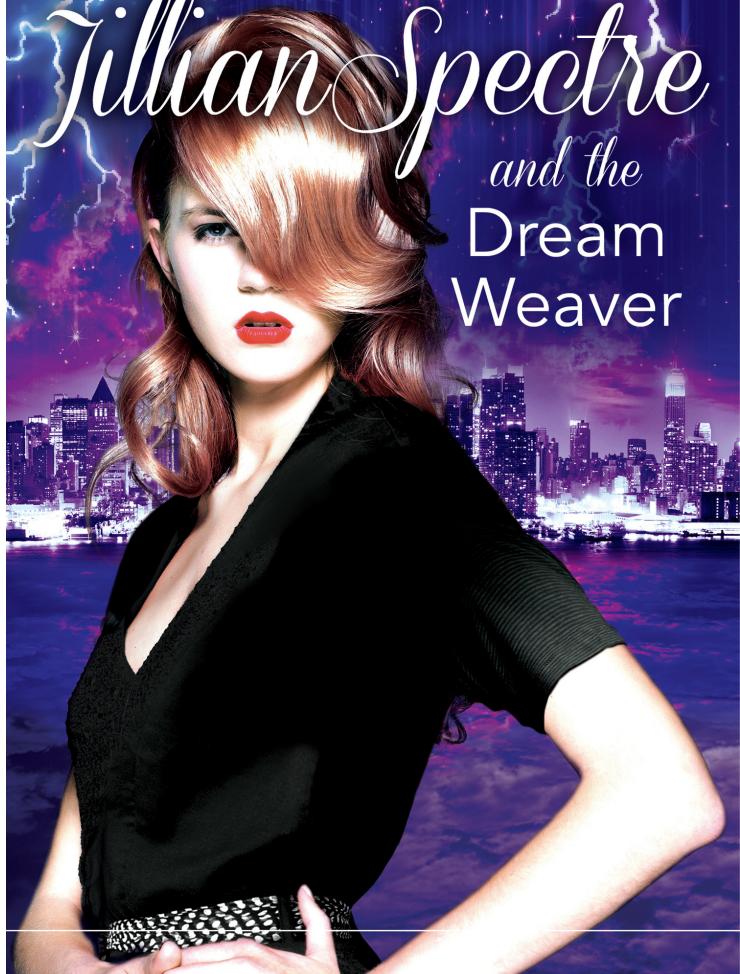




NIC TATANO

Jillian Spectre

and the
Dream
Weaver



Nic Tatano

Jillian Spectre and the Dream Weaver

Аннотация

There's a new villain in town...One who can manipulate dreams and reality to the point that people can't tell the difference.This is a job for Jillian Spectre.The snarky eighteen year old redhead with paranormal powers has already saved the world once but now she's under attack by a force that might be above her pay grade.The Dream Weaver.When Jillian's own dreams are invaded she finds herself desperately trying to separate reality from fantasy – and struggle with a totally inappropriate crush on someone who isn't her mind reading boyfriend, Ryan.When her own soul is on the line as the Dream Weaver manipulates her, Jillian has one shot to save herself and the rest of the world... or she and the rest of the world could be trapped in their dreams forever.

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Jillian Spectre & The Dream Weaver

The Adventures of Jillian Spectre
NIC TATANO



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Praise for The Adventures of Jillian Spectre

'A fantastic start to Tatano's new series...I can't wait to see where Jillian goes next, but as long as she has her friends around her and never loses her spunky attitude, I will be happy to follow her to the moon and back!'

The Book Geek

'It's got charm and panache and I absolutely recommend it for YA book lovers out there.'

Book & Coffee Addict

'This is honestly the absolute best book I've read so far this year.'

Magic in the Stacks

'A fab new world for paranormal fans young and old to enjoy.'

One More Page

'Carefree and magical.'

Young Adult Book Madness

'READ THIS BOOK! No, seriously, this book was such an amazingly fun read...The humor of this quick paced book had me desperately clinging to it.'

Carrie Reads A Lot

For Myra, who turns dreams into reality...

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Chapter 1

When you graduate from high school, you're often told you can change the world.

In my case, well...been there, done that.

But when you're an eighteen year old mystic seer who can physically be in two places at once and, oh yeah, you have what might be considered supernatural healing powers and an actual angel from Heaven on speed dial, saving the world is sort of an obligation. So instead of simply being Jillian Spectre, college freshman majoring in the ever popular *undecided*, I'm moonlighting as a comic book character. Boring classes that require regurgitation by day, redhead superheroine by night. No mask, no costume, no secret underground lair; just a freckled hundred and fifteen pound girl ... and saving the planet is not above my pay grade.

So when my cellular version of the bat phone rings, and I see who's calling—

"Jillian, my partner's been shot! I need you right now!" says Detective Spencer Ball, NYPD's astral projection investigator and my occasional partner.

I know the routine. "Mom, I'll be right back!" I yell in the direction of the kitchen, as I stretch out on our living room couch, put the phone on speaker and close my eyes. Spencer, affectionately known as Fuzzball, quickly recites his hypnotic

relaxation technique, making me relax and focus on his location as he describes the scene and the person in need of help.

And that person will die in minutes without me. I can hear the fear and concern in the detective's voice.

I create the scene in my mind and, in a blink, I'm there. In a moonlit alley somewhere in Manhattan.

The massive pool of blood on the ground and the twitching man make me jump back. It's one thing to have the detective tell you about it, another to actually see it.

"Jillian, hurry!" says Fuzzball, who is kneeling down next to his partner, pressing his hand over the guy's chest as blood oozes out.

I crouch down on the cool pavement next to his partner, a lean, dark haired man in his thirties whose dark eyes are flickering. "What's his name?"

"Jim." He turns to his partner. "Jimbo, she's here to help. Hang in there, buddy."

I take the dying man's trembling hand as he is gasping for air like a fish yanked out of the water. "Jim, look at me."

The man turns his head and locks eyes with me. His are deep pools of fear. I hear gurgling coming from his throat as he tries to talk and see blood trickle out of his mouth.

He knows he's going to die.

I tighten my grip on his hand. "You're going to be all right," I say.

He bites his lower lip as a single tear rolls down the side of

his face. "Spence, tell my wife—" His voice is a whisper, barely audible.

"Hang in there!" says Fuzzball, grabbing Jim's face with his free hand and turning it so that he's facing me. "Now, Jillian!"

I close my eyes, see the dying man in my mind, and send as much of my life force as I can into him in one incredible rush. I see the blood flow stopping, the bullet working its way out, the wound beginning to heal, his breathing returning to normal, calm returning to his eyes—

And then I black out.

I'm holding a different hand and my hair is gently being stroked when I wake up. I already know the touch before I open my eyes.

I look up and see my boyfriend Ryan. I'm back on the couch with my head and shoulders on his lap. "Welcome back, Sparks." He leans down and kisses me on the forehead.

"Did I save him?"

Ryan flashes a big smile. "Yeah. Fuzzball called. Doctors at the hospital say they can't explain it but he's going to make a full recovery. Guess they don't study redheaded guardian angels with healing powers in med school."

I start to sit up but a throbbing headache pushes me back down and I grab my forehead. "Whoa. How long was I out?"

"Three hours."

"Wow. It's been a while since healing knocked me out. I thought I was past that. Damn, I'm fried."

"You should be. The guy was as close to death as anyone you ever saved."

"Yeah, no kidding. I've never seen anything like that. It was like a scene out of a gory movie. Good thing tomorrow's a Saturday so I can rest up." I reach up to run my fingers through his thick dark hair and let myself get lost in his deep blue eyes.

"Well, hate to tell you this, but we don't have the day off."

"What do you mean?"

My mom walks into the living room and smiles at me. "Good, you're up. You feelin' okay, sweetie?"

"My head feels like there's a man inside banging a Chinese gong, but I'll live. What's this about not having tomorrow off?"

Her smile disappears as she turns to Ryan. "You didn't tell her?"

"She just woke up, Mrs. Spectre. Didn't have a chance."

"Tell me what?"

She turns back to me with a familiar look that tells me something is very wrong. She bites her lower lip, then exhales. "We need to go to The Summit. Sebastien called."

