!” Kagome chastised, setting a cup of tea before her mate and hurrying back to pour steaming water into a cup of ramen.

“Yeah, well, I was starting to wonder,” Evan couldn’t resist pointing out. “I mean, I was really starting to think that maybe he needed a diagram to figure out where to stick his—”

“How long’s it been since you’ve had your ass kicked?” InuYasha cut in with a narrow-eyed glower.

Evan laughed. “To kick it you’ve got to catch it, old man.”

“Too damn much like your fucking father,” InuYasha grumbled under his breath.

“Keh! The hell I am,” Evan grumbled back.

“The next time you talk to Bas, tell him that Sesshoumaru hasn’t heard anything about that Mickey B,” Mikio interrupted, heading off the altercation that seemed to be brewing.

Evan snorted again, shaking his head to decline Kagome’s offer for a third mug of tea. “You mean he even called you about that shit?” He rolled his eyes. “Unbelievable. What a bastard . . .”

Mikio sighed. “He just called so to ask that I speak to Sesshoumaru since he hadn’t been able to reach him.”

“What’s this?” InuYasha demanded as Kagome handed him the cup of ramen and a set of chopsticks.

Evan snorted indelicately. “Jilli’s being stalked and everyone in the family thought that it would be a bad idea to tell me about it.”

“She’s being *what*?”

Evan sighed. “Some cocksucker’s stalking Jillian—sending her pictures and shit that he’s gotten inside her condo. They thought she’d be safer out in Montana with Wonderboy, but then he was screwing everything up five ways from Sunday . . .” He cracked his knuckles, his temper soaring all over again from simply thinking about the situation. “The bastard fucked with her rental car down in Cancun. It blew up when it hit a gas pump just after she dropped it off.”

InuYasha slowly shifted his gaze to meet Evan, his expression stony despite the marked brightness illuminating the golden depths. “Yeah . . . and why the hell didn’t they tell *me* that my granddaughter was in danger?”

“Bas and Gunnar are handling it, Papa,” Mikio cut in with a weary sigh. “They figured the less people who knew, the better off they’d be. They didn’t want to tip off the guy, and frankly, I don’t blame them.”

“Does this bastard know they’re in Montana?” InuYasha demanded.

Evan shrugged. “So far as I know? No . . . I don’t think he does . . . then again, I’m not kept in the loop, either.”

“Gavin . . . Gavin . . . that scrawny little pup?” InuYasha went on, rubbing his chin in a thoughtful sort of way.

“Well, not so scrawny anymore,” Evan allowed. “He’ll protect her, if it came down to it.”

InuYasha rolled his eyes. “Yeah . . . and you think I’ll trust my granddaughter’s safety to some pup who’s still a little wet behind the ears?”

“InuYasha . . .” Kagome began dubiously.

“Forget it, wench,” InuYasha growled. “I won’t sit by while some bastard’s out there threatening my granddaughter.”

Kagome sighed. “At least take Ryomaru with you,” she intoned.

InuYasha shook his head. “He needs to be here with Nezumi,” he said, carefully staring at Evan. “You can come with me,” he decided.

Evan blinked and glanced from his grandfather to his grandmother and back again. “Me.”

“Yes, you.”

“Why me?”

InuYasha sat back, crossing his arms over his chest and glowering past everyone at the sky outside the window. “Coulda sworn you were bitchin’ about being left outta everything,” InuYasha pointed out. “Besides, you’re not a half-bad tracker, and you know English better than I do.”

Evan stared at his grandfather for several seconds before breaking into a low chuckle. He had little doubt in his mind that his manager, Mike would have more than a few choice things to say about the delay in plans, but that was too bad. Family was more important, after all, and if Mike didn’t like that . . . Well, Evan was reasonably certain he could find someone else who would be more than happy to represent him . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

Jillian blinked, shielding her eyes with a hand to her forehead. It took a moment for her to adjust from the dimmer light inside the house to the start brightness of the day outside. For once, she was the one who had slept in, likely because she and Gavin were up until the wee hours of the morning. She’d taken her time bathing and selecting the perfect outfit for the day, settling on a white sundress that hung loose around her frame in gauzy waves. Her patience had run out, though, and she’d hurried outside to locate her missing mate since she wasn’t entirely sure that they’d spent enough time in solitude . . .

‘You’ve had the man to yourself for a whole week, Jillian,’ her youkai pointed out reasonably.

‘And I waited on him to get around to making me his mate for the better part of twenty years,’ she shot back. *‘I’m simply making up for lost time.’*

‘Oh, is that what you call it?’

She giggled to herself, stepping off the porch and running lightly down the steps as she hurried toward the open doors of the stable. ‘Yes.’

Hank sauntered out of the stable with Willow on a lead rope. The mare followed him in much the same way as Bassie’s dog, Badd followed him around the house. Jillian smiled as she ran over to intercept the foreman. “Hey, Hank! Have you seen my Gavvie?”

Hank stopped long enough to close the corral gate and unsnap the lead rope from the animal’s halter, patting her on the neck before turning back to face Jillian once more. “Your Gavvie? Aw, he’s in the birthing stable checking on the new foal that arrived while you two were holed up,” he teased, crossing his forearms on the high fence railing.

“Oh . . . then maybe I should leave him alone for awhile . . .”

Chuckling as he shrugged in a nonchalant sort of way, Hank shook his head. "You don't have to," he assured her. "He's just filling out a few papers and such."

"Papers?"

"Yup. I make sure the births go smooth, and he makes out the paperwork . . . at least when he's here. When he's not, I make Dax do it."

"What sort of paperwork?"

"Eh, you know . . . filing the animal's indentifying markings and all that jazz. He has to have all that on hand for insurance and stuff."

Jillian nodded slowly. She hadn't realized that running a ranch could be so involved, had she?

"You look happy. I'm glad," Hank mused.

Jillian leaned on the opposite side of the fence and smiled as her diamond engagement ring caught the sunlight and sparkled. "I *am* happy, thanks."

Hank chuckled, reaching over to grasp her hand, turning her fingers from side to side as he stared at the ring. "So he didn't get rid of it," he said, his voice implying that he had thought that maybe Gavin had.

"Why would he?"

Letting go of her hand and turning around to lean back against the fence, he shot her a sidelong glance before smiling absently into the distance. "He said he did," he answered simply.

"But I thought he just got it recently," she said slowly.

"What? Hell, no . . . he got that . . . oh, had to be at least . . . seven or eight years ago . . . just before his last year of college."

"He . . . really?"

"Mm," Hank grunted with a curt nod. "Yup . . . said he had to wait till you turned eighteen, was all. Your father told him that, I guess . . ."

Staring at the ring on her finger, Jillian frowned. He'd had the ring that long? The sting of tears prickled her eyelids, and she blinked quickly to stave them back. "Gavvie . . ."

Hank laughed suddenly, shaking his head as though he were remembering something or seeing something that Jillian didn't understand.

"What's so funny?" she finally asked.

Hank grinned at her. “Just thinking . . . that boy worked for years, saving every dime he got his hands on. Tried to talk him into buying ice cream all the time—he’s the only one who ever had any money, you know? It never worked. His mama ran him to the bank once a week so he could deposit every bit of money he had. Asked him more than once over the years, what he was savin’ for. He always said he didn’t know, but he always blushed something fierce, too.”

“Aww,” she murmured, a tender smile turning up the corners of her lips.

“Anyway, one year, he got grand champion in the junior rodeo. Hung onto that bull for nearly thirty-five seconds . . . I think he still holds the record in that division, too. Won five hundred dollars, and he slapped that into the bank, too.”

“What kind of lies are you spreading now?” Gavin drawled as he ambled out of the smaller stable off to the left. He was smiling, though, and he didn’t sound at all irritated. Jillian stared at him for a moment before sprinting toward him, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling him down to cover his face with kisses. “J-Jilli?” he stammered but didn’t push her away.

“I love you, love you, love you, Gavin!” she gushed, wrapping her arms around his neck as she hopped up to wrap her legs around his waist, “and I don’t want another ring, you hear? This one’s fine . . . It’s the only one I want.”

“Uh . . . o-o-okay,” he agreed, his expression a mix of acute embarrassment and complete confusion. “But it’s nothing,” he went on with a thoughtful scowl. “I can afford to get you a bigger diamond . . .”

“You will not,” she insisted firmly. “This is the only one I want, Gavin Jamison. Why didn’t you tell me you’d had it for years?”

His blush deepened, and he cleared his throat, glancing at Hank, who was busy coughing indelicately to cover his amusement. “W—I—d—does it matter?”

“Yes, it does,” she admonished. “You won a rodeo for me!”

He barked out a terse laugh at the reminder. “Uh, yeah . . . I guess I did.”

Quirking an eyebrow, Jillian leaned away enough to look him in the eye as a wicked glint lit her gaze. “Speaking of rodeos . . .”

His answer was a groan. “Do I want to hear what’s on your mind?”

“Why don’t you take me in the house and . . . ride me, cowboy?”

His mouth fell open as his cheeks reddened even more. “W—I—Jilli! That’s—”

He cut himself off when she arched an eyebrow in protest. “Uh . . . o-okay,” he agreed, altering his path as he headed toward the house once more.

Chapter 28
Discoveries

Jillian strolled out of the kitchen with a steaming mug of coffee clutched in her hands and wandered over to the glass doors that led to the back yard and the forest beyond. A hint of a smile played at the corners of her lips as she sipped the fragrant brew. The clouds that covered the sky threatened rain, but that was fine with her. Maybe she could talk Gavin into going on a long walk in it, providing that it wasn't storming. For some reason, he tended to get rather anxious when she suggested an excursion during a thunderstorm. She could feel the electricity in the air—she always felt it when a storm was coming.

Nearly two weeks of being mates . . . She laughed softly. It was still difficult to believe that Gavin Jamison really was her mate, and soon, he'd be her husband, too. "Jillian Jamison," she murmured as the smile on her face widened. *'I like the sound of that . . .'*

She'd wanted to run out the next day and get married in a civil ceremony at the local court house: anything just to have it done. Gavin, however, had pointed out that her family would probably be rather upset if she didn't have some form of a wedding, no matter how small, and while she'd tried to argue the logic in that, there was no arguing the week-long wait they'd have to endure while awaiting the results of the prenuptial blood tests. Luckily, Hank knew of a youkai doctor in nearby Helena who could do the test and thereby avoid humans getting a hold of the results and reacting accordingly.

She'd spent the better portion of yesterday on the telephone, inviting her family to the wedding that they were planning on having in just a couple weeks: Saturday, August 16, 2064, at two o'clock in the afternoon, to be exact. That way her family would have a better chance of being able to make it to the wedding since she wasn't about to wait any longer than she had to.

The steady gurgle of the old pipes in the house told her that Gavin was still taking his shower. She'd come down to start a pot of coffee for him, but since she was already downstairs, she ought to look online to see if she could figure out what sort of dress she wanted for the wedding. Since they were having it at the ranch, she wanted something simple. In fact, she wasn't at all certain she wanted any of the men wearing tuxedos, either . . . If she had her way about it, Gavin would be wearing faded jeans and his cowboy hat. Too bad she didn't think he'd go for that . . . As it was, she'd asked both Minnie and Karis to be her flower girls. Sherry had been thrilled, and the girls were excited. She'd take them all shopping early next week to buy their dresses, and Madison had been only too happy to be asked to be Jillian's maid of honor. Sydnie and Bellaniece would be the bridesmaids, and Moe had agreed to be Gavin's best man while Evan and Hank had grudgingly agreed to be the groomsmen, but only after Gavin had promised that they wouldn't have to wear tuxedos for the occasion.

Staring out the windows for another long moment, she turned around and shuffled over to the rough old desk. If she looked on the internet for ideas, she'd be better prepared when she went shopping with the girls since they didn't really have time to order anything since most everything that could be ordered would also need to be altered, as well.

She liked pale yellows and blues . . . Gavin said he didn't care, one way or the other, but Jillian figured she'd ask him for his opinion later . . . Opening his laptop, she pressed the 'power' button and got up to refill her coffee mug.

She poured a cup for Gavin, too, since he'd probably be down shortly. After dumping about four heaping table spoons of hot cocoa powder into her mug, she poured herself a cup, too. Grabbing both cups, she carefully walked back into the living room and set them on the desk. By the time she sat down again, Gavin's laptop was booted and ready to go.

'*Hmm, maybe I should check my email,*' she thought as she wiggled her fingers and hovered over the keys. At least, the one she kept private for family correspondence. Gavin had set it up for her awhile back so that her public email didn't get mixed in with the ones that mattered most to her. Opening the internet browser window, she typed in the URL of her internet web server. The page opened quickly enough, and she frowned for a moment as she tried to remember all of her login information. The email address was simple to remember: it was the name that her mother used to call her when she was little: Jilli-Belly, and her password? That was even simpler. 'G-A-V-V-I-E,' she mused as she keyed that in, too.

It only took a moment for her email account to load. Scrolling down through the messages from her mother and siblings, she clicked on one from her father. '*He'd better be good to your or else,*' was all Cain had written. It was enough to make her laugh. Her mother had sent a ton of links to various wedding dresses that she thought would suit Jillian. Sydnie wanted to know what color her dress was going to be since she was partial to pine green—it was Bassie's ceremonial color after all . . .

There was one email from someone she didn't know; the email one that wasn't familiar to her. Shaking her head and shrugging offhandedly, she clicked on the email, thinking that maybe it was one of her family members who had simply changed their email address.

'*Don't play with me, Jillian,*' the email said. Just below that was a link with the text: '*Click Here*'. It was signed, 'Mickey B.'

The name wasn't familiar at all, but she clicked the link, anyway. A blank window opened up, and the URL filled itself in: <http://www.jillian-zelig.usa>. The page loaded slowly, a black and white image of her that had been done recently for a layout in *Conte* magazine. She frowned. She hadn't realized that someone was starting up a new website. The disclaimer at the bottom of the first page gave her pause. '*The official site of Jillian Zelig... At home, at work, at play ...*'

'*Official site? I didn't know anything about it . . .*'

Brushing aside the initial line of questions, Jillian shook her head. Maybe Dan set up something that he had forgotten to tell her about, but she was sure that she had an official website already. She just never messed with it because she didn't have the time . . .

Clicking on the image linked to another page, and Jillian's eyes widened at the images of the interior of her condo—images that she didn't give anyone permission to take. Her living room, her kitchen . . . even the little sun room with the wicker furniture where she sometimes sat and drank tea in the morning . . . Her bedroom, her bathroom . . . and every one of those images seemed to be linked to . . . something.

Her hand paused as she hovered the cursor over the picture of her sun room. Biting the inside of her cheek, she pressed the button on the laser mouse and frowned. It was a picture gallery of everything in that room, and there were even pictures of her, sitting on the old wicker loveseat with her legs drawn up as she leafed through a magazine. She was wearing a pair of cutoff pink sweatpants and a white tank top with her hair piled on top of her head as though she'd just gotten finished working out. Maybe she had. So far as she knew, no one had ever been allowed to take pictures like that of her . . . Where had these come from?

With a choked little gasp, she clicked through some of the images and more of the webpages, her alarm growing with every single tap of her finger on the mouse.

"Hey, Jilli . . . what are you doing?" Gavin asked as he loped down off the stairs.

She shook her head, unable to form coherent thoughts as she stared at the computer in complete horror. The pictures of her doing various things in and around her home were disturbing enough, but the bathroom pictures . . . smoothing a shocked little cry of complete and utter outrage, she slowly turned to meet Gavin's gaze as he strode toward her. He must have seen the upset in her expression, because he quickened his pace, his eyebrows drawing together in a marked scowl, and with a muttered curse, his hand shot out to smack the laptop closed. "What the . . .?"

Hopping up, smashing herself against his chest, she shook her head again, squeezing her eyes closed as the pictures danced through her mind; pictures that she hadn't known even existed. Bad enough to be caught naked in the shower, she'd somehow been photographed masturbating, and that was the most mortifying aspect of the intrusion. That the website was on the internet for anyone to see . . . "It said it's an official site," she whimpered, burying her face against him as she tried not to panic. "It's not! I never . . . I wouldn't . . . Some guy named Mickey . . . He sent me this link through my private email, and . . . *How did they get those pictures?*"

Gavin grimaced. She didn't see it. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed the top of her head and sighed. "It's all right, Jilli. I know. Come on."

Scooping her up in his arms, he strode over to the sofa and sat down with her cradled against his chest. Smoothing her hair, kissing her forehead, her cheek, he held her tight and sighed again. "Listen, okay?"

She nodded, allowing the calm in his aura to soothe her. "Okay," she whispered, breathing in the familiar scent of him, willing herself not to think about those horrid pictures, trying not to think about the idea that millions of people could see them . . .

“I . . . I brought you here because there’s a man—Mickey B. He’s been threatening you. Your father and Bas and Gunnar . . . they’ve been trying to track this guy down so that he can’t hurt you. You understand?”

Pushing against him, she leaned away and winced. “Why . . . why would someone want to *hurt* me?”

He grimaced again. “He says he loves you,” Gavin explained gently. “Don’t worry, okay? I’ll call Bas. We’ll get that website taken down immediately. Trust me?”

Staring into his aqua eyes, she nodded once before cuddling against his chest again. “That’s why you brought me here . . .” she repeated. “He’s a stalker, isn’t he?”

Gavin flinched. “Yeah.”

“To protect me . . . my hero.”

He cleared his throat before answering her. “Yeah,” he said. “Why don’t you go upstairs and read a magazine or something? I’ll be up in a minute.”

She held onto him for another long moment then forced herself to let go of him. “All right,” she agreed slowly. “You’ll take care of it?”

“Absolutely,” he promised.

“Okay,” she agreed reluctantly. “You’ll come upstairs after you talk to Bassie?”

“Yeah,” he promised. He kissed her gently, and she drew a deep breath as she stood up and headed for the stairs.

‘A . . . *stalker* . . .?’

Flinching, she made herself ascend the staircase. She could hear Gavin reloading the computer and sighed. As much as it irked her that he and apparently everyone else had wanted to keep her in the dark, she couldn’t help but feel a little grateful. If she’d known all along about this Mickey B, she never would have been able to relax at all.

‘*Gavvie will take care of that website,*’ she told herself over and over. ‘*He has to . . . and he promised . . .*’

He would, wouldn’t he? She shook her head. Of course he would. Gavin always took care of her, and now that he was her mate . . .

He’d protect her from anything and anyone. She didn’t have a doubt in her mind.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

InuYasha heaved a frustrated sigh and scowled at the unfamiliar forest. He'd called and talked to Bas before leaving Japan. His grandson had maintained that the man they were looking for seemed to be human, though he wasn't positive. InuYasha wasn't so sure he agreed. After being told that there'd been a strange sort of electrical current that had knocked out all the cameras in the parking garage beneath the hotel a few days before Jillian's car exploded, he had to wonder. He'd seen way too many strange things over the years to discount anything . . .

And he could *smell* youkai, all right—several of them, actually. Evan and he had been scouring area surrounding the J and H Ranch for the last three days in the hopes of figuring out if anyone who didn't belong on the ranch had been there. So far, though, they'd been absorbed in trying to figure out whose scent was whose. It seemed that all ten men who worked on the ranch were youkai with the exception of the young man who was working on the vehicles. InuYasha was of the opinion that they ought to just barge right in and sniff them all, but Evan kept insisting that Jillian shouldn't be told. "*It'd be too hard to explain why we're here,*" he said. "*I'm supposed to be on tour, and you're . . . you're supposed to be . . . somewhere . . .*"

Evan peered over his shoulder. He'd been studying some footprints left in the soft ground thanks to the rain that had been both a blessing as well as a hindrance. It had washed away some scents, InuYasha was certain, but it had left the ground soft enough to bear the footprints . . . "Something doesn't feel right," he ventured, lifting his gaze heavenward. "Something in the air . . ."

"Shoulda gone down to Cancun and sniffed around the garage."

Evan shook his head. "You think that we'd be able to find anything there? That was weeks ago, and they weren't there long enough to leave a lasting scent."

"Keh."

"I can smell that bobcat-youkai—Hank, I think his name is," Evan went on, "and that cougar-youkai, too . . ."

"So all his fucking hands are youkai?" InuYasha grumbled as he hunkered down beside Evan.

"No humans, though," Evan admitted with a sigh. "At least, none other than that squirrely guy that works on the trucks . . ."

"Cougar . . . bobcat . . . boar . . . fire . . . eel . . . raccoon . . . bat . . ." InuYasha snorted. "*Damn it!*"

"Unless the guy doesn't know where Jillian is . . ."

InuYasha shook his head slowly, crossing his arms under the copious folds of the fire-rat haori he'd taken out of retirement for the occasion. "If he tracked her down to Cancun, then he fucking *knows* where she is now."

Evan didn't reply, but the look on his face told InuYasha plainly that he was thinking the exact same thing . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Bas drummed his claws on the top of his highly polished desk as he waited with a marked scowl for Gunnar to answer his cell phone. "Come on, damn it," he grumbled impatiently, shooting out of his chair and pacing the length of his study and back again.

"Fine greeting," Gunnar said rather blandly.

Bas heaved a sigh, jaw twitching in irritation that he was fighting to contain. "There's a website."

"A what?"

"A website. Mickey B's put up a website. I'm downloading it now. The server will pull it as soon as I call them back."

"A website. What's on the website?"

"What the hell do you *think* is on the website?" Bas growled.

"Yeah, I figured," Gunnar agreed.

"We got a lead, though. That's why I'm calling. You still in New York City?"

"Yep."

"Good . . . due to the nature of the site, they're going to release the information on the site registrant to Dad. He's on the phone with them right now getting it. Anyway, Dad called long enough to tell me to have you stay put. We're going to scope him out. If he's youkai, you're to grab him. If he's human, then you watch him until the warrants are issued for his arrest."

Gunnar sighed. "Yeah, okay. How'd you find the website?"

Bas grimaced, recalling his brief phone call with Gavin. "Jilli found it."

". . . Shit."

"No shit."

"All right. Keep me posted."

"Yeah."

Snapping his phone closed, Bas wiped his eyes and let out a deep breath. He'd thought the photos that the bastard had emailed were bad, but no . . . those were nothing in comparison to the ones he'd uploaded to that God-forsaken website . . . A million images of Jillian flashed through his mind: the smiling baby who had grown into a pesky little sister that he wouldn't trade for the world had finally blossomed into a beautiful young woman who everyone wanted to protect . . . To have let this entire thing go on so long . . . It was unconscionable . . .

'Patience,' he told himself, restraining the urge to rip something to shreds. Glancing at Triumvirate, his sword, hanging over the fireplace, he clenched his jaw and cracked his knuckles. If there was a God, then Mickey B. would prove to be youkai, after all . . .

He could always hope, couldn't he?

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin kept his gaze trained on the television screen, purposefully pouring all of his concentration into the new video game that Jillian had bought him, along with a gaming system and a new plasma screen television for the bedroom. He was leaning back against the headboard with Jillian cuddled on his lap with her head on his shoulder having fallen asleep awhile ago. She was happy enough, it seemed, to be held while he stayed up as late as he wanted to play the game.

Truth was, after everything that had happened in the day, there was no way Gavin could sleep. Too keyed up waiting for Bas or Cain to call, he hadn't bothered to try lying down. With as upset as Jillian had been, there wasn't a chance in hell he'd be able to sleep, even if he wanted to .

..

Though she'd tried to hide her worry all day, he'd sensed it; he'd seen it in her eyes when she thought he wasn't looking. To distract her, he'd taken her into town to go shopping where she'd purchased the games and things. The way she'd continuously kept glancing around, though, had convinced him that it had been a colossally stupid idea on his part, and after a half-hearted attempt to distract her, he'd taken her back to the ranch, spending the rest of the day on horseback with her nestled before him. Only then had she regained a semblance of calm.

He sighed. He hadn't wanted to tell her about Mickey B, and he certainly hadn't wanted her to find out about him in that way. He couldn't help but feel as though he'd failed her. 'Never again,' he vowed, pausing his game and setting the controller aside so that he could push Jillian's hair out of her face and kiss her cheek tenderly. 'Never again, Jilli . . .'

His cell phone vibrated on the nightstand. He'd turned the ringer off so that it wouldn't wake Jillian. Carefully shifting her onto the bed, he pulled the coverlet over her and grabbed the phone before striding out of the room, glancing back at the clock to check the time. 'Three in the morning,' he read with a grimace. 'Let this be something good . . .'

“Hello?” he answered as he hurried down the hallway toward the stairs.

“Hey, Gavin . . . Sorry to call so late,” Cain said. He sounded infinitely tired and so completely unlike himself that Gavin grimaced.

“No, it’s fine,” Gavin hurried to say. “Any word?”

Cain sighed. Gavin could hear the soft snick of a lighter seconds before Cain exhaled. “The site’s been pulled, and I got all of the guy’s information. He’s human, unfortunately. Some eccentric guy who works via the internet for Sunsoft Systems . . . a computer software designer . . . Trouble is, he’s not been home. Gunnar and Bas are working on getting a search warrant for his house.”

“Human.”

“Yes. The prosecuting attorney said that there’s a rock solid case against him, though, so there’s no way he’ll get near Jillian, providing we can intercept him.”

“Good.”

“How’s she doing?”

Gavin dug a bottle of water out of the refrigerator and popped the seal around the cap with a vicious twist. “Sleeping . . . she’s worried. I just . . . I couldn’t keep it from her. When she found the site . . .”

“Yeah. Don’t let her worry.”

“I won’t.”

“I’ll call if anything happens.”

“Thanks.”

Shutting off the phone with one hand, Gavin drank down half the bottle of water. He ought to be more pleased that everything was coming to a head. Still he couldn’t quite shake the feeling that it wasn’t as simple as it seemed. Something just wasn’t right . . .

He’d gone over everything a thousand times if he’d gone over it once. When he’d come downstairs only to find Jillian so obviously upset, he hadn’t known exactly what to do. The very idea that she’d be so upset over the situation sickened him. He’d hated seeing the panic in her expression, couldn’t stand the worry darkening her gaze.

“It’s not! I never . . . I wouldn’t . . . Some guy named Mickey . . . He sent me this link through my private email, and . . . How did they get those pictures?”

Chapter 29
Mickey B.

Jillian glanced up from the photography magazine she'd been reading when the sound of an unfamiliar vehicle cut through the serenity of the late morning air. Tilting her head to the side, she frowned in concentration as she tried to figure out just who was in the car. The windows were rolled up so she couldn't smell anything from the distance, but she could vaguely discern the darkened outlines of the driver and the passenger.

Gavin stepped out to the threshold of the stable where he'd been busy mucking out stalls. Leaning in the doorway, he lifted a hand to wave to the occupants of the car. Seeing his actions, Jillian relaxed.

The tan rental car pulled in beside the trucks and stopped. Jillian slowly set the magazine on the chair beside her and wandered down the steps leading into the yard.

"Jilli!" a familiar voice rang out followed by a high pitched giggle as a blur of black hair rushed toward her.

Jillian giggled as her might-as-well-be cousin, Charity rushed over to hug her. Charity's twin, Chelsea wandered over, too, and with a bright smile, she hugged both Jillian and Charity. "Congratulations, Jill!" Chelsea said. "So you finally got him!"

"Yes, I did!" she replied. "Anyway, you two are the first to arrive! Let me show you around."

Linking arms with each of her cousins, Jillian led the way toward the barn.

"Hi, Gavvie," Chelsea said, letting go of Jillian's arm long enough to kiss Gavin's cheek.

Jillian giggled as Gavin's skin exploded in crimson color. "H-hi," he stammered.

"You're such a cutie," Chelsea went on, patting Gavin's face in a playful sort of way.

Gavin's blush darkened. Mumbling something about checking fences, he leaned in quickly to kiss Jillian's cheek and hurried out of the stable.

"I guess some things never change," Chelsea remarked, watching Gavin's hasty retreat with a completely unrepentant grin on her pretty face.

"I love how shy he is," Charity commented. "It's just cute."

Jillian rolled her eyes. "Of course he is! He's my Gavvie! Now this is the main stable—you can find the sweetest guys in here—"

“Geez, Jilli, trying to sell us?” a shirtless Dax grumbled as he ambled past with a pair of work gloves in one hand and a box of fencing nails in the other. A hammer was caught through one of his belt loops, drawing his faded, ragged jeans down precariously low on his lean hips. He shot the Jillian and her cousins a secretive little smile and tipped his hat as he shuffled out of the stable.

“He had really pretty eyes,” Chelsea remarked as they watched the retreating youkai. “Among . . . other things . . .”

Jillian laughed and nodded. Dax’s light brown eyes were striking, she had to admit. Then again, she was rather partial to aqua ones, herself . . . “Oh! Be careful around that horse,” she went on, pointing at Waterspell, who was pawing the ground angrily and looked like he would rather be anywhere than where he was, but Gavin and Hank had brought him in so that they could let the riding horses that were normally kept in this stable into the paddock while the stalls were being mucked out. “Gavvie says he’s dangerous.”

Charity took a step back and nodded. “He doesn’t look too friendly,” she agreed.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Chelsea commented. “I think he’s beautiful.”

“You would think that,” Charity shot back then grinned.

Jillian laughed. It’d been a long time since she’d gotten to spend any real time with her family—*too* long. Maybe now that she was getting married everything could slow down a little . . .

“So we’re the first ones to arrive?” Charity asked, drawing Jillian out of her reverie.

“Yes . . . Madison’s supposed to be here later today, though . . . she said that Evan was busy at the moment but that he’ll be here in time for the wedding . . . Uncle Ryomaru and Aunt Nezumi with Belle and Kichiro should be here Thursday . . . Grandma said she and Grandpa would be flying in with your mom and dad, and Uncle Sesshoumaru and Aunt Kagura should be here right after . . .”

Charity sighed. “It’d be so much easier if they didn’t have to take separate planes,” she mused, referring to the idea that Sesshoumaru and her father, Toga couldn’t fly in together.

Jillian was inclined to agree. It made sense to her, certainly. The tai-youkai and his heir were not allowed to travel on the same plane together in much the same way as the president and vice president didn’t. It insured that if something happened to one of them, then the other would be able to take over the duties of the office. It made planning trips that much more difficult, though, since that also meant that Cain and Bassie were never able to take the same plane, either.

“I suppose it can’t be helped,” Jillian mused.

Charity nodded. “Yeah . . . anyway . . . tell me! Have you chosen your dress yet?”

“Um . . . no,” she confessed. “I figured I’d go tomorrow. One of the shops in Helena said that they’re expecting a few new arrivals, so I wanted to hold off on buying one until I see what they get in.”

Chelsea wrinkled her nose, but she kept looking over her shoulder in a distracted sort of way. “You ought to call some of your designer friends. Bet they could get you something spectacular.”

“Maybe . . . I wanted something a little more casual, though,” Jillian confessed. “A country wedding, I suppose.” Smiling suddenly, she clapped her hands. “Why don’t the three of us go into town and do a little shopping? The florist said that she’d be getting some fresh samples in that I wanted to see, and Gavin doesn’t like me to go into Hidekea by myself . . .”

“That sounds like fun,” Charity insisted. “Oh, you know, there are a lot of really gorgeous indigenous flowers in this region . . . if you want a country wedding, then maybe you should go for ones that are normally found around here.”

Jillian laughed. Charity was a botanist, which was part of the reason that she was currently living in the United States. She’d gotten a job for one of the leading pharmaceutical companies doing independent study on the effects of certain drugs on the ecological environment though she was currently studying to attain her PhD at Rutgers University in Newark. In Jillian’s opinion, Charity was obsessed with all things green and growing, but in an entirely endearing way.

Chelsea, on the other hand, was completely and totally a city girl. Having been born and raised in Tokyo, it had surprised her that New York City was so much smaller than what she was accustomed to. Unable to stand the thought of staying behind when her sister decided to move to the States to further her education and career, Chelsea had packed up and come along. She ran a thriving events planning business and always seemed to be traveling here or there, so it had thrilled Jillian when Chelsea had promised that she’d make it to her wedding, for sure.

