

TRUST

THE ALEX CONNER CHRONICLES
BOOK ONE

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RAWLINGS BOOKS, LLC

CHAPTER 1



Alexis, Wake Up!

Journal Entry:

Being observant has been my blessing, my curse, and my destiny. My grandmother always told me that I was the most observant creature she had ever known, aside from her cats. This focus and intensity have brought about my ability . . . my power.

I remember smells that would have been foreign to any other five year old, but not to the daughter of Stacy Conner. A pungent mix of bodily fluids, industrial drugs, suntan oil, and stale food. My mom was sprawled out on the floor while a man I had just met touched her roughly, yet it seemed that she found it to be in an acceptable manner. A bag of pills lay on the bedside table: red, blue, purple, white, green, and yellow.

"So pretty," I remember commenting after I grabbed the bag and rolled it between my young fingers. I peered over the side at my mom as her pale blue eyes rolled in her cockeyed head while a goofy smile crossed over her crusted, cracked lips. Her arm slumped away from her chest and blood trickled from her self-inflicted wound. I had come to expect this display on a nearly daily basis, so I turned away and made a slow crawl to the middle of my bed with my little bag of treasures. This vivid memory causes me disgust and a patient, silent inner sobbing.

Regardless of these painful memories, my mother is still the most beautiful woman in the world to me. I assume most mothers are viewed that way. She lay there with her dirty blond hair tied back in her normal messy ponytail. Her beautiful high cheekbones remained, although her skin now held tight to her bones. When she stood, my mother was about six feet tall, usually dressed in tight short shorts, or jeans and tank tops with no bra. Her skin had a beautiful tone despite her drug induced haze. Our blend of Irish, Spanish, and Italian ancestry mixed the darker shade of her skin with freckles in various locations, but I remember them most on the bridge of her nose, exactly where mine are. The Conner family is a unique blend that no one can really place. We get lots of stares, but not many questions. I guess the mixture of our looks and fear of the unknown lends itself to such reactions.

I emptied the entire bag, and while some of the pills found themselves piled upon another of its kin, the unfortunate ones fell with their entire surface area directly on to the faded, filthy bedspread.

"So pretty."

I picked a few of them up, examining each one carefully before tossing them down to join the others. Soon I was sailing them up into the air and watching them lose their fight against gravity as they dropped back on to the bed with me. What a poor place to

be, little treasures . . . you are trapped, just like me. Well, we don't have to be bored just sitting here. Let's try something fun.

My head was turned ever so slyly, my lips curled in a delighted Cheshire cat's grin. Above me, the little treasures spun in the air in a cosmic splendor of colors and a plastic-like glimmer all on their own. I willed the air to move and shift, lifting and turning my mother's prized possessions, spinning them madly around me as if they were planets orbiting the sun. I must have lost track of time, or else time had ceased to exist, when suddenly I took a quick look at my mother and saw her face full of shock and somehow even paler than it had been before. As I lifted my chin in defiance, a pill brushed my ear. Mom gasped, and somehow, even in her drug-induced stupor, she managed to grab my face, the treasures falling all around me like dive-bombing tropical insects.

*Her beautiful blue bloodshot eyes focused on me as if to say, "Tell no one and never do this around anyone else again." And I didn't. Not until my grandmother taught me how to control my abilities and then only with her—till **that day**; the day I had to make him go away.*



"Alexis, wake UP!" It must have been my sore body, or maybe it was the pulsing headache talking to me. They both do that from time to time, neither having any regard for my apparent need of sleep.

Oh Justin, how sweet of you to stay.

Justin's 600-thread-count-covered form is outlined next to me as he sleeps soundly. It is painstaking as my body helps me recall the evening . . . endless hours of dancing and the soreness of sex that sends fire screeching through my thighs and a tense, sharp cramping in my calves. Most people would throw the amount of drinks I had into the mix, but alcohol doesn't affect me the way it does most people. Granted, I'm not the least bit like most people. Lately though, I've upped my game to keep the nightmares at bay, the only effect I've thankfully received from the numerous drinks each evening.

How long have I known Justin? It's been a little over a year now, and he keeps coming back no matter how many times I push him away. It's simple; he must only want me for my body. The Jane's Addiction song, "Jane Says," runs through my mind and becomes a theme to my misguided thought that it's never love, only the knowledge that someone wants me. I only wish it were that simple—I know Justin loves me. Leaning over, I lightly kiss his neck . . . he is cold, his eyes open and a look of deep, intense fear spread evilly across his face. His lips don't move, but I hear the words in their sickly whisper all the same.

"Doll eyes."

The rigidity of my neck gives way to the agonizing quiver of hairs as they stand on end, and I hear someone scream in the distance. The vertigo makes it apparent that the room isn't really spinning, although I am barely able to keep the evening's remnants at bay. The muffled scream persists, and it takes a few moments for me to

realize it's coming from my own lips. My gasps and screams wake me as my feet connect with flesh and bone, and Justin unwillingly tumbles off the bed.

"Damn it, Alex, that's the third time this week . . ." His tirade, mixed with incoherent grumbling, fails him as he teeters ever so slightly while trying to favor one leg on his way to the bathroom.