Uh-oh. An emergency trip to the home office for those with paranormal powers. This can't be good. "Yeah? And?"

"There's been a change with your father."

So it turns out my father, the deadbeat dad who abandoned me and mom when I was a year old, the guy who tried to turn society into a bunch of pod people with a mind controlling cell phone and now has a day job as a comatose villain, has taken a turn.

For better or worse, we don't know. Although worse wouldn't break my heart considering he nearly killed my boyfriend and best friend. But something tells me if that were the case, we wouldn't have been summoned to western New Jersey by Sebastien, head of The Council. The old guy in charge of monitoring everyone with paranormal powers doesn't mess around.

Sebastien leads me, Ryan and Mom into the antiseptic secure chamber. It's become my father's permanent home since we basically fried his brain and his ability to meld with technology by using a powerful computer virus provided by your tax dollars and Fuzzball's Man in Black buddy who works for the feds. He's still in a coma, face drawn, skin lacking in color, oblivious to the rest of the world. Nothing's changed since that day in May, the last time I saw him.

Well, nothing had changed until yesterday, according to Sebastien.

"So, what happened?" I ask, looking at my father through the glass. "He looks the same."

"His brain waves changed slightly," says Sebastien, as he stares at my father's body. "We monitor the activity constantly and last night something happened that we cannot explain."

"Is he waking up?" asks Mom, staring at the man who was once the love of her life before turning into an evil maniac. Her tense face tells me she's still conflicted, still wondering if we shorted out the evil part of his brain and the good man might

be inside.

Sebastien shakes his head. "No. But we detected a change in his Delta waves. Jillian, you know the implications of that."

I nod. "Yeah. The brain waves of the subconscious. How he was going to control me with the phone. So, could he simply be dreaming?"

"Our experts don't think so. There was no rapid eye movement detected, and dreams would produce a different kind of brain wave pattern that we've seen before from him. The change in his pattern is not unlike what we saw when you combined yours with Ryan and Roxanne. Our theory is that...well, the simplest way to put it is that we think he's been contacted."

Ryan furrows his brow. "How is that even possible?"

Sebastien shakes his head. "We don't know," he says, then turns to Ryan. "Which is why I asked you to come along. We were hoping..."

"You want me to read his mind?" asks Ryan.

"No!" I yell, throwing out one arm in front of Ryan before Sebastien has the chance to answer. "My father almost killed him twice, and you want to risk his life over some brain wave change? Find another way."

"There is no danger," says Sebastien.

My blood pressure spikes. "How the hell can you be sure of that?"

Mom grabs my arm. "Young lady, watch your tone. Don't yell at Sebastien."

"I'll yell if he's going to risk my boyfriend's life."

"We know there's no danger because we already tried using other mind readers. None of them suffered any after effects," says Sebastien. "But they also got no results."

"Then why do you need me?" asks Ryan. "I just finished my apprenticeship. I'm sure the people you've got here are the best and have a lot more experience."

"You've made contact with him before," says Sebastien.

"There's another part to that equation," I say. "My father also went into *his* mind, remember?"

Sebastien ignores my comment and keeps looking at Ryan. "We feel you may experience different results because of your previous connection with Jillian and Roxanne. Your powers are slightly different than the average mind reader."

"What are you talking about?" asks Mom.

Sebastien looks at the ground. "I admit, I should have told you this before. But when the three of them connected it took his powers in a slightly different direction. Roxanne's as well. They are both more finely attuned, as if they somehow absorbed some of Jillian's incredible gifts."

"I don't care if he's the best mind reader on the planet," I say, folding my arms. "He's not doing it. End of story."

Ryan rests his hand on my shoulder. "Hang on a minute, Sparks. The two times he attacked me he sent his own thoughts. He can't do that now."

"You don't know that!" I say.

"Yes, we do," says Sebastien. "There is no risk. But it is up to you, Ryan. I certainly understand if you don't want to do this."

Ryan nods, and I can tell he wants to do it.

Damn friggin' testosterone. That rampant Y chromosome needs a leash.

I reach for Ryan's hand and tangle my fingers in his, then give him the most soulful look I can muster. "Please don't. You're not bulletproof."

"I'll be fine, Sparks," he says, smiling. "Besides, you're here to heal me if anything goes wrong. You've done it before. Twice."

Damn friggin' logic. Why am I in love with the only eighteen year old guy on the planet with a forty year old brain?

Ryan turns to Sebastien. "You want me to do this now?"

He nods. "The sooner we find out, the better."

"Okay." Ryan closes his eyes, which is what he does when he's about to read a mind. I squeeze his hand harder and he squeezes back.

My heart slams against my chest and I focus on him, ready to send as much healing energy as I can muster. But thankfully nothing happens.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity but is actually about sixty seconds, he opens his eyes and looks at me. "See, I'm fine."

My heart downshifts as I wrap my arms around his waist and lean my head on his chest.

"Did you get anything?" asks Sebastien.

Ryan nods as he puts an arm around my shoulder and pulls

me closer, then kisses the top of my head. "Not much. It's him, but he's like an innocent five year old who has no idea what's going on around him. And I didn't see any of those dark images he sent into my head before. I didn't pick up anything that might be taken as evil."

"Good," says Mom.

"But..." says Ryan.

Sebastien's eyes widen. "Yes?"

"Someone's been in his mind."

My best friend Roxanne furrows her brow as she pulls another slice of pizza from the pan that sits on the red-and-white checkered tablecloth. "Someone powerful contacted your father?"

I swallow a bite of the steaming double supreme and wash it down with a sip of my super-sized-anti-Mayor-Bloomberg Dr. Pepper. It's funny, even though the guy's out of office people still associate him with declaring DEFCON ONE on soda, and the pizza parlor actually named its extra large drink the Bloomberg Special when the law got tossed by the courts. It's the New York carbonated middle finger at the guy. The restaurant is crowded for a Sunday night, the Mom-and-Pop eatery filled with loud conversation, the smell of baking pies and the sounds of Sinatra. "That's what Sebastien said. It has to be someone strong to get through their security."

"No way to identify the person?"

I shake my head. "Nope. Not yet, anyway. All Ryan got from

my father was that he'd had a visitor."

"So what was this person of power looking for?"

"The theory is that it's one of my father's minions who wanted to determine if his powers are totally fried. Or maybe try to bring him back to full strength. Which scares the hell out of me."

"Aren't you glad you didn't heal him."

"Yeah, no kidding." My heartbeat is picking up a bit and I realize we need to get off the subject. After saving a life on Friday and spending all day at The Summit yesterday, I need something mindless. "So did you and Jake have a good time last night?"

Roxanne surprises me as she shrugs. "Not really. We went to dinner and after that I wanted to go home."

"What happened? I thought he was taking you dancing at that new club?"

"I wasn't in the mood after hearing about his hot Political Science teacher for an hour."

"Hot teacher?"

She rolls her eyes and pushes her shoulder length black hair behind her ears with her hands. "Ooooooh, Ms. Cruise. She's soooo interesting and she makes her lectures come alive with her incredibly expressive face and all the boys have a thing for her and it's amazing that she's forty and never married...I mean, I know college boys have it bad for women who are a little older, but geez, it was like he was talking to another guy. Then he goes on and on about a meeting he had with her after class and how she really takes a personal interest in her students and seems to

think he's got a future in politics. Finally I'd had enough so I told him I didn't feel well and he took me home."

"Rox, I wouldn't worry about it. Freshmen boys are like kids in a candy store when they see college women after four years of high school girls. Even Ryan's got his head on a swivel."

"Yeah, but *we're* college women now."

"Yeah, but we're eighteen and a forty year old has been around the block already. It's the experience factor, and, as you know, we don't have any." I reach across the table and pat her hand. "Look, you've got nothing to worry about. Besides, if by some strange turn of events things didn't work out with you and Jake there'd be a line of hot guys waiting for a shot at a six foot babe with legs up to her neck. It's not a bad lookin' crop on that campus."

"I suppose. Still, I've got it bad for the little guy and it kinda hurt me a little, ya know?"

"Aren't you the one who always said men take longer to grow up?"

"Stop hitting me with my own logic, short stuff."

"Maybe you need a little of your own logic. Remember when you first started dating him you went out with someone else to keep him in line?"