“You know, I’m kind of tired. All that traveling,” Chelsea said suddenly. “Why don’t the two of you go on without me? I think I’m just going to lie down awhile . . .”

Jillian blinked. “If you’re sure . . .”

Chelsea nodded, smiling brightly as she gave Jillian another quick hug. “Sure . . . Go on.”

“Okay,” Jillian agreed slowly. “If you’re feeling up to it, Charity . . .”

Charity giggled, her little black hanyou ears twitching in a rather excited sort of way. She was just itching to go scrounging around the local foliage, Jillian could tell. “Let’s go!”

“All right . . . let me just tell Hank where I’m going so Gavin doesn’t worry.” Darting over to catch Hank’s arm, she smiled when he peered over his shoulder at her. “I’m going to run into town with Charity to look at flowers for the wedding, so if Gavin asks . . .”

“I’ll tell him you came to your senses and decided to leave his miserable hide,” Hank assured her.

Jillian made a face but laughed. “Thanks, Hank . . . oh!” Reaching over, she nabbed Chelsea’s hand and dragged her over. “This is Chelsea. She’s staying here, though, because she’s a little tired. Chelsea, if you need anything, just ask him. He can take care of you.”

“I can?” Hank drawled, turning around and leaning back against the stall he’d been repairing.

“Yes, you can,” Jillian insisted.

Hank shot her one of his patented lazy half-grins as he tipped the brim of his Stetson. “Yes, ma’am.”

Jillian grabbed Charity’s hand and dragged her toward the doors again. “Bye, Chelsea! Bye, Hank! Don’t forget to tell Gavvie!”

“Not a problem,” Hank called after her.

Chelsea stepped back, smoothing her short black suede skirt as she slowly smiled at the bobcat-youkai. “So . . .” she finally said, “you’re a cowboy, huh?”

Hank chuckled. “And you’re a city girl.”

Her smile widened as her gaze slipped down his frame and back up once more in a very deliberate way. “Pleased to meet you . . . *Hank*.”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin snapped the cell phone closed and jammed it into his breast pocket before reigning in the horse and scowling at the landscape. Three days since Mickey B. put up that website, and despite the site being pulled off the internet, Gavin couldn’t help feeling completely frustrated. Gunnar hadn’t had any luck thus far in locating the bastard: he hadn’t returned to his house as yet. The search warrants had just come through yesterday, and the police detectives had done a thorough job in ripping the place to shreds. By the time Gunnar was able to get inside, anything that might have helped them had been destroyed or taken, and there’d been so many humans scavenging around the house that he hadn’t even been able to get a good handle on Mickey’s scent, either.

What did they know? Gavin sighed. They didn’t know much, actually. Mickey B—or more precisely, Michael Bingerman—had either figured out that he was about to be caught or he was damn lucky. A thirty-nine year old software developer had apparently led an unremarkable life thus far, but according to Gunnar, the remnants of what appeared to have been a sick sort of shrine dedicated to all things Jillian Zelig. The scattered remains left by the detectives had horrified Gunnar. The menagerie of images that had been so meticulously arranged in a circular pattern around a central motif of a picture that had appeared in a magazine awhile back: Jillian in a designer wedding dress. A six inch dagger was embedded in the network of photographs in

a very clear message. In the end, Gunnar had photographed the macabre mosaic. He'd just sent the picture to Gavin, which was the main reason that Gavin was sorely pressed not to completely lose his composure.

'Damn it . . .'

He'd sorely love to get his hands on that bastard, no doubt about it. There was no way in hell he'd be able to calm down until Michael Bingerman was behind bars . . .

It didn't help, either, to tell himself that everyone was moving as quickly as they could. He couldn't help but gnash his teeth at the idea that Mickey B. had somehow managed to slip between their fingers, and that, more than anything, grated on his nerves. He'd protect Jillian, certainly. In the end, that was all that would really matter . . .

"Gavin!"

Turning in the saddle and lifting his hand to wave, he waited for his father to catch up with him.

It didn't take long for Moe to reach Gavin. Riding one of the few horses that Moe kept for sport, he reigned in beside his son and hefted an eyebrow at the disgust showing in Gavin's countenance. "Now that doesn't look like the face of a man who's about to get married."

Gavin sighed. "Yeah . . ."

"What's up?"

"They've figured out who is stalking Jillian, but they can't find him," he admitted.

Moe nodded. "Cain called me. Asked me to keep an eye on things."

"I can protect her just fine," Gavin grumbled.

"Didn't say you couldn't, Gav. Doesn't hurt to have someone else watching out, too, though."

Stifling a growl of frustration, Gavin raked a hand over his face, unable to contain the growl that escaped him. "Sorry," he muttered.

Moe shrugged. "Cain said something else, too."

"What's that?"

"He said InuYasha's out here. Been out here awhile, I guess."

"What?"

"Now don't blow your stack, boy," Moe chided. "He's just making sure your mate—his granddaughter—is safe."

Gavin didn't reply, but he couldn't help the glower that he shot his father.

"Just wanted to let you know. Now stop worrying about everything and spend some time enjoying your wedding."

Gavin could appreciate what his father was trying to do: telling Gavin all of this in an effort to reassure him that it was okay to let his guard down a little and relax. As if he could do that. If he let his guard down while Jillian was in danger . . . well, he'd be damned before he'd ever let that happen . . .

His cell phone rang, and he sighed, dragging the device out of his pocket and heaving a sigh. "Hello?"

"Gavin, can you talk?"

"Sure, Cain. What's up?"

Cain cleared his throat. "Bas ran a check on Bingerman's credit card. He bought two plane tickets: one is a round trip from JFK International to Helena. The other is a one way from Helena back to JFK."

"Son of a . . . when?"

"The plane should have arrived in Helena the day he disappeared."

"Three days ago," Gavin muttered. "Damn it!"

"Don't let Jillian out of your sight."

"Yeah," Gavin said, pulling the reins to turn the horse back toward the house. "Have you notified the police?"

"Bas is taking care of that as we speak. I'm sure the New York City authorities are on it, but we wanted to make certain."

"Okay. Thanks."

Clicking the phone off, he nudged the horse into a full-out gallop. Moe fell in beside him. "What's going on?"

Casting his father a cursory glance as he leaned in closer to the horse, he grunted, not entirely sure he could trust himself to speak just yet. "Bingerman's in Montana," he gritted out. "I've got to go find Jilli."

“I’ll go find InuYasha,” Moe said, abruptly veering off to the left. Gavin didn’t bother to respond as he leapt off the horse. The beast would go straight home, and Gavin could run faster than the animal could . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“So you and Granny K. really never hooked up back on your side of the well?”

InuYasha rolled his eyes, cheeks pinking as his scowl darkened, and he snorted in response. “Keh! Keep movin’, will you?”

Evan chuckled and kept moving, fingering the leather wrapped hilt of his sword as the two made the round along the perimeter of the estate. True enough, Cain and the others knew that InuYasha was here. They didn’t know, though, that Evan was with him. Evan hadn’t wanted to tell them, and InuYasha didn’t question his reasons. All in all, it was easy enough to keep secret though Evan was starting to wonder whether or not they really needed to be here . . .

Still it did help to make him feel a lot less useless. At least here he felt as though he really was helping to protect his sister, despite what his father and brother believed.

“You know, I think this is the longest I’ve gone in . . . well, forever . . . without getting laid,” Evan quipped.

InuYasha snorted again, stopping long enough to drape his hands on his hips to glower at his grandson. “I fucking swear your damn father dropped you on your fucking head,” he grumbled.

Evan grinned. “Cain says I take after Mama . . . which means, what? She takes after . . . you?”

“Move it, pup, or I’ll—”

Evan didn’t get to hear the rest of that threat. InuYasha cut himself off as his head snapped to the side. Darting to the edge of the line of trees, he peered at the road that ran along the western border of the ranch. Evan sauntered over to take a look, too. “It’s that car again,” Evan muttered with a marked frown. The same dark blue Franklin Astrid sedan had driven past a few times in the last couple days. At first it hadn’t been anything worth noting, outside of the fact that very few vehicles ever ventured down this way, but today . . .

The car pulled off the road, and the single inhabitant leaned to the side to retrieve something.

The car had crept up and down the road often enough that it looked suspicious, and when the driver’s side door opened, Evan narrowed his eyes. Decked out all in black that didn’t really serve to make him look any less chunky, the man’s ruddy skin clashed with what was left of his orangey-red hair, and he paused long enough to fish a kerchief out of his pocket to wipe his perspiring face. The pudgy little man that got out was holding what looked to be a camera bag, and he slowly looked around before he scurried toward the trees. *‘Human . . .’*

InuYasha didn't reply. Too intent on watching the vehicle, he didn't move a muscle, and he didn't blink. The man stopped long enough to retrieve a pair of wire cutters from the black bag, snapping through the fence that surrounded the ranch quickly and efficiently. He'd been scoping out the place all those times he'd driven past, trying to figure out the best point of entrance, Evan supposed. Damn *his* rotten luck. He obviously hadn't expected a welcome committee, now had he?

"Maybe he's paparazzi," Evan murmured, narrowing his gaze on the black leather bag slung over the man's shoulder. Then again, he doubted it. He'd been in the business long enough to know that ninety-five percent of the security leaks regarding celebrities' doings were done on purpose to gather publicity without looking like attention whores or inadvertent leaks from loose lipped staff. Jillian's manager was too upstanding to have let anything of that nature slide, and the family sure as hell hadn't leaked a damn thing . . .

"Follow him," InuYasha stated flatly. Evan nodded, understanding his grandfather's curt instruction. InuYasha sprang up into the tree branches to circle around to the other side, leaving Evan alone to track the man on the ground.

Creeping through the forest, Evan deliberately drew in a deep breath, memorizing the man's scent. He wasn't sure what to think of this guy, but it didn't matter, really. The man was trespassing, for starters, and that black bag . . . Whoever he was, he certainly wasn't going to get away with whatever he was doing.

The man hurried as quickly as he could without actually running. It wasn't very fast, and Evan couldn't help but think that humans, on the whole, were sadly slow creatures. He moved without making more than a whisper of sound—entirely indiscernible to human ears, he was sure. Neither he nor InuYasha had bothered with shoes. InuYasha had told him long ago that wearing shoes was a hindrance in tracking. Given to slipping on damp grass or muddy ground, entirely too clumsy to be of any real benefit, the noise factor was also something to be leery of. All things considered, Evan wholeheartedly agreed, opting to run around without shoes whenever he possibly could.

Glancing up, he noted that his grandfather was moving parallel to the man. Catching Evan's gaze, InuYasha nodded. Evan slowed and moved in behind the man as InuYasha sped up just enough to get ahead of him before he dropped from the treetops directly into his path.

The man gasped and stopped short, his chest heaving as he struggled to breathe as Evan slipped in behind him, barring his path should he think to run away.

"Who the fuck are you?" InuYasha demanded, crossing his arms over his chest as the sleeves of his haori stirred in the summer breeze.

The man didn't answer though whether that was because he was flat out refusing or because he was completely winded, Evan couldn't say.

"Answer me, damn it!" InuYasha snarled.

“Who are you?” the man countered. Evan grimaced, figuring that was anything but a wise move on the human’s part.

He was right. InuYasha lifted his fist, cracking his knuckles one finger at a time in a blatant threat. The man took a step back in retreat as Evan crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against a stout tree trunk. He was pretty sure that the man hadn’t even realized he was standing behind him. Then again, if he was standing there in front of an obviously irate InuYasha Izayoi, he didn’t figure he’d be paying a hell of a lot of attention to his surroundings, either. “Now tell me who the hell you are!”

Clutching the black bag against his chest, the man started to back away. He took three steps before he carted around to run back the way he’d come. He gasped when he came face to face with Evan but didn’t stop running. Evan stuck out his leg, tripping the man and sending him sprawling face down on the damp forest floor. In a blur of movement, InuYasha shot forward, drawing Tetsusaiga from its magnolia wood sheath and leveling it dead center of the man’s chest as he groaned and finally flopped onto his back. His gaze took in the sword and moved no further. He swallowed hard as Evan pushed himself away from the tree to retrieve his black leather bag.

The camera broke with an unearthly loud crack, and the bits of plastic painted to resemble metal fell out of Evan’s hand, dropping on the interloper’s chest. Evan stuck his hand into the bag once more, this time pulling out a tattered picture of Jillian jogging through Central Park. Her hair was caught up under a hat, and it was difficult to see her face. Still it was Jillian. There was no doubt about that.

InuYasha didn’t move his sword, letting the tip of it hover mere inches above the man’s throat. “Now fucking tell me who the hell you are,” he snarled.

The neigh of a horse cut through the afternoon quiet. Evan leaned to the side far enough to see Moe Jamison tying a horse to a nearby tree. He loped over, taking in the scene without a change in expression. “What’s going on?” he asked at last.

“He’s trespassing,” Evan said simply, nodding his head to indicate the man on the ground.

Moe nodded slowly before turning his attention back onto the strange human. Narrowing his eyes, he stepped closer. “Bingerman?” he finally asked though the question held very little true inquiry.

The man’s eyes flared wide, and his face paled remarkably. He tried to recover his composure, such as it was, but it was too late. The hunter who had made a career out of reading people’s faces, their body language, knew the truth when he saw it. Pulling a cell phone out of his pocket, he checked it then frowned. “Keep him here,” Moe grumbled. “I’ll call the police.

“Who the fuck is he?” InuYasha snarled, well past the limits of his temper.

Moe turned to go, tossing back over his shoulder, “He’s the stalker—Mickey B.”

That got Evan's attention quickly enough. Every muscle in his body stiffened, and he had to remind himself that the man was only human and would likely be left to the human authorities to be dealt with; not that it sat well with him, and judging from the look on InuYasha's face, it wasn't sitting well with the hanyou of legend, either . . .

"Fucking bastard," InuYasha growled, eyes glowing with an unnatural light as he held Tetsusaiga trained on the man's neck. The tip of the sword wavered slightly, and Evan grimaced.

"Old man," he said quietly with a shake of his head.

InuYasha shot Evan a dark look but grunted in response. The sword steadied, and Evan clenched his hands into tight fists. It was all too easy to feel InuYasha's frustration. It crackled in the air like electricity.

Moe ran back and shook his head. "They'll be here shortly," he informed them without preamble. "Zelig said he'd tried to call you but your phone was out of range." Casting Evan an assessing glance, he nodded once. "Didn't know you were here," he commented.

"Yeah . . . I didn't tell Cain," Evan replied simply.

"Y-you're mistaken," the man squeaked out, obviously thinking that Moe was a little more neutral than either InuYasha or Evan. "I—"

Moe nudged Mickey B. with the toe of his boot. "You're in a heap big shit. If I were you, I'd shut up." He shrugged. "Then again, don't . . . go ahead and hang yourself right here and now."

InuYasha growled as he hefted the sword away and dropped it into the scabbard. In a blur of motion, he grabbed the man's shirt and hauled him to his feet, giving him a rough little shake before shoving him back, straight into Evan's chest. "Go near my granddaughter again, and I swear I'll rip you apart," he snarled.

Evan would have laughed outright if he hadn't been so irritated, himself. The man squeaked out a harsh little sound and pushed away from him. He'd already seen one demonstration of Evan's power, he supposed. A bit of the plastic camera casing fell from the folds of Mickey B.'s shirt in silent testimony.

"You two have this under control?" Moe asked, alternating looks between InuYasha and Evan.

"Keh."

Moe nodded. "I'm going to go back and tell Gavin that he's been caught, then," he stated. "Just wait here. I told the police where you were."

That said, Moe Jamison turned on his heel and walked away.

Evan grabbed Mickey B.'s arm and propelled him back toward the road. "Move it," he growled.

InuYasha watched his grandson escorting the stalker away and narrowed his eyes. His scowl deepened as he shifted his gaze around the forest and slowly started walking, too.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

"What the hell do you mean; she went into town with her cousin?" Gavin bellowed, temper snapping as he rounded on Hank in the stable.

Hank shook his head and leaned against the tack table. "I mean just what I said, Gav. She'll be back in awhile."

"Damn it!" Drawing a deep breath, trying to tell himself that Hank didn't know that Mickey B. was probably in the area, he struggled to gain control over his soaring irritation. "Where did she go? Did she tell you?"

"She went to look at flowers for the wedding," Hank explained. "What's the matter?"

Gavin sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose and closing his eyes before counting to twenty for good measure. "He's here in the area," Gavin gritted out.

"Who? The stalker?"

He nodded.

"Shit . . ."

Digging the cell phone out of his pocket, he dialed Jillian's number, flexing his claws in abject frustration as he waited impatiently for her to answer.

"Gavvie!" she gushed happily. "I've found the perfect flowers! They're so pretty, and—"

"Jilli, listen to me," he cut in, struggling to keep his voice calm. "I need you to come straight back, okay? Straight back . . . don't stop anywhere, and don't talk to anyone. Got that?"

She giggled. "If you wanted to have me all to yourself, all you have to do is say so," she teased.

Grimacing at the painful blush that crept over his skin, he winced and choked out a strangled chuckle that he was far from feeling. "Hurry back, okay?"

"Okay, Gavvie," she agreed. "I need to finalize the order, but—"

"Now, Jilli. Don't worry about that. Just come home."

“... Okay ...” she said, the first hints of worry creeping into her tone. “What’s wrong?”

He sighed. The last thing he wanted to do was to tell her about Mickey B. over the phone. “I’ll tell you when you get here. Don’t worry, though. You trust me, remember?”

“I trust you,” she allowed. “I’ll be right home.”

The line went dead, and Gavin sighed as he snapped the phone closed and jammed it back into his pocket again.

“Jillian’s being stalked?” Cody questioned as he popped the top of a can of soda and shook his head. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” Gavin grumbled. “Keep your eyes open, can you? The guy found out where she is, and he got a flight out here. If you see anything weird ...”

“Sure,” Cody agreed. “I will.”

“You’re kidding,” Chelsea Inutaisho echoed as she sauntered into the stable. “Jilli?”

Gavin made a face. He hadn’t wanted to tell everyone about it. Then again, it would be in Jillian’s best interests for them to know, especially since people were starting to arrive for the wedding. The sound of a car engine registered in his head, and he darted outside to see if it was Jillian. Stifling a frustrated growl, he sighed as Ben Philips—Cain’s top general—got out of the black rental car. “I hear congratulations are in order,” Ben said with a little smile and warm handshake.

“Thanks,” Gavin replied.

Ben glanced around. “You’ve not heard anything yet?”

Shaking his head, Gavin clenched his jaw and turned to scan the empty, winding driveway. “Not yet.”

Ben nodded. “Cain thought it’d be best if I came out here. Since all indications are that Mickey B. isn’t in New York City anymore ...”

Gavin nodded, too. “I’ve never wanted to kill someone so badly in my life,” he admitted.

“I can understand that,” Ben allowed. “Don’t worry. I’ve been told InuYasha is out here, too. I doubt anything or anyone could get past him unnoticed.”

“Yeah,” Gavin agreed though his tone still held just a hint of doubt.

“So where’s the bride?”

Gavin grimaced. “She went into Hidekea to talk to the florist. She’s on her way back. She’s got Charity with her so she’s not alone, but . . .”

“Charity? Inutaisho?”

Gavin nodded. “Yes.”

“I see . . .”

Heaving a sigh when the tan rental car that he recognized from earlier rounded a bend in the driveway, Gavin couldn’t deny the flood of instantaneous and vivid respite that surged through him. Charity didn’t have the car shut off before Jillian tumbled out of the passenger side and ran over to throw herself against Gavin’s chest. Closing his eyes and rubbing her back, he indulged himself in a moment of complete relief, noting with a grimace that she was quaking like a leaf in a brisk spring wind. “It’s okay, Jilli . . . It’s okay.”

“When you called me, you sounded so upset,” she babbled. “Gavvie? What’s wrong? What happened?”

Cupping her cheeks in his hands, he forced a smile in hopes of calming her blatant upset. She winced, and he sighed. It didn’t work . . . “I just—”

“Gavin!”

Turning at the sound of his name, Gavin’s scowl deepened as Moe Jamison rode around the stables. “Dad?”

Reigning in his horse, Moe inclined his head in greeting to Ben before turning his attention back to Gavin once more. “They caught him,” he stated flatly. “The police are on their way to pick him up.”

“What?” Jillian cut in, glancing from Gavin to Moe and back again. “They caught who? Who’s ‘they’?”

“Your grandfather’s here, pup, and so is your brother,” Moe supplied. “They caught the bastard trying to sneak onto the ranch.”

“They . . . caught him . . .?” Gavin echoed, unable to wrap his brain around the idea that the stalker had finally been caught, after all.

“They did . . . Brother? Which brother?” Jillian demanded.

“Evan,” Moe supplied. “I imagine they’ll be along after the police pick up Mickey B.”

She stood frozen to the spot for several seconds before the gist of what Moe was saying started to sink in. Casting Gavin a bewildered sort of look, she suddenly slumped against him, burying her face against his chest as the first few sobs escaped her. Shooting his father a rather helpless

Chapter 30
Flower Girls

“Damn, Jill, there’s nothing to do here,” Evan complained as he drained his cup of coffee and shook his head in a show of complete disdain. “And I do mean nothing . . . went into Hidekea last night to the bar, and I gotta tell you, I’ve seen more action in a graveyard than there was going on there . . .”

“A graveyard?” Jillian echoed with a wry grin as she took Evan’s cup to refill it.

He grinned. “Hell, yes! Girls do really fucked-up things in graveyards . . .”

She rolled her eyes but giggled. Evan had arrived a couple hours after Gavin had carried her inside. His jokes and easy sense of humor were enough to reassure her, and for that, she’d love her brother forever.

InuYasha stomped into the kitchen and made a face at the mug of coffee that Jillian offered him. rummaging around in the refrigerator, he grabbed a bottle of water and hopped onto the counter, drawing his feet up and settling down with his hands gripping the edge of the counter between his feet, ears twitching as he tried to accustom himself to the new surroundings.

‘He looks like a puppy, doesn’t he?’

‘Sure,’ her youkai agreed, *‘just don’t say that to him . . .’*

Judiciously keeping her thoughts to herself, Jillian refilled Evan’s coffee mug and grabbed the one her grandfather had rejected before sitting down at the table with her brother. “I’m so glad you’re both here,” she remarked with a bright smile, “but, Evan, what about your tour?”

Evan shrugged offhandedly. “According to press releases, Zel Roka has the flu,” he told her. “Don’t worry about it. The shows are being rescheduled. I’ll pick them back up at the end of the tour. Maybe then I can get the old man to go,” he teased.

“Keh,” InuYasha snorted.

Gavin wandered into the kitchen with a wide yawn, rubbing his knuckles up and down the center of his tee-shirt-clad chest. She had a feeling that he would have rather stayed in bed a little while longer, but with guests in the house and more scheduled to be arriving today, as well, she’d asked him to help her entertain their guests since she still had quite a few things to do in the time remaining until the wedding. The main objective of the day was to buy dresses for her two flower girls.

“Morning, Gavvie,” she said, hopping up to give him a quick hug and kiss before careening around to get him a fresh cup of coffee.

“Morning,” he mumbled, stifling another yawn with the back of his hand.

“Holy hell, Gavvie, you look like shit,” Evan pointed out with a wolfish grin.

Gavin scratched the back of his neck and slowly forced himself to focus on Evan’s countenance. “I didn’t get much sleep last night,” he said.

“Oh, so that’s what that noise was,” Evan teased. “I wondered . . .”

True to form, Gavin blushed and shook his head. “It wasn’t like that,” he grumbled as a smiling Jillian set his coffee down on the table. “I was up late playing that new *Prix Grande Tokyo* game.”

Evan’s chin snapped up. Gavin had told her before that *PGT* was supposed to be *the* hottest racing title to hit the video game market in years, and she’d been more than happy to buy it for him. “Yeah? You got that?”

Gavin finally grinned, and Jillian hid her amusement behind her coffee mug. “Jilli bought it for me,” he admitted.

“You dog!” Evan complained. “Where is it?”

“Upstairs. Wait till I drink my coffee.”

Evan made a face but sank back down with a shake of his head. “Damn . . . you weren’t supposed to get that game until I was done touring,” he complained.

Gavin shot him a calculating glance. “Oh? And you’re saying that you wouldn’t get it and play it while you’re on the road?”

Evan’s only reply was an incredibly cheesy grin. “Well, I didn’t say *that* . . .”

InuYasha snorted. “Keh! Games . . . how old are you?” he grouched.

Evan rolled his eyes. “Don’t think I don’t know that Uncle Ryomaru and Kichiro play video games whenever they can . . . Toga does, too, for that matter.”

Jillian checked her watch and hopped up, leaning over to kiss Gavin’s cheek before hurrying over to rinse her mug and deposit it in the sink.

“Where you going, pup?” InuYasha called after her.

“I’m taking Karis and Minnie shopping for their flower girl dresses,” she replied.

Gavin leaned back to look at her. “You want me to come along?”

“Silly! You’re not supposed to see the dresses before the wedding!” she chided.

Gavin wrinkled his nose. “That only applies to the wedding dress, Jilli,” he pointed out.

She laughed. “I know, but Papa called late last night to say that he and Mama will be flying in around nine, which means they’ll be here around ten if the flight’s on time, so one of us should be here to meet them, don’t you think?”

Gavin grimaced. “All the more reason for me to go with you,” he muttered.

“Daddy’s not going to do anything to you,” she assured him.

Evan chuckled. InuYasha rolled his eyes. Gavin’s grimace shifted into a scowl. “All right,” he agreed reluctantly. “Just be careful, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, kissing his cheek again for good measure. “I’d have asked Charity and Chelsea to go with me, but I think they’re still sleeping.”

“Because they’re smart,” Gavin grumbled.

With a jaunty wave, Jillian ducked out of the kitchen, almost colliding with Ben, who caught her shoulders and steadied her before she stumbled. “Everything all right?” he asked, bending down to peer into her face.

Jillian giggled and patted his forearm. “Just fine,” she told him. “There’s fresh coffee in the pot, and muffins and croissants in the breadbox. If you want something else, I’m sure there are other things in the refrigerator.”

Ben smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Thank you, Jillian. I’m sure a muffin would be more than enough.”

Jillian’s expression stated plainly that she didn’t agree with him. After all, he was quite a big man—maybe not as big as her father or brother, and not as big as Gavin, but the panther-youkai was very tall though he possessed more of a lanky build than any of the men in her family.

Pausing just long enough to grab her purse off the table near the door, Jillian hurried outside, smiling wide when the sunshine hit her face, her shoulders. Her cell phone rang, and she glanced at the number. “Hi, Mikio,” she greeted after she hit the button to connect the call. “I’m surprised to hear from you!”

Mikio sighed. “Hello. It’s not too early there, is it?”

Jillian smiled. “No. In fact, I was just on my way out. I’m looking forward to seeing you, though!”

He sighed again. “That’s why I called. A few things have come up here, and I’m afraid I’m not going to get away to in time to make it for your wedding. I’m really sorry.”

“Aww,” she drawled. “I’m sorry to hear that. I was looking forward to seeing you!”

“I’m really sorry,” he repeated. “There’s a problem with one of Sesshoumaru’s acquisitions, and it can’t wait till I get back . . . a lot of legal red tape and stuff.”

“It’s okay,” Jillian assured him. “We were planning on recording the ceremony. If you’d like, I can send a copy of it home with Grandma.”

His tone brightened. “Yeah?”

“Don’t worry. We didn’t really give much notice.”

“I’m sorry, Jillian. For what it’s worth, I’m sure you’re going to be a beautiful bride.”

“Thanks, Mikio. Love you.”

He chuckled, but she didn’t miss the underlying hint of sadness in his tone. “You, too,” he told her.

Clicking off the phone, she frowned as she unlocked the driver’s side door of the truck. She’d miss Mikio at her wedding, certainly, but it couldn’t really be helped. As one of Sesshoumaru’s most trusted attorneys, Mikio had a lot of responsibilities, and since they hadn’t been planning the wedding that long, she couldn’t really hold it against her uncle that he couldn’t make it on such short notice as much as she would have loved to see him.

‘It’s all right,’ she said, giving herself a little pep talk. ‘Look at the bright side of things: Mickey B. is behind bars, Gavvie’s already my mate, next weekend, I’ll marry him . . . There’s nothing—nothing—that could possibly go wrong.’

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

Cain sat back in the shiny leather chair in the prosecuting attorney’s office, rubbing his temple to dispel the headache that thumped in his skull. InuYasha stood off to the side near the windows looking anything but friendly though he had actually put shoes on for the excursion, much to Cain’s surprise. Gavin sat in the chair beside him, and Ben slouched against the bookshelves the lined the far wall. Evan had opted out of the meeting in favor of meeting Madison, who had arrived just after Cain and Gin, and to be honest, Cain wasn’t at all sure he wanted to know what his youngest son was doing at the moment. For the most part, the prosecuting attorney—Harvey Manning—wasn’t overtly nervous, but if things kept up the way they were going, Cain had to wonder just how long the man’s composure would hold.

“So what you’re saying is that he’s got an attorney that’s fighting the extradition?”

“Yes, Mr. Zelig, that’s exactly what I’m saying.

“And the charges here?”

Mr. Manning steeped his fingertips together and nodded. “We’re keeping him on destruction of personal property and trespassing,” he answered.

“That’s not good enough.”

The prosecuting attorney’s smile was tight, and he shot a cursory glance at InuYasha before going on. “It’s enough to hold him. It gives you a little bit of time to get a restraining order put into place. With that, if he comes within a certain distance of your daughter at any time, he’ll be taken into custody, no questions asked. While the evidence you’ve gathered against him might not be admissible in criminal proceedings here in Montana, it can and will be taken into consideration in order to get an emergency restraining order against him within twenty-four hours.”

Cain nodded, peeking at Gavin out of the corner of his eye. Gavin looked like he was about ready to leap out of his chair and across the desk to knock some sense into the man. Gripping the arms of the chairs so tightly that his fingertips were white, his jaw bulged with the force that he was using to keep his mouth closed.

“Has he been questioned?”

Mr. Manning shifted in his chair and nodded. “Yes, but only regarding the trespassing and destruction of personal property . . . I’m assuming you want those charges to be filed, Mr. Jamison?”

“Do you really have to ask?” Gavin gritted out.

Mr. Manning sighed and nodded. “Yes, I do.”

Gavin nodded, too. “Just keep him the hell away from my fiancée,” he stated. “I don’t care what it takes. Just keep him away from her.”

“Understood.” Drumming an ink pen against the calendar on the desk, Manning seemed to be trying to figure out how to ask his next question. Shooting InuYasha a somewhat guarded glance, he sat back in his chair and pressed his lips together in a thin line. “Mr. Izayoi,” he began slowly, “is it true that you were holding Mr. Bingerman at sword point?”

“Fuck yes, I was,” InuYasha snarled. “Got a problem with that?”

Mr. Manning was at a loss, if the expression on his face meant anything at all. InuYasha glared belligerently back at him, and Cain had to cover his mouth to hide his misplaced amusement at the given situation. He didn’t find it humorous that Bingerman had showed up in Montana, no, but he couldn’t say he felt too sorry for the human, either, when he inadvertently found himself on the sharp side of Tetsusaiga. “Well, sir . . . it’s . . . not advisable to run around doling out vigilante justice,” Mr. Manning said carefully.

“Ain’t like I killed the damn bastard,” InuYasha growled.

“And he *was* trespassing,” Cain added reasonably.

“All the same,” Mr. Manning insisted. “Was it a model sword?”

“*What?*” InuYasha barked. “A *model*? Hell, no, it wasn’t a fucking model!”

A knock on the door cut through the rising tension. Mr. Manning stood up stiffly and strode over to the door. The prosecuting attorney and the stranger conversed in hushed voices for a moment before they entered the room. Mr. Manning cleared his throat. “This is Craig Hatch from the FBI. He’s been called in to investigate this case.