I know he's right; the dreams (or hellacious spastic brain episodes as I so lovingly call them) are not getting any better. Not even my higher level of self-medication has been able to curb them as well as it used to. I roll over with a deep sigh, covertly wiping tears from my eyes, and open the bedside table drawer to remove my leather-bound journal. Dr. Reynolds has asked (more like required) me to keep a log of these night terrors. It's been an easy enough request for me to follow since I already religiously keep a private journal. Thankfully, most entries prior to this last year are from my young adult life that reflect the angst of coming into myself, meeting and wanting the wrong man, or girlhood crushes and fantasies. Come on, every woman needs a good page turner filled with overly emotional exclamations of "Why did I?" and "How could he?" I love my journal from those times of personal gluttony, so I was happy to relive them and ink some memories. The current entries I keep are different. Lately, there have been too many nightmares dredging up dark memories; frivolity has no space on these pages.

Journal Entry:

*I woke myself up from this dream in which Justin lay next to me, dead. Nothing else in the dream seemed incorrect. . . . I had the dirty martini-induced headache, may need to X those from my repertoire—too salty. Or better yet, I'm sure you would suggest I cut back altogether. Be a thinker, not a drinker, ha that rhymes, oh sorry tangent, the doctor did request all my thoughts. . . . Justin is here. . . . alive though. I heard that whisper of "Doll eyes" again. The name **that man** used to call me, but that was a long time ago, and he is gone now. I should be past it all by now. . . . shouldn't I? I'm stronger than this, so why can't the past stay in its designated "do not open" time capsule? Why can't it keep its nose out of my present life and its sticky paws off my future?*

Why can't I eliminate these memories? Trick my brain and go back to pre-nightmare, denial mode? Memories? Well, those aren't *my* memories. They belong to some other girl's life—not mine.

The thing is, I used to love picking up this pen. The Mont Blanc encased in black steel and platinum was a gift from my grandmother years ago. She wasn't usually one for fancy do-dads, but she did always encourage me to write and to keep a journal of my life and experiences. It was something to be kept privately. I don't think she ever intended for me to use it with the doc's journal, but it's comforting. The pen's cool metal flesh compels my hand to write as it slithers and writhes between my fingers. It longs to stay warm and useful as my pages of irrational thoughts and beliefs come to life through nightmares and mind tricks. Perhaps even the famous psychiatrist Jung would have used me as one of his prime subjects back in his day. Maybe we would have shared our disturbing dreams since he had plenty of his own. I guess I should consider myself lucky to not have any golden snake gods in mine.

The sheer weight of the pen causes it to rock forcefully each time my words stop. I stare at the snowflake logo on the end it, half expecting it to glide off of its seemingly permanent home and rest upon my nose. Thoughts of the Glenwood Springs' hot tubs and Keystone switchbacks enter my mind, and I laugh at the memory of snow-filled Jacuzzi nights and soreness from failed snowboarding attempts. Helpful hint: have some schnapps before hitting the slopes and some for safekeeping in your jacket. You'll be toasty warm, so falling won't hurt as much, and you should become all the more gutsy . . . or reckless, I should say! I shake my head, and struggle to uncross my eyes as I wake from my daydream.

These days, the pen has become a sign of restlessness, horror, and necessity. The dreams have become ever more frequent, tiring, and mystifying. Journaling keeps me busy most mornings, or . . . okay, with my line of work, they're more like early afternoons. I write about my dreams and tirelessly find myself casting the gruesome details upon the pages. I have no doubts as to why I could never cut it in the medical field. My own imagination generates a fine deal of queasiness all by its lonesome.

"Doll eyes."

The voice is so crisp and clear in my mind. I shiver and gaze about my loft.

"Beautiful blinking doll eyes."

My head snaps up as the voice seems to be carrying upward and then . . . silence. Not that birds tweeting in the background silence either. It is a loud silence, the kind that grinds the teeth and feels like ice breaking on frozen glacial lakes.

Justin rummages about downstairs, his mess-making noises instantly melting away my fear. I gather myself to look over the railing of my loft. While staring at him I am intrigued, as I usually am, by him. I always go for the swarthy ones. His hair—dark, thick locks—tumble around his eyes. He curses as he tries to swipe some of his glorious stragglers away. With his back to me, I have a clear view of his brilliantly colored tattoo. It's an intricate tribal creation his friend designed for him in college. The main outline is of a cross, designed to reflect his Catholic heritage, although I don't know the last time he went to mass. Throughout the cross, patterns of serpent-like vines and strong branches give the impression of a tree instead of a religious symbol. It makes sense. Justin is at one with nature; his job has him working in the earth every day, although I swear he looks like he should be a North Face cover model. I can never get enough of his striking Italian appearance. Strong chin, large eyes framing dark irises nearly the color of night, and full lips that are both soft and strong. Each magnificent part of him making him hot blooded and hot bodied. It's a good thing, just as he is a good man.

"Looking for something?" Justin jumps, startled at the sound of my voice.

"You're always sneaking up on me, just like that damn cat of yours. At least his loud ass meows find a way to warn me. You almost made me piss myself!" Justin joked as he continued his search amongst my kitchen drawers.

"Now that would be a treat!" I giggle and rush down the cool terra cotta steps, nearly tripping as Pitter, the aforementioned feline, glides along my right leg just as I reach the floor. I swoop him up and scold him for trying to take me down just to make things even for teasing Justin, apparently his new best friend.

"So, what are you missing? Keys? Wallet? These?" I teasingly dance around, waving his boxers in the air. Pitter chases me and paws at the air while doing those

fascinating acrobatic moves only the graceful, stealthy *Felis catus* can do. I bring them closer to his level and he feverishly slashes at them with claws bared.

"I see someone is feeling much better," Justin remarks teasingly while snatching his shorties away.

"No," he goes on, "not what I was looking for, but I'll take these as well. I'm looking for a cigarette. You never keep any here for me, and when I leave them, they miraculously disappear. Now why is that, Alex?"