"I'm not playing those games anymore."

"I'm not saying you should actually do it. But just talk about a male teacher and give him a taste of his own medicine."

"The only male teacher we've got is that eighty year old English professor who died and didn't get the memo."

"Okay, not my best idea. Tell you what, I'll send my alter ego into that classroom and see what the hell is going on with that teacher."

After four years of challenging my stomach to a daily culinary smackdown in a high school cafeteria that served dishes which looked suspiciously like lab experiments, there was no way I was gonna eat college food. Roxanne and I had already done reconnaissance during our spring campus visit and were treated to a mystery meat dish she referred to as "cold shoulder" since a: it was cold, and b: she found a bone in it that looked like a shoulder blade she'd seen in her cousin's butcher shop. Besides, with the campus in Manhattan I could throw a stone and hit any number of terrific and reasonably priced places to eat. However, the school does have a subsidized coffee bar, which offers terrific flavored joes at a dollar a cup, so I'm enjoying a mug of almond amaretto while I attempt to navigate through the 1800s literary version of the health care law, *Moby Dick*. Get this: the book is required reading for my *Modern Literature* course. Which begs the question, would you have to be living during the Abe Lincoln administration to consider this book *modern*? Anyway, after thirty pages on the care and feeding of whales I'm ready to impale myself on a harpoon and making a point to hit the college bookstore on the way home to pick up the Cliff Notes. Hey, I can spend fifty hours reading this dated monstrosity or getting the thirty minute recap and spending my time doing noble deeds. Seems like a no-brainer to me. I could even do a testimonial for

the Cliff Notes people that they could put on the back cover:

"The condensed version of Moby Dick gave me the time I needed to save the planet."

-Jillian Spectre, superheroine

Anyway, the java bar is packed and I'm sitting alone at a corner table for two when a tight pair of jeans moves into my field of vision. I look up and see a Greek god standing before me with a cup of coffee.

"Mind if I join you? All the other seats are taken."

A quick glance around the room tells me this is true. Not that I care with a guy like this, since one does not often encounter mythological figures who look like fashion models, so I gesture toward the chair opposite me. "Sure."

"Thanks." He places his books and coffee on the table as he sits down and slides his chair closer to the table, then extends his hand. "Trip Logan."

My hand looks tiny and disappears into his as we shake. "Jillian Spectre."

His handshake is gentle despite his size. He cocks his head toward my novel. "You're not actually reading that mind-numbing thing, are you?"

I close the book and slide it off to the side. "I made a valiant attempt, but I started to lose interest at *Call me Ishmael*."

"Ah, yes, I remember this school's concept of Modern Literature. When I took it we were reading the Rosetta Stone."

I laugh and take in this vision as he sips his coffee. The guy's

built like a linebacker: incredibly broad shoulders, huge ripped biceps straining to escape from his short sleeved shirt, forearms with bulging veins that belong on a blacksmith. One of those men whose chest looks twice as wide as his waist. He obviously lives in the gym. At least six-foot-four, maybe taller. He looks like he could bench press a Toyota but has a silky smooth voice. Throw in the angles-and-planes face, thick black hair, dark brown eyes and dimples, and my heart is beginning to flutter. I think back to Ryan's favorite phrase when he sees a beautiful woman. *"I'm your boyfriend, but I'm not dead."*

I'm not dead either. Besides, with Roxanne's news that Jake has a bit of a wandering eye, I could just be on a scouting mission for her, seeking out young men built like Thor.

Yeah, let's go with that.

I look at his stack of books, a collection of history and political science. "Let me guess...pre-law?"

He nods. "You're very perceptive. I start applying in a couple of months."

"Oh, so you're a senior."

"Yep."

"What kind of law do you want to practice?"

"Criminal. I'd love to be a prosecutor, put bad guys away."

"Very noble. So, not going for the big bucks?"

"Maybe someday, but right now I just want to make the world a better place."

"Yeah, I know the feeling."

He locks his spectacular deep-set eyes with me and it's all I can do to remind myself I'm taken. "I realize that's kind of a naive rose colored glasses way to look at things, but it feels good to help people. So, what do you wanna do?"

"Same deal. Help people. You might say it's in my blood. But right now I don't have a major." I sip my coffee and then it hits me. He's taking political science. "Hey, you ever have a teacher named Ms. Cruise?"

"The Cruise Missile? Nah, I had someone else for freshman poly sci. But I know who she is. Anyway, she apparently knows her subject matter. Served a couple of terms in Congress. She was known for sleeping around there, too."

"What do you mean...*too*?"

"She, uh...well, she has quite the reputation around here. Let's just say it's possible for male students to get extra credit, if you get my drift."

"They call her the Cruise Missile?"

"Legend has it that she zeroes in on one student every semester like a heat seeking missile. Apparently her affairs with freshmen are legendary around here."

"So why is she still teaching here?"

"Because legend has it she also had an affair with the college president, and she's holding that little bit of information over his head. Along with some incriminating photos."

"Wow. I guess I'm not in high school anymore."

"Nope. Welcome to the real world."

Ten minutes worth of great conversation later, he looks at his watch. "Well, off to class." He stands up, slugs down the rest of his coffee and tosses the empty cup in a nearby trash can. "It was nice meeting you, Jillian."

"You too, Trip. See you around the campus."

He grabs his books. "So, uh...would it be too forward of me to ask for your phone number?"

"It wouldn't, if I didn't have a boyfriend."

He playfully puts out his lower lip in a pout. "Figures. The good ones are always taken. Well, see you later."

"Yeah," I say, as he turns and heads out of the room, leaving in his wake a sea of longing looks from every girl in the place.

Including me.

The aforementioned "hot teacher" Rebecca Cruise holds court in a classroom that looks like an amphitheater and has what is commonly known as stadium seating, with the rows sloped downward toward the teacher. I've been in the room for another class, so it's easy to focus on it as I stretch out on the couch. I'm going to materialize in the back row during Jake's class so I can make a quick, unnoticed arrival and getaway.

What I don't expect is to arrive in the dark.

The only light in the room is provided by a projector which is filling the front wall with a PowerPoint presentation while the teacher strolls by the front row.

She comes as advertised.

Ms. Cruise is a tall, stunning, blue-eyed blonde, maybe five-

nine with a short leather skirt showing off spectacular legs atop red four inch heels and a tight gathered burgundy top that leaves little to the imagination. Not exactly the *costume de rigueur* for a college professor, as she looks more like a middle-aged party girl in search of a red plastic cup. If you looked up "cougar" in the dictionary, you'd see her photo. A quick look around the room shows the class is comprised mostly of guys, all of whom are riveted as she prances around the room. I spot Jake in the front row, the glow from the projection lighting up his face and the fact that he's practically drooling over his teacher as he leans forward on the desk.

Luckily in the last row it's pitch dark, so I'm unnoticed. Besides, no one's sitting back here anyway, as most of the class is crammed into the front half of the room.

Anyway, she's whipping through slides that are highlighting some of the more notable revolutionaries in history, many of whom are guests of the state. (Fuzzball's cute little term for "prisoners.")

"Political resistance has always been the instrument of change throughout history," she says. "It is necessary for societal growth. It's up to each of you to carry the torch and challenge authority. And you don't need a degree to do that, you can start now. Use your freedom of speech." She launches into this wild monologue which tells me she's a stereotypical radical professor whose main objective is not to teach but to influence her students with her own views.

Then, she says something that makes me sit bolt upright.

"It's a shame that the Spectre phone crashed, because it was on the way to changing society for the better."

My eyes narrow as she extols the virtues of my father, his failed invention, and how it would have allowed people to live in the present and not place any trust in blind faith. I look around the room and see heads nodding in agreement.

Including Jake's.

Which makes no sense. Jake knows how evil my father was. I mean, the guy tried to kill Roxanne, the supposed love of Jake's life. Jake hates him with a passion.

But right now he's smiling, agreeing with the lunatic stuff his teacher is spouting.

So what is this woman doing to him and every other student in this class? And how the hell is she doing it?

This is more than a guy being all gaga over a hot woman. This is something else.

Is she a minion of my father? Is it possible she's got some mind controlling powers? If she's got powers, Sebastien will know.