Mr. Hatch made the rounds, shaking hands and introducing himself to everyone with a tepid smile plastered on his face. After that, he stood back and glanced at each one of them before speaking, straightening his nondescript black tie and stuffing his hands into his pockets. “We’ve been called in because, as you know, there’s reason to believe that Mr. Bingerman was also responsible for the accident with Ms. Zelig’s rental car down in Cancun. If that’s the case, then he’s created an international disturbance. I’ve been sent over to speak to you while my partner, Dane Maxwell is over interviewing Mr. Bingerman.” He paused a moment, glancing at Gavin and Ben before looking at Cain once more. “Mr. Zelig, I take it you don’t mind that non-family members sit in on this meeting?”

“Non-family? Ben, you mean? He’s an old family friend,” Cain clarified. “He’s assisted in the investigation to date, as well.”

Mr. Hatch nodded. “And him?” he asked, nodding in Gavin’s direction.

Cain didn’t have to glance at Gavin to know that the young man was on the verge of losing his temper. “Gavin is Jillian’s fiancé. I’m sure that whatever you have to say can be said in his presence.”

“I see . . . and you, sir?”

Cain almost snorted at the use of ‘sir’ to address InuYasha. “Keh! She’s my granddaughter. I ain’t leaving.”

Mr. Hatch looked rather surprised. “Granddaughter?” he echoed with a shake of his head. “She’s your *granddaughter*?”

“Yeah . . . what of it?”

Cain might have laughed outright if the situation weren’t so dire. The look of disbelief on the FBI agent’s face was almost comical. Of course, to a human, InuYasha didn’t look old enough to have an adult child, let alone a granddaughter, but the FBI agent looked much older than InuYasha. “Is his age really the issue? Every one of us is here because we’re concerned about Jillian’s well-being,” Cain commented.

Mr. Hatch blinked and nodded almost absently. “Right . . . right . . .”

“I want this guy kept as far away from Jillian as possible,” Gavin ground out. “I don’t care *how* you have to do it; I just want him kept away from her.”

Mr. Hatch nodded. “And we’ll do whatever we have to do to ensure that Mr. Bingerman can’t hurt her, Mr. Jamison. Now, it’s my understanding that you, Mr. Zelig, have had a private investigative unit on the case for quite some time now. Is that correct?”

Cain nodded. “My oldest son and my nephew, yes.”

“Would it be possible to have copies of all of your records?”

“Certainly.”

“Okay. That’d help quite a bit.”

“Are you going to keep that bastard away from Jillian?” Gavin demanded.

Mr. Hatch pasted on what could only be described as an indulgent smile as he turned his attention to Gavin once more. “We’re doing everything we can, Mr. Jamison. At the moment, however, I really need to speak with Mr. Zelig since he is her father.”

“I’m her fiancé,” Gavin bit out.

“Of course you are. You still don’t have any legal right to sit in on these meetings. I’m allowing you to, however, since I understand that you care about Ms. Zelig, and while I can appreciate your concern—”

“Can you?” Gavin challenged. “Can you really? As for your ‘rights’? I have more right to be in on this meeting than just about anyone else alive, all things considered. Jillian and I are getting married next weekend. The last thing she needs to worry about is some psychopath that *thinks* he’s in love with her.”

“I can understand your worry,” Mr. Hatch said again. “However, you must understand that these things take time. There are certain things we must do in order to keep things airtight, as far as researching the case against Mr. Bingerman, and—”

“And you’re telling me that in this case—in this country—that the criminal has more rights than the person he’s victimized,” Gavin cut in coldly. “I realize that. I also realize that the same man has done nothing but terrorize my fiancée, and you’re saying that I have to be patient?” He shook his head, refusing to look away from the FBI agent as he challenged him. “If a man walks onto another man’s land with a gun with the intention of robbing the man’s home, and the intruder pulls that gun on the man that lives on that land and kills him in front of his family . . . He’s still got the right to walk into court and say he didn’t do it, and woe betide the security cameras that recorded him there, recorded him pull the gun, recorded him shooting that man

because his guilt has to be proven . . . and all you're doing is victimizing the family all over again, now aren't you?"

Mr. Hatch nodded once and shrugged. "I apologize, Mr. Jamison. This is the best we can do."

Gavin shot out of his chair and stormed out of the office. InuYasha shoved himself away from the window and stomped toward the door, pausing just long enough to glower over his shoulder at the two stuffed shirts. "If he comes anywhere near my granddaughter again, it'll be the last mistake he ever makes."

Mr. Hatch sighed, casting the prosecuting attorney a worried glance. "As I've said, I can understand your concerns, but making idle threats doesn't really help the situation."

Cain sighed and stood up as Ben strode over to the door. Following the general out of the room, he paused long enough to peek back over his shoulder to make his parting comment. "I won't apologize for their threats, and I'd hardly call them idle. I feel the same damn way."

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

"Oh, this one is just darling!" Jillian gushed as she pulled a pale yellow dress chocked full of ribbons and lace from the rack. "What do you think, Minnie?"

Minnie giggled and touched the sheer overskirt. "That's pretty!" she breathed, her eyes rounding in wonder. "Can I try it on?"

Sherry laughed. "Well, that's up to Jillian. You like that one?"

Minnie nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah!"

"Okay, sweetie. Why don't you and your mommy go try that one on for me?" Jillian suggested.

"We just got that dress in yesterday," the salesgirl who had been hovering nearby the entire time commented. "It's very pretty, but it's not exactly a classic flower girl's dress."

Jillian waved a hand dismissively. "We're having a pretty casual wedding," she explained.

Minnie clapped her hands while Jillian handed the dress over to Sherry. "I really like that one, too," she said with a smile. "We'll be out in a minute. Come on, Minnie."

Karis tugged on Jillian's hand. "Can I see my dress again?" she asked.

Jillian knelt down and winced. "I'm sorry, honey. Your dress is in the car, remember?"

Karis made a face but nodded. "I'm gonna be pwetty!" she stated.

Jillian laughed, glancing over to make sure that Raina was still sleeping in the stroller. "Yes, you are!"

They'd chosen Karis' dress easily enough. Jillian had rented a car for the day since they had all three girls and the truck wasn't big enough to accommodate them. They'd spent the bulk of the day running around the malls in Helena, trying to find the perfect dresses for the girls. It was a fortuitous happenstance that they just happened to be eating lunch in a small café across from a quaint little boutique while the store clerks were busy rearranging the window display when Jillian had found the perfect wedding dress, too. The calf-length antique white lace dress was so simple and so delicate that it just felt perfect when she'd tried it on, and it hadn't taken more than a minute of looking at it after she'd tried it on to decide that that it was the dress she wanted to be married in.

Karis' dress was a simple pastel blue cotton with an overlay of sheer white chiffon that would be casual enough to wear after the wedding and yet elegant enough to make a perfect flower girl's dress, and Karis had been so pleased with it that it was difficult to get it off of her after she tried it on, but Minnie wanted something fancier, so they'd sought out the store where they were now: a boutique that specialized in christening, first communion dresses, and general pageant wear.

Jillian pulled a circlet of white flower sprays off a display rack and settled it on Karis' corn silk hair. "That's pretty," she commented.

"I like that!" Karis exclaimed.

Jillian laughed. "Well, you'll have one of real flowers for the wedding. How's that?"

Karis nodded and bounced on the balls of her feet, pointing at a rhinestone tiara glittering on the shelf as Jillian carefully removed the circlet and put it back. "I can be a princess!" she insisted.

Jillian pulled the tiara down and arranged it in Karis' hair. "Now you look like a princess," she agreed.

Karis giggled. "Daddy says I'm a princess," she stated.

Jillian smiled. "Of course you are! Little girls are always their daddy's princesses."

"Were you a princess?"

"Yes, I was. I still am."

Karis nodded solemnly. "I'm the princess. Minnie's not the princess; just me."

"Jillian! How do I look?"

She turned in time to see Minnie twirling around, her skirt belling out around her only to drift back down when she stopped and ran over to Jillian. "Wow, that's so pretty!"

Sherry made a face. "It's awfully expensive . . . almost twice what Karis' dress cost."

Jillian shrugged. "I think that's the dress," she decided as she turned to face the attendant.

"All right," the salesgirl replied. "If you're sure you don't want to look at some of the fancier dresses . . .?"

Jillian shook her head. "That one is perfect," she insisted.

The girl cocked her head to the side, scowling slightly as she slowly shook her head. "I'm sorry . . . you look really familiar," she finally said.

Jillian smiled. "Do I?"

"Yes . . . you do."

"I'm Jillian Zelig," she supplied.

The girl's eyes widened, and she held up her hands. "Really?"

"Yes."

"Oh, wow! Can I . . .? Would it be okay if . . .? I'd love to have your autograph," she said.

"Sure," Jillian said. The girl smiled in excitement and led the way to the check out counter, pulling a long strip of cash register tape out of the machine and extending it to Jillian. She pushed Raina over to the counter to pay for the dress while Sherry ushered Minnie back to the changing room to take off the dress. "Is there a slip that would work best for that dress?" Jillian asked. The clerk nodded and hurried off to get the slip, and Jillian selected a couple of pairs of snowy sheer white socks with thick iridescent ruffle around the cuffs. They'd already purchased white leather Mary Janes for both girls along with stretch lace white gloves and a full slip for Karis. Jillian tapped her credit card on the counter while Sherry returned with the dress before running back to help Minnie finish changing.

She was just putting her credit card away when Minnie ran up to her again. "I like my dress," she said with a wide grin. "Mama says I have to say thank you."

"You're very welcome! Thank you for agreeing to be one of my flower girls!"

Minnie giggled as Jillian took the thick pink plastic garment bag from the salesgirl.

"Good luck!" the girl called after them.

"Thanks!" Jillian replied.

"I suppose we should be getting back," Sherry commented as they stepped out of the store into the mid-afternoon sunshine.

"Sure," Jillian agreed as she dug the keys to the rental car out of her purse and looked around the crowded parking lot, forgetting just for a moment where, exactly, she'd parked the car.

Sherry made a face when Raina awoke with a start as the stroller thumped down off the raised sidewalk. "Oh, so now you decide to wake up, do you?" Casting Jillian an apologetic glance, she shrugged. "I think I should change her before we get moving. You don't mind, do you?"

"It's fine," Jillian assured her. "We'll go on to the car."

"Thanks . . . girls? Do you have to potty?"

Karis shook her head and grabbed Jillian's free hand. Minnie thought it over then shook her head, too. "Nope."

"Okay," Sherry said as she turned back toward the store again. "It won't take long."

Jillian nodded, and she led the way to the car, unlocking the trunk with the keychain control as they neared the vehicle. The girls crowded around the trunk to watch as Jillian carefully laid the garment bag down on top of the others. "I can't wait to show Daddy!" Minnie exclaimed.

Jillian laughed. "I bet he can't wait to see you in it, Minnie."

A strong arm snaked around Jillian's waist, drawing her back against a thick, hard chest. She tried to whirl around, but the arm tightened. "Jillian! Here you are!" he said pleasantly.

Karis scooted behind Minnie, clutching her sister's skirt and peeked out from behind her. The man smiled at the girls. "Sorry, girls. I'm an old friend of Jillian's, aren't I?"

His arm tightened around her waist, and she tried not to flinch. "Y-yes . . ." she agreed, forcing a smile for the girls' benefits.

"Jillian . . .?" Minnie said, her expression full of doubt as she scowled at the stranger.

"You're a hard girl to find, Jillian," the man said in a conversational tone. "What *precious* little girls."

'*He's youkai,*' she thought wildly. '*Youkai . . .*'

"Why don't you tell them, Jillian? Tell them that everything's just fine . . ." He leaned in closer, his breath fanning her skin as she tried not to recoil in disdain. "I'd *hate* to see anything happen to such them, wouldn't you . . .?"

She nodded, understanding the underlying menace, the threat in his words. "It's fine, girls; I promise."

Minnie didn't look like she believed Jillian, but she nodded slowly.

"If you want those pretty little girls to *stay* pretty, you'll do exactly as I say," he hissed into her ear in a tone so low that the girls couldn't hear him. "Do you understand?"

She willed herself to nod once.

"Good. Then you need to come with me."

She started to shake her head. "I don't—"

"Humans die easily . . . they bleed even easier . . . care to test it?"

She flinched. "Please, don't . . ."

"That's right," he agreed amiably enough. "I won't . . . so long as you do everything I tell you to do, Jillian."

Staring into Karis' eyes for a long second, feeling Minnie's trembling resonating in waves from the frightened child, Jillian swallowed hard and made herself nod. "Whatever you say," she agreed. "Just please don't hurt them."

"Excellent," he approved.

"Jillian?" Minnie asked, confusion marring her expression.

"Jillian smiled. She even managed a curt little laugh. "He's an old friend, Minnie, just like he said . . ."

"Jillian . . .?" Sherry questioned as she neared the car. Both girls ran over to duck behind their mother, and Jillian had to be grateful that Sherry wouldn't think that out of the ordinary considering how timid both girls tended to be upon encountering strangers.

Jillian's smile widened as panic gripped her stomach. She had to get this man away from Sherry and the girls. She had to do it fast before he made good on his subtle threats.

"Oh, um . . . Sherry . . . this is . . . my business manager. Um, you know, I . . . I need to talk with him about a few things . . . Why don't you take the car and go on home? I'm sure he'll—" she swallowed hard, licking her lips as the smile on her face faltered. "He'll take me back to the ranch when we're finished . . ."

Sherry shook her head slowly but took the keys from Jillian's outstretched hand. "O-okay . . ."

"Great! Great! I'll . . . I'll see you later!" she said.

Chapter 31
August Rose

Gavin stifled a growl and reigned in the almost overwhelming desire to chuck the remote control through the plasma screen television. Having spent the last hour and a half watching the fat bastard known better as Mickey B. as he bragged about the emails and the pictures, about his obsession with Jillian, he'd sat through about all he could tolerate. About the only thing he refused to acknowledge was tinkering with the brake lines on Jillian's rental car, and why would he cop to that? A man had died because of his sick fascination, and the charge that would carry would likely be murder . . .

Shooting another glance at the window, he couldn't help it as he stood up and strode out of the house onto the front porch, glaring at the empty driveway as the night shadows started to fall.

"Glowering at the driveway isn't really going to get her here any faster," Natalie Jamison commented as she slipped outside and pulled the door closed behind himself.

He shook his head. "I know. . . It's just . . . Where the hell is she?"

Natalie slipped her arms around him and kissed his cheek. "Have you tried to call her?"

Gavin grimaced. "Yeah . . . her cell's shut off or out of range or something . . . It sends me straight to voicemail."

"She'll be home soon."

"Yeah."

Scowling as the unsettling feeling that something was wrong that had been plaguing him all afternoon, Gavin heaved a sigh, leaning against the pillar that flanked one side of the porch steps and pinching the bridge of his nose as he closed his eyes. He'd been telling himself that he was only feeling that way because he'd been watching hours of Mickey B's interrogation, but was he? Casting his mother a surreptitious glance, he didn't miss the slight worry marring her features as she gazed at the empty driveway. She shook herself and cleared her throat, pasting on a bright smile as she hugged her son once more. "I'll get you some iced tea. How's that?"

"Thanks," he said. The last thing he wanted was iced tea, but he knew that Natalie was just trying to settle his nerves.

'It's fine, isn't it? They caught him—that bastard . . . he's in jail. He can't hurt Jillian . . .'

'Rose . . .'

Blinking quickly as the soft whisper faded as quickly as it had sounded in his mind, Gavin shook his head and narrowed his eyes on the driveway once more. ‘G—*grandma*...?’

InuYasha stomped out of the stable, and he stopped short, scanning the landscape in much the same way as Gavin had done. When he glanced at the house and saw Gavin standing on the steps, he folded his arms together under the folds of his fire-rat haori and walked toward him.

“Who’s the eel?” InuYasha asked without preamble.

Gavin blinked. “What’s that?”

InuYasha snorted. “The eel-youkai I smelled when we were watching the perimeter of the ranch,” he clarified. “Who is he?”

Gavin shook his head. “There’s no eel-youkai working here,” he said slowly.

InuYasha’s steady stare shifted into a marked scowl. “Bullshit. I smelled him.”

A cold chill trickled down Gavin’s back as he met InuYasha’s darkened scowl. “What are you saying?”

InuYasha shrugged. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but in the end, he shook his head and stomped up the stairs. “Where’s your mate, pup?” he growled.

Gavin’s gaze lifted to the driveway once more. He dug the cell phone out of his pocket without taking his eyes off the lane.

Again he was sent straight to Jillian’s voicemail, and he cinched his jaw so tightly that it ached. “Jilli, where the hell are you? Call me when you get this message . . .”

Clicking off the cell phone, he stared at it for a moment before dialing Sherry’s number. She answered on the fourth ring. “Hello?”

“Sherry? This is Gavin . . . is Jilli still over there?”

“Jilli? No . . . She left with some guy awhile ago . . . I think she said he was her manager.”

Gavin gripped the phone so tightly that the plastic casing creaked. Willing himself to loosen his grip, he licked his lips and shook his head. “She . . . her manager? When? Where?”

Sherry paused, as though she was considering her answer. “In Helena . . . we’d just found Minnie’s dress . . . it was just after lunch . . . maybe two? I took the baby in to change her before we started back, and when I got outside, this man was there, and Jillian said that he was her manager and that they needed to talk . . . She said he’d bring her home . . . she’s not home, I take it?”

“N-no, she’s not . . . Damn it . . . Listen, if she calls you, will you call me right away?”

“... Is Jillian in trouble?”

He grimaced, not really wanting to cause Sherry concern, but ... “I ... I don't know.”

“O-okay ... Call us after you find her so we know everything's all right?”

“Sure ...”

Hanging up the phone, Gavin slammed open the front door and strode over to the gathering of men who were still watching the interrogation DVDs. “Cain ... Jillian's manager ... what's his number?”

Cain glanced up at Gavin and did a classic double take. “Dan? I'm not sure off the top of my head. Why?”

Gavin rubbed his hands over his face in complete exasperation. “Sherry said that some guy showed up while they were shopping, and Jilli said he was her manager. She left with him *hours* ago.”

Cain stared at him for a moment before digging his cell phone out of his pocket.

“Never mind,” Ben commented, holding his phone to his ear. “I got it.” Tapping his claws on the arm of the easy chair, Ben waited for Dan to answer the phone. “Dan? Hi, it's Ben ... yeah ... Yeah, I need to ask you: are you in Montana?”

“Is he?” Gavin growled.

Ben shot him a look but didn't respond. “I see ... Uh, no ... yes ... They did catch him. He's in jail, but ... Gavin said that someone claiming to be her manager took off with her earlier, and we haven't seen or heard from her since ... I see ... Okay, thanks ... Right. You, too. Bye.” Snapping his phone closed, Ben narrowed his gaze as he met Cain's foreboding expression. “Dan's still in Canada visiting his son.”

“Then why would Jillian take off with someone and say he's her manager?” Gavin snarled.

Evan shot InuYasha a thoughtful look. “She was with that human girl and her pups, wasn't she?”

“Sherry? Yeah, but—”

Evan snorted. “Maybe he threatened them.”

Gavin grimaced. That made sense; damned if it didn't. InuYasha's question echoed through his head, and he glanced at the hanyou. “*The eel-youkai I smelled when we were watching the perimeter of the ranch ...*”

Cain cleared his throat. “What if Mickey B. was telling the truth? What if he really didn’t have anything to do with Jillian’s rental car and the accident?”

“That’s what I was thinking, too . . .” Ben allowed.

Gavin rubbed his face and stifled a growl. “Sherry said that he took her from the parking lot at one of the stores where they’d shopped. I’m going.”

Gin, Madison, and Natalie emerged from the kitchen with trays of iced tea. Stopping short, Gin slowly looked around at the sober faces before finally settling on her mate. “Cain? What’s wrong?”

Cain stood up and strode over to her, kissing her forehead and giving her a thin smile. “It’s okay, baby girl. We’re going to go look for Jillian.”

Gin’s eyes widened in worry, and she gripped Cain’s forearm. “Jillian? But you said she just went shopping . . .”

He nodded. “Don’t worry, all right? We’ll be home before you know it.”

“Zelig, maybe you should stay here,” Ben said slowly.

Cain shot his general a menacing glower as he headed for the door. “Save your breath, Ben.”

Ben hurried after him, catching him by the shoulder when he stepped out onto the front porch. “I understand why you want to go, but—”

Cain shook Ben’s hand off and shook his head stubbornly. “She’s my daughter, Ben.”

“It could be dangerous, damn it! Will you stop and think about it? You’re the tai-youkai—”

“And that doesn’t mean a fucking thing if my daughter is in trouble. If something happens to me, Bas knows what to do . . . and you’ll be here to guide him if he doesn’t.”

Ben narrowed his eyes and glared at Cain. “Godspeed, Zelig.”

Gavin didn’t wait for the others. Breaking into a sprint down the driveway, he dialed Sherry’s phone again to find out exactly what store they were at when the man showed up. Waiting for Sherry to answer, he condemned himself a thousand times for ignoring the feeling that something was wrong, he cleared his throat and tried to swallow the rising tide of panic that was threatening to consume him. ‘*Jilli . . .*’

‘*Rose,*’ the voice in his mind whispered again. The sound was a little clearer than it was before, and this time he flinched when he recognized it.

‘*Hold on, Jilli . . . I’ll be there . . .*’

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“*Did she get on a plane or not?*” Gavin snarled, slamming his hand onto the counter and glowering at the receptionist. She jerked away at his display of vehemence, and Cain grabbed his shoulders, pulling him back before he could do something really stupid, like grab the girl and shake her.

“Calm down, Gavin. Losing your temper isn’t going to get us anywhere.” Evan hissed in his ear.

“Damn it . . .”

Cain shoved past the two, glaring at the receptionist with an expression that Gavin figured was as close to ‘pleasant’ as the tai-youkai could muster at the moment. “Look, she’s my daughter, and she wouldn’t have gotten onto a plane willingly. Do you remember her? She’s tall—about six feet tall—really pale bluish-silver hair . . . pale blue eyes . . .”

The woman shook her head, grimacing apologetically. “I’m sorry, sir. There’s been no one who met that description that I know of, and even if there were, I really cannot disclose that sort of information . . .”

Gavin jerked himself away from Evan’s grasp and stepped up to the counter once more. “She’s famous, for God’s sake—Jillian Zelig! Are you sure you didn’t see her?”

“Jillian Zelig? I would have remembered her,” the girl insisted. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“This ain’t gettin’ us nowhere,” InuYasha growled. Stomping away, he dropped to his hands and knees, crawling around on the faux marble floor as he tried to locate Jillian’s scent. Luckily, he wasn’t down there long enough to draw too much notice though a few people standing nearby did give him rather odd looks. “Found it,” he growled, hopping back to his feet and darting toward the security check only to be stopped by the guards while people who were patiently waiting in line complained.

Cain rolled his eyes and heaved a sigh. “I’ll be back,” he said before striding after InuYasha, who was busy yelling at the guards.

“She got on a plane,” Gavin insisted, digging a picture out of his wallet. “Here . . . this is her. Are you *positive* you haven’t seen her?”

“I’m positive, sir,” she maintained, glancing at the picture then starting to hand it back. She stopped suddenly, though, bringing the picture back up to study it closer. Gavin could feel his claws digging into the counter as he scanned her face, as he searched her expression for any semblance of recognition. She shook her head, her brows drawing together in a show of confusion, and she bit her lip. “There was one woman . . . but her name wasn’t Jillian Zelig . . .”

Gavin had to reign in the desire to smash something. Evan put a hand on his shoulder and nudged him aside. “Listen . . .” he said, leaning across the counter to get a better look at the nametag hanging around her neck. “Molly—Can I call you ‘Molly?’”

“Sure,” she replied, smiling despite herself.

Gavin was sorely pressed not to thump Evan upside the head. Evan’s penchant for not being able to keep it in his pants certainly wasn’t going to help Jillian now. Evan shot her one of his lazy grins that reminded Gavin of a Cheshire cat. “What everyone’s trying to say is that Jillian could be in potentially serious trouble. We have to find her and help her. I mean, she’s marrying this guy next Saturday,” he said, jerking his head toward Gavin. Gavin grunted in acknowledgement, crossing his arms over his chest and glowering at nothing in particular. “She’s been in love with him since she was a little girl. Does that sound like a woman who wanted to get on a plane with some strange guy?”

The girl looked completely mesmerized by the smooth quality of Evan’s voice. It was all Gavin could do not to roll his eyes and smack the crap out of Evan. His schmoozing wasn’t helping, and they were wasting precious time, weren’t they?

“I’m sorry, sir,” the girl said slowly, shaking her head and looking genuinely upset. “I know there wasn’t a woman who fit that description . . . not really . . .”

“Not really?” Gavin growled, shouldering Evan aside. “Was there someone who resembled her at all?”

She bit her lip, obviously unsure as to what, exactly, she dared tell them. “I’m sorry . . . I really can’t give out that information . . .”

“Another name,” Evan cut in, reaching across the counter to grasp the girl’s hand and squeezing her fingers gently. “She might have used another name? Come on, baby . . . throw me a bone, here, will you?”

Gavin opened his mouth to tell Evan to knock it off since his flirting wasn’t really helping a damn thing. Jillian’s voice echoed through his mind again, a hint of urgency tingeing the word with gentle meaning. It was a name he’d recognize, certainly . . . his grandmother’s name . . . ‘Rose . . .’

“Rose!” Gavin blurted. “Did anyone use the name ‘Rose?’”

The woman blinked in surprise. “Well . . .”

“Please,” Gavin implored. “Please . . .”

“She’ll thank you for it; I promise,” Evan added, resting his elbow on the counter and rubbing the pad of his thumb gently over the girl’s knuckles. “Molly, please.”

“There was . . . one woman . . . tall, graceful . . . but she had black hair.” Leaning forward as though she didn’t want to speak out loud, Molly shifted her gaze from Evan to Gavin and back again before she went on. “She was with this guy—I remember because I thought he was kind of a jerk . . . He wouldn’t let her talk at all, and when he gave her name so I could check her identification, she sort of leaned forward and said that everyone called her Rose. Sort of gave me this strange sort of look over the top of her sunglasses . . . Her eyes were really pale blue—like . . . ice, I guess . . .”

“Jillian!” Gavin exclaimed. “Where did she go?”

Evan shook his head and shot Gavin a quelling glance. “What was she wearing?”

Molly shrugged. It was obvious that she didn’t really want to divulge the information, but whether she was telling them because she believed that Jillian really might be in trouble or because Evan was still rubbing her knuckles, Gavin didn’t know and honestly didn’t care so long as they found out where Jillian was . . . “She was wearing a plain brown dress. It seemed odd to me; not like what I’d picture a woman like her wearing. Sort of . . . old-womanish, I guess . . .”

Evan nodded. “Where’d she go, Molly? Please . . . we have to know.”

Molly grimaced. “I could get into real trouble if I tell you . . . I could lose my job . . .”

“Or you could save Jillian’s life,” Evan added calmly. “Please.”

She didn’t look like she was going to tell them. Sparing a glance over his shoulder, Gavin stifled a frustrated sigh when he noticed that Cain and InuYasha were still arguing with security. Feeling as though he was getting nowhere fast, Gavin gritted his teeth and willed himself to remain calm despite the nearly overwhelming need to smash things to pieces.

“She . . .” Trailing off as she glanced around again, she winced. “Denver,” she finally whispered. “Denver with no connecting flights.”

It took a minute for Gavin to realize that she had told them, after all. As comprehension slowly sank in, he couldn’t help the small sigh of relief as he slumped forward on the counter for a moment. “Thank you!” he breathed, standing up straight and digging into his pocket for his wallet. “Get me on the next plane to Denver, please.”

The girl nodded and keyed information into the computer terminal, licking her lips as she scowled at the screen. “There’s one flight leaving from Gate 7 in ten minutes, but that’s hardly enough time to—”

“I want on that plane,” Gavin stated again.

“Me, too,” Evan added.

“And two more tickets,” Gavin remarked, glancing back at InuYasha and Cain once more.

“I’m sorry, sir. There are only two seats available on that flight, but there is another flight leaving in an hour for Denver . . .”

“All right,” Gavin agreed. “Just book me on this one. Those two can catch up.”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Leaning back against the high headrest in the business class section of the small plane, Gavin closed his eyes and sighed. The guy seated next to him kept trying to chat with him, and the last thing he wanted to do was make small talk with a perfect stranger who seemed bent on showing Gavin photographs of his new son.

Evan was seated toward the back of the plane—the only available seats weren’t situated together—and that was just as well. After the deplorable display with the receptionist, Gavin was ready to throttle his soon-to-be brother-in-law despite the nagging thought that maybe—just maybe—Evan really had helped to get the information on where Jillian was headed. Of course, the looks on InuYasha and Cain’s faces had been almost comical, too. When Evan and Gavin had hurried through the security checkpoint, both had looked completely shocked until Gavin, without slowing his pace, had hollered over his shoulder, “*There’s another plane leaving in an hour for Denver!*” He supposed they’d both be able to figure out that’s where Jillian had headed.

‘*Hold on, Jilli . . . I’m on my way . . .*’

‘*G-Gavin . . .?*’

‘*Jilli?*’

‘*You got my message? Rose . . .?*’

‘*Yeah, I got that. Smart girl.*’

‘*I . . . I thought you’d recognize your grandmother’s name . . .*’

‘*I did,*’ he assured her. ‘*Of course I did.*’

‘*Gavin . . . I want to go home . . .*’

He grimaced but didn’t open his eyes. He could feel her drawing him closer, and the feeling was enough to soothe the frayed edges of his emotions. ‘*I know . . . where are you? Do you know?*’

She whimpered. ‘*I don’t know . . . He took me to a hotel after we got to Denver, and he gave me a shot of something. Then I fell asleep . . . I think I’m still asleep . . .*’

‘*Oh, God . . . He hasn’t . . . he didn’t . . .*’

Chapter 32
Frantic

“Hold still.”

Jillian grimaced but did as she was told, closing her eyes in an effort to avoid seeing her hair falling around her like snow. Sure, it would grow back. She knew that. It didn't help the sick feeling that twisted her stomach in knots. Handcuffed to the chair in the abysmal hotel room just down the street from Helena Regional Airport, she'd been powerless to stop him. ‘Gavin,’ she thought as she bit her cheek hard. ‘Gavin, help me . . .’

The eel-youkai unlocked her arm and jerked her to her feet, propelling her toward the bathroom before handing her a bottle of black hair dye. “If you'd be so kind,” he said, his voice mocking, his smile insincere.

Jillian shook her head slowly. “No . . .” she said slowly. “No . . .”

Pushing his black leather jacket aside, he rested his hand on his lean hip. Jillian grimaced at the flash of metal—the gun—holstered to his waist. “. . . Please,” she whispered.

Biting her lip, swallowing hard, she took the bottle and did as she was told. The starkness of the black hair was startling against her skin, washing out her tan and making her eyes seem even paler by comparison. There was a plain brown cotton dress carelessly dropped over the closed toilet. He grunted, nodding at the change in clothes, and Jillian didn't complain as she tugged off her sundress and donned the ugly clothes. A pair of smoky sunglasses completed the ensemble, and she stood by and watched helplessly as he dumped everything out of her purse into the trash can. “Here,” he said, slapping a plain black wallet into her hand along with her purse. “Your name is Mary Smith. Try anything cute, and you'll regret it.”

From there, he'd dragged her to the airport. He did most of the talking—hurrying to speak for her any time she was directly asked any questions. Panic was setting in thick, choking her and making her want to scream.

“And your name, ma'am?” the receptionist asked.

“Mary Smith,” the youkai said quickly, his claws digging into Jillian's elbow.

She leaned forward quickly, ducking her chin, peering over the rim of the sunglasses, giving the girl a look that Jillian could only hope that she would interpret correctly. “My friends call me ‘Rose’,” she said quickly. “I was named after my mother, but I loved my Grandma Rose best.”

The woman didn't seem to understand the message that Jillian was trying to impart her.

“Now, Mary, you don't need to bore her with your life story,” the youkai growled in her ear. “Give her your ID card so we can get on the plane.”

Jillian did as she was told before he hurried her through security and up to the terminal where they'd boarded the plane bound for Denver.