"You know I hate when you smoke. What do you expect? Plus, they make that drawer reek of disease-causing, lung-injuring, secondhand, toxic air-spreading cancer sticks!" I snap my mouth shut as I realize I had been on my ranting pedestal again, and it is clearly way too early for elevated blood pressure levels. Justin glances at me in a relieved sort of way as if to say "thank you for stopping on your own."

"I've gotta go." He kisses me on the cheek and turns to leave.

I should say something now. Thank him for staying with me or maybe even tell him that I love him, but I don't. The empty, soundless moment between us does not waver with any such words. Pitter meows faintly, trailing behind him. As Justin bends down to scratch him behind his ears, a smile crosses my face as Pitter slithers along the floor, fully engrossed in feline pleasure. "See ya rat," he says with a chuckle in his voice, and closes the door behind him.

I stare at the door for a while, as if I actually expect him to come back. Then I try to will it so. The pleading echoing inside my head.

"Please don't leave me here. Not alone."

I quickly dismiss these demands as my grandmother's voice echoes, "You have gifts . . . do not misuse them." It's not only the memory of her words that stops me. I know, as well as he does, that I can't give Justin what he wants anyway—at least not now.

I turn my eyes to the clock and then dance toward Pitter. "Busy, busy night ahead of us, stinky! This party can't run itself. Let's quadruple check our planning, and everyone else's for that matter."

CHAPTER 2



Alex

Journal Entry:

When people think of living in a motel, the associations aren't typically rosy or sweet. Usually, they are linked with poverty; a gypsy-type, nomadic life; or some sort of addiction. Well, maybe two out of three hit the spot for my mother and me, but I was still happy most of the time. I always knew that no matter what mistakes she made or how many difficult times we went through, she loved me, and I loved her.

Now, this motel was one of my favorites. It was a weekly rental in the heart of Ocean Beach. We were so close to the ocean that I could fall asleep to the Pacific waves crashing onto the sand, and to the pleasing tones of the street musicians and peddlers. That was a true beach town. Although it had its rough spots, it was charming, rare, and raw all at the same time.

On that particular night, I had the best dinner prepared for me. Mom had gotten me large chili cheese fries from Wienerschnitzel, and I looked forward to diving into four of our major food groups—cheesy, salty, veggie, and fruity. Okay, so the fruit was the last grape popsicle in our little half-size fridge, but it still counted, right?

I was gingerly eating the fries, letting the cheese spread as far as it could go, when Mom's new boyfriend came stumbling in. Matt. Mom had been seeing him for a couple of weeks now. He smelled like booze and sweat, and I couldn't stand to be near him; with a space this small, it was nauseating. There was only one place to go, so I jumped up and went to the freezer for my popsicle. That yummy little treat and I had a date outside on the sea wall.

*"Hey kid, thanks," said the slob as he took my popsicle out of my hand and ripped the paper off. The paper stuck in all sorts of spots on the frozen concoction, and I could see that it was starting to frustrate him. Hell, if I couldn't have **my** popsicle, why not enjoy this for a minute. Now, as far as my eight-year-old mind could tell, this was a good time to giggle. I know, not one of my premiere moments. If I had been more on the ball, I would have taken off like I had intended, popsicle be damned. Instead, I clapped my hand over my mouth too late, and Matt turned his bull-like head toward me, eyes blazing. He was two hundred pounds of muscle and bone, with extra weight hanging over his pants where the beer went to graze. He had receding blond hair slicked to his head that screamed to be washed, while his nose was contorted in a one-too-many bar fights sort of way.*

*"You laughing at me, brat? Do you think this is funny? Well, you know what **I** think is funny?" I knew this was a rhetorical question so I thought the best answer would be to*

get my bratty ass out the door as soon as possible. I turned to leave, but he grabbed me by my neck and pulled me toward him. His face was so close that I nearly gagged under the weight of his hot breath. At this point, I thought it best to focus on not doing anything to further piss him off. Apparently, I didn't have to. He shoved the grape popsicle in my face and forced it into my mouth, both the coldness of the ice and his Neanderthal-like force causing me significant pain.

"Take it then, you little bitch. I know your scrawny ass doesn't mind a little paper, and I'm sure you have a mouth like your mother, so it should be easy for you." I tried to claw away from him, but I felt the heat and the sting before I could get away. His fist connected with my cheek, and I crashed to the floor. He was grabbing for my feet as I tried to crawl away, which is when my mom came in.

*"What in the **hell** is going on in here? Matt, what are you doing? Get your hands off my daughter **now**! Alexis, come here. Matt was just leaving!" She turned her hot gaze on Matt and said, "Matt, get out **now**—before I call the manager." She reached for me but Matt lunged at her, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her. She shook like a hula doll on the dash of a car, her ponytail flying in wild circles, creating a pinwheel-like effect.*

"You think you can talk to me like that after all I've done for you? I've been feeding you and that little parasite for weeks. All I wanted was a little respect and your brat daughter starts talking back to me."

Now I hate liars, never was one . . . okay, I imagined a lot, but that's kid stuff and pretty much expected, right?

*"I did not! He's lying!" My mom didn't seem like she cared to hear what Matt had to say. She looked at me, and I **knew** she had a plan to get us out of this mess. She had the look of someone who was done taking this kind of shit, and she was in no way bringing her daughter down with her.*

Mom moved away from him in a slow, delicate manner that suggested she was preparing to work things out and wave the white flag of surrender. Her intention was to fool Matt, but I wasn't sure he was buying it. She took my hand to help me up when out of the corner of my eye I saw the foot come flying out.