Finally, after this five minute manifesto about how to possibly recapture the false utopia promised by the Spectre phone, I've had enough.

"Excuse me, I'm just curious," I yell, stopping her in her tracks.

She shades her eyes with her palm as she moves away from the projector, squinting in vain to see who's interrupted her from

the back of the room. I know there's no way she can see me in the dark. "Yes?"

"Well, you know, I pay forty grand in tuition in order to learn about political science, not to listen to your opinions. Would it be possible for you to stick to the curriculum and leave your personal views at home?"

A collective "whoa" floats through the room from the students. The teacher's face tightens, her eyes narrow into a glare. "*Excuse me?*"

"Hey, you said we should challenge authority. So I'm challenging yours by saying the Spectre phone was part of the biggest con job in the history of this country. I'm happy it crashed. It would have destroyed society."

"Who's back there? Lights!"

And just before a student in the front row reaches the light switch, I book on outta there.

Chapter 2

I guess I should catch you up on how my powers work these days, since I spent most of the summer working on my newfound projection and healing abilities.

As far as my duties as a seer go, not much has changed. I can still only see five years into the future, still only read romance, still get occasional views of the afterlife. Luckily I'm still in contact with the angel Carrielle, though he hasn't needed me for any special projects since we put my father into a deep freeze. I simply meet him when I need inspiration or advice.

But when it comes to projecting myself to a different location (Ryan refers to my alter ego as Jillian 2.0) I've made significant progress with the help of Fuzzball. My alter ego trips fall into two categories. If I simply project and don't have to heal anyone, I return to my body and wake up immediately feeling perfectly normal. If I have to heal someone during an out of body experience, I need recovery time but I don't black out unless it's a life or death situation, which I have just learned. It's taken less time as I've gotten more experienced, but the rule of thumb is this: the more drastic the healing process, the longer the recovery time. However, I had never saved anyone as close to death as the detective's partner.

Sadly, for Ryan anyway, I cannot be awake in both my real body and the projection at the same time, denying him his fantasy

of being with two Jillians at the same time. What is it about men and twins?

Now that school has started, my mystic seer duties are down to two nights a week. Fortunately Fuzzball has helped me replace that lost income by helping him on a few of his moonlighting jobs that all cops seem to have. We're quite the buddy cop duo, projecting ourselves to solve mysteries, which pays pretty well. I'm working for him Friday night, on an assignment that should be a hoot. Politician's wife thinks he's cheating (yeah, there's a real stretch) and she wants to find out if the guy's hot female "consultant" is taking care of more than focus groups.

But right now I've got a new client to take care of, and hopefully I'll be done quick since the Giants are on Monday Night Football and I never miss a game. He's a young guy, probably my age, which is surprising. As you can imagine, most of our clients are older, and most are women. Most college age men aren't exactly worried about romance as they are about sex. (There should be a freshman class to teach them the difference.)

Anyway, this guy has that lost puppy dog look which tells me he's got it bad for some girl. He tells me his name is Stan as he shakes my hand, then sits down opposite me. He's very average looking, five on a scale of one to ten, maybe five-foot-six with a scruffy blonde beard and curly hair to match. He might qualify as a six if he bought a razor.

"So, you have some concerns about romance," I say.

He nods. "There's someone I'm very interested in. And to be

perfectly honest, I think she's probably way out of my league."

"Why do you say that?"

"She's really pretty, and I know a lot of guys are interested in her."

"Well, that's true of most attractive women. Doesn't mean you don't have a shot. You might be her type."

"I doubt it. But I'd like to save myself the pain of getting shot down if possible."

"I hear ya. Did you bring a photo?"

"Sorry, don't have one." He describes her, and I can tell he's right about the out-of-his-league thing since she sounds like a supermodel.

"Okay, Stan, here's how this works. I want you to ask a question about romance, and only about romance. Then focus on the question and nothing else. Got it?"

"Sounds simple enough."

"So what's your question?"

"Is it possible for me to have a relationship with her?"

"Now close your eyes and focus."

I do the same and try my best to create a mental picture from the description he's given me, adding his image in the process. I open my eyes and the crystal ball is already fogged up. "Okay, Stan, you can open your eyes."

He looks at the ball and sees the fog. "Wow, that was fast. You see anything?"

"Not yet, but the picture is clearing. It won't take long." The

fog dissipates and I see Stan walking along a hallway with a lot of doors. It looks like a bunch of offices. He heads for the door at the end of the hallway and is about to reach for the doorknob when he appears to hear something. He leans his head against the door and listens. The image dissolves to the inside of the office. I can see shadows on the floor, two people kissing. And then I see the two people creating the shadows.

Ms. Cruise.

And Jake.

"She could be a dream weaver."

Mom's words make me furrow my brow. "A what?"

"Dream weaver. It's legend really, as there's no evidence on record that one has ever existed. But it's an old tale about a woman who can manipulate others into thinking they're dreaming when they're actually awake." Mom puts down her coffee, gets up from the kitchen table and heads upstairs. She quickly returns with a very old leather bound book and slides it onto the table. The cover is plain, with no title visible on it or the spine.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Call it the big book of paranormal legends." She flips it open. I see her name, Zelda Spectre, written on the inside cover.

"How old is this thing?"

"I think it was put together around 1900. You're in it, by the way."

My eyes widen. "Excuse me?"

"Remember you were told there was a legend of a seer who could see beyond the physical world?" She flips through the book, stops at a page, turns it around and shoves it in my direction. "There you are."

To say my jaw dropped would be putting it mildly. There I was, a crude pencil drawing like the kind you see in dictionaries. But it was definitely me, complete with freckles. I quickly scan the description of the legendary seer, which describes me perfectly. "When were you gonna show me this?"

She shrugs. "I actually forgot it was in there."

"Your daughter is in a hundred year old book about paranormal legends and you *forgot*?"

"Hey, I'm middle aged. I'm getting C-R-S."

"What's C-R-S?"

"Can't remember shit." She grabs the book and turns it around, then starts flipping through the pages. "Car keys, grocery lists, where my glasses are even though they're on top of my head, lately I can't remember a damn thing. Anyway, I remember reading about the dream weaver when I was a little girl." She stops and points to the middle of a page. "Here it is."

She starts to read aloud but I grab the book.

DREAM WEAVER

A person of high intelligence who is able to manipulate the reality of those around her. Subjects will assume they are having lucid dreams when in reality they are awake. The Dream Weaver is then able to manipulate them into doing anything since the

subjects believe they are dreaming and there are no consequences. There is also a mind control factor, as the dream weaver is able to implant thoughts and ideas into the subject.

The legend of the Dream Weaver originated in Roman times, when it was said that a general had the ability to make opposing troops march off cliffs while making his own troops lose their fear of death.

There is no evidence to support the existence of a Dream Weaver.

I slide the book back to my mother. "Well, she's a college professor, so that takes care of the high intelligence part."

"A degree doesn't make someone smart, sweetie."

"Good point. Look who's in Congress."

"Tell me more about what you saw in the reading. Jake and this teacher, Miss Whatsername."

"Cruise. Rebecca Cruise. Well, they were in her office at the college. She basically had him pinned against the wall and was kissing him and about to do God knows what else. And she was totally in charge of the situation."

"Was he resisting at all?"

I shake my head. "No, he looked like he was really enjoying it. She started to unbutton his shirt and that's when I ended the reading. I didn't want to see anything else."

"And this teacher, Cruise, she's a supporter of your father?"

"Yeah, big time. You shoulda heard her, building him up like he was some sort of messiah and everyone in the class just eating

it up. So the fact that Jake likes her makes no sense."

"Hmmm. If she is a dream weaver she could be manipulating Jake."

"Is there any other paranormal power that would account for something like this?"

She shakes her head. "Don't think so. I'll ask Sebastien but I've read this book cover to cover and there's nothing else that could explain it."

"You think the legend is real, Mom?"

"Hey, the legend about you turned out to be true." She looks at the page. "Too bad there's no illustration of the dream weaver in the book."

"Mom, there's one other thing. I met another student who said this teacher is well known for having affairs with a different freshman every year. You think what I saw means that she's going after Jake?"