'Rose,' Jillian thought wildly, hoping, praying, that Gavin could hear her. 'Rose . . .'

Something was pulling her away from him; an invisible force that drew her back out of the realm of dreams. She didn't want to wake up. She didn't want to see where she was or who was waiting for her. Gavin's voice—now so far away—echoed to her, lent her strength. *'Where are you, Jill? I'll find you . . . just wait for me . . .'*

Jillian lay on the uncomfortable gurney and stared through heavily-lidded eyes at the glinting silver circlets that wrapped around her wrist. There was one on her other wrist, too, she supposed. She was having trouble focusing her attention on any one thing; maybe a lingering effect of the dope they'd pumped into her when she'd first woken up . . .

'Where am I?' she asked herself, forcing her attention off the handcuff—she vaguely remembered someone telling her that they were the kind with Ofuda sealed inside to prevent her escape. The cold cinderblock walls were covered with a glossy coat of white industrial paint, and the long fluorescent bulbs that glowed high overhead gave a timeless sort of look to the surroundings. Devoid of windows, the room where she lay gave off a business-like aura that seeped into her very bones, made Montana seem so far away . . . 'Gavin . . .'

The very mention of his name lent her a peaceful feeling that she desperately needed. It was enough to take the edges off her predicament. He'd come for her. He promised . . .

She could discern whispering voices coming from somewhere off to the left. Unable to make out any sentences and only able to make sense of a few scattered words, Jillian's head swam when she tried to concentrate on what any of them were saying. It took a few moments of intense concentration and enough effort to bring a sheen of sweat to her brow before she could manage to turn her head to look at the men—her captors.

"Need . . ."

" . . . Alive, but . . ."

" . . . Simple process . . ."

"Eli said . . ."

" . . . Don't know . . ."

" . . . Chips . . ."

'Chips?' Jillian thought distractedly. 'Hungry . . .'

The shortest of the youkai—they were all youkai—stood up on his tiptoes to glance over the shoulder of the squat man who had his back facing her. Noticing that Jillian was awake, he grimaced and cleared his throat as his ruddy complexion grew a little redder. “I’m going to talk to her,” he stated. “I’ll see if I can get any answers.”

The other three seemed rather irritated at the man’s statement. Squaring his shoulders, he stepped away from the group and cautiously walked over to the gurney. “Can you say your name?” he asked.

She blinked at the odd question. “Yes,” she replied slowly, careful not to slur her words. “Jillian. Who . . . are . . . you?”

He ignored her. “Do you know why you’re here?”

She shook her head. At least, she thought she did. She wasn’t certain, though, because the man continued to stare at her, his watery brown eyes wide. “No,” she forced herself to say out loud.

“Does the name ‘Kennedy’ mean anything to you?” he went on, “or ‘Liza?’”

“N-n-n,” she half-moaned.

He looked a little crestfallen. “I see . . .”

She wanted to ask questions of her own, but she couldn’t. Her brain was too foggy; it was too difficult to form coherent thoughts let alone form questions.

“Bring me the hand scanner,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at the youkai who were still talking in hushed tones that Jillian couldn’t discern.

“Who . . . ? Ken . . . nedy . . . Liza . . . ?”

The man—a doctor?—carefully inserted the end of a needle into a little glass jar and turned it upside down, drawing clear liquid into the syringe. “Go back to sleep. This’ll be much simpler if you do.”

Where was she? Where was this place?

She tried to pull away from the man as he grasped her arm and poked her with the needle. She tried to tell him to stop, but she couldn’t . . .

Her eyelids felt heavy, leaden, and though she struggled to stay awake, she couldn’t. Gavin’s face floated before her, and in her mind, she could hear him whispering to her. She couldn’t tell if she was dreaming or awake. Gavin wasn’t there, was he? Yet he was there; right there. He reached out to touch her hand, to stroke her cheek with tender fingers. *‘Hold on, Jilli . . . I’m on my way . . .’*

‘G-Gavin . . .?’

Jilli?

'You got my message? Rose...?'

He smiled, nodded. 'Yeah, I got that. Smart girl.'

'I... I thought you'd recognize your grandmother's name...'

'I did,' he assured her. 'Of course I did.'

'Gavin... I want to go home...'

He grimaced but nodded. 'I know... where are you? Do you know?'

'I don't know... He took me to a hotel after we got to Denver, and he gave me a shot. Then I fell asleep... I think I'm still asleep...'

'Oh, God... He hasn't... he didn't...'

'He said they need me, Gavvie... but I just want to come home...'

'Okay, Jilli... just hold on. I'm on my way. I promise...'

'... O-okay...'

Jilli?

'Hmm?'

'Don't cry, and don't worry, all right?'

'... All... right...'

'Hold on, Jilli... Just a little longer...'

She could do that, couldn't she? She could hold on and be brave for Gavin...

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Cain sat back with a heavy sigh and fastened his seat belt. The last thing he wanted to be doing was enduring a two hour flight with InuYasha Izayoi, of all people, but wouldn't you know that the only available seats were situated side by side?

He sighed. It was nearly four in the morning. His cell phone rang, and with a grimace, he checked the caller ID. "Hello?" he said after turning the device on.

Ben grunted. "Any word, Zelig?"

"It looks like whoever took her is headed to Denver. Gavin and Evan already flew out, and we just got off the ground a little while ago. Anything there?"

"Nope. Bas and Gunnar are flying in, but it was a bit of a pain to find two flights," he explained. "Sebastian's flying into Helena; Gunnar's coming into Billings."

Cain nodded and rubbed his eyes. "What the hell happened? Mickey B. confessed, damn it . . ."

"Keh!" InuYasha snorted, arms folded and expression blank other than the tell-tale glowing of his golden eyes. "Cause there's two of them, baka," he snarled. "Pretty damn stupid for a tai-fucking-youkai, if you ask me—that damn Mickey B. ain't smart enough to find his way out of a cardboard box let alone kidnap Jillian, even if he wasn't in jail right now."

Cain shot InuYasha a quelling glance that would have been much more effective had the hanyou been looking at him. "And you know this?" he asked instead.

"Stands to reason," InuYasha pointed out. "He copped to everything but the shit down in Mexico."

"Which makes sense since he'd be in a lot more trouble for murder than he will be for stalking," Cain ground out.

"Actually, Zelig, what InuYasha says *does* make sense," Ben cut in.

If Ben were there in front of him, Cain would have had to refrain from giving into the urge to smack his best friend and general, more for having agreed with InuYasha than anything else.

"God," Cain sighed. "What the hell does he want with Jillian?"

Neither InuYasha nor Ben responded to that.

"If you figure out anything, call me back," Cain finally said.

"Zelig . . ."

"What?"

Ben sighed. “Just be careful, will you? Not one of you took a weapon . . . It could be that Jillian isn’t their target, at all.”

“What do you mean? Of course she’s their target. They—”

“Like it or not, youkai know who you are. To dismiss the idea that they’re just trying to get to you through your daughter is completely short-sighted. Don’t be a fool.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Cain growled. “No one would dare.”

Ben uttered a little chuckle completely devoid of humor. “You should know better than anyone that targeting the tai-youkai’s family is something that has been done in the past and could be done in the future.”

That gave Cain pause, and he sighed. “All right,” he said. “I’ll be careful. Just keep me posted if you hear anything.”

“Absolutely.”

The line went dead, and Cain scowled at the device for a moment before dropping it into his pocket again.

“If my granddaughter is in danger because of you, I swear to kami, I’ll sharpen my claws on you,” InuYasha growled.

Cain snorted. “Pfft! Why *did* you come along, anyway?”

That earned him a doleful glower. “Why else? To make sure you didn’t fuck it all up.”

“Come again?”

InuYasha dug his claws into the armrest, unmindful of the harsh sound of ripping fabric. “Keh! You were taking care of this business, weren’t you? Did a piss-poor job of it, too.”

“We did everything we could do, given the information we had,” Cain ground out.

“The hell you did!” InuYasha snarled, earning him strange looks from the surrounding passengers. He ignored them. “If you’d sent someone down to Mexico in the beginning, you’d have known that you were barking up the wrong fucking tree!”

Cain held his breath for all of a minute before he dared open his mouth to speak to InuYasha again. When he did, his tone was clipped, calculated, and it took everything within him to keep his rising temper in check. “I *did* send someone down there to check things out. Trouble was, just like in New York, there’d been so many human authorities in and out of the area around the crash site that there was nothing we could do. There was no lingering scent. There was no trace

evidence. Every bit of evidence that might have helped us in locating this guy blew up with the car. Don't tell me what I am and am not doing, damn it. I'm doing the best I can."

"And when it's your pup in trouble, you do *more*," InuYasha insisted, bearing his fangs at Cain.

"I'm worried about her, too," Cain gritted out. "Let's just find her, all right? You can take potshots at my parenting skills later."

"Fine by me," InuYasha growled.

"Good."

"Good."

That said, Cain leaned back and closed his eyes, set on ignoring his father-in-law, even if he had to die in the doing. Now if they could just catch a break when they touched down in Denver, they'd be one step ahead of the game.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Jillian moaned softly as she tried to force herself to open her eyes. *'Where... am I...?'*

It took a moment for her cloudy mind to comprehend the idea that she was still being held against her will. She was still cuffed to the gurney, but she was inside some sort of cylindrical containment unit. A long red beam was slowly tracking down her body, and while it didn't hurt, it did make her uneasy. Just what were they doing to her? And why?

A soft whimper escaped her as a vicious pang erupted deep inside. *'Gavvie...? Gavvie, where are you?'*

Her brain hurt. Still groggy from the drugs they'd been pumping into her—who knew how much they'd injected into her when she was out of it?—she couldn't seem to form any real coherent thoughts. Everything seemed surreal, distorted. The only thing that was concrete to her was the desperate need to escape, to find Gavin. He'd protect her. He was her hero, and the hero always protected the damsel in distress... She could feel the edges of hysteria creeping up on her, and she moaned again as a single tear slipped down her temple into her hair.

Her senses were dulled, too. She'd always wondered what the others had meant when they'd had their human nights—at least, until Bas and Evan were old enough that they stopped having those completely. Evan had told her once that it felt like he was swimming underwater. He couldn't smell, couldn't see, couldn't hear as well as he normally did. It was a sensation that he hadn't liked, and Jillian hadn't really grasped that. Being a water-youkai, she supposed, she hadn't really noticed that sort of discomfort underwater. Now, though... maybe she did know what he'd been saying before...

The top of the unit opened with a hiss of a hydraulic lever, and Jillian blinked as the harsh light of the fluorescent bulbs bore down on her. The doctor stood beside the machine, and after checking her pulse, he reached over, tinkering with something that Jillian couldn't see. A soft beep sounded in her ears, and with another hiss, the end of the containment unit opened up.

He walked away only to reappear by the opened end at the foot of the gurney. Pulling her out of the cylinder, he carefully maneuvered her toward the elevator on the far side of the room.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice husky, her words a little slurred. "What do you want with me?"

The man didn't look at her. Staring at her feet, it seemed, he scowled and pushed the button on the control panel beside the metal doors.

"M-maybe I can help you," she went on, struggling to keep her brain focused. "If you tell me what you want . . ."

Pushing her into the elevator, he remained silent.

'Don't panic, Jillian... don't panic . . .'

Wise words, she figured. Too bad she wasn't positive she could heed the advice.

The elevator lurched unpleasantly, and Jillian had to bite back the dizzying waves of nausea that hit her hard. She'd never liked the contraptions, and being chained to a gurney on one was even worse, in her opinion.

She just wanted to go home; wanted to be surrounded by people who loved her. She was supposed to be getting married, wasn't she? Just how long had she been here so far? How long did they intend to keep her here?

The elevator jerked to a stop, and the doors slid open. Finding herself back in the room that she recognized vaguely from the last time she'd woke up, Jillian bit her lip when the man wheeled her out of the elevator and walked around the gurney, pausing at each corner to secure the wheels.

"Are you thirsty?"

Jillian blinked at the conversational tone in the man's voice.

"Wh-what?"

He shrugged, his gaze meeting hers for a moment before skittering away to the side. "Are you thirsty?"

Nodding slowly, Jillian watched as the doctor filled a Styrofoam cup with water from a pitcher on the small stand nearby and stuck a clear straw in it. Holding the cup, he eased the straw between her lips and held it for her while she sipped. “Thank you,” she said, turning her head away to show that she was finished.

He set the cup aside and picked up a clinical white phone. “Bring me the Zyrtoph . . . broken? What happened to it . . . ?” He heaved a sigh, shaking his head slowly as he rubbed his cheek. “You do that,” he barked. “Hurry up.”

Jillian grimaced when the youkai slammed the phone down and snatched a syringe and bottle of the drugs off the stand. “Incompetent . . . of all the . . . What was he doing? Playing with it? It’s not a toy, damn it! *Broke* it . . . stupid . . .” he mumbled as he filled the syringe and dropped the bottle onto the stand once more.

“No,” Jillian whispered as the doctor turned her arm efficiently but not meanly. “Please—”

“It’s better this way,” he said in a voice that was much gentler than the angry glint in his eyes would have let her believe were possible.

She couldn’t suppress the whimper that escaped as he pricked her arm with the needle again. “*Why...?*”

He didn’t reply. Jillian tried to fight the effects of the drugs, but she couldn’t help it, either. Her eyes started to close of their own accord, or so it seemed. As desperately as she wanted to stay awake, she just couldn’t. ‘*Gavin... help... me...?*’

“You look just like your mother, Jillian . . .” the doctor murmured.

‘*Mama...?*’ she wondered vaguely as she drifted off to sleep. ‘*He... knows... Mama...? But I don’t... not really...?*’

‘*Unless,*’ another voice whispered in her mind—her youkai voice, ‘*unless he means... your biological mother...?*’

The last thing she heard before she lost consciousness was the man’s voice: “Just like Liza . . .”

‘*Li...za...?*’

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin stood on the street, breathing deep as he tried to catch a lingering trace of Jillian’s scent. He could almost discern it, though to be completely honest, he wasn’t certain whether or not he

really did smell it or if he simply wanted to so badly that he thought he did. “Damn it,” he muttered, clenching his fists tight. “*Damn it!*”

Evan pushed out of the airport and scanned the semi-circle drop-off area with a narrow-eyed gaze. “None of the receptionists remembered her,” he said without preamble. “Not surprising. They’ve probably changed shifts since then . . .”

Stepping off the curb into the path of a yellow taxi, Gavin ignored the yelled curses from the harried driver as he was forced to lie on the brakes to avoid hitting Gavin.

Dawn was just breaking over the skyline of the city, and with every moment that the light grew brighter, he could feel the surging panic creeping higher. Jillian had been in their control for almost twenty-four hours. Gavin would be damned if she’d stay with them for another twenty-four . . .

‘Jilli! Where are you?’

There was no answer.

He grimaced. *‘Jilli . . .’*

A sudden warmth shot through him. Akin to the feeling of her youki brushing over his, he snapped his head to the side, eyes widening as he glanced around the city. She was that way: to the north. Without bothering to speak to Evan, he sprinted through the parking lot and around the high rise parking garage. In the alley, he vaulted onto the low roof of the car rental building.

“Oi! Jillian’s scent went the other way!” Evan hollered as he landed on the building and dashed after Gavin.

“Don’t care,” Gavin growled as he sped up.

“What do you mean, you don’t care?” Evan demanded.

Gavin glanced over his shoulder and snorted. “She’s this way, Evan. I can *feel* her.”

“Yeah? You’re sure?”

Gavin nodded. “I’m sure.”

“Gotcha.”

With every step he took, he could feel the pull of her growing steadily stronger, and that was enough to lend him a sense of reluctant reassurance. He might not know exactly where she was, but he knew that she wasn’t too far, and that was enough.

‘Gavin?’

He faltered for a moment but managed to keep his footing as the instant flood of relief crashed over him and nearly brought him to his knees. *'Jilli!'*

'Gavin...?'

'Where are you? Did you figure anything out?'

'No... they keep giving me shots...?'

'Don't worry, okay? I'm coming for you... can you feel me? I can... I can feel you... I'll be there...?'

'He said I look like my mother... how would he know that, Gavin? How?'

Gavin grimaced as he vaulted over the rooftops, over the wide streets below. Somewhere it registered in his mind that what he was doing was dangerous; that he shouldn't be running around in broad daylight like this where humans could see him. He didn't care. Jillian was more important. She was scared, she was worried, and he just didn't give a damn whether humans saw him or not. Evan was fast on his heels, though, and he wasn't commenting on the impropriety of it, either...

'I don't know, Jilli... just hang on, okay? We'll be there...?'

'What if you can't find me?' she wailed, the fear in her voice goading him faster.

'I'll find you; I promise. I'll be there as soon as I can.'

'Hurry, Gavin? Please hurry...?'

He winced but kept running. *'I'm sorry, Jilli... I never should have let you go alone. I'm sorry; so sorry...?'*

'You'll save me, right? Be my hero...?'

'Yes. God, yes... I'll be there before you know it.'

'And we'll still get married?'

'Whatever you want, Jilli. Anything you want...?'

'I... I just want to go home...?'

'Okay... I'll take you home; I swear.'

'Gavin...?'

Chapter 33
Eli

“What the . . .?” Cain grumbled as he scowled at the street in front of Denver International Airport. Hands on hips, he could discern Jillian’s scent, albeit faint, and from what he could tell, the youkai that took her had led her on foot along the sidewalk to the left, but the strange thing was, Gavin and Evan’s scent—stronger than Jillian’s—weren’t following Jillian’s trail at all. Heading straight across the parking lot, or so it seemed, Cain couldn’t figure out why they’d deviated from the trail.

InuYasha stomped outside, casting Cain a furious glower. He stopped, too, eyeing both directions for a moment before heading off to follow Gavin’s scent.

Cain caught his arm and pulled him back. “Where are you going?” he growled. “Jillian went this way.”

“Keh! I know Jillian went that way,” InuYasha snarled.

“Then you’re going the wrong way,” Cain gritted out, struggling to control his rapidly rising irritation.

“The hell I am!”

“The hell you’re not!”

“Fine . . . you go that way if you want. I’m going *this* way.”

“Look, I don’t know why Gavin took off this way, but her scent goes *that* way,” Cain growled, pointing back the other direction.

InuYasha snorted. “You know, you were fucking stupid when you almost killed my pup, and you’re even stupider now, damn it! He’s her mate, ain’t he? Maybe he can sense where the fuck she is!”

Cain recoiled slightly from the harsh reminder of what had happened so many years ago. There weren’t many things that had the ability to make him cringe, but that memory . . . it was enough. All the same, he wasn’t so sure that Gavin did know where Jillian was. If he was running around, half-cocked, then he wasn’t really going to help Jillian at all. “All I’m saying is that maybe we should go see why her trail leads off that way,” Cain said, forcing his voice to remain calmer than he was feeling at the moment.

“You go do that,” InuYasha growled. “I’m going this way.”

“Of all the hot-headed, idiotic things to—” Cain began. The trill of InuYasha’s cell phone stopped him, though, and he waited impatiently while the hanyou dug the device out of his pocket . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Gavin knelt, glowering through the row of hedges at the brick building. Jerking his arm in a vain effort to dislodge Evan’s hand, he growled low in his throat but remained silent as Evan held the cell phone to his ear. “Let go, Evan!” Gavin hissed.

“Just hold on,” Evan told him. “You can’t go charging in there yet.”

“What?” InuYasha growled in lieu of a greeting when he finally answered his phone.

“Where the hell are you?” Evan growled back.

InuYasha snorted. “Where the fuck else? Arguing with your old man.”

Evan rolled his eyes and tightened his grip on Gavin’s arm when the youkai tried to jerk away again. “Yeah, well, hurry it up, will you? You can follow our trail, right?”

“What the fuck do you think I was trying to do?” InuYasha snapped.

“Just follow us. Gavin’s youkai got us here, but pay attention. Our path doubles back on itself in one area near the South Platte River—*someone* thought we could just fly right over it . . .”

“I could have,” Gavin growled.

Evan snorted. “*You* could have, then *I* could have spent the next hour looking for your sorry ass while you ran off and got yourself into trouble *because you’re not thinking!*”

That earned him a black glower but he ignored it. “Anyway, we’re just over the river to the north of Denver. It’s some sort of industrial facility, but it doesn’t look like there’s an actual business here anymore.”

“Be careful, damn it,” InuYasha demanded. “I don’t feel like having to rescue you, too.”

“Yeah, yeah . . . Hurry it up.”

Clicking off his phone, he slipped it into his pocket before leveling a no-nonsense look at Gavin. “They’ll be here. Let’s scope the place out. It doesn’t look like it’s being guarded, but you never know . . . Are you *positive* she’s here?”

Gavin stopped long enough to glare at his friend. “Yes, I’m sure she’s here!” he snarled. “She’s here! I can *feel* her!”

Evan nodded. It hadn't really crossed his mind, the idea that Gavin might be wrong on this. He'd heard stories from before; stories about other youkai having the ability to sense when their mates were in danger. Gavin and Jillian were both youkai, and they'd been so integral to one another for so long, it was probably second nature to both of them, really. That was the main reason he hadn't argued when Gavin had taken off in a completely different direction from Jillian's scent. That was the main reason why he trusted Gavin's conviction now. "Okay. You go that way; I'll go this way. Just check around the building before we try to bust in there."

Gavin growled but nodded, and Evan finally let go of his arm.

Setting off in opposite directions, Evan glanced back in time to see Gavin dash around the side of the building.

Of course, that same sense that had led them here had also led them straight into the South Platte River. Too wide for them to jump across, Gavin had been of the opinion that he could transform into his energy form and make it over. Too bad Evan couldn't. Youkai, certainly, but since his mother was a hanyou, Evan lacked the ability to do that. After a lot of arguing, Gavin had grudgingly given in, realizing on some level that Evan was right; that splitting up wouldn't be good when there was only two of them, to start with.

Apparently Gavin's youkai was being led straight to Jillian, literally, and that didn't account for such things as rivers . . .

It didn't make sense, though. Why would someone have brought her here? The place was some sort of abandoned facility. Near the entrance on the wall were the still-discernable outlines of letters that had been affixed to the building at some point. '*Carradine Medical*', it read.

Evan frowned as he kept moving. '*Carradine Medical*,' he repeated to himself. He vaguely remembered the name. He'd heard it somewhere before . . .

Something else had occurred to him, too. From what Gavin had mentioned, Jillian hadn't been taken by another stalker. No, it seemed like whoever took her was working with or for someone else, and that someone wanted something from her. Gavin said she kept telling him that 'they' kept giving her shots and stuff, and there wasn't a doubt in Evan's mind that, while Mickey B. was a nuisance, these youkai were the real threat . . .

He could smell several of them in the area surrounding the building. That worried him even more. Sure, Gavin had been trained. It wasn't a secret that Moe Jamison had always hoped that Gavin would follow in his footsteps and become a youkai hunter. To that end, he'd been thoroughly trained—almost as thoroughly as Evan and Bas had. Still, Jillian was Gavin's mate, and Evan had seen enough youkai make idiot mistakes when their mates were involved that he knew that even the best training might not help much in the given situation.

Gavin rounded the side of the building and spotted Evan, shaking his head as he closed the distance between them. "I didn't see anyone," he said without preamble. "You?"

“No,” Evan admitted, “and I don’t like it.”

Gavin nodded. “Me, either, but I’m not leaving her in there another minute. You coming?”

Evan cracked a half-assed grin. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

Gavin grunted. He looked like hell, actually. A good shave would help . . . so would some sleep. His hair had come loose during their trek over the Denver skyline, and somewhere along the way, he’d torn the arm of his shirt. Striding back toward the entrance of the building once more, Evan paused and grabbed Gavin’s arm. “There’s someone coming,” he mumbled.

A strange look passed over Gavin’s features—a stubbornness in the set of his features as he shook Evan off and strode forward. Evan grimaced and followed.

“Where’s Jillian?” Gavin demanded, stepping into the path of the two youkai who had just emerged from the building. One was wearing a white lab coat while the other was clad in black. Both looked rather surprised.

“What are you talking about?” the one in the lab coat—a kitsune—asked with a shake of his head. He was trying to play ignorant. Too bad Evan hadn’t missed the momentary look of recognition that lit the man’s initial gaze.

Gavin wasn’t waiting for answers. Lunging forward, he grabbed the man by the front of his coat and slammed him back against the thick glass doors. “Where is she?” he demanded once more.

The other man—a rat-hanyou—started to move in. Evan darted over and grabbed him, bearing him back against the wall. His skull cracked against the bricks, and he slumped to the ground in a heap.

“I-I don’t—” the youkai began, his tone rising as Gavin started to growl low in his throat.

“I wouldn’t lie to him if I were you,” Evan drawled, nudging the hanyou with the toe of his boot to make sure he really was unconscious. “He gets hella grumpy when his mate goes missing.”

Gavin wasn’t waiting for an answer. Jerking the man off his feet, he sent him flying through the air. He hit the ground in the middle of the ragged-looking lawn and slid a good fifty feet before he finally came to a stop, and he didn’t get up, either. “Damn, Gavvie,” Evan remarked. “Remind me not to piss you off.”

Gavin’s only response was a curt grunt as he jerked the door open and strode inside.

The lobby of the building was eerily empty. The lobby encompassed the entire front of the building, and was opened up to the metal rafter beams high overhead. Gavin shot Evan a glance as he stepped forward, his cowboy boots resounding on the hardened clay floor like the echo of gunfire. “She’s . . . downstairs . . .” he finally said.

Evan nodded. "You go get her. I'll make sure there're no surprises up there," he said, nodding at the open staircase that rose from the center of the lobby.

Gavin paused long enough to look at Evan once more. "Thanks."

Evan shrugged. "Go get my sister, will you?"

Gavin nodded and strode toward the steps leading down.

Evan waited for a moment before hurrying past the staircase and down the hallway on the ground floor. Judging from the outside of the building, he'd say there were only two levels of the facility above ground. The corridor was lined with doorways: most of which were open. They looked like a series of empty offices, for the most part. A couple held desks that had been abandoned long ago. Glancing up and down the hallway, he paused long enough to tug his boots off. He should have told Gavin to do the same, come to think of it. He didn't like the feel of this place, not at all . . .

Moving past the swinging doors of what looked to be a bathroom, Evan looked through the windows in the doors. Over the row of sinks was a plate glass window, and he shook his head. 'An . . . operating room . . .?' he mused. 'What the hell kind of place is this?' He sighed and kept going. Making his way down to the last door at the very end of the hallway, Evan stopped, closing his eyes and stretching out his youki to check the area. He couldn't sense anyone inside the room, but he wasn't taking any chances, either . . .

Pushing the door open very slowly, he peered around it and narrowed his eyes. The room looked like a laboratory . . . microscopes on lab tables . . . a row of x-ray lights lining one wall . . .

He slipped into the room and looked around. This room, unlike the others he'd seen, didn't seem abandoned. A Styrofoam cup sat beside one of the microscopes, and upon closer inspection, he realized that it still held half a cup of still-warm coffee.

'What the fuck are they doing here, and why do they have Jillian?'

He couldn't smell her in the room. She obviously hadn't been brought in here. Too bad Evan couldn't decide whether or not he thought that was a good or bad thing . . .

He turned to leave when something else caught his eye, and he frowned as he slowly walked toward it. A strange sort of device was lying on a lab table. It was shaped like one of those hand-held metal detecting devices that airport security used to find concealed weapons, and Evan slowly picked it up, turning it over in his hands. Things were getting weirder by the second. The sooner Gavin found Jillian and got her out of there, the better . . .

Shaking his head, he dropped the device onto the counter and hurried out of the room and down the hallway. It didn't really matter what they were doing here so long as Jillian wasn't in danger anymore . . .

Negotiating the stairs was simple enough. The quietness of the building wore on his nerves with every step he took. Hurrying down the hallway, he wasn't surprised to find the rooms as empty as the ones below. Eyes focused on the door at the very end of the corridor, he spared cursory glances into the rooms he bypassed.

If the room below had been a laboratory, he wasn't sure what to call this one. Filled with all sorts of medical machinery, he grimaced when the all-too-familiar scent of his sister infiltrated his senses. Jillian had been in here, hadn't she? On a small, portable surgery table, he saw the unmistakable bottle; the syringes—carefully covered with disposable plastic caps—arranged: the drugs she'd told Gavin about while she was helpless; immobile. '*Cyclimorph*,' he read with a scowl. '*Cyclimorph* . . .' It was a mix of morphine with an anti-sickness medicine mixed in, if his memory served. It was normally used as a pain killer, but Evan remembered hearing Kichiro tell him awhile back that in youkai, it tended to knock them out if administered in the right dosage. "Bastard!" he growled, grabbing the half-empty bottle and crushing it in his palm.

'*Jillian* . . .' He grimaced, forcing himself to focus on the task at hand as he watched the shards of glass fall from his hand before he shook the blood and residual liquid off. Following her scent to the far end of the room, he scowled at the hulking machine. It looked like a mobile MRI system .

..

"What the fuck do they *want* from her?" he growled in the silent room. Rage building deep down, his vision wavered as anger the likes that he'd never felt before ignited below his skin, burning him from deep down. A steady roar built in his ears—he didn't realize that the sound was coming from low in his throat. Vision disintegrating in a reddened haze, he gnashed his teeth together and slammed his fist into the small, round window, shattering the tempered glass, which did nothing to relieve his rampant frustration, his outrage.

A harsh hiss erupted behind him, and Evan wheeled around, stopping short as a strange youkai stepped out of the elevator. The youkai didn't seem surprised by Evan's presence—or he was damn good at hiding it. Evan didn't care one way or the other. One thing and one thing alone registered in Evan's mind: the youkai before him—the eel-youkai—he was the same one who had been around the ranch. "You," he growled.

The eel-youkai made a mocking bow. "Me . . . ? Eli, at your service."

"Where the hell is my sister?" Evan growled, his voice lower, more gravely than his normal timbre.

"Hmm, I'm not sure . . . Maybe she's dead."

"You wouldn't touch her," Evan snarled, cracking his knuckles as he glowered at the youkai.

Eli smiled insincerely and shrugged. "Wouldn't I? I did kidnap her, didn't I? You really think I wouldn't kill her? Pampered little cunt . . . I'd *love* to."

Evan unleashed a furious howl as he barreled at the youkai. He caught the youkai in the center of the chest, barreling him backward into the wall. "You bastard!"

With a grunt, Eli shoved Evan away. He staggered back a couple steps but caught himself and lunged forward again. “Anger is your enemy, hanyou,” Eli laughed. “Lose control of your emotions, and you’ll be the one to pay!” His voice rose with every word, the final one punctuated with a lightning-fast motion as Eli whipped around, grabbing Evan and slamming him against the wall. Holding him in place with his forearm under Evan’s chin, Eli grasped the middle finger tip of his Gila-monster glove on his free hand and tugged it off. “Say goodbye, son of the Great-Dog,” he said as little strings of lightning crackled between his fingers.

Evan couldn’t control the unbridled rage that threatened to engulf him. He might not be able to lose himself in the youkai rage that true hanyous could, but that didn’t mean he was immune to the overwhelming need to protect his own—his family. Eli’s fist was a blur of movement. Evan ducked and heaved, hitting the floor and rolling to the side as the errant shot of lightning energy shot out of Eli’s fingertips.

Rolling to his feet, chest heaving as he drew deep breaths, Evan shot forward once more, arms encircling Eli’s waist, locking around him, propelling him back across the room. Eli twisted, his fingers crackling, bolts of electricity sending sparks trailing behind them like a shooting star, and with a mighty shove, he thrust Evan backward. The bolts of lightning hit him dead center in the chest, lifting him off his feet and sending him flying back. He smacked hard into the huge scanning apparatus, his head snapping against the unforgiving metal, his scream cut off abruptly as the air whooshed out of his body; as he slumped slowly to the floor.

Eli stared down at him for several moments, a cold grin spreading over his features. His fingers itched to finish off the pup, but unfortunately, he didn’t have time for that. He wasn’t a horrible adversary; Eli had to give him that. Too bad he’d been too angry to put up a decent fight. With a disgusted sigh, he turned away with a flourish, yanking off his other glove and retrieving the one he’d dropped before stuffing them into his pocket. He doubted that the bitch’s brother would be here without her mate . . .