"Mom!" I screamed, but it was too late.

Matt gave my mother a full force kick right into her stomach. She doubled over and fell, landing right on top of me and looking into my eyes. She should have been in pain, but her face wasn't registering it. We scrambled to get up, but he grabbed her by her ponytail and threw her on to the bed. He was closing in on her with his back to me when I jumped up and looked around for something, anything to help me. I grabbed the table lamp and held it in my hand so tightly that my knuckles blanched stark white. I closed my eyes and swung. I meant to hit him square in the back, but my aim was a bit off and it landed, a few inches too high, smacking him forcefully on the back of his head.

"What the fu . . ." his voice trailed off as his eyes rolled backward, and he fell on my mother. She pushed, and I pulled, until we got him off her.

We quickly grabbed the phone, maneuvered the cord into the bathroom, and locked the door. I know we probably should have run, but our whole life was in that room, and we were pretty damn sure that it would all be gone, or ruined, if we left it with crazy Matt.

My mom's hands were trembling as she wildly pressed buttons. Her breathing was erratic, and beads of sweat trickled down her face. I knew I had to stay calm for her even though inside I was frightened and wanted to release a mighty wail. At that moment, we heard a crash, followed by a thunderous BOOM.

"Whatcha doin' Stacy, trying to call for help? Pulled the cord on you, little lady. You'll get no help except from me." WHAM! I could see the door taking the force but bending on itself. Mom had a death grip on the phone, and I thought I heard her talking to someone.

Suddenly the door burst open. Blood was trickling down Matt's neck and in his eyes shone a ferocious anger that froze me. He had just taken a step toward me when I heard another man's voice.

"Hey you!" Matt whipped around and was smacked in the face with a bat. The hotel manager swung again, and Matt went down.

"Now stay down, man. This is the least of the power I can use on you."

"Thanks for coming, Hal." My mom managed to get up and out of the bathroom before she doubled over, her breathing beginning to get labored. I went to wrap my arms around her while the sounds of sirens broke out in the distance.

When the police came, it was both a blessing and a curse. We had been involved with Social Services for some time now, and my mom was indeed high on drugs that night. They took Matt away, but also found a stash in my mother's belongings that was obviously hers. Mom and I would be transported to the hospital where our case manager would be waiting for us. I was wrapped in a blanket on the bed, waiting, when I overheard a couple of cops talking as they aimlessly sifted through the mess.

"How did she even call out? The wire is completely severed from the wall. Must have gotten the call out just in time." He shrugged and bagged the wire while I looked at the cord and the plaster fragments from the wall unit. The officer had made a keen observation. I knew my mom hadn't been able to call before Matt forcibly ended the phone's life.

I looked up at her as a paramedic treated her, and our eyes held. I didn't fully understand what I saw at first, but suddenly I saw her eyes spark into a wild blue blaze of fire. She was someone else entirely, and she seemed to be barely holding it together. Her body was shaking, and her face was wet from her fever. It was almost as if sparks would start to fly off her at any moment, like mad, mistimed fireworks. She held my gaze, and I started to take deep, slow breaths. She instantly mimicked my pace and I saw the fire's intensity lessen.

Those moments went by as if time was standing still, and there was only the two of us in the room. It felt like we were touching hands, but suddenly the connection was gone. Her eyes calmed to their usual pale blue, and I watched her almost snap back to herself. Her head went limp and her blond, sweat-soaked hair, freed from its bondage, was stuck in odd places to her face and neck. She gave me another look and smiled. That was when I knew her power was within me. I was my mother's daughter, and we both had a secret.



I love my vanity. No, see, that came out wrong. In no way do I mean to imply that I am vain. Rather, I love the old Victorian vanity my grandmother gave to me. The classic ivory-embossed cushioned chair is enveloped in deep, cherry wood with a matching mirror suspended by the most delicate beveled encasement. The cherished wood, which I care for obsessively and often, is safe beneath its polish. Each carving forms a plant-like pattern, with runs of vines, leaves, and petals. Very feminine and in tune with nature, it is just like my grandmother.

How odd it is to stare at oneself every day while going through a routine that requires such self-manipulation, patience, and careful painting and placement. I don't consider myself gorgeous. My goodness, this gangly form was taunted and teased from grade school to high school, and I always stood in the back row with the boys for picture day. I didn't think my body would ever stop growing, but I eventually stopped at a smooth 5'8½". . . yep, I hang onto that half inch with all my might.

I didn't even develop breasts or hips until the summer before my senior year at Monument High in Colorado. I have endured what feels like an entire lifetime of tiny boob jokes. Trust me, I've heard them all. In middle school, I had this fabulous idea of stuffing my bra so that no one would know how small I was. There were these snippety girls in my school who always made fun of young, impressionable girls who tried enhancing themselves. Of course, being well endowed already, they couldn't possibly imagine the horror in others who couldn't even partially justify wearing a bra.

So the trick these little snits had was to take an unsuspecting victim into the bathroom and make her lift her bra and shirt in hopes of watching the devastation as the remnants of well-placed wads of toilet paper or tissue fell to the floor. It was humiliating and sadistic—kids can be cruel after all—but it was *not* going to happen to me. I was done being called flat as a board or crater chest. Instead of carefully stuffing layers of soft paper between my tiny breasts and my bra, I snipped the thread and placed the lovely accentuating tissue inside. The girls cornered me on the second day of school. I happily lifted my Padres T-shirt and when nothing came out, well, their look of absolute shock still stays with me. If only I had a patent . . . that was one hell of a wonder bra.