"It would make sense. And if she has that kind of power, she could also be the one who made contact with your father."

Roxanne slowly picks at her Monterrey Jack chicken, head down, not remotely herself as we have a casual dinner on this Friday night. No, I haven't told her what I saw in the reading or about the possibility of a dream weaver doing a Manchurian Candidate thing on Jake and turning him into her own personal boy-toy. It would push her over the edge. I'm hoping our double date of dinner, a movie and dancing will cheer her up. The restaurant is one of those casual fun chains, where all the waiters

and waitresses bounce around like they've had a six pack of Red Bull and you can win a fried cheese appetizer if you answer the trivia question of the night.

Ryan's been briefed and sworn to secrecy. His mission tonight: to take a quiet trip into Jake's mind during the movie and find out what the hell the Cruise Missile has done to him. Sebastien is coming by tomorrow to get a full report. Meanwhile, he has no information at all on Ms. Cruise. If she has powers, she's totally off the grid. And Mom was right, there's no other paranormal power that could account for what's happening.

Jake is his usual talkative self, totally oblivious to the fact Roxanne looks very depressed. He hasn't said anything about the teacher in question, but something is different about him. Can't put my finger on it, but I'll figure it out.

"Rox, your food okay?" I ask.

She shrugs and gives me a sad look. "Yeah, it's fine."

"Is it just me," I say, going on our pre-planned fishing expedition, "or are freshman college courses beyond boring?"

"Tell me about it," says Ryan. "I've got a couple of professors who I think died in 2010 and no one's told them. But I guess we've gotta get the required courses out of the way. I sure hope it gets better, because four years of this would be torture."

"I dunno, I've got a couple of good courses," says Jake. Roxanne glares at me, as if to say *why the hell did you bring this up?* "I like a couple of my classes."

Ryan pops a French fry and talks through it. "You got that

whack job radical political science professor, right?"

"Who, Ms. Cruise? She seems pretty conservative to me."

And now I know the woman has some power.

Chapter 3

I'm deep in thought as I wait for the crosswalk light to change to the little green man. And I have to admit I'm frustrated. My first weeks of college were supposed to be fun, meeting people who actually have ambition as opposed to the human doorstops who made up half of our student body. Of course, this being a very expensive school (thank goodness we all have full scholarships), there are a few girls working on a MRS degree with a trust fund brat, of which there are many. Overall, the whole college experience has been extremely disappointing, and when you throw in the fact I'm still doing my superheroine thing while dealing with a possible dream weaver who might be trying to access my father, I'm ready for spring break in September.

And after another Saturday with Sebastien there are more questions than answers. The geek squad at The Summit has tried everything in the book but can't get a read on the Cruise Missile. However, they're convinced she does have some sort of mind control powers. She may not be the legendary dream weaver, but she's a snake oil salesgirl who is selling stuff that is hazardous to your health and could necessitate a penicillin shot for one lucky male freshman. Meanwhile, what she's done to Jake has me worried and Roxanne upset. He's noticeably changed. Nothing major, but he's not the same and it's playing havoc with their relationship. Sebastien has a theory that those under my father's

domain know the four of us took him down and are working on some plan to split us apart. To me that makes perfect sense. After all, we were pretty unbeatable when we combined our powers. Divide and conquer is an old but effective strategy.

The crosswalk light changes and I'm still trying to sort all this out, so I'm not paying attention as I step off the curb right into a hole and twist my ankle. Pain shoots up my leg as I crouch down—

"Look out!"

I look up and see a taxi barreling straight for me, obviously ignoring the red light. My heart rate skyrockets but an arm wraps around my waist and lifts me out of harm's way in the nick of time. The cab flies through the intersection, colliding with a city bus.

"You okay?" asks the voice attached to the arm still holding me in midair.

"Yeah. God, thank you." My heart is still pounding as I'm returned to the ground, which causes a shooting pain in my ankle. "Owww!" The arm steadies me and I lean on it, then turn around to find out the identity of my white knight.

"Oh, it's you," says Trip. "Jillian, right?"

"Yeah. Trip, I don't know what to say. You saved my life."

"Eh, you probably would've rolled out of the way."

"Doubtful."

"You need to pay attention when you cross the street in New York, young lady. A red light doesn't necessarily mean traffic

stops."

"Yes, Sir, I'll be a good little girl and look both ways in the future."

He looks down at my leg. "Did you twist your ankle?"

"Yeah, I stepped in that pothole and must have sprained it. Hurts like hell." I try to put some weight on it again but the pain makes me wince.

He wraps one arm around my back to steady me. "I think we need to get you to the school infirmary."

"You're probably right. At least get some ice on it." I stick my hand straight out into the street.

"What are you doing?"

"Hailing a cab. I can't walk on this."

"Don't be ridiculous." Trip reaches down, wraps his other arm under my legs and easily lifts me, cradling my body as he starts walking in the direction of the campus.

"What are you doing?"

"It's only two blocks, and I'm cheaper than a taxi."

"You think you can carry me that far?"

"I dunno, you weigh a ton."

"Hey!" I playfully slap his arm.

He shoots me a grin, one of those sly smiles that makes your heart (and other parts of your body) do somersaults. What the hell, I guess I can be a damsel in distress and get rescued by a handsome block of granite. I relax and wrap my arms around his neck to hold on, feeling his rock-hard muscles under his shirt. He

effortlessly carries me down the street. We get to the crosswalk and have to wait for the light. He looks at me and smiles again.

And I'm the one breathing heavy.

I hate to say this, being Ryan's girl and all, but I'm feeling some serious electricity.

This "I'm not dead" thing has some dangerous aspects to it.

My ankle is completely healed after two full days off my feet. Being able to send my alter ego to class was a real asset, so I didn't miss a thing while getting well. However, at one point my projection fell asleep in Economics class and for a moment I ended up back at home. Good thing I'm now a back row girl.

So I'm enjoying the school's welcome-to-the-outside-world dance on this Friday night with Ryan, Roxanne and Jake. Most of the students are freshmen wanting to take advantage of this educationally approved meat market. But there are plenty of upperclassmen as well, ready to swoop in on what Roxanne refers to as "starry-eyed freshmen" girls. College is, as Mom said, a sexual candy store, and everyone has a pocketful of change.

Apparently the school's idea of decorating for a dance is to dim the lights, as the large, rectangular meeting room looks like...wait for it...a large, rectangular meeting room with dim lights. The guys are currently being checked out by one of the school chaperones, the aforementioned Ms. Cruise, who has been licking her lips and giving seductive looks to anything in pants. She's in another cougar outfit, short skirt and tight top, and I note the other teachers are keeping their distance though

the males of the species can't stop staring. I've seen Jake looking in her direction a few times, though he hasn't mentioned her and has been paying attention to Roxanne. (We still haven't told him we suspect someone's playing games with his mind, though that may change shortly.) Rox understands there's something going on in the thought control department and is being a real team player by not reading him the riot act.

"Ladies room?" I ask her.

She takes a quick look at Ms. Cruise, who is looking at our table like a cat eyes a canary. "Think I'd better keep an eye on things. Let's tag team. You go first."

I nod. "Sure. Be right back."

I get up and head toward the hall leading to the restroom, then notice there's a giant octopus playing keyboard for the band. I stop dead in my tracks and look around, then see George Washington on the dance floor, doing the jitterbug with Hillary Clinton.

I'm dreaming.

This one's incredibly lucid, so I wonder if Carrielle is hanging out here somewhere. Maybe he has some news about the dream weaver.

"Jillian."

I hear a voice coming from outside the hall. It's not Carrielle, and I don't recognize it, but I decide to follow it, passing a ten-foot blue lobster carrying a tray of champagne glasses who says hello. I move out of the room and into a dimly lit hallway.

"Jillian."

"Who's there?"

No answer.

I keep heading down the hallway. The music fades behind me, until I can't hear it any longer and my heel clicks on the linoleum provide the only sound. I see a silhouette of a man leaning against the wall. He stands up straight and suddenly a soft ethereal light emanates from his body, making him look like an angel.

It's Trip Logan.

"Hey, it's my lifesaver," I say, stopping in front of him. "What are you doing here?"

"It's your dream. You tell me."

"I'm not sure. I didn't even know I was dreaming until a minute ago."