His smile widened as he glanced at the elevator and turned on his heel. The elevator wouldn’t provide the element of surprise that he wanted. Her mate might be a complete square, but he was also huge, and with a father who was a renowned hunter . . . Well, Eli wasn’t stupid enough to take any chances. He’d been ordered not to harm Jillian Zelig, but things had changed, hadn’t they? If the tai-youkai’s son and would-be son-in-law were here, then it was a safe bet that the others wouldn’t be far behind.

No, he needed Jillian Zelig alive, but not because he’d been ordered to let her live. He needed her to ensure that *he* stayed alive, and for that reason only, he’d play the game . . .

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

‘Damn it . . .’

It didn't take Gavin long to figure out that trying to be quiet and being angry enough to kill someone just didn't go well together. Slipping down the half-lit hallway, he looked around for any signs of opposition. Jillian had to be lower—there seemed to be at least two underground levels in the building—and he could feel the pull of her youki. He just had to make certain that there was no one who could interfere.

The first basement level yielded him nothing. It was just as well. A myriad of memories were tormenting him as the fierce need to protect her warred with the insane desire just to see her, to touch her, to know she was still there with him. The first time he'd met Jillian with her silvery hair caught up in piggy tails, little tendrils that had escaped hanging in wisps around her angel's face . . . the bright smile that always greeted him, always made him feel just a little taller, a little bigger than he ever really had been . . . the way her eyes glowed whenever she looked at him . . . He'd come to realize that the light that illuminated her gaze was her way of telling him for so long that she really *did* love him . . . She'd been telling him that for so long . . . He just hadn't realized it until now . . .

Sprinting back down the hallway, he caught the banister to swing himself around the corner, leaping over the railing onto the next level down. Landing in a crouch as two youkai darted around the corner, Gavin vaulted off the floor, lowering his shoulder as he pummeled straight into the first one, knocking him back into the other one. The two sprawled on the floor, and Gavin wasted no time in jabbing two fingers behind each of their ears to knock them out. Sparing a second to ascertain that they were both still breathing, he stood up and ran down the hallway, absently muttering a word of thanks to his father, who had insisted that Gavin learn how to utilize pressure points to disable his opponents.

Another youkai dashed out of a room off to the side, catching Gavin around the waist and shoving him against the cinderblock wall. He grabbed the front of Gavin's shirt and jerked him away from the wall and started to shove him back. Gavin braced his hands against the youkai's chest and heaved him away. His shirt ripped as the youkai careened away, smacking into the wall hard, his head hitting the cinderblocks with a sickening thud. He slumped to the floor, and Gavin grimaced, glancing down long enough to see the jagged streaks of blood running down his chest from the youkai's claws.

'She's behind that door . . .'

Face contorting in an irate grimace, Gavin lowered his shoulder and barreled into the door. It slammed open with a resounding crash, and he stood in the doorway, scanning the room for Jillian.

She was handcuffed to a gurney with youkai—a doctor?—standing over her. They seemed to have been talking when he broke in, but the doctor looked rather stunned, and Gavin . . . well, he certainly wasn't about to waste any time. The flash of something in the doctor's hand caught his attention, and his eyes flared wide when he realized what it was: a needle.

"*Hell, no!*" Gavin bellowed, shooting across the room and catching the doctor's wrist, bearing him back against the wall. The air whooshed out of the doctor's lungs with the force of the impact; the syringe in his hand clattered helplessly to the floor only to be crushed under the heel

of Gavin's boot. Grasping the youkai by the throat, Gavin hefted him off his feet, fighting the desire to snap his neck. "What do you think you're doing with my mate?" he growled.

The doctor wheezed, clawing pathetically at Gavin's hand in an effort to break his hold. The color in his face mottled, darkened, and he grimaced as he tried in vain to choke out a word.

"Gavin!" Jillian called, her voice oddly detached, almost hollow—doubtless a residual effect of the drugs she'd been given. "Don't kill him . . . he knows . . . knew . . . my biological parents . . ."

Gavin winced. As much as he wanted to rip the guy to shreds—as much as the guy deserved to be torn limb from limb—he couldn't ignore Jillian's quiet entreaty; not to mention the idea that Cain would want him alive, if only to question him. "*Damn it!*" Gavin snarled, slamming the youkai against the wall with a force so strong that the cinderblocks groaned. Letting go, he glowered as the doctor crumpled to the floor in a careless heap.

"Gavvie . . ."

Gavin ran back to Jillian and hugged her tight. "Oh, God, Jilli . . . Are you all right?" He straightened up, grasping the length of chain between the cuff on her wrist and the one hooked around the leg of the gurney and yanking hard. "What the . . .?"

She nodded and heaved a sigh. "I think . . . I think he has the keys . . ."

He spared her a momentary glance before hurrying back over to the doctor. Pushing the youkai onto his back, Gavin made quick work of searching the doctor's pockets to find the ring of keys. His hands were shaking so badly, though, that it took a few tries before he actually managed to free her hands and feet, dropping the keys on the floor before scooping her up and setting her feet on the floor. He didn't let go. Hugging her tight, refusing to relinquish his hold on her, he closed his eyes just for a moment as he tried to comprehend the idea that she really was going to be all right. She leaned against him, her legs unsteady, burying her face against his shoulder. "Come on," he said, carefully lifting her into his arms. "Let me get you out of here."

"Okay," she agreed softly. "The girls are all fine? Minnie and Karis, Sherry and the baby?"

"They're just fine," he assured her, kissing her forehead. "Just fine . . ."

"Oh . . . you're hurt!" she exclaimed softly, her panic spiking as she struggled to lean away, to inspect his wounds.

"Don't worry about that," he told her. "Just scratches. Barely feel a thing."

That didn't reassure her. If anything, she seemed even more distraught than she had before.

"Well, well, well . . . isn't that just sweet?"

Whipping around, Gavin's arms tightened as he watched the eel-youkai stride into the room. "You're the one they smelled around the ranch," he growled.

Chapter 34
Hero Points

The youkai lunged at Gavin. He dodged the first attack easily enough, spinning away and shoving a small surgical table aside. It crashed onto the floor with a resounding crack that echoed through the room, bouncing off the cinderblock walls in such a way that it oddly reminded Gavin of high school and the pep rallies in the gymnasium when the band would smash their hand held cymbals together.

Completing the circuit, he used his momentum to lead into a harsh shove, pushing the eel-youkai back. It threw him off balance, but he righted his footing before he slipped. Holding his hands out straight, Eli unleashed two bolts of lightning straight at Gavin's chest, but hit the wall when Gavin dove to the side only to roll to his feet once more before launching himself directly at the youkai. Knocking him back was simple enough—Gavin had more than enough brute strength to accomplish the task. Eli crouched down as he slid across the floor, the heels of his boots squealing against the hardened clay tiles, reaching out behind him to steady himself against the wall then using it to hurl himself at Gavin once more.

Gavin caught him in mid-air and tossed him aside as though he were little more than a sack of horse feed before turning to glance at Jillian to make certain she was still all right.

“Watch out, Gavvie!” Jillian exclaimed suddenly. Gavin nodded whipped back around to face Eli once more. The youkai braced his hands and feet against the floor before launching himself at Gavin again. Drawing his right hand back over his left shoulder, he was poised to strike. Gavin spun around, his claws catching Eli's cheek, but not in time to avoid the descending blow. With a sharp hiss, Gavin grimaced as an explosion of pain shot down his arm from his shoulder, reverberating through his body as the scent of his blood intensified.

“Did that hurt, puppy?” Eli challenged, wiping the blood away from the cut on his cheek.

Gavin shook his arm. “Nope. I'm just fine,” he bit out, trying to block out the sound of Jillian's soft whimpering. He needed to focus. If she wasn't still suffering from the influence of the drugs, he'd tell her to go find Evan . . . “Tell me why you kidnapped her,” he growled.

Eli shrugged, still content to make light of the wound on his cheek. “Who knows? Avis wanted her. That's all I ever knew.”

“Avis?” Gavin echoed, flexing his fingers and satisfied that the lacerations on his shoulder weren't nearly as deep as he'd feared.

Eli nodded at the still-unconscious doctor. “Yes . . . Dr. Avis,” he clarified. “This is all well and good, but it'd be so much simpler if you just give me the girl and walk away.”

“Like I'd do that,” Gavin snarled. “She's my *mate*.”

“Mates . . . the biggest of all fairy tales,” Eli mused. “Fools die foolish deaths. Is that really what you want?”

“You’re assuming you can kill me.”

Eli chuckled, lifting his hand, cracking his knuckles one by one. “I’ve just been playing with you, thus far, Mr. Jamison.”

“Then feel free to bring it.”

Unleashing a vicious growl, Eli shot forward again, his fingertips crackling with electricity. Gavin was faster. Dashing forward, he drew his arm back and snapped it straight out, catching Eli in the center of his chest with the heel of his hand. Eli grunted as he flew backward, tumbling over a high lab table and rolling to his feet once more. Without giving him a moment to recover, Gavin vaulted over the table, kicking out straight. His heel connected with Eli’s chin, sending the youkai careening into the wall. Landing in a crouch, he sprang once more, drawing his fist back as he honed in on his target. Eli saw the blow coming and ducked, extending his arms and with a grunt of exertion, he heaved Gavin back, all traces of his prior cockiness evaporated, gone.

With a frustrated growl, Eli raised a hand as threads of lightning shot up and down his fingers. Mud brown hair spiking all over his head, his eyes ignited in angry fire. Face contorted in a mask of barely-contained rage, Eli grimaced as a thin trail of spittle dripped from his lip. The room was too wide open yet not nearly big enough to withstand an all-out energy attack. Somewhere in the back of his mind Gavin realized that if they weren’t careful, they’d run the risk of bringing the entire building down around them . . .

Dodging to the right, he eluded the first few bolts of lightning that Eli shot at him. He was doing little more than attempting to buy a few moments while he racked his brain for a better strategy. True, he was trained in the martial arts and in hand to hand battle as well as with a sword. The trouble was that Eli didn’t seem to be interested in trying to take Gavin on in closer combat, and without his sword, it was more difficult to launch any sort of real long-range attacks . . . Shoving a table into the youkai’s path, Gavin couldn’t avoid the bolts of lightning that shot out of each of Eli’s outstretched fingertips. One struck him in the middle of his right thigh as he tried to roll out of the way. The shock numbed his leg instantly, and he gritted his teeth as Eli had the audacity to stand back and laugh. “It’ll take more than an untried pup to bring me down,” he goaded.

Gavin couldn’t help the grimace of pain that surfaced as he tried to stumble forward a couple steps. He could see Jillian out of the corner of his eye. Sitting up and gripping the edge of the gurney so hard her knuckles were white, she looked like she wanted to say something but didn’t dare interfere . . . She looked concerned, but she didn’t look *frightened*. Biting her lower lip, she stared at him, eyebrows drawn together in fierce concentration, as though she was willing him to read her mind; as though she was trying to send him a message that just wasn’t getting through . . .

‘You’re my hero, Gavvie,’ her voice whispered in his head. ‘My hero . . .’

And that was enough. Something about the confidence in her words lent him courage, added to his determination. Gathering his strength, he raised his hands. Eli mimicked the motion a thousand sparks of electricity grew in the space between his palms. Gavin felt his energy gathering, igniting in a ball of aqua light that swelled and warmed between his hands. He could hear Jillian slipping off the gurney—she must have realized that she needed to be further away—but he didn’t turn to look at her.

Pulling his hands apart slowly as the energy ball grew, the unsettling feeling that something was coming undone in his soul registered despite his resolve that he had to stop Eli. He’d only felt that way once before—the only other time he’d conjured up the glowing attack as part of his training years ago.

A howling echo sounded in his ears like the gathering wind just before a storm. The glowing ball crackled, fizzled, popped between his hands, blowing his hair back off his face as it grew and expanded, pulsing in the brilliant glow of his energy. With a harsh cry, a savage growl, he unleashed the attack. Whizzing through the air with a high-pitched screech, Eli released his attack. The two balls of light and energy collided, culminating in an explosion that reverberated out in waves of power, rattling the glass-fronted cabinets mounted on the walls, shattering the glass as brilliant flashes of aqua and yellow radiated across the room.

Gavin lurched to the side, grabbing Jillian and curling himself around her, protecting her from the unnatural wind that lifted tables and tossed them around as though they were made of cardboard and feathers. Picking her up and hurrying across the room, fighting against the wind and the blowing debris, he staggered toward the doorway. He had no intention of leaving, but he’d be damned if Jillian was going to remain in the melee.

A steady hand gripped his shoulder. Gavin growled fiercely, letting Jillian down before whipping around to face the newest perceived threat.

“Get her out of here,” Cain Zelig said with a curt nod.

“C-Cain . . .”

“Just get her out of here,” he repeated. “I’ll take care of this.”

He didn’t want to comply. He didn’t want to walk away from his fight, but Cain was right. Jillian had seen enough, hadn’t she? She didn’t need to witness anything more. With a single jerk of his head, he scooped Jillian up once more. Cain spared a moment to touch her cheek before nodding at Gavin and striding into the dying wind.

Gavin watched for a moment before hurrying out of the room with Jillian in his arms.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

Cain didn't blink as the din died down. It hadn't taken him long to locate Gavin and Jillian after entering the building. Following the sounds of discord echoing through the empty building, he'd stepped over the still bodies that littered the floor in the lowest hallway, and he'd almost reached the doorway when the explosion stopped him in his tracks. Lifting his arms to shield his face, he grimaced at the absolute force that erupted within the room. Unable to discern exactly who had unleashed the attack, Cain had to grasp the doorframe to keep himself from being blown back with the waves of energy and light that reverberated outward. By the time he'd been able to see through the swirling gales, he'd caught sight of Gavin, staggering toward the doorway with Jillian nestled in his arms.

He'd called out to Gavin, but the young man couldn't hear him. Portable surgeon's tables were flying through the air, tossed about like paper, swirling around the centrifugal force of the fusing and dispersing balls of energy. Merging into one, they crackled and snapped. Cain strode into the room, laying a hand on Gavin's shoulder to gain his attention.

He must have startled Gavin. Setting Jillian back on her feet and swinging around to face him, Gavin looked like he was ready to tear into Cain for the disturbance. "Get her out of here," he said with a curt nod.

"C-Cain . . ."

"Just get her out of here," he repeated. "I'll take care of this."

Gavin didn't look like he wanted to comply, but he finally nodded, scooping up Jillian once more. Cain reached out, stroking Jillian's cheek just for a moment before turning on his heel and striding into the dying fray.

"So I rank the personal attention of the tai-youkai?" the eel-youkai asked with an air of mock bravado that Cain could see right through. Gavin had dealt damage enough. Blood streaked down the youkai's cheek from a set of parallel scratches that traversed the left side of his face, and it was evident that he was moving a little gingerly.

"I'd advise you to stand down," Cain stated, careful to keep his tone completely flat.

"That's what you advise," he repeated, making Cain a mocking bow as he casually skirted the perimeter of the room, stalking Cain, studying Cain. Cain noticed, but he didn't move as his eyes tracked the youkai's movements. "How *proper* of you."

Something about the youkai, though, reminded Cain of someone he'd known long ago. More of a memory than a conscious thought, he narrowed his eyes slightly as he regarded the eel-youkai, and he knew . . . "You're Darren Terry's son, aren't you?" he finally asked in a tone that suggested that he knew the answer without having it verified.

A momentary look of surprise crossed the youkai's features, and he leaned back as he slowly shook his head. "So you remember my father? He'd be honored."

“Spare me your sarcasm and tell me just when you thought that it would be acceptable for you to dishonor your father this way,” Cain demanded.

“My father died in your service,” he shot back. “He died trying to prove to you that he was a hunter worthy of your notice.”

“Your father died defending those who couldn’t defend themselves,” Cain replied, “and this is how you would show your respect for him? Do you honestly believe that this is something he’d approve of?”

“I wouldn’t know,” he growled, the temerarious control he held over his emotions thinning, weakening with every passing moment. “He’s dead. Mother’s dead. It’s nothing personal, you understand. Just business.”

“You’re wrong,” Cain countered. “You made it personal when you dared to lay one finger on *my* little girl.”

“Sorry you feel that way, *Lord Tai-Youkai*,” he intoned, insincerity fairly dripping from his voice.

The first blast of lightning shot out of his fingertips without warning, hitting Cain in the left shoulder and jerking him back though sheer strength of will kept him from losing his footing. Raising his hand, unleashing a bright teal ball of fire meant only as warning that grazed the youkai’s cheek, Cain lowered his chin and slowly shook his head. “Don’t push your luck.”

With a savage growl, Eli launched himself at Cain in a blur of motion and reverberations of rage, of hatred that centered solely on the perception of Cain. He could feel the anger of the man who still felt the pain of being little more than a child who didn’t understand exactly what had happened and why his father just wasn’t coming home; the anguish of losing his mother sooner than he should have and the hopelessness of being left all alone. Bringing his arm up to block the descending claws, Cain grunted, grimaced as Eli’s claws sliced through the fabric of his shirt. Grabbing Eli’s wrist, Cain jerked, bringing the youkai down flat on his back and planting his foot in the center of his chest. “Give up, son,” he said quietly.

“Like hell!” Eli spat, latching onto Cain’s leg and jerking it out from under him. Cain hit the floor and rolled to his feet, diving to the side again in time to avoid a full-on blast of lightning that melted a thermo-plastic tray on contact, igniting it as smoke roiled in the air. “Why won’t you *die*?” he bellowed, his eyes sparking as streaks of lightning crisscrossed the room, uncontrollable, wanton.

It was a split-second decision—one that Cain hated to make but knew there really was no way around it. Young Eli Terry had made his choice long ago, hadn’t he, and maybe it was something that had been no more than a simple matter of time. The foundation of the building was groaning, creaking, screaming under the assault of the electrical attack. Cain dashed out of the way of the next string of bolts as the fluorescent bulbs overhead fizzled and popped, exploding waterfalls of sparks that rained down to fuel the fires igniting all over the room. Smoke poured between the fissured ceiling tiles—the overload on the building’s electrical systems a living,

breathing thing. The steady hum of the broken circuits erupting in a wizened groan as the structure shuddered.

Stopping abruptly, Cain turned, narrowed his eyes as he gritted his teeth, as he focused his power, his energy. The blackness of the room was filled with the strobe-lighting effect of the bolts of errant lightning flying through the air. Even the knowledge that he really didn't have a choice didn't alleviate the feeling that dug at him, tore at him—the same feeling he always got when he had to issue a kill-order, only this time, the feeling was intensified, tying his stomach in knots as he slowly raised his hand.

Eli stood, frozen it seemed, unable to move as the burn took over. The insane lightning sputtered and died as the youkai grunted, as the first tendrils of steam rose from his body. The room took on an eerie, hazy glow that emanated from Eli's solitary form that warred with the piles of burning plastic. Burning from the inside out—some might have likened it to spontaneous combustion—it was a horrible way to die. The smell of charring flesh filled the room along with the anguished moans from the eel-youkai.

He exploded with a flash of blinding light, with an unnatural wind that howled in Cain's ears—a death knell. He stood, hand extended, unblinking as the light and wind died away. There was no sense of satisfaction, no relief that the ordeal was over; just a sense of complete emptiness; a melancholy that it never should have had to come to such an end.

Striding over to grasp the unconscious doctor's body, Cain drew a deep breath and grabbed a set of handcuffs off the floor near the gurney, pausing long enough to secure the youkai's hands behind his back before hefting him over his right shoulder and striding out of the room again.

'*Jillian's safe,*' he told himself, chanting it like a mantra over and over again in his head. '*She's safe . . .*'

That was the most important thing. Climbing the stairs, his movements infinitely weary though the exhaustion was mental more than physical in derivation, he sighed. It was over, yes, but the questions remained: just why the hell had these people wanted Jillian, in the first place?

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

"I can walk," Jillian offered as Gavin wandered through the forest with her held securely in his arms, nestled against his chest.

"I'll carry you, thanks," he mumbled, his cheeks reddening as his grip tightened on her.

"I knew you'd come for me," she said quietly.

"Of course I would . . . you're my Jilli . . . my mate."

“Oh, God! You’re going soft!” Evan grouched. He was lingering a few steps behind Gavin—InuYasha had insisted that Evan go with Gavin to make sure that there wasn’t anyone else lying in wait to cause trouble on the trek back to Denver.

Gavin shot Evan a dark scowl. “Shut up, Evan.”

Evan managed a wan grin despite the obvious stiffness in his gait. When he’d gotten back to the lobby with Jillian, Evan had been stumbling down the staircase with a glower on his face as he rubbed the back of his head. The relief on his face, however, was intense, and without a word, he ran over, pulling Jillian out of Gavin’s grasp to hug her tight. InuYasha had been busy rounding up the bodies of the unconscious youkai, a couple of whom were in the process of waking up. They’d located some rope in one of the rooms, and it didn’t take long to secure them all. It was Gavin’s considered opinion, though, that the rope wasn’t really necessary. Not one of the youkai looked like they really wanted to tangle with the hanyou of legend, not that he really blamed them. Growling at him to get Jillian out of there, he hadn’t taken his eyes off the captured youkai, even when he’d reached over to touch Jillian’s hand as Gavin carried her out of the building.

“Call and reserve a hotel room,” Gavin commanded over his shoulder.

Jillian shook her head. “No. I want to go home,” she argued.

“Jilli,” he protested. “You need to rest—and you probably need to see a doctor, too.”

“I need to go home,” she insisted. “Besides, Kichiro will be here soon, and he can check me out, can’t he?”

Gavin wanted to argue that, but he sighed. As much as he’d love her to see a doctor now, he had to admit that there wasn’t a better one around than Kichiro Izayoi. Glancing down at Jillian’s contented expression, he shook his head. He had a feeling that he was in for a lifetime of giving in when it came to her, and somehow, the idea of that just didn’t bother him in the least. “Call and see if there’s a flight out to Helena,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, sure,” Evan remarked. “Course, before we get on a plane, you’d better do something about Jillian’s smell.”

“Her . . . what . . .?”

Jillian giggled. Evan snorted. Gavin drew a deep breath then grimaced. In the insanity and the late relief, he hadn’t noticed that her scent had shifted as she snuggled closer to him. Face exploding in hot color, he winced and increased his stride. “Jilli!”

She laughed. “What?”

“Stop that!” he choked.

Evan groaned. Gavin didn’t have to look to know that he was probably rolling his eyes.

Chapter 35
Chips and Salsa

Cain stumbled into the house just after midnight with a tired sigh and a grimace, wondering just what the odds were that he could head straight to bed without having to answer questions or be put to the third degree by someone like Ben with the best intentions, certainly. It didn't alleviate the fact that the last thing that he wanted or needed to do was to be grilled by his head general over the events of the day.

Gavin had called around three in the afternoon to tell Cain that he and Jillian were landing in Helena. She wanted to go home, and Gavin . . . well, the young man just wasn't good at telling Jillian 'no' and meaning it. Evan had flown back a little after Gavin and Jillian since they hadn't been able to get a flight out together, but InuYasha had remained behind in Denver, waiting for Larry and Cartham to get there. They'd take care of the youkai, taking them all in for questioning before any verdict was handed down, but Cain had to get back. He needed to talk to Bas and Gunnar, and he needed to talk to Ben, but mostly, he had to find out what Jillian knew. Trouble was, he didn't really want to question her; at least not yet until she'd had a day or two to recover.

The house was empty, or so it seemed. Everyone must be in bed already, and he hoped that included Jillian, too. Bellaniece and her ass-monkey of a mate had arrived in his absence, and Cain supposed that Kichiro had likely given Jillian the medical once-over. He'd ask about that later, maybe in the morning . . .

Shuffling into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water, Cain stopped short when Bas glanced over his shoulder at him. "Water?" he asked, his tone careful, clipped.

Cain nodded. "Please."

Bas grabbed two bottles out of the refrigerator and pushed the door closed with his elbow, chucking one bottle to Cain before jerking the lid off the other one and slugging back half of its contents in one long swallow.

Cain regarded his eldest son with a measure of suspicion. "All right," he finally said, "what's eating you?"

Bas turned his head, leaning back against the counter with his arms crossed over his chest, his jaw ticking with the irritation he was trying to control. He didn't answer right away, and Cain heaved a heavy sigh. "Okay, then I'm going to bed," Cain remarked. "We can talk in the morning."

"That was stupid, Dad, you know it?" Bas muttered abruptly, stopping Cain in his tracks.

Cain slowly turned to face his son once more. "Stupid?" he echoed, eyebrows lifting in surprise.

“Yeah, stupid,” Bas reiterated.

“How so?”

Bas snorted. “Pfft! You didn’t know what they wanted—what you were walking into! You didn’t know a damn thing, and you marched right in there, anyway.”

Cain sighed, leaning against the wall and leveling a no-nonsense look at Bas. “Did you think I wouldn’t?” he challenged mildly.

Bas shook his head, slamming his water bottle onto the counter. “You’ve always told me that I can’t just go flying off the handle without thinking things through! You’ve always said that being the tai-youkai came first and everything else came second! You’ve always said—”

“I’ve always said that your mother and you children came first!” Cain countered angrily. Ordinarily, he would have just let Bas have his tirade and been done with it. Maybe it was just the timing of this, on top of everything else that had happened during the course of the day, but Cain . . . He simply didn’t feel the need to stand there and be chastised by his son when he’d done what he needed to do. “I was putting your sister first!”

Bas shook his head stubbornly. “Yeah, well, contrary to what you might think, I don’t really want to be tai-youkai just yet, damn it! What if something happened to you?”

Pushing himself away from the wall, Cain strode over to his son, drawing himself up to his full height, glowering at Bas with a fierce expression that he rarely made. Irritation delineated Cain’s every movement, and he slammed his fist down on the counter beside him. “You know, Bas, I hope to God you never know why I did what I did. Do you understand? When you have children, and they’re relying on you to protect them, I pray on all that is holy that you never, *ever* have to make the choice I made. Don’t preach to me when you have no idea!”

To his credit, Bas didn’t back down. Standing toe to toe with Cain, he glowered right back, his anger a palpable thing. “What if they’d kidnapped Jillian just to draw you out? What if it had been a trap? You’ve always said that I had to examine things from every conceivable vantage point, and then—”

“She’s my daughter—*your sister*—and you damn well better have made the same choice I did if it had been your daughter, damn it!”

“Stop it!”

Both men turned in time to see Jillian—a blur of motion—as she darted over, ferreting her way between her father and brother as tears streamed down her cheeks. “Stop it, stop it, *stop it!*” she screeched, pushing Cain back and stepping away, wrapping her arms around her stomach as the tears continued to fall. “Can’t you . . .? Why do you have to . . .? Just *stop it!*”

Casting a furious glance at Bas, Cain reached for Jillian’s arm. “Sweetie, listen,” he began.

“No, no, no, no, no!” she blubbered, burying her face in her hands as her shoulders shook with the force of her sobs. “No . . .”

“Jilli?” Gavin’s soft voice interrupted. Sparing a moment to glance at Bas and Cain, he narrowed his eyes and hurried over, pulling Jillian against his chest, rubbing her back, smoothing her hair. “Come on, Jilli. You should be lying down.”

She sniffled and whimpered, hiding her face against his shirt. Gavin scooped her up, cradling her against his chest as though she were little more than a child, before pinning Bas and Cain with an angry scowl. “She’s been through enough, don’t you think?” he growled. “The last thing she wants or needs to hear is the two of you fighting over . . . trivialities.” His glower shifted to Bas. “You can’t change it. What’s done is done, and you—” his gaze roaming to meet Cain’s, “—you’re her *father*, for God’s sake.”

He strode out of the room with Jillian in his arms. Cain blinked and stole a glance at Bas, who was looking rather odd, his expression a mix of surprise and irritation.

“Cain Zelig!”

Head snapping to the side in time to see Gin stride into the kitchen with her arms crossed over her chest and a belligerent look on her face, Cain opened his mouth to say something—*anything*—to placate his mate before she had a go at him, too. It was too late. “Gin—”

“How could you upset Jillian like that?” she demanded, her youki crackling around her. Stomping over, she glared up at her mate with a mutinous scowl on her pretty face. “After everything that she’s had to endure, you come home and start an argument with your son over something as ridiculous as that? You go running off in the middle of the night, but we were worried, you know!”

Cain cocked an eyebrow at her. “You think I can’t fight?” he challenged quietly.

She rolled her eyes. “Of course you can, Zelig-sensei! But you more than anyone should have realized that we’d worry anyway! You, Evan, Jillian—”

“Aww, Mama . . . we’re fine,” Evan grumbled, shuffling into the kitchen to grab two bottles of beer out of the refrigerator and handing one to Kichiro, who had followed him into the room. Ben stopped just inside the doorway, crossing his arms over his chest and trying his damndest not to look entirely amused by the situation.

“All the same,” Gin went on haughtily. “After all that . . .” She trailed off and shook her head, her face contorting as her scowl deepened, and when she spoke again, she punctuated her words by poking him dead-center in his chest. “Then you come home and start arguing when you know that Jillian’s going to hear you, and all this time she’s been worried that you’d been hurt even though we told her that we’d talked to you on the phone! You don’t even go see her before you get into a screaming match with your son! How can you be such a—such a—so—so—How can you be such an *ass*?”

Cain blinked at that—Gin just didn't curse often. Bas looked completely stunned, and Evan had to hide his amusement behind a well-placed cough. Kichiro—ever the ass—didn't even try to hide the grin on his face, but Gin wasn't finished, not by a long shot. "Of course we were *worried* about you, Zelig-sensei! It's been a long time since you've had to fight anyone, and regardless of whether or not you can fight, it's been a long time since you've had to do it!" Her eyes took on a glassy sheen, and Cain grimaced, knowing that the tears weren't far off. She shook her head stubbornly, determined to have her say, and she jabbed him hard in the shoulder. "You could have gotten yourself hurt or killed or—"

His sharp inhalation stopped her dead, and he couldn't help the grimace that contorted his features as pain erupted from the lightning burn in his shoulder. "Kami, you did hurt yourself, didn't you?" she murmured, slapping his hands away as she tugged at the front of the cheap button-down shirt he'd bought to replace the one he'd fought in before getting onto the plane bound for Helena. Giving up with a long-suffering sigh, Cain stood patiently and waited while Gin peeled the shirt back and uttered a soft whine. "Why didn't you tell me you were hurt?" she berated though her tone lacked any real censure. She grimaced at the grayed, inflamed skin she uncovered. "Oh . . ."

"It's fine," he assured her. "It'll be gone by morning . . . or at least in a day or two."

She took his hand and started dragging him toward the doorway. "Let me put some ointment on it," she said, all traces of her earlier irritation gone.

"I'll be all right," he protested.

Shaking her head, she kept moving, pulling him along behind her. "All the same, Cain, I want to get a better look at that. Did you get hurt anywhere else?"

"No, Gin," he replied. Stopping in the doorway long enough to glance over his shoulder, he caught Bas' incredulous stare and broke into a very wide, very smug grin, lifting his free hand to wave at his son before letting Gin drag him out of the room and toward the stairway.

"How the hell does he *do* that?" Kichiro grumbled, looking completely disgusted by the turn in events.

"I can't believe she yelled at Dad," Bas admitted, shaking his head in complete disgust at his father's penchant for manipulating the situation to his advantage.

Evan snorted, downing his beer in a single gulp before ambling over to rinse the bottle out in the sink. "I can't believe she said 'ass'," he added with a chuckle.

Bas barked out a terse laugh. Kichiro grinned. Ben just shook his head and strode out of the kitchen.