Things are different for me now—I'm twenty-six, for a start, and there's nothing like the ability to wield wicked amounts of Earthen magic to boost one's self-esteem. That and the mature realization that those girls were in pain as well . . . most bullies are and, in a way, I felt sorry for them.

I clear my mind of the trip down memory lane and rise from the vanity to look in the full-length mirror affixed to my bedroom wall. My onyx glass beaded earrings tip lightly against my neck as I do a spin in my new little black dress. The lovely San Diego boutique may stay in business due to my credit card and my name-dropping, but this dress is worth every penny. I used to model clothes for my two designer friends when they had nothing but their dreams. Now look; I get to help market one of the hottest stores in town, not to mention watch the delight on Andrea's face as she makes a permanent name for herself in the fashion world.

They must have been in an ultra-sexy, naughty mood when they created this particular dress. The back plunges into a daringly low V, exposing my back in its

entirety yet stopping just in time to keep things decent. Two thin straps hold the little number on my shoulders. See, those not-so-huge breasts finally come in handy when one actually *can't* wear a bra! The dress skims my knees, a slit creeping up the right side, exposing my leg before the fabric hugs my hip, helping me accentuate it as my still-boyish figure lacks the envied voluptuousness I will never have. I look up into the mirror after making one last adjustment to my barely there thong underwear. My reflection startles me. Sometimes I can't get used to the change in my eye color. Tonight my normally hazel eyes beam green at me in the mirror, highlighting the freckles on my nose. My dark, shoulder-length curls fall around my face, reminding me of one of those hauntingly intense characters from the *Crow* or *Underworld*. Kate Beckinsale's glowing blue eyes come to mind, and I take a deep breath before I turn away.

"Doll eyes."

The echo draws my attention back to the mirror, and I shudder.

It's just a memory, I tell myself, and you knew that with such an act reminders would come, and come at a price. It's the nights alone that truly are the rub. I can try my hardest not to sleep, but sleep will come nonetheless, and nightmares don't care whether it is dark or light outside . . . things still bump and bother even in the daylight.

But for now, work is the queen of all distractions and I am truly a ringmaster of the night. I earn a living entertaining people and by showing them a level of dining, drinking, entertaining, and partying that they have only dreamed of. I am the party planner, the event coordinator, the one with the know-how for those who need to be known. My friends are DJ's, dancers, cooks, designers, club owners, and club rats, with a few drunks and druggies thrown in for good measure. I love my job, and it pays well; why *wouldn't* it, with a job that takes all my weekends and fosters my innate vampire-like circadian rhythms. Plus, it is *my* company, with trusted professionals and friends that surround me. It's fun to get dolled up each night. On days that are solely mine, I am a true tomboy, but when I'm running an event there are no holds barred. In this industry, it is vital to be noticed. I aim to be approachable while also making it clear that I am not a person to be toyed with, but it depends on what the event or mood calls for, I guess.

I do a quick check around my apartment. My downtown loft is close to the Gaslamp district in downtown San Diego. I love this place. I love the terra cotta tile floors and the earth-toned walls and furniture. A breakfast counter lined with a mish-mash of barstools separates my kitchen from a tiny dining area. The rest of the downstairs feels like one big room. The open space holds a nice-sized TV with stacks and stacks of movies. Hello, my name is Alexis Conner, and I'm an addict. Movies are my escape from reality; hey, with my history, it could be a *lot* worse! In front of the TV is a cushy brown leather couch that has been snuggled and passed out on enough times to make it comfy. Right now, Pitter is sprawled out on an ottoman in front of a matching brown leather oversized chair draped in a chenille throw of greens, blues, and browns.

There is a half-bath downstairs and a *very* small "room" that holds a futon and works well for both overnight guests and for storage. A door off the kitchen leads to a small outdoor patio, walled off and draped in lush, hot pink bougainvillea. I have a

small patch of grass decorated with painted clay pots of flowers. It's a serene place. The moonlight hits it just right, making it an excellent place for a nightcap, while the blazing heat from the sun during the day makes it the perfect place to get some vitamin D.

The upstairs portion of my apartment has a good-sized bedroom loft with a full bathroom that houses an old-fashioned clawfoot tub as well as a shower. My bedroom has always been my sanctuary, and the feeling in this one is no different. To top it all off, I actually have an upstairs balcony right off my bedroom. The building is on a hill, so if I stand on my tippy-toes, I "think" I can see the faintest glimmer of the bay.

San Diego is truly different from most cities, in my opinion. It is more like a big town, but with so much culture and diversity I feel like I'm in more than one country at any given time. From the lush South American jungle feel of Balboa Park, to the earthy beach town salty air of Ocean Beach and its famous dog park, not to mention the high class hills of La Jolla and Del Mar, one could have so many wildly different experiences in the span of just one day. I live in a beautiful, vibrant area, and I really can't see myself living anywhere else. We may sleep at night, but every day is too beautiful to stay indoors to nurse hangovers or sleep deprivation. This is an active, outdoorsy city, and if you happen to be crawling home early in the morning, you are sure to see others just starting their day jogging, biking, surfing, and skating. Although bad things have happened to me in the past here, I still love San Diego. This is my home.

Justin's phone calls started around 5 P.M. I wasn't in a complete rush yet, but if the calls kept coming, I would be.

"Alex, you need to consider some alternatives. This quack "shrink" is not helping you, and I'm not sure this job is either. You're always out late, and I don't know if you're sleeping at all anymore." I'm sure this is coming from a place of good intentions, but I hear it differently and immediately go on the defensive.