"Maybe you've been thinking about me since I saved your life."

"That explains it."

"Or maybe you've been thinking about me for other reasons."

"Well, you did ask for my phone number. And I am unattached."

Something seems odd as I say that, but I can't put my finger on it. What the hell, it's a dream and a serious hunk is glowing and obviously interested in me.

He moves closer, near enough that I can smell his earthy cologne. Trip is about a foot taller, so his chest is at eye level. He reaches toward me and gently runs his fingers through my

hair. He lifts my chin with one finger, locks eyes with me, and suddenly the world disappears. His look is almost hypnotic, and I'm powerless to turn away. Not that I want to. I feel myself being drawn in, like I'm going into a trance. "So, Jillian, you figured out why I'm here?"

"I *have* been thinking about you. The way you saved me. I loved how it felt when you carried me." I slide my hands up along his arms, stopping on his biceps for a brief visit before ending up on his shoulders. "I felt so safe, so protected." I reach my arms up around his neck.

He bends down and lifts me by my hips. I wrap my legs around his waist, grab his head with my hands and our lips meet with a hunger I've never experienced. The ethereal light grows stronger, emanating from me as well, seeming to gain strength from our passion.

"Jillian!"

Someone's calling me but I don't care. It's my dream and this is too damn good. I keep kissing Trip, running my hands along his massive shoulders, then inside his shirt onto his toned chest.

"Jillian! What the hell?"

Oh, for goodness sake, what? I break the liplock and look to the side.

Ryan.

The ride home is excruciating. Ryan's jaw and fists have been clenched the whole time. I've been looking at the floor of the subway car. Luckily we're the only people in it, so we can talk.

Not that we've been doing much of that.

Right now I'm dead sure I'm not dreaming.

And never was.

But it seemed so dreamlike. The famous people, the lobster and octopus. The glow from Trip's body. The fact that I didn't think twice about jumping into the arms of Trip Logan, something I would never do in real life. And that I told him I was unattached.

Because I couldn't remember I have a boyfriend who I love very much.

Then, it was like the alarm clock went off when I heard Ryan's voice. I was jolted back into reality and got walloped with a massive dose of guilt.

Ryan was furious, ready to blow. If he were a cartoon character, steam would have come out of his ears. I dropped out of Trip's arms and put my body between them, hoping they wouldn't get into some sort of duel over me. I mean, my boyfriend is well-built but Trip probably has sixty or seventy pounds on him and looks as though he could easily break Ryan in half.

Trip did the honorable thing and managed to diffuse the situation with some quick thinking, telling Ryan he didn't know I was taken and he'd had too much to drink. He apologized, beat a hasty retreat and left us alone.

Still, what was *my* excuse? My words sounded incredibly lame. I mean, think about it, you tell the guy you love, "Sorry, I

thought I was dreaming so I was giving a tonsillectomy to a guy who is off the charts gorgeous while it looked like he was going to carry me off to the bedroom."

I even told him to read my mind, and he did, but for some reason it didn't back up my story. What I remembered was *not* what Ryan picked up, as he never saw the dream characters. All he saw was his girlfriend acting like a cheap slut about to hook up with another guy. Why I can remember it and he can't read it is something we need to figure out, and fast.

I'm biting my lip, trying to hold back tears as he stares straight ahead at a Broadway show poster for *Wicked* that hangs on the opposite wall of the subway car. The only sound is the train rumbling over the tracks. I slide my hand over, putting it on top of his, and his face relaxes a bit. "I hope you know I love you, Ryan."

He doesn't say anything, but slowly nods.

Progress.

"Something is happening to us. To me and Jake. Something we cannot control. I don't know what it is but I'm going to find out."

"Yeah," he says, barely audible. He turns to me, eyes wet. "Jillian, if it was a dream, why would you have been thinking of him?"

He doesn't trust me. He never calls me Jillian. I'm always Sparks.

"Remember the guy who pulled me out of the street the other

day? It was him. He's really a nice guy—"

His eyes narrow into a glare.

"Sorry."

"Are you attracted to him?"

"I'm in love with *you*."

"You didn't answer the question."

"I believe I just did, Ryan." I squeeze his hand.

He goes back to staring at the poster, and I wonder if he now thinks of me as the Wicked Witch of the West. I know it's gonna be a while before he can get the image of me and Trip that's burned into his brain out of his head.

Problem is, it's burned into my brain too.

Chapter 4

Mom is already reading the New York tabloids with her morning coffee as I trudge down the stairs. She looks into my bloodshot, puffy eyes and her face tells me she instantly knows something is very wrong. "Jillian, what happened?"

I move across the kitchen, pour a cup of coffee and sit down across from her. "I think the dream weaver got me last night, Mom."

She sits up straight. "What?"

"It's a long story, and it wasn't my fault...but I sorta cheated on Ryan."

Her eyes widen as I tell her the story, from meeting Trip Logan to him saving my life to the dance. And the fact that Ms. Cruise was in the building and obviously got into my head.

"So this Trip fellow...that was the guy who pulled you out of the traffic the other day?"

I nod.

"And you were absolutely sure you were dreaming?"

"I was convinced, Mom. I saw things that couldn't possibly be real. I never would have cheated on Ryan. But when I ran into Trip, I couldn't even remember that I had a boyfriend. I told him I was unattached."

"Hmmm. The dream weaver has obviously gotten into your subconscious. Are you attracted to this guy?"

"He's beyond good looking, Mom, but I love Ryan."

"Not what I asked, Missy. Do you find him attractive?"

"Well, yeah. Sure. I think you'd be hard pressed to find a woman who *didn't* think he was attractive. Physically he's off the charts, and he's nice, too. I have to admit I was flattered that he asked for my phone number when we first met because guys like that can hook up with supermodels."

"She obviously tapped into that and used him to tempt you. I think Sebastien was right, they're trying to come between the four of you."

"Makes sense." I stare into my coffee cup. "Mom, there's something else."

"What?"

"Well, I don't know how to put this...but when I was kissing Trip in the dream, or what I thought was a dream, well, I felt something. A real connection that I don't feel with Ryan."

"You weren't yourself, sweetie. Hey, if I had a dream and ran into Bradley Cooper I'd rip his clothes off."

"You got a thing for Bradley Cooper?"

"I'm middle-aged, honey, I'm not dead. Anyway, you're being manipulated."

"God, I hope that's it."

She reaches across the table and takes my hands. "Let me tell you something about love. It's not about finding someone you can live with, but finding someone you can't live without."

Once again, parents can sometimes simplify things. It makes

perfect sense.

"Could you live without Ryan?"

"No way, Mom."

I decide to do a little damage control and stop by Ryan's dorm room with a small peace offering. Even though Mom says I've done nothing wrong and it wasn't my fault, I know I've hurt him. The kind of hurt that doesn't go away quickly, and I know how fragile a guy's ego can be, even a self-confident guy like Ryan. I've got a box of red velvet cupcakes, his favorite, from Roxanne's family bakery. Just as I'm about to knock on the door he comes up behind me, dripping with sweat, carrying a gym bag.

"Hey, Sparks, good timing."

He didn't call me Jillian. Maybe he's not mad anymore.

I lean forward and give him a quick kiss. "Brought you a present." I hand him the box and he smiles as he sees it's from the bakery.

"Thanks. You didn't have to do this. I'm okay."

"I don't need a reason to do nice things for the man I love. So, you and Jake been playing racquetball?"

"We're playing later today. I joined the campus health club. It's free to students and you get a personal trainer for your first visit."

I scrunch up my face. "Isn't racquetball enough exercise for one day? Since when are you a gym rat?"

He opens the door to the room, holds it for me and I walk inside. "Racquetball is a great workout, but I wanna get strong.

I started lifting weights. Trainer says I could add ten pounds of muscle since I'm only one-seventy. I started boxing classes as well."

Oh, crap. I know what this is about. When it comes to men everything boils down to that "size matters" bullshit. He saw me with a guy who's a lot taller and bigger than him and built like a comic book superhero. "I don't suppose this has anything to do with what happened the other night."

"I just thought it was time to tone up. You know. Get buffed. For you."