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“How are you feeling today?” Gavin asked as he sank down on the edge of the bed and held out a cup of coffee for Jillian. The sun was shining through the window, and she looked much better this morning than she had the day before. Still he couldn’t help but be worried since Kichiro had said that it could take a few days for all the drugs to work themselves out of Jillian’s system. He’d prescribed bed rest for her, and Gavin meant to make sure that she complied with the order. The only way he’d gotten her to agree to lie down for awhile was to let her use his Mokomoko-sama as a blanket. He sighed. *‘Whatever it takes, right?’*

His youkai snorted. *‘Ri-i-ight . . .’*

“Much better,” she assured him with a bright smile as she pulled Gavin’s Mokomoko-sama up around her chin. “In fact, I’m feeling really good.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded, her smile taking on an impish sort of tilt. “Absolutely. Want to feel for yourself?”

Blushing furiously when he caught her meaning, he shook his head and chuckled. “You need to rest another day or two, Jilli,” he reminded her. “Kichiro said so.”

Wrinkling her nose, she heaved a melodramatic sigh and turned her attention to her coffee mug. “Fine, fine . . . but you’ll owe me when this bed rest thing is done,” she pouted.

“Whatever you want, Jilli,” he promised, his blush deepening a little more.

A soft knock on the door interrupted her rebuttal. Pausing long enough to kiss her forehead, Gavin stood up and ambled over to answer it.

“Hi . . . is Jillian awake?”

Gavin nodded and stepped back to allow Cain entrance. Spotting his daughter sitting up in bed, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and shuffled over to stand beside her. “Hey, sweetie . . . how are you feeling today?”

Jillian set the coffee mug on the nightstand and shrugged, pulling her knees up, wrapping her arms around her ankles. “I’m okay,” she said quietly.

Cain grimaced. “I’m sorry about last night, Jilli. Your brother and I shouldn’t have argued like that. Forgive me.”

She stared at the palm he held out to her for a moment before hesitantly slipping her hand into his. He sank down on the bed and pulled Jillian between his legs with Gavin’s Mokomoko-sama cuddled around her, leaning back against the thick wood frame. She curled up on her side, resting her cheek against her father’s shoulder, her head tucked under his chin as he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead. “I love you, Daddy.”

“Love you, too, Jilli,” he murmured.

“You and Bassie aren’t still fighting, right?”

“No,” he assured her. “We’re not fighting anymore.”

“Good.”

Cain sighed. Gavin leaned back against the wall, crossing his ankles and watching as Cain and Jillian cuddled on the bed. The irrational feeling of misplaced jealousy ripped through him, and Gavin had to tamp down the desire to march straight over there and pull Jillian away.

“Jilli, sweetie . . . I need to ask you some questions,” Cain said gently, rubbing her back and looking as though he’d rather be doing anything else other than sitting there grilling her about the ordeal she’d just endured.

“Like what?”

He grimaced and glanced at Gavin. Gavin nodded, surprised that Cain was asking his permission to question Jillian. “I’m going to go make sure everything’s okay out there,” he muttered, waving his hand in a broad gesture indicating the ranch, itself, and slipping out of the room and leaving Cain alone with Jillian.

Cain nodded, watching as Gavin disappeared into the hallway before turning his attention back to his daughter once more. “Do you remember anything? Did they say anything to you?”

She frowned. “The guy—the doctor . . . he knew my biological parents.”

Cain tensed beside her. “What?”

She sat up a far enough to look into her father’s face. He carefully kept his expression bland, refusing to let her see the questions that tumbled through his head. “He said . . . he said I looked like my mother.”

“He did . . .?”

She nodded, allowing Cain to pull her back against his chest once more. “Yeah . . . he didn’t say much more than that, though . . .”

Cain digested that for a moment as memories of the day Jillian had come into his life cycled through his mind. She was so tiny, so beautiful, so perfect, and she’d stolen his heart in that moment. It didn’t matter whether or not she was his daughter by birth; she was his daughter from the second he’d picked her up, held her against his heart. Those bright blue eyes, her tiny hand wrapping around his finger . . . he loved her as certainly as he loved any of his other children, and he supposed that over the years it had been easy to forget that she hadn’t really been born a Zelig. He’d never been able to track down her natural family, and that had been a

blessing in disguise, hadn't it? It had allowed him to keep her, and Gin . . . Gin was Jillian's mama in every single way.

"You don't remember anything else?" he asked, breaking the silence as he shook off the lingering remnants of his reverie.

"No . . ." she said slowly, scowling at the black ends of her hair. Her hair had grown back, of course, but the color was still there. She'd likely have Madison cut it later to get rid of the lingering dye. "Not really . . ."

Cain sighed. Cartham had already called earlier to tell him that Larry Rowland and he had taken the youkai into custody. Cain had ordered that they were all taken to headquarters in Maine to be confined at the state of the art facility under the Youkai Special Crime Unit's building until Cain got back to deal with them. The doctor, however, had been brought back to Montana and was currently being held in Moe's custody since Cain wanted him closer for questioning. In fact, Ben was over there interrogating him at the moment. Cain could only hope they were able to get some answers out of him . . .

"He did say something . . ." Jillian ventured, snuggling closer to Cain's chest.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Mmm . . ." She sighed, basking in the warmth of her father's embrace. "He got angry because the Zyrtoph broke. I remember because it sounded like something else they were going to drug me with," she ventured.

Cain frowned. "Zyrtoph?" he echoed.

She nodded.

"Zyrtoph," he repeated again. Why did that word sound familiar . . .?

"Daddy?" she asked suddenly, leaning away far enough to look up into his face.

He smoothed her hair back and forced a wan smile. "Hmm?"

"I can still get married Saturday, can't I?"

Cain's smile widened as he kissed her forehead. "As long as the Dr. Philanderer thinks you're up to it."

She rolled her eyes but snuggled against him once more with a soft giggle. "I'm so glad to be home," she murmured, stifling a yawn with the back of her hand.

Hugging her gently, Cain sighed. "Okay, Jilli. Why don't you rest some more? I'm going to go downstairs and see if Ben's back yet. If you remember anything else, though, come find me, all right?"

“Yes, Daddy,” she replied, snuggling back down in the nest of pillows as Cain extricated himself from the bed. Pausing long enough to kiss Jillian’s forehead again, he pulled the Mokomoko-sama closer under her chin and rubbed his face as he shuffled out of the room.

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Evan leaned back against the wall in the living room beside the fireplace, watching and listening as the paltry bit of information that Ben had been able to get out of the doctor was laid out on the table, so to speak.

“So basically he said nothing,” Cain growled, slamming his coffee mug down on the coffee table as he shot out of his chair and paced the floor.

Ben rubbed his forehead and sighed. “And Jillian wasn’t able to tell you anything?”

Cain shot him a dark look and kept pacing. “No . . . just something about Zyrtoph, I think . . . She wasn’t really sure.”

“Zyrtoph?” Gunnar repeated with a frown.

Cain nodded. “Something like that . . .”

“Sounds familiar,” Bas mused though he, like the rest of them, didn’t seem to know why it did.

“She said he knew her real parents,” Kichiro spoke up.

“We *are* her real parents,” Cain growled coldly.

Kichiro rolled his eyes. “Let’s quibble the incidentals, Zelig . . . Her *biological* parents, then.”

Cain sighed. “Yes.”

Ben sat down and pulled Gavin’s laptop computer over. “Where did you say she was taken?” Ben asked, sparing Evan a questioning glance.

“Uh . . . Carradine Medical,” Evan supplied.

“Yeah? And did you see that before or after you had your ass handed to you?” Bas asked dryly.

“Shut the fuck up, Bubby,” Evan grumbled.

Bas grinned insincerely.

“Lost your temper, didn’t you?” Gunnar cut in before Bas could retort in kind.

Evan grimaced. “Maybe.”

InuYasha snorted. “Keh!”

“Sound like someone you know, old man?” Kichiro asked.

“Shut it, pup,” InuYasha growled.

Cain rolled his eyes. “Losing your temper is your biggest problem, Evan,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, whatever, Cain,” Evan grouched.

“No, not ‘whatever,’” Cain insisted. “You’re lucky you weren’t hurt worse than you were, damn it! You’re a skilled enough fighter when you don’t lose your head.”

“And that’s pretty irrelevant now, isn’t it?” Evan shot back. “Or doesn’t Jillian matter anymore?”

Cain looked like he wanted to argue it further, but he drew a deep breath and flopped back down in the chair he’d vacated, raking his hands through his hair in a thoroughly exasperated sort of way.

Gavin loped down the stairs and glanced at the gathering without stopping as he hurried off to the kitchen. “Anything new?”

“No,” Bas grouched. “Did they say anything to you?”

Gavin’s voice drifted out of the kitchen. “Just that Dr. Avis wanted her brought in.”

“Dr. Avis?” Evan queried.

“Apparently the mastermind behind the operation,” Cain replied, draining his coffee mug and slamming it down once more.

“Carradine Medical was the headquarters for a research team some years ago,” Ben interrupted without taking his eyes off the computer monitor. “One of the two heads of research died on a river rafting vacation, and the other one . . . must have retired or something. It says he closed the facility and disappeared.”

“Medical Research?” Kichiro piped up with a shake of his head. “Carradine . . . I remember them . . . they did quite a bit of youkai research . . .”

Gavin strode out of the kitchen with a bag of tortilla chips in one hand and a jar of salsa in the other. Cain glanced at him only to do a classic double take as his eyebrows shot up to disappear beneath the fringe of bronze bangs. “Gavin?”

Gavin grimaced. "I'll be right back. Jillian's been talking about chips and salsa ever since we got back."

"Chips and salsa?"

Bas snorted. "Pfft! She's not pregnant, is she?"

Gavin blushed. "Wha . . . ? No . . ."

"Hurry up," Bas grumbled, waving in the general vicinity of the stairs. "I need to ask you some more questions."

"Sorry . . . Jilli said something about hearing the word 'chips', and, well, you know how her mind works sometimes."

"Wait," Kichiro blurted, reaching out to grab Gavin's arm before Gavin could head back up the stairs. "Where did she hear that?"

Gavin frowned. "I-I don't know . . . she said it once when she was . . ." He grimaced, glancing around as though he were afraid that everyone was going to tell him he was crazy. "It was like she was talking to me, in my head . . . She might have been drugged at the time, though . . . she said she thought she was . . ."

"Because she was in trouble," Kichiro concluded with a curt nod. "Makes sense. About this chip thing . . . what else did she say?"

Gavin shook his head. "Just . . . she just said she was hungry and that she wanted salsa . . ."

Kichiro considered that for a moment. "Damn . . ."

"Damn', what?" Cain demanded.

Kichiro turned to Evan, effectively ignoring Cain's question. "Ev, you said that there was a bunch of scanning equipment?"

Evan nodded slowly. "Yeah . . . one of those huge scanners . . . like an MRI machine or something . . . a few handheld ones like security uses in airports . . ."

". . . And a Zyrtoph," Kichiro mused.

Gunnar nodded, shoving himself away from the wall, his gaze brightening as though something had occurred to him. "Right . . . Zyrtoph . . . isn't that a specialized scanner?"

"Yeah."

Cain looked like he was ready to hit someone. "Why does Zyrtoph sound so familiar?"

Chapter 36
Extrication

Jillian shifted her gaze from one face to another as she struggled to understand just why everyone seemed so serious; so foreboding. Leaning back against Gavin's chest, seeking the comfort of his embrace, she tried to will away the sense that something horrible was happening. Whether he understood or not, he tightened his arms around her just the same.

Gavin cleared his throat. "It's there," he finally said. "In her left side."

"What's there?" Jillian asked, turning to look into Gavin's eyes. Waking up from a nap only to find him sitting beside her with a strange device in his hand, he hadn't said much of anything as he scooped her up, retrieved the device, and strode out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

Cain snapped the pen in his hands, wincing as thick black ink flowed over his fingers and onto the floor. "Damn it."

"Gavin?" Jillian demanded, her tone rising with her anxiety.

He made a face and heaved a sigh, pulling her back against his chest and offering her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "It's okay. It won't hurt you."

"What won't hurt me?" she whispered, the sense of foreboding growing stronger by the second.

Kichiro sighed and hurried over, hunkering down beside the chair where Gavin held Jillian on his lap. "It's called a bio-chip, Jilli, and all it does is hold information. That's all. It can't hurt you; I promise."

"A what?"

"We can use that scanner to retrieve the information stored on the chip, and I swear it isn't a big deal, okay?"

Shaking her head, she glanced at Gavin. He rubbed her back and kissed her forehead, bringing to mind memories of her childhood, of when she'd fall off her bike and scrape her knee and Cain would put a bandage on the wound and tell her that she should get back up and try it again . . . "But . . . why? How . . .? *Who put it there?*"

"We don't know," Kichiro went on calmly. "Chances are good that it's been there since before you were born."

"*How?*"

"They can be implanted *in utero*," Kichiro explained. "After we get the information off it, we can wipe the memory of the chip, and you'll never have to think about it again."

Pushing herself off Gavin's lap, she stood, pushing her shirt up as she frantically looked at her abdomen. "*Where is it?*" she screeched.

Gavin shot to his feet and pulled her into a tight hug. “It’s okay, Jilli. Calm down, all right?”

Slumping against him, she squeezed her eyes closed. “O-okay,” she finally agreed.

Gavin sighed, letting go of her and retrieving the scanner from the coffee table. Drawing a deep breath, he pushed the little green button on the handle and carefully hovered the metal probes over Jillian’s left side just below her ribcage. The series of slow beeps emitted from the device grew faster, louder, more frantic, and Jillian winced when the beeps merged into one loud, shrill sound. Gavin turned the device off and set it down again.

“Jilli, why don’t you go back upstairs?” Gavin suggested.

“But . . .”

He forced a smile. “Go on. It’s okay. I’ll be up in a minute.”

She glanced around again then nodded. “O-okay . . .”

“So how do we retrieve this information?” Cain asked, breaking the silence as the assembled men watched Jillian’s retreat.

Kichiro sighed. “Hook the converter up to the computer, then we download the information from the chip with the scanner. Simple.”

“And they *kidnapped* her just to get this information?” Bas growled.

“So it would seem,” Ben agreed.

“Did you get any other information out of Avis?” Gunnar pressed.

“He’s not saying much. Says he wants to talk to Zelig or not at all.”

“Moe should let his claws slip a little,” Bas grumbled. “I don’t like having that bastard this close.”

“Who the fuck cares? Get that chip downloaded, will you?” Evan snapped.

The panic that crept up Jillian’s spine was magnified by the pragmatic talk spiraling around her. Talking about this—thing—inside her, the absolute horror that grew and grew . . . as though they’d all forgotten that she was in the room, they kept talking about the best way to go about downloading the chip’s information, and she bit her cheek to keep from screaming.

“One thing’s certain,” Ben went on with a shake of his head. “If Avis knew Jillian’s parents, and he knows about the existence of the chip, then it was done before she was born.”

“So you’re saying her *biological* parents did this to her?” Cain growled, shooting to his feet and stomping across the room. “What the hell kind of people would do that to their child?”

Jillian didn't wait to hear more. Darting up the stairs as fast as she could, she burst into the bedroom with a smothered sob. Frantically jerking at her shirt, she grimaced as the delicate fabric ripped. Dropping it on the floor, she couldn't help the whimper that escaped her as she stared in complete horror into the old-fashioned standing mirror at the place on her side where the scanner had detected the chip.

"What the hell kind of people would do that to their child?"

Choking on a sob, Jillian's fevered gaze raked over the room. "Why?" she gasped, closing her eyes, unable to stand the sight of herself any longer.

"Does the name 'Kennedy' mean anything to you? Or 'Liza'?"

Kennedy . . . Liza . . . her . . . biological parents . . . ?

"You look just like your mother, Jillian . . . Just like Liza . . ."

"What the hell kind of people would do that to their child?"

It was too much, wasn't it? More than she could stand . . . With a harsh cry, she dug her claws into her side, squeezing her eyes closed against the pain that shot through her. The scent of her blood filled her nose, turned her stomach. With another ragged growl, she dug her other hand into her skin as the door slammed open, as Gavin's arms locked around her. "No, Jilli! *Stop!*"

"Get it out of me!" she shrieked as he pulled her hands up, gently but firmly. "I don't want it in me! *Get it out!*"

Gavin grimaced, pulling her close, locking her arms between their bodies. "It's okay, Jilli . . . if that's what you want, it's okay," he crooned in her ear. "Calm down, all right? I . . . I won't let anything hurt you again. I promise."

"Why?" she whispered, clenching his shirt tight in her fists as she cried. "Why would they . . . ? Was I just . . . just some sort of th-throw away b-baby?"

"What?" Gavin asked sharply, pushing her back far enough so that he could look into her face. He looked horrified—absolutely horrified, and he shook his head stubbornly before dragging her back against his chest in a fierce hug. "Don't say that! Don't you *ever* say that! No one would *ever* throw you away!"

"I hate them!" she railed, pounding her fists against Gavin's shoulders. "I hate them . . ."

"It's okay, Jilli . . . It's okay . . ."

Shaking her head, she struggled to breathe as she broke down in quiet sobs once more. Gavin held her close, held her tight, held her as her heart pounded painfully, held her as she willed herself not to think . . .

She didn't know how long she cried. Gavin picked her up, sat on the edge of the bed, cradling her against his chest. The pain inside her subsided slowly, ebbing away like the receding tide. The emptiness that filled her in

its wake left her feeling numb. Clenching handfuls of Gavin's shirt—stained crimson under her reddened claws, she drew a tumultuous breath as he stroked her hair, kissed her forehead, muttered reassurances that she couldn't discern.

"I . . . I want it out of me," she whispered, her voice oddly detached, empty.

"Okay," Gavin agreed. He heaved a sigh, burying his lips in her hair. "Okay."

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'Gavin's going to be furious, you know . . .'

Slipping around the edge of the house, Jillian wrinkled her nose and bit her lip. *'Maybe.'*

'Maybe? There's no 'maybe' involved here, Jillian. Your mate is going to be furious, your father is going to be livid, and your brothers? Good God, you'll be lucky if they both don't turn you over their knees and beat your ass.'

'I have to do this,' she insisted. *'I . . . I have to . . .'*

Clutching her left side as she closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, she could sense Dr. Avis close, and it didn't take long for Jillian to realize that he was being held in the utility shed toward the back of the clearing. Gavin probably was going to be irate if he discovered that she sneaked out after telling him that she was tired and wanted to rest. She was tired; that wasn't a lie. Too bad she hadn't been able to sleep. Too many things spun around her head, and she wanted answers—answers that she wasn't likely to get otherwise. Everyone was so set on protecting her that they all seemed to have forgotten that she wasn't a child anymore.

She sighed, sparing a moment to check the bandage that covered the wounds on her side. Gavin explained to Kichiro that Jillian just wanted the chip removed, and he'd taken care of it posthaste. It hadn't been an invasive procedure. After applying a cream that numbed her skin in the area, Kichiro had used the scanner to locate the chip. From there, he'd been able to use a larger gauge needle to extract the chip as well as a small portion of her fatty tissue—enough to keep the bio-chip from disintegrating so they could cull the information from the chip. After that, he'd cleaned off her self-inflicted wounds and covered the area with a large gauze patch, telling her to rest for a couple hours at least, just to give her body time to work off the effects of the numbing ointment.

She wasn't sure when the idea had first occurred to her. She supposed it might have been sometime while she'd been waiting for Kichiro to gather the necessary supplies to perform the extraction. As it was, the whisper of a thought had grown larger in her mind until she'd realized that she actually had every intention of seeing it through, so while Gavin was downstairs with the rest of the men trying to make sense of the information stored on the bio-chip, Jillian had padded across the hallway to one of the unused guest rooms where she'd carefully dropped out of the window and ran off into the forest, heading toward Moe and Natalie Jamison's house.

Sparing a glance at the house and thanking her luck that Natalie was over visiting with the rest of Jillian's family at the moment, Jillian hurried across the lawn to the padlocked doors of the shed. Moe was nowhere to be seen—she wasn't sure where he was at the moment—and she scowled at the lock, biting her lip as she

carefully slipped the tip of her claw into the keyhole. Years ago, Evan had taught her how to pick generic locks like this one. He'd probably be cursing that lesson later, but for now, she was relieved when the lock fell open with a soft click, and Jillian glanced around quickly as she yanked the padlock out of the loop and dropped it into her pocket before she slipped into the darkened shed.

It took a moment for her vision to adjust to the paltry light siphoning through the slats on the weathered walls. Shrunken from years of intermittent heat and cold, the strips of light brightened the room enough to see. Old yard equipment hung from hooks on the wall by the door. A faded green lawnmower sat on four flat tires beside an old work table and a greasy-smelling tool chest. In the center of the room sat Dr. Avis on a cold metal chair with his hands secured behind his back with ofuda handcuffs and his feet chained to a huge iron anvil. 'Secure enough,' she supposed. The youkai's eyes were covered with a dark blue bandana. He kept turning his head to and fro as though he could sense her presence, but if he recognized her scent, he gave no indication at all.

"You knew my biological parents?" she asked without preamble. She didn't have any time to spare. The odds that she could afford to stay here longer than a few minutes weren't good, and she did intend to try to make it back to the house before anyone actually realized that she was gone . . .

He started, his head snapping to face her though he couldn't actually see her. "Jillian?" he said quietly, as though he were afraid that he was suffering delusions.

"Please, Dr. Avis, I have to know . . . did you know them?"

He swallowed hard but didn't answer right away. Jillian was starting to think that he wasn't going to. She had no way of coaxing him to tell her. She only wished she could understand something—anything—no matter how small. Maybe if she did, she wouldn't feel so betrayed, so helpless . . . so alone . . .

"I . . . I knew your mother," he admitted softly. "Well, I knew your father, too, but . . . Liza . . . she was my . . . friend."

"Your friend?" Jillian echoed, brows furrowing as her confusion grew. "If she was your friend, why did you kidnap me? Why would you do that?"

"It's not as simple as all that," he replied, turning his head from side to side as if he believed that his inability to see had something to do with the way he was sitting. "I just wanted the chip . . . just the chip . . ."

Crossing her arms over her chest, rubbing her forearms as a cold chill crept up her spine, Jillian shook her head. "What's on the chip?" she forced herself to ask, hating the way her voice caught on the words.

"The *world* is on that chip!" he exclaimed, his tone taking on a passionate fire where it was bland just moments before. "Everything—*everything!* Or maybe nothing at all . . ." Laughing suddenly, he sounded almost insane. Jillian recoiled then bit her cheek, forcing herself to close the distance between herself and the doctor. Leaning in, she carefully tugged the handkerchief off Dr. Avis' face. He blinked quickly, his eyes slowly focusing, and when he finally dared to meet her gaze, she was shocked to see tears pooling in his eyes. "I didn't want to hurt you, you see? I really didn't . . . I swear."

Jillian knelt in front of the doctor and shook her head. “Then why? Why kidnap me? Why not just ask me? If you were their friend—”

He sighed, shoulders slumping as his gaze skittered away from hers once more. “I wasn’t sure. It was just a rumor . . . the chip might not have existed at all . . . and you wouldn’t have believed me. Why not? I don’t have anything to back up my claims. For all you know, I’m just some crazy old doctor . . .”

“Tell me about them? Kennedy and . . . and Liza?”

Dr. Avis sighed again, his chin dropping onto his chest as his shoulders slumped a little more. “Liza,” he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper. “Liza . . . she was my friend . . . my *best* friend . . . I thought that she and I . . .” He trailed off just before choking out a rather sad little laugh. “It doesn’t matter what I thought . . . she met Kennedy in college, and they were mated before I ever met him. He was a good man; I’ll give him that . . . and he loved Liza, but sometimes . . . sometimes he’d get so immersed in his research that he’d lose track of everything, Liza included. She always said that he and his research partner—his brother, Carl—were just dedicated to his work. I guess you could call it that . . .” He coughed then cleared his throat, casting Jillian a nervous sort of glance. “Do you think . . .? Is there . . .? I’d really love a drink of water . . .”

Jillian glanced around, spotting a bright blue sports bottle with a capped plastic straw sitting on the work table. Moe must have brought it out to give Dr. Avis a drink earlier. She got up and retrieved the bottle. It was still half-full with perspiration dripping down the rubbery-plastic sides as the ice cubes inside slowly melted. Uncapping the straw as she slipped it between the doctor’s lips. He gulped down a few swallows and smiled almost despite himself. Jillian waited until he was finished drinking before replacing the cap and setting the bottle back on the shelf.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice a little stronger than it had been before. “Thank you . . .”

“What was . . . she . . . like?”

Dr. Avis blinked. “Liza, you mean?”

Jillian nodded. “Yes . . .”

He smiled a little sadly. “Liza . . . she was beautiful . . . warm, gentle . . . always smiling . . . That’s how I remember her. She loved to laugh.”

“And my father?”

“I didn’t really know Kennedy as well. I mean, I went to work for him. Back then I was sort of a gofer—still finishing up med school . . . I did my internship for Kennedy and his brother. I wasn’t really privy to the secrets and the intricacies of their research, but I heard whispers . . . rumors . . .”

“Do you know . . . why? Why they’d put this chip . . . in me?” she forced herself to ask.

Dr. Avis blinked. “I don’t know . . . it wasn’t something that I figured out until later. The notes were gone, you see? All the research notes that they’d worked on for so long . . . just vanished.”

“But what does that have to do with me?”

“I’m sorry, Jillian,” he murmured, and he really did look sorry . . . staring at his feet, he looked as though he were entirely defeated . . . maybe he was. “You were never supposed to be harmed,” he went on, more to himself than to her. “I . . . I couldn’t have hurt you . . .”

She shook her head slowly. “Dr. Avis . . .?”

“Jillian! Damn it, what the hell are you doing here?” Bas growled, throwing open the shed door and glowering at his sister as though he believed that she’d lost her mind.

Jillian grimaced inwardly, cursing the luck that had brought this particular brother to find her. She might have been able to reason with Evan—at least enough to get a few more moments with Dr. Avis. Bas was having none of that. Stomping into the shed, he grabbed her arm firmly but gently and tugged her out of the shed before slamming the door closed and pinning her with his formidable glower. Holding up a finger under her nose, he pulled his cell phone out and dialed a number. “Yeah, I found her. I’m bringing her home,” he said then hung up. “Explain. Fast,” he demanded.

“I wanted some answers,” she admitted. “I just . . .” She shrugged. “I’m sorry.”

Bas heaved a sigh, still looking completely disgruntled. With a muttered curse, he reached out, dragging Jillian into a tight hug. “Don’t go near him again. I mean it. He’s dangerous.”

“He’s not,” Jillian insisted. “He said I wasn’t supposed to have gotten hurt.”

“Easy for him to say,” Bas grumbled. “He’s facing serious charges.”

She pushed away to stare into her brother’s face. Handsome, surely—Bas looked just like Cain with the exception of his eye color, which he got from their mother—he tended to look intense most of the time, which accounted for why he tended to come off as being more intimidating than Cain ever had. It was a face she’d known all her life, but as much as she adored him, Bas had never really been the one who had understood her, either. “He knew my biological parents,” she whispered, willing him to understand just what that meant to her, why she had to know . . .

Bas grimaced. “Does it really matter?” he challenged. “Mom and Dad . . . they’re your parents. They’ve always *been* your parents.”

“Of course they are,” she agreed as Bas snagged the padlock out of Jillian’s pocket and snapped it back into place. “I love them . . . it’s just . . .”

“Just what?” Bas prompted, grabbing her hand and pulling her back toward the forest once more.

“I just needed to know,” she said. “I just needed to know why they’d put something like that in me . . .”

Bas shook his head, dragging a hand over his face as though he were weary. “And did you find out anything?”

She sighed. “No . . . at least, nothing about that.”

Bas nodded, trudging along with a thoughtful scowl on his face and, Jillian noticed with a frown, Triumvirate, his sword, strapped to his hip. “It’s an address,” he admitted at length.

“What?”

Bas kept his gaze focused straight ahead. “The information on the bio-chip . . . it was an address.”

“An address . . .” she repeated.

“Yeah . . . thing is . . . the address? It’s right next to the facility where you were being held.”

“What does that mean?”

Bas shook his head, squinting as he lifted his gaze heavenward, gazing at the afternoon sky shining through the network of tree branches high overhead. “Wish I knew, Jillian.”

“Dr. Avis said that my biological father was a medical researcher,” she ventured. “He said that the research that my father and his partner were studying disappeared after he died . . . Dr. Avis said he didn’t figure it out until later . . . I just don’t know exactly what he meant by that.”

Bas stopped short and slowly turned to stare at Jillian, his scowl deepening though he wasn’t frowning exactly. “Come on, Jillian,” he said, grasping her wrist and tugging her onto his back.

Jillian wrapped her arms around Bas’ neck as he caught her knees and held her in place seconds before he broke into a sprint. “Bas? What’re you doing?”

He shook his head but quickened his pace. “The address on that chip,” he replied as they tore through the trees, “maybe that’s what they were looking for all along.”

“They were looking for an address?”

“No . . . you said that Avis told you that the research notes disappeared, right?”

“Yeah . . .”

“Yeah . . . so maybe that address . . . maybe that’s where the research notes are.”

Jillian didn’t answer that. She didn’t know what she could say. It made sense, sure, but . . .

But it only served to make her feel just a little worse, too . . .

‘How could they?’ she wondered as she rested her cheek on Bas’ wide shoulder. *‘How could they put that chip in me if it might put me in danger . . .?’*

The only answer she got was the whisper of the wind in the trees.

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The door opened and Ryomaru held the door as Nezumi stepped into the room. Jillian got up and hurried over to hug her aunt. The woman was a little thinner than Jillian remembered, but she smiled warmly. “Congratulations, Jillian,” she said as she hugged Gin and Belle in turns.

“Are you tired? Do you want to rest awhile?” Jillian asked, frowning in concern.

Nezumi shook her head and wrinkled her nose, tucking a strand of long black hair behind her ear as Kagome strolled into the house with Sierra. “I’m fine,” she assured Jillian. “I slept on the plane.”

“Keh! It’s unnatural, I tell you!” Ryomaru grumbled but grinned as he grabbed two suitcases and got out of the way moments before InuYasha stomped inside with Toga following close behind. “No one should be able to sleep on a fucking plane.” He paused, cocking his head to the side as he gazed at his mate. “Maybe you ought to lie down awhile, Nez,” he said thoughtfully.

Nezumi’s back stiffened though she didn’t turn to face Ryomaru. “I’m fine,” she insisted. “You know, Jillian, I think I’d rather go on a walk . . . unless you’re not feeling up to it . . .?”

Jillian shook her head quickly, linking her arm through Nezumi’s since she could see Gavin out of the corner of her eye, and he looked like he was getting ready to gainsay the excursion. “That sounds wonderful,” she hurried to say. “In fact, we could all go . . . get some last-minute wedding talk out of the way.”

“Jilli,” Gavin began.

Kichiro laid a hand on Gavin’s shoulder. “She’s fine, pup.”

Gavin didn’t look like he wanted to listen, but he nodded curtly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Bas got up to hug his grandmother and aunts before sinking back down on the sofa. Gunnar brushed a chaste kiss in the air near his mother’s cheek then hugged his aunts. Evan picked Kagome up and swung her around while InuYasha rolled his eyes and pulled Kagome away from her overzealous grandson. Kichiro greeted the ladies as well, sparing a few extra moments to whisper something in Sierra’s ear that drew a giggle and a blush while Toga narrowed his eyes but smiled nearby. Cain bowed and kissed Kagome’s cheek while InuYasha muttered something that Jillian was probably better off not hearing moments before Ryomaru pulled her into a tight hug that lifted her off her feet and sent her into a fit of giggles. The men took turns shaking Gavin’s hand and teasing him unmercifully.

When the greetings were finished, Gavin pulled Jillian aside. “Be careful,” he cautioned her, still looking like he wanted nothing more than to argue with her over her choice to go for a long walk.

“I will,” she assured him, kissing his cheek and smiling at him.

He sighed but didn’t argue with him though he looked like he was contemplating it. Crossing his arms over his chest, he leaned against the wall as the women filed out the glass doors with collective reassurances that they’d

be careful. Ryomaru scowled as they headed toward the path that led into the forest and sighed. “They’re safe, right?” he muttered.

“Yes,” Cain remarked. “Moe and Hank are out there at the moment. It’s fine.”

“Where’s Ben?” Toga asked.