"You know, if you don't like it or can't stand it, then why do you keep coming around? Nobody is asking you or making you... are they?" So childish, I know. Justin just kind of stumbled into all of this, not really knowing what he was getting himself into by dating me. I've been having nightmares for the last year now, but they certainly have gotten worse lately.

"Let's see, Alex," he says, with an irritating condescending tone, "last night I was just fine hanging with my friends, having a few beers, and you begged me to come out and meet you. I believe you asked *then*, and there was also last week..."

"Okay, enough!" No one could ever tell me that I don't know how to cut someone off and end a fight, even if there is no substance to my end of the argument. "Fine, I *won't* call you anymore and then you won't have to deal with any of it." This is pure bona fide Alex, defiant to the end, but part of me feels that he deserves better than what I am and what I can offer. Love is hard for someone like me, and trust is even harder.

"Is that what you think I'm doing, Alex? 'Dealing' with you? I'm in love with you, you miserable, selfish, beautiful, crazy woman! I don't want to 'deal with you.' I want to help you, damn it! I want to help stop your nightmares and maybe even save myself some mental and physical battering in the process."

"When's the last time that happened? Weeks ago, maybe even a month, and I wasn't attacking *you*, I was attacking... oh, never mind!" I throw out some colorful language and stomp around the house, feeling frustrated as I hunt for the shoes I want in the same spot for the hundredth time.

"Attacking what? Who? Why won't you tell me what's going on with you, so that maybe I could help you?" Justin sounds exhausted at this point, as he always does. He can't stand fighting with me. I always wear him out and cause him more strain than an hour in the gym would. That's his version, anyway.

"Look, Justin... ah, there you are." I snatch up my heels and slip them on. "Dr. Reynolds *is* helping me. She thinks that if I don't allow the dreams to happen, I won't get to the bottom of them. If I take the drugs, the medication... you know, that shit they keep pumping into children who are bored and adults who are even worse? I'll change. I won't be me. But hey, maybe that's what you want. Look, I gotta go."

"Alex. Alexis, listen to me." God, I love his voice. He may very well be the most real, honest person I know, and I lie to him *every day*. "All I want to do is be with you, but I don't think you will ever *really* want to be with me until what you're going through gets resolved. I'm willing to wait for that, for you."

"I know." My voice is barely a whisper as I stare at my keys, flipping and twirling them in my fingers. The radio blares Oceanlab's "Satellite" as I waver in my next comment.

"Justin, I have to go. You know I need to be there at least two hours earlier than everyone else. You know how crazy these things can be. I'm all right, I promise, and I'll be even better... soon. I'll call you later. Bye."

I take a look around my loft one last time. Pitter is snuggling on the couch now, only looking up to give me an appraising look along with his usual goodbye noises.

"See ya, rat," I say, mimicking Justin as I swoop out the door. My back rests against the outside of my oak door as I think. I think about Justin. I think about what he says and what he means to me. My feelings for him are real, but then I remember all the ugliness and secrets I have trapped inside, and I wonder, how can he possibly love me.

CHAPTER 3



It's Just Another Party

Journal Entry:

People say the West is the best. I felt the real sting in that saying as I headed East, away from the Pacific and into landlocked territory. I felt myself sever in two that day; it was as if my soul was ripping apart. I could practically feel my toes clinging to the ocean sand even as my head and my thumping heart were being yanked away. I felt my heart beat intensify as I curled my toes and gripped them tightly into the sand . . . but Grandmom just would not let go. No matter how much of a fit I threw, she held on tight. You would have thought she was a 300-pound beast of a man by the way she held onto me, but no matter how hard she held me, it never felt mean. She enveloped me and tried to quiet my screams with the sweetest voice. Even though she wasn't loud, I could hear her over the crashing waves, over the sound of the diesel Winnebago starting up, and over the wind ripping through the air as I held my curl-ridden head out of the passenger window, wailing my little girl heart out.

I cried for my mother, for the part of my spirit that was being left in San Diego, for the salt air, for my ocean cliffs and the waves my legs used to kick through so that my body could effortlessly glide atop. What would I ever have or learn to do in Colorado that I didn't already have in California? My skyscraping palm trees, endless summer days, the dreamy sounds of pounding waves, and the coarse warm sand that felt to me like down pillows. I didn't want the rivers or lakes of Colorado, and I didn't want the mountains to replace my soaring oceanside cliffs. The thought of losing all I had grown up with was nearly paralyzing.

I wanted only to be with my mom again, to stay with her by the waterside and to look into her eyes alight with beautiful blue sparks, and talk about our secret. A secret she was never able to speak about before she was taken away.

*"It's for the best," Grandmom would say. "Your mommy is sick and she needs help. She **will** get better, and you **will** be together again—one day." The song in her voice was like a warm blanket, or a hot cup of chocolate on a cold day. Oh, and definitely with those yummy little marshmallows.*

"Don't worry, my darling. All will be good again . . . in time. You'll see, my sweet Alexis—I will make this better. Just give me time." Grandmom's soothing voice was winning out, and my tantrums finally began to subside. My screams turned into sobs, my sobs into the tiniest of sniffles. And then my body gave in. The feeling of sand lingered, even though my toes uncurled themselves from its warmth long ago. The only world I had ever known was just . . . gone. I collapsed into my nine-year-old body—my

whole body—but my soul remained torn. Half of it refused to leave its West Coast home.