"Uh-huh." He moves inside and I close the door behind him. He puts his gym bag away, grabs a towel, and wipes his face. "Ryan, look at me."

He turns to face me. "What?"

I move forward and take his arms. "You don't have to change a thing for me. You're perfect the way you are."

"You're only saying that because you love me."

I shake my head and exhale in frustration. "Does the stupidity of what you just said even register in that head of yours?"

"What? It's true. You don't want to hurt my feelings because you love me."

I look to the side and do my anchorwoman voice. "Let's recap that last idiotic statement for those of you who just tuned in." I turn back to him and tap him on the head with a knuckle. "Hello! McFly! What were those last three words you said? Huh?"

"You love me."

"Now, would you like to go for *Double Jeopardy* where the scores can really change? Maybe if you focus on those three words you'll realize I say things to you because they're true. *Because* I love you. So yes, you're perfect for me. I thought of you that way before we started dating. You're a six-foot hunk without an ounce of fat, and I oughta know because I've conducted a thorough search. You don't have to get all musclebound because I'm already yours and you have a hammerlock on my heart that no one is going to break."

"I wanna be strong for you. Be able to protect you."

Damn. Guys just don't get it.

I snake my arms around his neck and give him a soulful look. "Ryan, there's more to being strong than just physical strength, which, I might add, you already have. You've been my emotional rock since I've known you. I never had a father and you *always* protected me and took care of me, even when we were little. I've always been able to lean on you. And, in case you've forgotten, you almost gave your life to save me a few months ago. Which was the second time you nearly died for me. I couldn't find a stronger guy than you if I tried."

He grows a hangdog look and his face drops.

"This is about what happened at the dance, isn't it?" I ask.

He nods, still looking at the floor. "I was, you know, feeling a little...inadequate."

I take his chin and lift it so he's facing me. "Stop it. Stop it right now, young man. There's nothing inadequate about you."

Any girl would be thrilled to have you and I'm incredibly lucky to be that girl."

"I just...felt like such a shrimp next to him."

I roll my eyes. "Obviously you're not getting my point. You talk to Jake a lot, right?"

"Yeah."

"And in case you hadn't noticed, he's got an amazon girlfriend who towers over him and yet is madly in love with him. She doesn't think he's a shrimp. Hell, she wears four inch heels around him. She's proud to be seen with him."

"Yeah. I guess."

"You guess? For God's sake, Ryan, I love you! Do I have to have sex with you to prove it?"

"No, of course not. We agreed to wait."

"Good, because you shouldn't need it to know how I feel. What happened the other night wasn't me."

"Deep down I know that, Sparks. But it's still hard to compete with a guy like that."

Roxanne's bite of bagel nearly falls out of her mouth as she looks at Trip sitting down at the opposite end of the coffee bar. "*That's* the guy you made out with?"

I take a look and nod as I sip my coffee. "Yeah. Trip Logan."

"Yowza. Damn, Jillian, at least the dream weaver has good taste. I'm not sure I'd wanna wake up."

"Down, girl. You're still taken, remember?"

"I know, but geez, he looks computer generated. You basically

had a fantasy come true and got a *get out of jail free* card."

"Doesn't make me feel any better about it. And I didn't get away free. It really hurt Ryan. He's still upset."

"Hell, I don't blame him. The equivalent would be me seeing Jake making out with a supermodel."

"And get this...Ryan joined the health club. Started weight training and boxing lessons."

Rox shakes her head and rolls her eyes. "If men have one common denominator, you just found out what it is."

I take a quick look at Trip, who is busy reading a book. "That's not the only thing bothering me, Rox." I lower my voice to a whisper. "I...uh...can't stop thinking about it. Me and Trip, I mean. What happened the other night is stuck in my head."

"I wouldn't be able to forget either. But as long as you're just thinking, you won't need to go to confession."

"It's not just that he's incredibly hot. Remember when you went out last year with that football player?"

"The crash test dummy? Yeah, what about it?"

"Remember how you didn't feel anything? Well, this was different. I felt something with Trip I never felt with Ryan."

"That's 'cause you were dreaming. Or thought you were."

I shake my head. "No, no, there was something else. We were, I don't know, it was like we were connected on a different level. There was an electricity about it, like we were meant to be together."

"Jillian, stop it." She stares at Trip over her coffee cup, then

turns back to me. "You caught the sexual brass ring for a couple of minutes, that's all. You're acting like a man."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You're thinking with the wrong head." She looks at Trip again. "It will pass."

"She says as she stares at the guy and drools all over the table."

"Hey, it doesn't matter where I work up my appetite as long as I have dinner at home."

"I'm sure Jake would appreciate knowing that. Meanwhile, I need to talk to Trip."

Her eyes widen. "Are you out of your mind? You're only gonna make things worse. What if Ryan walks in?"

"He's got class right now. Rox, I need to know what really happened, I need his point of view. What I remember and what Ryan saw when he read my mind are two very different things. I need to know why there are two different memories in my head of the same event. I promise, this will be the last time I ever talk to him."

"I'm tellin' ya, you're playing with fire."

"I'll be fine."

Roxanne finishes her bagel, wipes her mouth with a napkin and stands up. "Okay, but I gotta get to class in five minutes, so I can't keep an eye on you."

"Really, I'll be okay."

"Well, if you're gonna do this at least take me over and introduce me."

"Working up that appetite?"

"I want an up close and personal look at Mister Universe. I'm attached, but I'm not dead."

I get up and lead her over to Trip's table. He's engrossed in his book as we approach. He looks up and his eyes widen and fill with a touch of concern. "Uh...Jillian. Hi. You sure this is a good idea?"

"We need to talk, Trip. Oh, this is my best friend, Roxanne."

He stands up and extends his hand. Rox does all she can to keep her jaw from hanging open as she looks up at him but is unsuccessful. This is one of the few guys who's taller than her in her heels. "Hi, Trip Logan."

She shakes his hand. "Uh-huh."

She doesn't say anything else as he sits down. I give her a gentle elbow in the ribs. "You've got class, right?"

"Whuh?" Her eyes are still locked on him. "Class, right. Nice to meet ya."

"My pleasure," he says. Rox turns and walks right into a chair, nearly falls, then continues out of the coffee bar. I grab a chair opposite Trip and sit down.

"Look, Trip, what happened the other night—"

He puts up his hands. "I promise, it won't happen again. You don't have to worry about me coming between you and your boyfriend. I'll keep my distance."

"It's not that. I wasn't myself and... Well, I need to know what I said."

"You don't remember?"

"I can't handle my liquor." I've never even had alcohol, but it's the best excuse I can come up with.

"Okay. Well, I went out in the hall to use my cell, and just as I finished the call I saw you, so I shouted out to you."

"I remember that. What happened next?"

"You asked me what I was doing there, which I thought was an odd question. I told you I'd come to the dance."

"You didn't say anything about dreams?"

His brow tightens. "Dreams? What dreams?"

"Not important. So then what did I say?"

"You said you'd been thinking about me, and I said I'd been thinking about you too but it was really frustrating since you had a boyfriend. You started to laugh and I asked you what was so funny. Then you said you were unattached, that you always told guys you just met you had a boyfriend. Until you got to know them better. Just to be safe. And then you said you wanted to get to know me better, that I seemed like a good guy after saving you from getting hit by the cab."

"I said that?"

"Yeah. So now I'm thinking I have a shot with you so I got excited. Jillian, I was very interested from the moment I met you. I hadn't stopped thinking about you."

"Me? I would think a guy who looks like you would have women beating down your door."

He actually blushes a bit. "There's something about you,

Jillian. I'm mean, you're gorgeous and all but you have this incredible life force thing going that takes it to another level. Anyway, when you almost got hit by the car and I got to spend a little time with you, it made things worse. I'll admit I got turned on carrying you down the street when you put your arms around me. It was driving me crazy that you had a boyfriend because I desperately wanted a chance with you."

I must say I'm getting really flattered at this point, and now I'm beginning to blush, but I need to stick to the task at hand. "Okay, so what happened next?"

"Well, you started talking about how I saved your life and how you felt protected when I carried you to the infirmary. How you hadn't properly thanked me and wanted to do it in private. You started sliding your hands up my arms, then around my neck and you gave me this look that went right into my soul. Then you jumped into my arms, wrapped your legs around me and started kissing me. Then you asked me to take you back to my place. That's when your boyfriend showed up."