Bas sighed. “Questioning Avis again.”

“Still not talking?”

Gavin growled. “Nope . . . All we know is that the bio-chip had an address on it.”

“Any word on the address?”

Gunnar grunted. “It’s a residential . . . thing is, the house that used to be there was torn down some thirty years ago, so even if it had some significance, it’s gone now.”

Ryomaru dragged his attention off the doors long enough to glance over his shoulder. “Then why go through all the trouble kidnapping Jillian?”

Cain sighed, rubbing his face in a tired sort of way. “Considering the chip only had an address on it, I’d say that Avis didn’t know anything about the address in question.”

Gavin shook his head. “That still doesn’t make sense,” he mused. “I mean, you said that the house was torn down thirty years ago . . . that’s well before Jillian was conceived, so the chip still has to have some sort of viable information, doesn’t it?”

“Who owned the house?” Toga asked.

Gunnar clicked the mouse a few times, scowling at the laptop screen. “Says here it was owned by a Liza Merriwether Carradine.”

Gavin’s chin snapped up at that. “Liza?”

“Yeah.”

“Jilli said that Avis told her that her mother’s name was Liza . . .”

“Liza Merriwether Carradine . . .” Kichiro repeated. “Really . . .”

“What?”

He shook his head, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Well . . . Carradine Medical . . . They were youkai researchers . . . Kennedy, I think his name was . . . He was . . . a water-youkai . . .”

Silence reigned in the room for several minutes, each man contemplating the things that were said. “Gunnar . . . cross-reference Kennedy Carradine and Liza Merriwether Carradine. See what you get.”

Gunnar nodded, typing in the information. The few moments that passed as the computer searched the database seemed like a lifetime. “Kennedy Carradine married Liza Merriwether in July of 2000 . . . medical research . . . land purchased to construct the Carradine Medical Center with his younger brother, Carl . . . house purchased adjacent to the facility—the address on the chip . . .” Trailing off with a scowl, Gunnar clicked through a few links before turning the computer to face Cain. “This is strange . . . the blueprints of Carradine Medical show a corridor that extends to the property line, but the house plans aren’t in the records, ostensibly because the house no longer exists.”

“A tunnel?” Cain mused.

Bas shot to his feet and headed for the door. “I’m on it.”

“Wait! You don’t even know what you’re looking for!” Gunnar hollered.

Bas stopped and glowered back over his shoulder. “You mean that’s not obvious? He was a medical researcher, right? Stands to reason that’s what they’d be after, don’t you think?”

Cain stood up, too, striding over and grabbing the door handle.

“Where are you going?” Bas demanded.

Cain shot him a cursory glance. “I think it’s time I talked to Dr. Avis, myself. You and Gunnar head to Denver. I want this taken care of as quickly as possible. After all, Jillian’s getting married in three days, right?”

Bas nodded. “Yes, sir.”

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Cain stood back, arms crossed over his chest as he waited for Ben to remove the blindfold that covered Dr. Avis’ face. “You know why I’m here,” Cain said without preamble. “Tell me what you were looking for.”

Dr. Avis grimaced visibly. “I . . . I don’t want to die,” he muttered.

Cain kept his features blank. “You kidnap my daughter and you tell me you don’t want to die?” he challenged.

He swallowed hard, clenching his fists tight, as though he were mustering the last vestiges of his courage. “All the same . . . I-I want your word that you won’t kill me after I tell you what I know.”

Cain shook his head. “Be very careful, Dr. Avis. Eli was in your employ when I killed him. You can be held responsible for his actions, and if I wished, I could turn you over to the authorities in Cancun for the death of the man driving Jillian’s rental car.”

Avis paled visibly. “I didn’t . . . I wasn’t trying to hurt her.”

Cocking an eyebrow, Cain couldn’t contain the snort that slipped out. “Pfft! You weren’t trying to hurt her but you sabotaged her car down in Cancun?”

Avis winced, having the grace to blush at the reminder. “That . . . that wasn’t supposed to happen. Eli . . . he was just trying to get her to pull over so he could bring her back.”

“For the bio-chip.”

“Yes . . . for that.”

“How did you know my daughter had a chip in her?”

“I didn’t. It was a hunch . . . it didn’t make sense that Carl would just disappear after Kennedy was killed—”

“Killed?” Cain echoed. “It says in the reports that Kennedy Carradine died in a river rafting accident.”

Dr. Avis shook his head slowly, hesitantly lifting his gaze to meet Cain’s. “And you think a water-youkai could be killed in a rafting accident?”

Cain considered that slowly. It was true enough, he knew. A water-youkai . . . could not drown. His face, however, did not give away his thoughts. “Why didn’t I hear of this?”

Avis sighed. “Dr. Carradine didn’t want it to get out. They were working on something—something top secret. That’s all I knew . . . I think Carl was afraid that he’d be killed, too, if he went to you. Even then, there wasn’t any *real* proof . . . just speculation. I mean, he was a water-youkai, right? Carl got kind of paranoid after that. Only he and Kennedy knew what their research really was. It had to be big . . . keeping it secret like that . . . it had to be something really, really big.” He grimaced, gaze dropping away. “Anyway, he, uh . . . he told me a few weeks later that Liza had died. He disappeared a couple days after that.”

“But she didn’t die,” Cain growled. “She came to me. She lived long enough to give birth to Jillian, and she died on my land in my forest. She asked me to take care of her daughter—*my* daughter, and I have. I have . . .”

Avis flinched. “I didn’t know . . . I-it wasn’t until I saw her—Jillian—on the cover of the magazines . . . She looks just like Liza except . . . well, she’s a water-youkai, like Kennedy.”

Cain digested that for a moment before nodding slowly. “So this chip . . . you believe it holds the location of this research?”

Avis jerked his head once in a nod. “Yes.”

“And that’s the only reason you wanted it.”

Avis nodded again. “Yes.”

Chapter 37
Jillian's Wedding

"Jillian, are you sure you're up to doing this?" Gin fretted as she fussed with Jillian's bangs.

"I'm sure, Mama," she insisted, smiling sweetly despite the butterflies churning in her stomach. "I've never been more positive of anything in my life."

"Everyone would understand if you wanted to postpone the wedding a week or so," Gin pointed out gently.

Jillian shook her head. True, with the uproar generated by the abduction and aftermath, Gavin had offered to put off the wedding for a week or two more than once. Jillian, however, wanted to do it. She *needed* to do it. She needed to reclaim some semblance of normalcy in her life, and Gavin . . . he was and always would be the center of her world. In a time when everything seemed strange to her, when everything else frightened her, Gavin was the one constant, and if she married him today, she knew that everything would be okay in the end. "I want to marry him, Mama. It's all I've ever wanted."

Gin's eyebrows drew together in a marked frown. "I know . . . It's just that, with everything else going on, I worry that you're not going to enjoy your wedding as you should."

Jillian smiled, touched by her mother's concern but knowing very well that her mother had married Cain during a fairly stressful time, too. "Do you regret marrying Daddy when you did?" she countered.

Gin blinked and sighed. "Of course not," she admitted.

"And I'll never regret marrying Gavin, either."

Gin finally smiled. "I don't suppose you will."

"It's about time, I say," Madison commented dryly. "Are you sure you want to leave your hair down?" she asked, leaning to the side to grab the brush off the dressing table.

"I want a country wedding," Jillian insisted. "What's more 'country' than having my hair down?"

Madison giggled. "I suppose you're right."

"Is Dan leaving you alone?" Jillian asked.

Madison laughed outright. Dan had been on the ranch a grand total of ten minutes when he'd spotted tall, blonde, gorgeous Madison and had been following her around trying to convince her that she ought to be a model, especially since Jillian had explained to him a few days ago that

she wanted to slow down on the assignments so that she could devote all her time and energy on taking care of her new mate. Dan's wife, Helen finally had to grab her mate to remind him that they were there for a wedding, not scoping out the next new face. "Yes," she stated with a shake of her head. "He's been very good since Helen slapped the leash on him."

The last few days had passed in a bit of a haze for Jillian. With the mass-arrivals of the rest of the wedding guests, including Sesshoumaru and Kagura along with Aiko and her mate, Seiji and their son, Rinji, and Rin and Shippou—their daughters hadn't been able to make it on such short notice—the ranch had been in absolute chaos. They'd even had to open up the bunk house for guests—not a big deal since the only employee who actually lived on the ranch was Hank. Isabelle and Alexandra had flown in together. They'd arrived late last night, and Isabelle was leaving first thing in the morning since she'd only been able to get the weekend off work. Even the generals had made it in for the occasion. Cain had spent hours locked away in Ben's room with them, explaining everything that had happened.

Bas and Gunnar had gotten back early yesterday. They'd found a box of papers and notebooks in a hidden room in a defunct passage that had led from the house that used to stand beside the medical facility. Jillian hadn't wanted to hear the details. She trusted Gavin to take care of everything. It was easier not to think about it all, wasn't it? It was difficult enough to look at the picture that Bas had given her—a faded and dog-eared image of her biological parents. Dr. Avis was right: she did look like Liza Merriwether Carradine—exactly like her. Still, the faces in the picture were strangers to her, and while she wanted to feel something toward those people, she couldn't . . .

She sighed. That was a lie. She did. She was angry at them; furious . . . Try as she would, the questions still tormented her. Why would they allow something so dangerous to be injected into her? How could they do that? Cain and Gin—her mama and daddy—had always protected her, hadn't they? They'd always encouraged and supported her, and they never, ever would have done such a thing to her. It seemed unnatural to her, and the pain of that perceived betrayal was the worst feeling of all . . .

Drawing a deep breath, Jillian smiled at the reflection in the mirror. Sherry had brought over Jillian's dress a few days ago, and Jillian had been relieved to spend some time with someone who didn't know every single detail about the abduction. Glancing out the window in time to see Karis and Minnie sitting in chairs that had been set up for the wedding, Jillian's smile widened.

Marrying Gavin was a good thing, the *best* thing . . . the only thing she'd ever wanted . . .

A soft knock sounded on the door, and Gin gave her a quick squeeze before hurrying over to answer it. Stepping back to allow Kagome followed by Sydnie and Bellaniece into the room, Gin closed the door behind them.

"You look lovely!" Kagome said with a gentle smile and a quick hug, careful not to wrinkle Jillian's dress.

"I think Gavin's going to faint," Sydnie said, wicked light dancing in her bright green eyes.

“I don’t think the guys are helping that,” Belle giggled.

“Aww, my poor Gavvie!” Jillian said with a shake of her head.

“Are you ready, Jillian?” Kagome asked, giving Jillian’s shoulders a reassuring squeeze.

“Yeah,” she said, letting out a deep breath. “I think so.”

Gin smiled. “Let me go get your father.”

“Okay.”

Gin hurried out of the room while Madison continued to fuss with Jillian’s hair. “I can’t believe you’re getting married,” Bellaniece exclaimed with a shake of her head. “It seems like just yesterday that you were just a baby . . .”

“I remember you telling me that Gavin just needed to come around,” Sydnie chimed in. “It took him long enough.”

Jillian smiled, indeed recalling that moment in time. Just before Sydnie and Bassie’s wedding, and she’d jokingly commented that she wished Gavin would jump out of a cake at the bachelorette party . . .

“Excuse me, ladies . . . I’d like a minute alone with the bride.”

All heads turned to see Cain standing in the doorway. Hands shoved deep in his pockets, he shuffled his feet almost nervously as the women hugged Jillian and slipped out of the room. Bellaniece spared a moment to kiss Cain’s cheek before she left. Cain closed the door and leaned against it, his long bronze ponytail hanging over his shoulder. “You look nice, Daddy,” Jillian said with a smile.

Glancing down at the long sleeved white dress shirt and black slacks that made up his outfit, he shrugged. “Awfully funny that my model-daughter is having such a casual wedding,” he remarked.

“I thought you’d like it,” she teased.

“I can get dressed up every now and then . . . when it’s for a good cause.”

Jillian giggled. “I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, too, Jilli . . .” His smile faded, and he sighed, rubbing his forehead as he stared past her out the window. “Sweetie . . . you know, right? You’re every bit my little girl . . . where you came from . . . it’s never mattered to me.”

Blinking quickly to dispel the tears that gathered in her eyes, Jillian nodded. “I know,” she whispered. “You’ve always been my daddy.”

His smile was strained, almost sad; more bittersweet than unhappy. “Yeah . . . but . . . Gavin’s always been your hero.”

“Can’t a girl have more than one?”

He chuckled and pulled her into a gentle hug. “I suppose . . .”

“Oh, Daddy! Don’t cry!” she exclaimed softly, leaning over to nab a couple tissues from the box on the table.

Cain laughed despite the haze of tears standing in his eyes. “I’m not crying,” he grouched as she dabbed at his eyes. “I . . .”

“Got something in your eye?” she supplied.

“Mm,” he grunted. “You’re beautiful . . . and Gavin’s a fine man.”

Using the tissues on her own eyes, she laughed shakily before kissing her father’s cheek. “He makes me happy.”

“Yeah . . . he’d better.”

Offering her his elbow, Cain sighed softly as he pulled the door open. “You ready?”

Jillian nodded. Cain bent down and kissed her cheek. “Shall we do this?”

She laughed, pausing long enough to straighten Cain’s tie. “Yes.”

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“Twenty bucks says she came to her senses and snuck out the window,” Hank muttered under his breath.

“Fifty bucks says she finally realized that Gavin’s a fucking geek, and she’s fainted,” Evan added.

“Shut up,” Gavin growled, wondering just how conspicuous it would be if he wiped the cold sweat off his hands on his slacks—or killed his groomsmen . . . both options sounded good at the moment . . .

He’d thought that the last of his worries was taken care of earlier when Moe had informed him that Mickey B. had been transported overnight back to New York City to face the stalking charges, thereby alleviating at least one of his concerns. He wasn’t as anxious about the youkai

since they were obviously contained very well. Unless they were mighty stupid, they wouldn't try to tangle with Deke Cartham, who was in Maine acting as interim warden until Cain got back there to deal with them. Avis had been escorted there right after Cain's talk with him, but the idea that there were no real threats left just wasn't something that Gavin could get used to right away, either.

Now, though, the main concern was the missing bride. The acoustic guitarist that they'd hired to play for the wedding was launching into the song Jillian had chosen to walk down the aisle for the second time.

He drew in a sharp breath as Cain led Jillian around the side of the house. Relief warred with nerves—a bad combination, all things considered. She smiled up at her father as her hair floated on the breeze. Cain whispered something to her, and she laughed as her eyes rose to lock with Gavin's. He tried to smile. The knot that kept pulling tighter and tighter in his stomach thwarted him. She wore only a hint of makeup—she didn't need the embellishment, anyway—and her dress, while simple, was so classic, so timeless, that she seemed entirely unreachable all over again. She didn't wear a veil, and the only adornment in her hair was a spray of tiny white wildflowers wired to a simple hair comb. Absently thinking that he was damn glad that he wasn't wearing a jacket because he'd be sweating like a pig if he had been, Gavin forced himself to meet Cain's steady gaze.

"You take damn good care of my daughter," he murmured as they stopped beside Gavin.

Gavin nodded. "Yes, sir."

Cain almost smiled as he kissed Jillian's knuckles and put her hand on Gavin's. "Love you, Jilli," he murmured as he stepped back.

"I love you, too, Daddy," she whispered.

"I thought maybe you'd decided to stand me up," Gavin joked.

Jillian wrinkled her nose. "As if I'd do that."

"Glad you didn't."

She smiled.

"I love you, Jilli."

"Good, then marry me, Gavvie."

He laughed.

"You heard the lady," Evan piped up. "Let's get a move on."

The minister chuckled and opened the *Bible* in his hands.

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“It was a lovely ceremony, wasn’t it?” Gin murmured, leaning against Cain’s shoulder when he sat down beside her on the bench under the huge tree in the back yard.

“Yeah, it was,” Cain allowed with a wan smile.

“They don’t stay babies long, do they?”

He chuckled, wrapping his arm around his mate. “No, they don’t.”

“We could always have another,” she ventured.

“Bite your tongue, baby girl,” Cain complained. “Besides that, Evan’s not married—not that I expect that’ll happen any time soon, mind . . . and God forbid he passes on his genes . . .”

“Evan will make some lucky woman deliriously happy,” Gin chided. “He’s just like you.”

That earned her a dark look. “Ha ha . . . no.”

“No, really! He’s *just* like you . . .”

“You know, Gin, I’ve punished you for less,” he reminded her with a quirked eyebrow.

Gin blushed at the blatant reminder since Cain had a habit of ‘punishing’ her by counting to five then chasing her down and doing . . . evil things to her wherever he happened to catch her. “You wouldn’t do that here,” she breathed, not at all certain that he really wouldn’t.

His grin was downright wicked as he leaned in to nuzzle her neck. “Wouldn’t I?” he challenged.

The air caught somewhere between her lips and her lungs, her cheeks reddening a little more as she struggled to keep her eyes open. “You’re . . . bad . . . Zelig-sensei . . .”

He chuckled. “You *like* me bad, baby girl.”

“I . . . yes,” she breathed.

Cain’s chuckle escalated into a full-out laugh.

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“Keh! That’s just wrong,” InuYasha grumbled as he turned away from the spectacle that was his daughter and her mate.

Kagome rolled her eyes but giggled. “Who? Cain and Gin? They’re happy,” she chided. “That’s all.”

“Happy, huh?” InuYasha grumbled. “Their pup just got married.”

“All the more reason to be happy,” Kagome said patiently.

“He should act his age,” InuYasha growled.

“Hmm, maybe you should, too.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, wench?”

Kagome laughed as she took InuYasha’s hand and led him toward one of the tables further away from their daughter and her mate. “It means that you’re younger than Cain. You could act younger.”

“Exactly!” InuYasha snapped, closing his eyes as the arrogant expression she knew so well filtered over his features. “He’s older. He should fucking *act* older.”

Kagome giggled. “Aww . . .”

Ears twitching, InuYasha leveled a half-guarded, half-confused look at his mate. “What?” She tugged on his arm to turn him around. “*What?*” he repeated. “I don’t see—”

“Ryomaru and Deirdre . . .” Kagome said, nodding at their son.

InuYasha stopped long enough to watch them for a moment. Ryomaru was sitting beside his mate with his arm around her shoulders, leaning down to whisper something that made his wife smile. InuYasha nodded slowly, his eyes bright as he took in the moment. He couldn’t remember the last time Nezumi and Ryomaru had been that close. Well, maybe he could . . . they’d been that close before she’d miscarried the pup, hadn’t they . . .? Seeing them together like that . . . it was good. “About time,” he grumbled, the barest hint of a smile lighting the depths of his gaze.

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“This seat taken?”

Nezumi blinked and glanced up into Ryomaru’s eyes. He stood almost reluctantly, and she grimaced at the hesitance, the uncertainty in his gaze. “Yes,” she remarked as a wan smile surfaced. “It is.”

“It is?” he echoed, his ears flattening just a touch. “Yeah . . .”

“Wait,” she called as he turned to go. Catching his hand, she drew him back. “I was saving it for my baka husband . . . you seen him?”

Ryomaru’s smile—endearingly cocky—was her reward as he flopped onto the bench swing beside her. Leaning forward, knees spread, fingertips tapping almost nervously, he cleared his throat and glanced around. “Everyone looks like they’re enjoying themselves,” he remarked casually enough. “Reminds me of our wedding . . . the real one, at least.”

Nezumi smiled. “Hell . . . that one was kind of a disaster,” she mused with a shake of her head. Their second wedding—the one they’d had mostly for Nezumi’s father’s sake—really hadn’t been the stuff dreams were made of, by any means. The Shinto ceremony had been more of a comedy of errors than anything else, topped by the best man—three year-old Morio—getting the ring literally embedded on the tip of his tiny claw. He’d cried for the longest time, thinking he’d ruined the wedding . . .

“Yeah . . . I think I liked the first wedding better.”

“Married by Elvis . . .”

He chuckled. “I just wanted to marry you,” he grumbled, cheeks pinking slightly as he thought back to that first wedding—the *real* wedding. “That was the one that mattered . . . ‘course, it was kind of interesting, having a best man who was a big baby.”

Idly toying with the diamond solitaire pendant suspended by a thin gold chain around her neck, Nezumi’s smile widened. “He was not!” she argued with a laugh. “I thought he was a great best man!”

“He was,” Ryomaru agreed as his grin widened. “He didn’t get why he couldn’t sit up there with us, though.”

“He just wanted to see what was in those cups,” Nezumi remarked.

“Yeah . . . that would have been something . . . give him the *sake*, and he’d have been sloshed at his first wedding.”

Nezumi sighed, her smile fading as she stared at the grass under her feet. Everything had been so strained lately, so unnatural . . . all she’d wanted was to get back to living, and while she could understand Ryomaru’s concern, she couldn’t handle the constant vigil he kept over her as though he really thought she was going to break or something . . . Maybe he did . . . Losing the baby had been difficult, and yes, she was still sad about it, but being treated like she was going to crack and die if people treated her normally . . . well, that was worse, in her mind . . .

“Nez?”

“Hmm?”

“You . . . uh . . . you don’t . . . regret marrying me, do you?”

Her face snapped to the side, and she stared at him. Staring at his hands, he looked casual enough. Only the nervous twitching of his ears gave him away, and she sighed. “Why would I regret that?” she asked quietly.

He shrugged. “I’m not really the ideal mate,” he pointed out with a shake of his head. “You know that, right?”

The corner of her lips twitched just a touch. “Yeah, I’m not really, either,” she admitted.

Ryomaru snorted. “Keh! You’re better than I am,” he grumbled. “You’ve always been better than I am. You’re my best friend, and, uh . . .” Trailing off with a frustrated sigh since he couldn’t seem to find the words he wanted to say, he shook his head and sat up, digging into his pocket as Nezumi watched with acute interest. “Bought you something,” he said with a flash of the arrogant smile she knew so well. “Kind of stupid, I guess . . . but you know . . .”

She blinked and stared for a moment as he pulled a lurid yellow, lemon Ring Pop out of his pocket and tore off the wrapper. Unable to help the gales of laughter that rippled out of her as he carefully stuck the ring on her finger, she shook her head and leaned against him. “You bought this for me?” she demanded.

“Well, yeah,” he remarked as he pulled a hideous, electric blue, sour apple flavored Ring Pop out next. “We ate your other one.”

She shook her head as she took the blue Ring Pop and carefully opened the plastic, handing him the wrapper before jamming the ring as far onto his finger as she could, which wasn’t far, not even to the first knuckle, actually. “*You* ate my first one,” she reminded him with a shake of her head.

He wrinkled his nose but grinned. “Way to quibble the incidentals, wench,” he grumbled.

She narrowed her eyes though her smile didn’t falter. “You’re going to eat this one, too, aren’t you?”

Glancing at her out of the corners of his eyes, Ryomaru’s lips twitched. “Keh! No . . . lemon?”

She rolled her eyes but held out her hand. He caught it and stuck the bulbous ‘jewel’ into his mouth.

“I’d marry you all over again, Nez,” he mumbled before attacking the candy once more.

She sighed and leaned against him, letting him slip his arm around her shoulders and closing her eyes just for a moment, basking in the feeling that she’d missed for so long. “I’d marry you again, too.”

“Yeah?” he asked, lifting an eyebrow and sounding genuinely surprised.

Nezumi rolled her eyes again. “Yeah, I would, baka.”

Ryomaru grinned. “Good.”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Meara giggled wildly as Morio pulled her up from the low dip he'd done with her during their dance. “And you said I can't dance,” he chided.

Meara shook her head. “You can't. You have absolutely no rhythm at all. It's a wonder you can fight . . . you *can*, can't you? You weren't just lying about that . . .”

“I can fight,” he assured her. “I was a hunter for awhile, remember? And I don't lie . . .”

“Uh huh . . .”

He grinned. “I just stretch the truth.”

“Hopeless,” she said with a heavy sigh.

“Hopelessly in love,” he agreed.

Meara giggled, grabbing Morio's hand and dragging him away from the dancing couples.

“Can't take any more of my mad dancing skills?” he teased.

“Is that what they're calling it these days?” Meara asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Sure . . . I'll dance for you any day, baby.”

She laughed as he sat down and pulled her into his lap, locking his arms around her to prevent her escape. “You didn't get me a flower today,” she reminded him.

Morio made a face and leaned to the side, snagging a pale pink lily out of the center display on the table. “Here you go.”

“Haven't we had this discussion before about your penchant for stealing flowers?”

He grinned. “But I did get your flower.”

Twirling the stem between her fingers, she lifted the blossom to her nose. “So you did,” she allowed.

“Anyway, you have to hold up your end of the bargain,” he prompted.

Meara heaved an exaggerated sigh. “You’re not really going to hold me to that, are you?”

He nodded slowly. “Hell, yes, I am. Let’s hear it.”

She groaned, burying her face against his shoulder for a moment before heaving another sigh and leaning back so that she could look into his eyes. “You were right,” she said in a tone that expressed her absolute resignation to the idea that she’d have to admit that every day for the rest of her life. “I was wrong. You’re the king, and I am but the simple wench who doubted your abilities, oh great and omniscient one. Good enough?”

Morio’s grin widened. “That’ll do for today. I think tomorrow’s slice of humble pie should include something about the ‘Great Kami of the Hanyou Ears . . .’”

Meara rolled her eyes then groaned but giggled since she had been the one who had first admitted that Morio had been right when he’d maintained for years that he could make her happy if she’d just give him a chance. Of course, he’d decided that she would have to admit as much every day for at least as long as it had taken him to actually woo her, in the first place. She was pretty certain she’d made up for it by now. Morio, however, had other ideas, and he never ceased to make her admit it, either . . . “The Great Kami of the Hanyou Ears?” she repeated with a slow shake of her head.

He chuckled. “Yes. Yes, I like that . . .”

She reached up and tugged one of the Great Kami’s hanyou ears. “You’re pathetic.”

“Ow! Take it easy, Meara! You *like* those, remember?”

“I like them,” she allowed as her fingers went from tugging to caressing. “I like them just fine.”

Erupting in a low rumble of contentment, he closed his eyes as his smile turned dreamy and leaned into her touch. “I like *you* just fine, too,” he murmured.

“You know, Morio, I . . . Oh, will you look at that . . .”

Eyes snapping open, Morio was about to chastise her on her abandonment of his ears when he caught sight of the scene that had given Meara pause. Grinning as he watched his father sucking on a hideous neon yellow Ring Pop on his mother’s finger, he wrapped his arms tighter around Meara and rested his chin on her shoulder with a soft chuckle. “Good.”

“Your father is so cute,” Meara remarked with a happy little sigh.

“Oi!”

“Well, he is!” she insisted. “I’m glad he and your mother are working things out.”

Morio sighed, too. “Yeah . . . me, too . . .”

“You get your cuteness from him, I think,” Meara teased.

“Yeah, well I did get you a real wedding ring,” he pointed out. “A *big* one—almost as big as my—”

She reached up and tugged on his ear again. “Morio . . .”

“—big, fat ass.”

She laughed. “You do have a rather well-rounded ass,” she agreed.

He looked like he was either going to laugh or grumble, and the conflicting emotions drew a soft giggle from Meara. “You like my fat, well-rounded ass,” he reminded her. “You like to grab onto it when we’re—”

“Hush, you! There are children present!” she interrupted, nodding at the two little girls—the flower girls—who were dancing with two of Gavin’s ranch hands.

Morio’s reply was a husky chuckle that sent a shiver down Meara’s spine as he leaned down to kiss the back of her neck. “Okay, you win . . . I’ll just *show* you later . . .”

“Is that a promise?” she asked a little breathlessly.

“Absolutely, Meara my love . . . absolutely . . .”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“That’s just disgusting,” Gunnar fumed.

Bas glanced up from checking the messages on his cell phone. Following the direction of Gunnar’s glower in time to see Morio ducking his head as he whispered something to his mate that made her giggle and blush, Bas hid his amusement. “What is?”

Gunnar nodded toward their cousin. “That.”

“You telling me you wouldn’t cuddle with your mate in public?” Bas challenged.

That earned Bas a bored glare. “Hell, no. Why would I want some woman clinging to me all the time? It’s unnatural.”

“Unnatural, is it?” Sydnie mused, wrapping her arms tighter around Bas’ bicep before scanning the assembly to make sure that none of the females in attendance—family or otherwise—were eyeing her mate.

“Yes, kitten—completely unnatural. You’re the exception but only because you’re a cat.”

“What does that have to do with the price of tea in China?” Sydnie shot back with a raised eyebrow.

Gunnar chuckled. “Cats are affectionate.”

Sydnie rolled her eyes but giggled. “You’re such a strange puppy . . . and I can’t say I care for the . . . *woman* . . . you brought with you.”

“Tiffany? Why?”

“Was she born without a sense of humor or has she had a healthy dose of BOTOX lately?”

Gunnar grinned. “She’s sophisticated—”

“Cold,” Sydnie supplied.

“—Self-assured—”

“Condescending.”

“—Motivated—”

“Manipulative.”

“—Confident—”

“Arrogant.”

“—And damn good in bed.”

“Hussy.”

Bas choked back a chuckle as Gunnar rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, kitten, I hear you. Trust me, I have no complaints,” Gunnar assured them both. “Besides, you just don’t like her because she’s a bird-youkai.”

“Yes, well, I think I’ll go introduce myself to your ice queen,” Sydnie remarked before leaning up to kiss Bas’ cheek. “I’ll save the feathers for you, Gunsie.”

He watched her go with an amused smile before turning back to face Gunnar once more. “Or maybe you just haven’t found your mate,” Bas suggested with a quirked brow.

Flipping a lock of jet black hair over his shoulder, Gunnar snorted. “Keh! That is not going to happen,” he insisted.

“Bet your parents are pleased to hear that load of shit,” Bas remarked.

Gunnar shrugged as his gaze lit on Tiffany. She was a model—he’d met her through Jillian—and she was everything he’d described to Sydnie. Talking to the bride at the moment, she turned and met Gunnar’s gaze with the vaguest hint of a smile and a cordial nod. It was more than enough acknowledgement for the future Japanese tai-youkai. “Relax, Bas. I’ll get married sometime. I just don’t intend to let my mate rule me like my father does. Granted, I adore my mother—she’s damn near a saint for putting up with my gaggle of sisters all these years—but true mates? Please . . . that notion is completely overrated. I’ll have my heir, and I’ll have a mate . . . that doesn’t mean I have to . . . be her bitch.”

“You’re unbelievable, Gunnar,” Bas said in a tone that suggested that he wasn’t being complimentary.

Gunnar chuckled. “Say what you will, Bas, but believe me: I’ll be the happier man since I won’t care about trying to make someone else happy.”

“That has to be one of the most twisted things I’ve ever heard you say,” Gavin remarked as he stopped beside Bas with two glasses of champagne in his hands.

“See there?” Gunnar pointed out, nodding at the glasses. “Obvious bitch in training.”

Gavin rolled his eyes. “Because I want to make Jillian happy?”

“No, because all she does is bat her eyelashes at you and you nearly wet yourself trying to do her bidding.”

Gavin chuckled. “If you think so . . .”

“Tell me I’m wrong?”

Gavin shrugged. “You’re wrong. Anyway, you’ll see. One day you’ll meet *the* girl, and when you do, you’ll roll over and let her scratch your belly . . . see if you don’t.”

“Like hell!” Gunnar scoffed, looking properly horrified at the very idea.

“Yeah, well, my mate’s looking for me. I’ll see you later.”

Gunnar snorted indignantly as he watched Gavin’s retreating back. “You’re all insane,” he grumbled.

Bas patted his shoulder. “Maybe. We’re happy, though. Now if you’ll excuse me, I think I want to catch my kitty . . .”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“Weddings are overrated,” Evan remarked as his gaze roamed over the guests and he slowly shook his head.

“You think so?” Madison asked with an amused smile.

Evan nodded, shuffling through the slow dance to a cheesy, drippy country love song. “When I get married, I’ll kill anyone who tries to play a fucking ballad; see if I don’t . . .”

“You sing ballads,” Madison reminded him.