Throughout the days of driving, I had lots of time to think; Grandmom is apparently a driving machine. We slept in campgrounds, rest stops, and the occasional parking lot. We played card games, and I learned how to play . . . well, okay, how to **lose** at poker. Our chips were replaced by saltwater taffy left over from her trip to the Keys. Although we spent a good deal of time talking, we never brought up Mom, and I never spoke of what I now knew. My mom and I had a power, and that scared and excited both of us. Before we were separated, she told me to tell and show **no one**. Looking at my grandmother, I wondered if she knew, but I was too afraid to find out.

What if she sent me away? Mom didn't talk about why she didn't see **her** mom much, but what if it was because her powers scared my grandmother? I wouldn't risk it. My grandmother pretty much kept to herself, so I should be able to stay under the radar even nestled above the Colorado National Monument in Glade Park, just outside of Grand Junction. Grandmom said there were lots of hiking trails and hidden gems near her house, so I decided to just keep my distance and work on figuring out this power thing on my own.

That was the million-dollar question, wasn't it? What was I? Was I just like my mom? I wasn't even sure what I can do, let alone what she was capable of doing, so how could I even answer that question? Apart from that one night, I never got to ask her anything about her abilities. Worry spiked through me as I thought through all of my favorite books and movies involving witches, elves, sorcery, magic, and the like. Did I fall into some mystical category that I had been drawn to for what used to seem like mere fun and enjoyment? Maybe a part of me felt more alive and less alone with those movies than the reality around me. Oh boy, I hoped I wasn't some crazy goblin king, like David Bowie in *Labyrinth*, or the Skeksis from *The Dark Crystal* stealing essences for my own gain. No, instead I hoped that I was good, like the world-saving Gelfling, or maybe a good fairy like Flora, Fauna, or Merryweather. I reached behind my back, patting around for wings, scales, or maybe even horns. Okay, an overactive imagination brought me way off track. So I didn't know who or what I was. That didn't mean I couldn't find out what I could do.

In the desert of Western Colorado, I found red rocks to climb and to hide among. I spent days learning to pull the energy from the earth into my hands by pure thought and will alone. I learned to control my power in small doses, doing things to the world around me like twirling rocks in the air, yanking small weeds from the ground, and teasing water from a stream creating small, floating droplets reflecting the light of the setting sun. My gift for observing everything around me came in handy as I practiced pulling on the energy and searching out what I couldn't see. Eventually, I could feel the movements of small creatures scurrying above ground, underground, and in the water. In time, I could find people as well, but try as I might, pinpointing my grandmother was always tricky.

It was near a beautiful waterfall and swimming hole, locals coined the "Potholes" nestled between Delta and Grand Junction that my awareness of my abilities went in a different direction. Grandmom was getting our lunch set up while I walked along the rocks, enjoying the sound of rushing and falling water. In the largest natural pool, one fed by a torrential waterfall that many a person leaped into from various death-

defying points, I noticed something splashing about. At first I thought it was a fish, but I soon realized that it was a young fox frantically scrabbling in repeated attempts to climb up the steep, slick rock to safety. I could see that one leg was injured and wondered if he had fallen and hurt himself, or if something or someone had gotten to him first. Sometimes he stopped and rested against a slippery rock, but he was never able to stay there long before being swept into the current and slammed against the rocks again.

If I was going to help this little guy out, I needed to make the jump into the pool below. I'm not great with heights (hey, who is at ten?), and I am not exaggerating about the close proximity of the rock wall on the other side of the tunnel-like jump into rushing water some fifteen feet below. Leap too far and I hit the jagged rock wall on the other side; leap too short and I hit the jutting rocks just below me. It was a matter of specific calculations, and I feared, an element of luck. I sent my thoughts into the earth and pulled energy into my being, hoping maybe I could elevate myself if I miscalculated. I took a deep breath and jumped.

Cold water rushed up around me as I plunged into the circular pool, and I quickly scanned for the fox. My splash had startled him, and his fear made it harder for him to stay afloat. I sent a tendril of Earthen energy toward him, and he instantly calmed. He stared into my eyes as I spoke quietly to him.

"Don't worry, little guy, I won't hurt you. I'm going to try to help you. But I need you to be still, okay?"

No, he didn't speak back, but he did let me scoop him into my arms as we swam over the last little waterfall before making it to shore. He was so little, even smaller than all his splashing and carrying on made him appear at first glance. He was such a strong little guy. His front left leg was obviously broken, the bone nearly snapped in half as it protruded from his coat at an odd angle. The wild look in his eyes made me realize he had been hurt for a while, and was maybe even half mad with sickness. I found a wooded area to hide in as I held him close to me, sending my energy into him partly to keep him still and partly to keep him from biting me (he was wild after all) and to see if maybe, just maybe, I could help him. His little heartbeat pounded wildly, as clearly as if I could hear it, and his breaths gradually went from rapid to calm as he relaxed into my body. I opened my eyes to see bone pulling itself together, veins and muscles reconnecting, and lastly, skin and hair pulling tight over what had been a wound just seconds before. His eyes opened and he looked at me thoughtfully. I placed him gently on the ground and he quickly scampered away.

Now that was something, the first something that solidified the knowledge that my power was good. I could heal. That had to be good, right? It was definitely something to hold onto while I was alone in this place, far from my mom and my San Diego home. The odd thing (as if this whole thing hadn't been odd enough) was that after that astonishing day, I found myself coming across injured, sick, or lost animals quite frequently. I chalked it up to my powers of observation, yet in the back of my mind I had the nagging feeling that these critters were somehow seeking me out, drawn to me—or maybe just to my power.