"You didn't make the first move? You didn't pick me up?"

He shakes his head. "No, you took the initiative. And you certainly weren't shy about it."

"And I asked you to take me to your place?"

He nods. "Yeah."

"Were you going to?"

"A guy doesn't pass up an invitation like that from a girl like you. But then your boyfriend showed up. Talk about a

disappointing end to an evening." He looks around, leans forward and lowers his voice. "Look, Jillian, I'm sorry you got in trouble with your boyfriend, but I never would have let it happen if you hadn't said you were unattached. I don't want you to think of me as one of those guys who breaks up relationships."

"I don't. And I want to thank you for the way you handled it. That was quick thinking on your part. It would have ended up much worse."

"Well, I understand how he feels, and I'd feel the same way. He obviously cares for you a great deal. Lucky bastard."

"Actually, I'm the lucky one."

"So how are things with your boyfriend? He looked pretty angry."

I shrug. "He's hurt, but he's tough. He'll get over it."

"Good. Not sure I will."

"Excuse me?"

He leans forward and locks eyes with me. "Jillian, I know we were only kissing for a minute or two, but what I felt with you is something I've never felt before."

Jake and I are riding to The Summit on this Saturday morning. Mom's backed up on her clients, so she isn't tagging along. Sebastien only wanted to see the two of us since we're the ones who have been affected. Roxanne and Ryan are patiently waiting at home, both of whom hoping for something that will explain why the people they love suddenly seem interested in others. But them being left behind is fine since I wanted a chance to talk

with Jake and bring him into the loop. While I know I've been affected, he doesn't think anything is different.

"Trust me, Jake, you've changed."

"I changed last year, remember? In a good way."

"I know. But you're doing stuff you wouldn't normally do. And I've been meaning to talk to you about it since Roxanne hasn't."

He turns to me as I drive and keep my eyes on the road.

"What's up with Rox?"

I exhale deeply, knowing she didn't want me to talk about it, but I can't let this go on. It's hurting her too much. "Jake, you've been talking about another woman when you're out with her."

"No I haven't. I would never do that."

"You've been doing it. You just don't realize it."

"Well, then, who am I talking about?"

"Your teacher, Ms. Cruise."

"That's different, Jillian. I was just talking about a teacher I like, that's all."

"Yeah, but the way it comes out, it sounds like you're interested in her. Romantically."

"That's ridiculous. Cruise is old enough to be my mother. And I love Roxanne."

"I know you do, and she knows you do. But your teacher has seriously screwed with your mind." I can tell he doesn't believe me, so I decide to tell him about seeing him in a reading. "Okay, you have to pinky swear with me that you will not tell Roxanne what I'm about to tell you."

His face tightens. "What?"

"Pinky swear." I stick out my pinky.

He shakes it with his. "Yeah, sure. So what's the big secret?"

"I saw you in my crystal ball the other night."

"You did a reading for Roxanne?"

"No, Jake. It was a reading for someone else who is a student at our college, but you were in it. You were kissing Ms. Cruise. And it looked like you were going to go a lot further."

We're both propped up on a couple of hospital beds with electrodes attached to our heads. Jake is noticeably upset about what's been going on with Cruise, especially after talking with Sebastien about her. After two hours of testing, I'm ready for answers.

But when Sebastien walks in with a worried look, I know I'm not getting the answers I want.

"You can remove the wires now," he says. Jake and I quickly pull the sticky connectors from our foreheads.

"So, what's the verdict?" I ask.

Sebastien looks down at a printout. "Both of you have been affected in the same way."

"How so?" asks Jake.

"Your brain waves have been altered."

My eyes widen. "Altered?"

"The patterns have changed slightly. In the Delta waves."

"The subconscious ones," says Jake. "The ones her father wanted to access in her."

"Correct," says Sebastien. "Jake, I know you would like to drop this class, but if we are to study this situation we need you to remain close."

"I understand," he says. "Not sure Roxanne will, though."

"And Jillian, I need you to monitor her class, but only using your alter ego. Remember, she cannot access your brain waves when you are a projection. We will need to compare what Jake takes from the class to what she is actually saying."

"Okay. So...what does this mean?" I ask. "Can we be, you know, fixed?"

Sebastien looks at the floor. "I'm told it's like a virus in your brain waves. Right now we have no idea how to deal with it, but at least we have isolated the problems."

"So how do I know when I'm dreaming and when I'm not?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Unfortunately, I cannot answer that question. You will simply have to be very careful."

"If it's a virus, like the computer virus we gave to Jillian's father, will we get sick?" asks Jake.

"It's not physical, it's mental," says Sebastien. "But when you take that into account with the things you both have been experiencing, it serves to confirm our suspicions."

"And those suspicions would be?" I ask.

"That the dream weaver exists."

It's a beautiful fall day, late in the afternoon, temperatures in the seventies and low humidity. The leaves will be changing soon,

the maples bringing color to my favorite month, October, which is just around the corner. It's a perfect day for a walk to clear my head, which currently has all sorts of problems bouncing around like bingo balls. When I shove one concern to the back burner, another moves to the front.

The streets are surprisingly quiet, the only sounds coming from the dribbling of a basketball at a nearby court. I look ahead and see there's only one guy shooting hoops. Maybe I'll join him. I've got a pretty decent jump shot and I could use some exercise.

The guy has his back to me, but he's shirtless and what I can see is impressive. His well-defined shoulder muscles twitch with every shot. Each time the ball swishes through the hoop, nothing but net, and comes right back to him. He starts to dribble a bit, tries a bank shot, misses. The ball rolls toward me and he gives chase as I bend down to pick it up.

When I stand back up I'm face to face with Trip Logan. "Oh, Trip, it's you."

"Hi Jillian." He reaches down to a bench, grabs a towel, and begins to mop his brow. His chiseled body is glistening with sweat. The sight of him in just a pair of shorts makes me gulp. My original assessment of him as a Greek god was correct.

"I was, uh, out for a walk."

He smiles at me as he moves closer and drapes the towel over his neck. "Uh-huh. You know, Jillian, for a girl who needs to avoid me, you sure do seem to run into me a lot."

"Coincidence."

"Coincidences are destiny's favorite trick when it comes to romance."

"I already have someone, Trip. I thought we cleared that up."

He grabs a bottle of water from his gym bag, takes a sip, and puts it on the bench. "I still can't get that night out of my head, Jillian. That feeling hasn't gone away." He reaches out, tilts my chin up, the way he did at the dance. My pulse quickens as his touch brings the now familiar electricity.

"Trip, this isn't a good idea. I...I really should go."

"You don't have to. We're just talking."

"Talking with you is dangerous."

"Why? You afraid it might lead to something that you actually *want* to do?"

"Trip, I really need to go. Being here is not a good idea."

He moves a bit closer, locks eyes with me. "You know you're attracted to me, Jillian. We're meant to be together. Why are you fighting it?"

My heart rate kicks up another notch. "Because I love Ryan."

He nods. "You may *love* Ryan. But you *want* me."

And I know what he says is true.

"You know I do things to you that he doesn't." He gently takes my shoulders and pulls me closer.

His look, his touch, take my breath away and render me powerless. I can't stop myself. My hands come up like they have a mind of their own and rest on his sides, then slide forward as I run them across his washboard abs. The sensation steals my

breath and sends fireworks through my heart. "Oh. My. God."

"Problem?"

"Not with your body."

"It's all yours if you want it."

I'm staring at his abs, his chest, hypnotized by the feel of his muscles. It's like nothing I've ever experienced. "Please, Trip. Let me go."

He takes his hands off my shoulders and gives me a casual smile. "Nothing's keeping you here, Jillian. You can leave anytime you want."

My head tells me to leave but my feet seem to be stuck in cement while my hands are busy exploring. They slide up onto his chest, then across his shoulders and around his neck as I look up into his eyes.

"Thought you were leaving."

"I really need to go, Trip."

"So go."

"I...I can't."

He licks his lips as he looks down into my soul. "Do you want something?"

I'm craning my neck as I look up at him. "I do, but...you're awfully tall."

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