He made a face. “I sing *raunchy* ballads about sex and sweaty tits and sopping wet pussies and fucking those aforementioned pussies,” he corrected. “*Huge* difference.”

Madison rolled her eyes since she’d heard it all before. “So where were you last night?”

He grinned. “Waiting up for me, were you?”

She shook her head. “Nope . . . I had plans of my own . . . I just wondered since your room was empty when I went upstairs around three.”

“Gunnar said that I couldn’t get into Tiffany’s pants.”

Madison laughed. “So did you?”

“What do you think?”

“And Gunnar knows?”

“Sure . . . he doesn’t care.”

Madison’s smiled widened. “No, I don’t suppose he does.”

“Gunnar’s got it all right. He doesn’t care who she’s doing as long as he gets what he wants when he wants it. Not a big deal, right?” He chuckled. “Now ‘fess up . . . where were you last night?”

Madison shrugged casually. “I was talking to Dax.”

“Just talking?”

“Sure . . . Samantha was hanging out in the stable, too. I think she might have a crush on Dax.”

Evan laughed. Samantha was Bellaniece and Kichiro's youngest daughter, and at thirteen, she tended to be quite a handful. She claimed that she wanted to be a youkai-hunter one day, and she was training accordingly though from what Evan had heard, Kichiro had insisted that Samantha learn how to shoot a gun to supplement her training. She was an interesting girl: tough as nails one minute then squealing over a new dress the next . . . Samantha didn't draw a line between girl and hunter. Evan had always admired that about her . . .

"A crush on Dax?" Evan commented with a shake of his head. "Really . . ."

Madison nodded. "She was a little irritated when her mother dragged her inside around midnight."

"And nothing happened between you and Dax."

"I didn't say that," Madison allowed. "It just didn't happen when Samantha was outside."

"Yeah?"

She smiled.

"That's my Maddy . . . always doing what you can to boost morale, right?"

"You make me sound so noble."

"Sure," Evan agreed. "You've perfected the art of the pity fuck."

"I don't think Dax needs a pity fuck," she maintained with an impish grin.

"Better than me?"

Madison shrugged. "I'll never tell."

Evan laughed. "Good answer . . ."

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

Kichiro pulled Isabelle close, dancing with her like he used to when she was just a little girl. "You sure you have to go back tomorrow?" he questioned.

She made a face then smiled. "Unfortunately . . . they're short-staffed at the hospital. Not surprising, is it?"

"Not really . . . hospitals are infamous for that . . . Still, I wish I got to visit with you a little longer."

“Me, too, Papa.”

“I want in on this!”

Kichiro smiled as Alexandra ducked under Isabelle’s arm to cut into the dance. Chuckling as his oldest daughters locked arms around one another, each one grabbing one of his hands to complete the circle, he danced with both girls like he had done when they were younger. “You having a good time, Lexi?” he asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“Of course! Just think . . . one day we’ll get married, too, and then you get to be the one walking us down the aisle.”

Kichiro grimaced. “Yeah, I can wait for that.”

“You’ll still have Sami,” Isabelle pointed out.

“Did you ever figure out what sort of research all that was?” Alexandra interrupted.

Kichiro shook his head. “Nope . . . it’s written in some strange sort of language . . . we haven’t figure out what it is, though.”

“I’d like to look at it,” Isabelle ventured.

“If you have time before you head back,” Kichiro agreed. “Anyway, we’ll figure it out.”

“As much as I love that my daughters are doting on their father, I think I’d like to steal him away from you,” Bellaniece commented as she winked at her girls.

Isabelle grinned and kissed her mother’s cheek before linking her arm through Alexandra’s. They wandered toward the congregation of ranch hands, and Kichiro shook his head. “Think I should be worried?”

Bellaniece smiled as he slipped his arms around her. “No, but Samantha is awfully taken by that one young man, Dax.”

“She is, is she?” he drawled, eyebrow quirking again.

Bellaniece shrugged. “Well, either that or she just really likes the horses . . .”

Amber eyes roaming over his mate’s beautiful face, Kichiro grinned lazily, reaching up to run the pad of his thumb over her smooth cheek. “You’re just as gorgeous now as you were the day I married you,” he remarked.

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

She giggled. “What do you think of the idea of you and me sneaking off and finding somewhere secluded for awhile, lover?”

Kichiro chuckled. “Are you coming on to me, Belle-chan?”

She leaned up and nipped his chin playfully, tugging on his braid to draw him in closer. “Hmm . . . I think I am . . .”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo-

“You’d think they were still pups,” Toga remarked with a smile and a shake of his head as Kichiro and Bellaniece disappeared down the path that led into the forest.

Sierra looked up at him and blinked. “Because they want to be alone together?”

Toga shook his head. “Nope . . . because they’re trying to irritate their respective fathers. Look.”

Sierra turned and covered her mouth with her hand. Cain was standing up, making no bones about watching the two abscond into the trees while InuYasha just shook his head. “You think that’s the only reason they’re doing that?”

Toga laughed. “No . . . no, I don’t.”

“We could go . . . take a walk,” Sierra mused a little too casually.

Toga blushed but smiled. “You’ve been hanging out with Bellaniece a little too much, I think.”

She winked at him. “It’s a shame Coral and Cassidy couldn’t make it.”

“Yeah . . . short notice, though. Even then, I’m not so sure this place could hold many more people—at least not in the back yard . . .”

“Papa!”

Blinking as a blur of black hair darted toward him, Toga barely had time to lift his arms before one of the twins—Charity—threw herself against her father’s chest. “You act like you haven’t seen me in years,” he teased, hugging his daughter tight.

“I just love to see you,” she quipped, leaning on tiptoe to bestow a loud, wet kiss on his cheek.

Toga chuckled. “And I love to see you, too.”

Sierra grabbed Gunnar’s arm as he started to walk past. “Dance with your mother, Gunnar,” she commanded.

Gunnar grinned and offered his elbow. “Well, if you insist . . .”

Sierra winked at Toga as Gunnar pulled her off to dance. Charity stepped back, smoothing her dress, and Toga raised his eyebrows at the single flower she held in her hand. “Where’d that come from?” he asked, inclining his head toward the blossom.

“What . . .? This? Oh . . . Ben gave it to me,” she explained.

“Ben gave you a flower?” Toga echoed.

“Not like that,” Ben mumbled as he held out his hand to Toga.

Toga shook it but couldn’t help the calculated look he alternated between the youkai general and his daughter. “Oh? Then pray tell, what was it like?”

Ben smiled a little self-consciously but shrugged. “She said it was pretty, so I picked it for her. That’s all.”

Toga nodded slowly. “I see . . .”

Suddenly turning around, Charity pinned Ben with a questioning look. “Have you seen Chelsea?”

“Chelsea?” Ben echoed. “Not since the wedding.”

“Chelsea’s missing?” Toga asked.

Charity shook her head slowly. “Maybe she’s off talking to Hank. She seems to like him well enough.”

Toga scowled. “Hank?”

Charity went on as though she didn’t hear her father. “I mean, she spent a lot of time with him when Jillian was missing . . .”

“Hank?” Toga repeated louder.

Ben frowned then chuckled. “Oh, well . . . I’m sure she’s fine, right? She’s a big girl.”

Laying a hand on Charity’s shoulder, Toga turned her around to face him once more. “Excuse me, Charity. Who is this ‘Hank?’”

Charity smiled. “He’s the ranch foreman—one of Gavin’s groomsmen.”

It took a moment for Toga to place the face with the name, and when he did, he frowned. For some reason, he just couldn’t fathom Chelsea and this Hank fellow together. Sure he’d heard the

adage that opposites attract, but that was stretching the bounds. Hank was as laid back, rancher as they came, and Chelsea? She was absolutely a city girl. She always had been.

“Do you want to dance, Charity?” Ben asked, cutting through Toga’s musings with the finesse of a sledgehammer.

Charity slipped her hand into Ben’s and spared a moment to smile back at her father.

Toga narrowed his eyes again, this time assessing his daughter than the general. ‘*Maybe,*’ he thought wanly . . . ‘*Maybe there really is something there . . .*’

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“Did Mikio suspect anything?”

Stealing a glance out of the corner of his eye, Sesshoumaru met Kagura’s steady gaze before looking away again. “I haven’t a clue what you’re implying, Kagura,” he insisted.

She smiled, her magenta eyes glowing softly. “I know very well that Mikio didn’t need to stay behind in Tokyo,” she chastised.

Sesshoumaru nodded. “His balance issues . . . they’re not normal.”

Kagura sighed. “No, they’re not . . . and you’re right,” she agreed with his unspoken assessment. “He’d have pushed himself too hard and ended up sick because of it had he forced himself to fly out here.”

“Yes, well, there’s that. I needed those contracts finished.”

Kagura shook her head. Maybe he did need to contracts. She also knew that the real reason behind Sesshoumaru’s actions wasn’t the contracts, at all. It was a way to give Mikio a reason not to fly out when he’d be nothing but miserable for a week or more afterward. Sesshoumaru was saving Mikio’s pride, in his own way. It was one of the things that Sesshoumaru did that others might not realize, but she did. For his cold exterior, he wasn’t as aloof as he pretended to be, and that deep-seated caring was something that Kagura loved and respected in her mate.

“Maybe we should go on vacation,” she suggested with a little smile.

“Vacation? This Sesshoumaru needs no vacations,” he scoffed.

“Everyone needs a vacation,” Kagura insisted. “I could give you a lift on my feather . . .”

Sesshoumaru shot her a bored glance. “You want me to ride on your feather?”

She laughed.

“I think not.”

“You know, you’re a control-freak,” she mused.

That earned her a blank stare.

Kagura relented with a laugh as she took his hand and pulled him toward the dancing area. “Come on, old man. Dance with me.”

“You think I dance?” he countered but didn’t pull away from her.

“Don’t make me get my fans out,” she threatened with one quirked eyebrow.

Sesshoumaru finally broke into the barest hint of a smile. “This Sesshoumaru fears not his mate.”

Kagura stepped into his arms and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Maybe you should, Sesshoumaru. Maybe you should . . .”

-OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO-

“Are you *crazy*? What the hell do you think you’re *doing*?” Dax bellowed as he skirted the edge of the paddock, trying to find a way to get close enough to grab Waterspell’s reigns but remaining far enough away to keep from spooking the angry horse.

High atop the creature’s broad back, Samantha Izayoi laughed, throwing her head back, silver hair rippling behind her like a banner on the summer breeze. “It’s fine, Dax!” she insisted, waving a jaunty hand as she hung onto Waterspell’s mane with the other one. “He likes me!”

He grimaced, holding out his hand as he slowly approached the agitated animal. Pawning the earth, snorting loudly, Waterspell looked anything but amused.

“What the hell’s going on?” Hank growled as he stomped around the side of the stable. His shirt was unbuttoned halfway down his chest, and he looked anything but amused about the interruption of whatever he’d been doing. Spotting the thirteen year old girl atop the horse, though, his eyes widened and with a muttered curse, he sprinted off toward the back yard where the wedding reception was going full-swing.

“Sam, can you jump down?” Dax demanded, his tone leaving no room for argument.

She opened her mouth to reply as Dax drew closer. The untucked end of his shirttail fluttered in the wind, though, and it spooked the horse. Rearing up—straight up—he pawed the air with a shrill cry and leapt forward, coming down in the first strides of an all-out gallop as Samantha

held on for dear life. Speeding across the paddock and along the high fence, the horse didn't slow as he tore around the empty field.

"What the hell is she doing?" Gavin growled as he cleared the fence, landing just behind Dax.

Dax shook his head, casting Gavin an irritated scowl as the two sprinted after Waterspell. "I have no idea . . . she was out there petting Willow, and next thing I knew, she was hopping onto Waterspell . . . She's going to break her damn neck . . . or I might," Dax growled.

Gavin sighed. The horse was fast, but he was more agile. Cutting Waterspell off wasn't exactly the problem, so far as he could tell. No, the real trouble was Samantha. If he spooked Waterspell, he'd probably throw the girl, and hanyou or not, that'd be one hell of a fall . . .

The horse turned just in time to avoid colliding with the rear fence. The longer he ran, the angrier he grew, and the fact that he hadn't managed to unseat Samantha seemed to be irritating him more than anything else ever had before.

Darting out of the way to keep from being trampled by the horse, Gavin lunged after him, trying to grasp the reins but missing. Dax was closing in on the other side, and Samantha screamed as Waterspell bucked hard. How she managed to stay seated was something that Gavin couldn't quite grasp.

Waterspell circled back again, and again, Dax lurched for the reins. Gavin vaulted over Waterspell, plucking Samantha off his back and twisting himself in mid-air, coming down hard, flat on his back with Samantha cuddled carefully against his chest. Waterspell galloped away, and Gavin got up as quickly as he could then hauled both Samantha and Dax to their feet to hustle them toward the other end of the paddock. "Move!" he growled.

Samantha tried to, but her legs were shaky from the ordeal. With a sigh, Gavin scooped her up and sprinted toward the stables, carefully avoiding the end of the paddock where Waterspell was throwing a fit the likes of which Gavin had never seen.

Kichiro dashed around the house and didn't slow his pace as he ran over to the fence. Hank shook his head from his perch atop the fifteen foot fence and grabbed Sam, lifting her over the railing and handing her down to her father.

"Kami, Samantha!" Kichiro growled though his tone had lost most of the irritation as he hugged his daughter tight. "You'll be the death of me, yet."

Gavin crossed his arms and leaned against one of the rails at eye level, letting his forehead rest on his forearms as he willed his heart to slow down. Dax loped over with a curious mix of chagrin and embarrassment on his features. After a long moment, Gavin hauled himself up the fence and dropped to the ground on the other side. "She okay?" he asked Kichiro.

Kichiro nodded. "Yeah, she's fine . . . scared, but fine."

"I'm sorry, Papa," she whimpered, burying her face against his shoulder.

Chapter 38
Shameless

“Aren’t you going to swim with me, Gavvie?”

Leaning back on his elbow with his legs stretched out before him and an indulgent little smile gracing the corners of his lips, Gavin shook his head slowly and shrugged. “Maybe in awhile,” he allowed. “I’m just enjoying watching you at the moment.” He sighed, cocking his head to the side as he listened to the faint sounds of the ongoing wedding reception. “Think they’ve realized we’re gone yet?”

She giggled and swam closer to shore. “I’d imagine so . . . Do you suppose that Charity really will be the next to get married?” she asked since Charity had been the one who caught the bouquet before they’d been so unceremoniously interrupted by the Waterspell incident.

He shrugged. “Maybe.” Scowling thoughtfully as though something had just occurred to him, he shot Jillian a contemplative look. “Do you think there’s something going on between her and Ben?”

Pausing as she glided through the water, she stood up to ponder his question. They had been together the few times she’d looked for them at the wedding reception, hadn’t they? And . . . and he did dance with her, too . . . “Ben? Hmm . . . I don’t know . . . she’s never said anything to me about it.”

He nodded slowly but didn’t look entirely convinced. “Which doesn’t mean that there isn’t.”

“True enough . . .”

“But if it is true, then it means that Gunnar’s the next guy to get married,” Gavin remarked with a wolfish grin. “God, he looked horrified, didn’t he?”

Jillian laughed. Gunnar really *had* looked absolutely horrified when Jillian’s garter belt landed neatly on his arm. He’d been convinced that Gavin had fixed it somehow despite the blindfold that had impaired his vision at the time. “His date didn’t seem upset by the idea.”

Gavin snorted. “Of course not. I have a feeling she’d love to be the wife of the next Japanese tai-youkai . . .”

Jillian quirked an eyebrow though her smile didn’t disappear completely. “Are you saying that Tiffany is opportunistic?”

Gavin shook his head, eyes widening in a show of mock innocence. “Now, did I say such a thing?”

She laughed again, skimming her arm over the water to send a splash that fell well short of reaching Gavin where he reclined. "Tell me something, Gavvie?"

"Hmm?"

"Why are we talking about my family when we've just gotten married, and we're *finally* alone?" she asked drolly, lifting an eyebrow at him as she pushed forward in the water once more. "Jillian Jamison . . ."

He opened his mouth then snapped it closed, cheeks reddening as he cleared his throat and shrugged. "That sounds . . . perfect," he confessed.

Jillian stopped swimming long enough to flash a brilliant smile at him, and he blushed a little darker. "Mrs. Gavin Jamison," she mused. "I like that."

"I, uh . . . I do, too," he murmured.

Jillian giggled. "Come swim with me?" she coaxed.

He chuckled. "I . . . I don't . . . o-okay . . ."

Standing up slowly, he studiously avoided her gaze as he yanked his tie loose and unbuttoned his shirt. Discarding it on the grass, he leaned against a large boulder to remove his shoes and socks before slowly reaching for the button on his black slacks. Jillian bit her lip as she watched him, her blood warming as it coursed through her body. There was something altogether beautiful about Gavin's body, and in the waning light of the late summer's evening sky, she couldn't help but appreciate the way his skin glowed golden, the heightened glint that shone in his aqua eyes. Her smile widened as he strode into the lake still clad in his briefs. He had to be the only living man who actually looked good in the old-fashioned underpants . . . Then again, he also looked damn fine *without* them . . .

Swimming over to meet him halfway, Jillian rose to her feet and wrapped her arms around his neck before he could register his complaint at her marked lack of shame. Breasts pressed against his chest, he shuddered as she drew herself up as close to him as she could, rising up on her toes to kiss him. Licking the softness of his lips, sinking her fingers into his hair, she couldn't contain the whimper that slipped from her lips as he slowly pulled her even closer and deepened the kiss.

"Want to see a neat trick?" she whispered, her voice husky from the same passion that ignited her gaze.

"T-trick?" he stammered with a shake of his head.

She giggled moments before dropping under the water, cutting away his underpants with her sharp claws. His body went rigid as his penis sprang free. She could feel the reverberations of his groan as she grasped his shaft and plunged her mouth down over him. His hands gripped her forearms though he didn't try to push her away. Sound was muted by the gentle water as she

sucked him deep, stroked him with one hand as she massaged his balls with the other. He was her soul mate—he'd always been—and she couldn't help the tears of happiness that stung her eyes. Everything about him had spoken to her for so long that it was hard to believe that he really was hers—completely hers in every single way. She needed him, loved him, lived for him, and he . . . he loved her, too . . .

He jerked and twitched as she drew him in only to release him for a moment before closing around him again. His legs shook as he struggled to maintain a semblance of control. She could hear the distorted sounds of his harsh moaning. She could feel him thicken between her lips. His hands tightened around her arms. His body was quivering, racked to its limits as he fought for dominance over the rage of passion that surged through him. A ragged growl echoed through the water, his body tensing as she pulled him in as deep as she could, as he came undone.

His orgasm was powerful, consuming, and he staggered back a step before he managed to catch himself. Sparing a moment to gather his scattered emotions, he pulled Jillian to her feet, crushing her against his chest as his mouth fell on hers; as he kissed her deep, held her tight. Scooping her up, he carried her toward the shore, sinking to his knees in the shallow water's edge and laying her down gently. She tugged on his shoulders, moaning when he moved between her raised knees while the water slapped against her thighs, ebbing and receding in the falling night.

Trailing hot kisses along her jaw line, down the soft curves of her throat, he licked away the lingering moisture, reveled in the heat of her body against his. Hands kneading the soft peaks of her breasts, he flicked the tip of his tongue over one distended nipple, drawing a harsh gasp from her as she arched up to meet his touch, as she reveled in the sensation of emotion and repletion, of love and honor and peace.

Her body burned under his scrutiny. She murmured broken words and sounds that made no sense at all. Lavishing smoldering kisses all over her skin, she whimpered again as every nerve in her body ignited. The scrape of claws over her belly, the flick of his tongue in her navel . . . Gavin's attention was unrelenting, agonizingly slow; so thorough that she thought she might scream if he didn't soothe the insane ache that strummed with the flow of the water . . .

Sliding down between her legs, parting the folds of skin with his thumbs, he held her open, vulnerable, staring at her in with a sense of absolute wonder. The invasion of his tongue wrung a strangled cry from deep inside her. The stroke of his tongue, the caress of his lips, the gentle ferocity of his teeth broke her time and again. The surge of passion evolved into a consuming lust as she dug her feet into the wet sand, lifting her hips to thrust against his mouth. Body shaking, racked with pleasure so powerful that she thought she'd go mad, she laughed, she cried, she sank her fingers into the sand, calling his name out over and over as the trees and the pond and the breeze swayed in the descending night.

He moved to cover her, his body rising up, rubbing against hers in a shocking caress. Crying out softly as he pressed into her, she locked her ankles around his waist, meeting the slow rhythm of his thrusts with her own. Kissing her gently, murmuring endearments that she barely understood, Gavin stroked her cheeks, rocked against her, soothed her with his body as the slow ache steadily grew again.

Undulating deep inside her, the steady throb, the bank of kindled passion glowed. Wrapped in the comfort of his scent, comforted by the rasping moans that rippled out of him in time with the shivers that ran up and down his spine, Jillian urged him faster, grinding her hips against his, meeting him, demanding, wanting . . . needing.

Reaching down, cradling her leg, he rose up on his elbow, throwing his head back as his eyes drifted closed. Shallow breathing echoed in her ears; the fusion of their bodies goading them with a will all its own. Jillian could feel the first shudders of repletion constricting her stomach, forcing out a keening moan as he pushed her ever closer to the brink.

The jarring motion of his thrusts, the insistence of him inside her . . . He groaned, growled, whispered her name. Heat and light converged in him; the culmination of a dream that had finally come true.

Jillian cried out, body tensing as her world exploded. Gavin gasped as she convulsed around him, thrusting hard a few more times before his voice rose with hers, his body releasing deep inside her, filling her as he collapsed on her, his harsh breathing tickling her skin. "I love you, I love you, I love you," he murmured over and over as a riot of shivers raced up and down his spine. "My . . . Jilli . . . Always my Jilli . . . I love you . . ."

"My Gavvie," she whispered back, holding him close as she savored the complete melding of their youki.

He barked out a shaky laugh, wrapping his arms around her as he rolled to the side. She couldn't help the little whimper that escaped her as he slipped out of her. Legs falling between his raised knees, she cuddled against his chest, smiling as his heart mirrored the stuttering rhythm of her own.

They lay there for long minutes as water surged over them only to recede again. Jillian laughed softly, kissing Gavin's chest as she hugged him tight.

"You know," he said at length, "you shouldn't be laughing at a man when he just made love to you."

She giggled louder and leaned on her elbow to peer into his half-closed eyes. "I'm laughing because you make me feel so good," she assured him. "I love you, Gavin Ryan Jamison."

"Not half as much as I love you," he countered, fingering a lock of hair that had fallen over her shoulder. "I've *always* loved you."

"Did I ever tell you the first time I knew you were my mate?" she asked, propping her temple on her fist.

He chuckled, tightening his arms around her. "When?"

She ducked her head long enough to kiss his lips. “When you caught me when I fell out of Bassie’s tree.”

“God, you scared me to death,” he grumbled.

“I knew you’d catch me . . . I have a confession.”

“What’s that?”

Her smile turned a little contrite, and she shrugged. “I jumped on that branch,” she admitted.

That got his attention well enough. Eyebrows shooting up in surprise, he blinked a few times as his expression turned a little incredulous. “Come again?”

Jillian giggled, lightly tracing idle circles on his chest with her index finger. “I knew that the branch was weak, and I jumped on it.”

“Jilli!” he complained. “Why would you do a fool thing like that? Do you have any idea how scared I was?”

She shrugged. “I knew you’d catch me.”

Snapping his mouth closed on the retort that had been forming, Gavin scowled at her even as his cheeks pinked in the bright moonlight. “Fine thing . . . what if I wasn’t able to?”

“That never even crossed my mind.”

He snorted, still incensed that she could be so careless. Suddenly, he sighed. “You know . . . I think I always knew that,” he said slowly.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

She laughed and kissed him again. “I went to Mama right after you came back from college . . . I didn’t understand the strange feeling I got when I looked at you.”

“Strange? How so?”

She shrugged, and he blinked in surprise when she uttered a nervous little giggle. “Just a feeling in my stomach . . . like . . . sort of a sick feeling, but not exactly . . .”

“I-I . . . I made you . . . *sick*?”

She grinned. “Mama said that it was normal . . . she said that it meant I was growing up . . . She said that if I was lucky that the feeling would never go away.”

Epilogue

*September 1, 2064
New York City, New York*

Jillian giggled as Gavin sank down on the edge of the bed. “Okay . . . I brought all the bags up. We can unpack them tomorrow,” he said as he leaned in to kiss Jillian’s cheek.

“Okay,” she agreed, stifling a wide yawn with the back of her hand. They’d caught a late flight back to the city, and after waiting in line for their luggage, it was well after midnight when they’d finally stumbled through the doors of Gavin’s apartment. “I miss the ranch already.”

Gavin grinned. “I do, too.”

“Can we go back soon?”

He shrugged. “When I get some time off,” he agreed.

“Okay,” she relented though she didn’t look as though she really liked his answer. “I don’t suppose you’ll ever give up and just run around the apartment naked,” she mused, catching the waistband of his briefs and rubbing her finger along his hip under the elastic.

Gavin blushed—being Jillian’s mate for well over a month hadn’t alleviated that little nuisance—and wrinkled his nose. “It’s chilly in here,” he informed her.

She rolled her eyes and pushed herself up. “Fine excuse, Gavin Jamison.”

“It’s the truth, Jillian Jamison.”

She broke into a wide grin at the sound of her new name. “Why don’t you come here, and I’ll warm you up.”

He chuckled but leaned in to kiss her, pushing her back against the pillows with a playful growl. “That a promise?”

She laughed. “Yes.”

“Mmm.”

She sighed as he kissed her again, nibbling on her lips as her eyes drifted closed. Suddenly, she pushed at his shoulders and sat up, a thoughtful frown replacing the smile that had been there mere moments before.

“Jilli?” he asked, shaking his head since he wasn’t quite sure exactly what had just happened.

She made a face, leaning to the side to peer around his shoulders. "I can't," she whispered.

Gavin blinked. "You can't? Can't, what?"

"You know . . . *that!*" she hissed, pinning him with an imploring look that he probably should have understood but didn't.

"That?" he echoed. "What are you talking about?"

She grimaced, scrunching up her shoulders and hiding her face against Gavin's chest. "They're *staring* at us."

Eyebrows disappearing under the thick fringe of his bangs, Gavin shook his head. "Who are?"

She shook her head but didn't look up. "Your *dolls!*"

Gavin blinked, turning and looking over his shoulder at the enclosed glass shelves that held his *Star Wars* collectible action figures. "They're *action figures*, Jilli," he corrected with a chuckle, "and they're not staring at you . . ."

She wrinkled her nose again but finally leaned back to pin him with a no-nonsense look. "They have movable arms, legs, and heads, right?"

"Right," he agreed slowly.

She rolled her eyes, frowning as she ducked her head to hide herself from the action figures' view. "Then they're dolls, and I could have sworn that we've had this discussion before."

Gavin laughed outright at the chagrined expression on her face. "Okay, but they're plastic . . ."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter! They all have eyes, and those eyes are *staring* at us!"

He couldn't help the soft chuckle that escaped him at the utterly forlorn look on his mate's face. "Okay, Jilli . . . do you want me to get them out of here?"

She bit her lip and scrunched up her shoulders a little more before jerking her head once in a nod.

"First thing in the morning," he agreed.

"Thank you," she said, then proceeded to roll over in bed, dragging the blankets up to her chin and turning away before burying her head in the downy pillows.

Gavin sighed, the message clear: she really wasn't going to do a thing with him so long as the action figures were 'staring' at her. Grinning, he tossed his legs over the side of the bed and stood up, heading out of the bedroom with every intention of finding a box to put the action figures in. He'd stick them in his office for now and move the display cabinet in the morning.

The telephone drew him up short, and he veered to the left, grabbing the handset out of the charging cradle before glancing at the caller ID and hitting the button to connect the call. “Hello?”

“Sorry to call so late,” Cain Zelig apologized. “How was your flight?”

“Uneventful . . .”

“Good.” Cain sighed. “I just wanted to call and let you know that Mickey B. has agreed to plead guilty on all charges of stalking as well as forced entry and destruction of property on the ranch. The case against him is too solid. He’s afraid that a jury would nail his balls to the wall.”

“Yeah? Good . . .”

Cain took his time replying, making Gavin feel more than a bit reluctant to hear whatever else Cain wanted to tell him. “Yeah . . . and I’ve decided to exile Dr. Avis. The rest of his lackeys have been taken care of . . . I don’t think that Dr. Avis poses a threat anymore.”

Gavin nodded, loathe to broach the subject but wanting to state Jillian’s wishes on the matter. “About that . . .” he began, clearing his throat since he had a feeling that Cain wasn’t going to like what he had to say. “Jilli . . . she wants to talk to Dr. Avis again. She wants to hear everything he knows about her biological parents.”

Cain grunted, sounding wholly displeased but completely resigned to the idea. “Yeah, I figured she would.”

Gavin grimaced, understanding Cain’s ambivalence. Not only had Dr. Avis masterminded Jillian’s kidnapping, but as the only father that Jillian had ever known, it had to be killing Cain deep down. “I told her that I was going with her. There’s no way in hell I’d let her walk in there by herself.”

“I didn’t expect you would,” Cain allowed. He sighed, an entirely defeated sort of sound. Gavin grimaced. “Let me get him relocated first. The Australian tai-youkai’s agreed to allow him into his jurisdiction.”

“Okay,” Gavin said. “Cain?”

“Yeah?”

“She . . . she said that she didn’t want you or Gin to be upset. She just wants to know . . .”

“I know.”

Gavin nodded. “Yeah.”

Cain sighed again, and Gavin could hear the faint creak of the office chair that stood behind Cain's huge desk. "I'll let you go. I just wanted to let you know what's going on."

Hanging up the phone, Gavin couldn't help the scowl that furrowed his brow. Jillian had been so worried that Cain and Gin would be upset about her desire to speak to Dr. Avis again. Gavin hadn't known what to think. On the one hand, he was the only person that knew her parents. On the other, the man had her kidnapped just for the bio-chip she hadn't even realized she carried. He wasn't sure he was too fond of the idea of letting Jillian talk to Avis again, himself, but for Cain the idea had to be so much more difficult to swallow . . . what else could he have done?

Letting out a deep breath, Gavin grabbed an empty box out of the closet by the front door and headed back toward the bedroom again. Jillian was nowhere to be seen, and he frowned as he glanced around the room. With a soft click, the bathroom door opened, and Jillian emerged with an impish grin on her face. Gavin sucked in a sharp breath as she slowly turned around, modeling a metal bikini that closely resembled the one that Princess Leia had worn in *Return of the Jedi* while being held captive by Jabba the Hutt . . . "Wh . . . where did you get that?" he breathed as the box slipped out of his hand and tumbled onto the floor.

She smiled sweetly, striking a provocative pose as she batted her eyelashes at him. "Evan sent it as a late wedding present," she said. "It was in my fortune cookie . . . you fantasized about Princess Lei-me?"

The blush that crept up his features was nothing compared to the fierce urge to grab Jillian and kiss her silly. "I fantasized about *you*," he mumbled, cheeks reddening even more.

She giggled. "I *love* Evan's gifts!"

Gavin snorted since they'd spent the rest of their time in Montana acting out the things written in the fortune cookies that Jillian had found in the closet. Once she'd gotten a hold of those, there had been no stopping her . . . not that Gavin was really complaining. He certainly wasn't . . .

She sauntered over, draping her arms around Gavin's neck, pulling him down into a lingering kiss that burned his blood and drew a ragged groan from him. "What . . . about . . . the . . . eyes . . .?" he mumbled between kisses.

Jillian laughed and pulled away, casting a meaningful look over Gavin's shoulder. Still dazed from the barrage of desire that gripped him, he glanced back and laughed. "You turned them all to face the wall?" he drawled with a raised eyebrow.

She nodded, slipping her arms around his neck. "Yes."

"Even Artoo . . . he doesn't have eyes, you know."

"No, but he taped that holographic message from Princess Leia, remember? That's even worse."