“Stop saying that! You know how I get about these things and just, just look at me. I’m a nervous wreck, and all those boys will be there. Ugh, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You’re fine, Nicky! You’ve got this. How many times have we done this type of gig? It’s always beautiful, and even if something goes wrong, we’ll fix it.” How am I going to fix him is the issue. Nicky is my lead designer, and he is having a complete conniption. What’s new, I know. Watching him pace around, and this is in a strutting, peacock sort of way, while I try to avoid his flailing arms is a nightmare. Not to mention the million other requests buzzing in my ear.

“Alex?” The static breaks into my earpiece as Carmen, my event manager and business partner, comes through. “We’re T-minus thirty minutes. Are things under control down there?”

“Yep. We’re doing fine.” My teeth are grinding; I’m surprised I haven’t chipped a tooth by now. I’m stuck in the ladies’ bathroom with a hyperventilating gay man and a drunk girl who is supposed to be jumping out of a cake to sing happy birthday to one of San Diego’s best receivers in less than two hours. This may seem like a disaster, but I have certainly dealt with much worse. Nicky continues to pace, his perfectly spiked jet-black hair looking like it might just fly off his head.

I love Nic; he’s a crazy man whose parents came here from Mexico right before he was born. He is obsessively fit, I get occasional “humphs” from him for towering over his five foot four frame, especially in my heels. Nic is always trying to set me up with random boys he sees. Actually, usually he just wants me to give one of them a try to see if the guy plays on my team or his. I sometimes enjoy obliging him; it’s kind of a fun game when we aren’t tearing our hair out about an event.

“Okay, enough of this crap. We need to sober her up. Go see if she’s still draped over the toilet.” I watch with mental fingers crossed as Nic steps quickly to the second stall door. He takes a deep breath and enters the stall headfirst.

“Oh no, she *didn’t* . . . she’s chuggin’ an airliner in here. Where did you get that? Honey, now give that vodka to Uncle Nicky. Dammit girl, gimme that!” A struggle breaks out, and I see silver and red boa feathers float up over the stall. Plan C it is.

“Well, I guess I’m on then. Carmen can’t find backup at this late hour, and neither of the dancers can sing. I need to get out and do one more walk through, greet our guests, and then get changed. Nic, go to my car, get my bag and . . . hell, grab yours too. I’m going to need you to find me an outfit. Oh, and bring in your bag of good wigs. I need to be on the down low, you know, discreet. Do you even know that word? ” I swiftly pace out the door, leaving Nic slack-jawed, preparing to make a snippy comment, but I don’t have time for our usual banter. What I need is for him to get the items I need, and to make sure that girl gets out of the bathroom and into a cab.

One of the most important things in this business is to hustle without *appearing* to hustle. After tearing out of the restroom, I slowly smooth my dress and my hair before making a sweep of the set-up.

The club looks stunning. Tonic sits below the sidewalk in San Diego’s famous Gaslamp Quarter. It gives off a New York vibe, but with the class and natural subtlety of La Jolla and life in a beach city. The glass top of the bar, which has a warm golden glow produced by lights under the surface, beautifully accentuates the

dark wood. The front room is kicking some jazzy house beats as the guests begin to arrive and mingle in the cozy chairs and couches that surround an elegant piano. Others choose a different view by snuggling up to the bar. Beautiful crowd so far. What did I expect? The main man's birthday is tonight, and all are here to impress.

I loop around into the back room and the mood changes. Walking through either side of the front room's main bar has you swiftly knocking through a set of swinging doors. The light changes and the music feels heavy, emitting a low, deep throb. The dance floor is bare for now, but the lights play games on the floor, the stage, and on the two podiums that hold my dancers. The girls look good; I give them a quick nod before quickly making my way around to the DJ booth.

Danny is in the booth tonight, and he looks to be having a good time already. I just hope not *too* good a time. During our last party together I found a baggie containing two orange pills on the floor and his "*huh, where'd those come from*" look wasn't selling me. He is good at what he does, and loves it more than any other DJ I have known, I just have to check in with him every once in a while. I actually might have to schmooze with this security team coming in with the football team, since my usual security contingent was out. I need to make sure Danny is on the "watch but do not touch" list.

I step through the other set of double doors and the music immediately changes as I pass the main bar again, entering the bright glow of the front room. After taking a pass through the middle of the room, among the chairs and by the piano, I make my way to the right and enter the alcove where the stairs lead up to the street. My greeters are up top, gradually bringing guests down in their leather and spice and all things not so nice. It's not your everyday party, but this is going to be a kickass night. Sex sells, to most human beings, and I used that when I drafted this proposal. When required, my imagination has no trouble taking a trip into the gutter and this birthday boy didn't seem to mind.

Spinning away from the stairway, I walk back through the alcove toward the main bar. From the bottom of the stairs, through the alcove and along both main paths leading to the bar and the back of the club, small circular amber lights shine from the floor, creating a beautiful glow for the guests to follow. On the way back to the bar there's a small sitting area carved out, a secret little space tucked away and darker than the rest of the front room. The nook normally has an oversized chair against the wall, but for tonight I removed it to allow space for a small table and two chairs for my psychic. The theme doesn't really call for one, but I threw one in anyway. Should be fun; plus, she's my best friend.

Sandra sees me and calls me over. Her hair is cropped platinum blond, and she's in a tight gray pinstriped skirt, a barely there white skintight top that accentuates her large, store-bought breasts, and a bitchin' pair of fuck-me heels. No, I'm not jealous . . . I swear I'm not. So she doesn't ever have to wear a bra to be perky. Who cares?

"What's up, sexy? You look to die for tonight. How do *I* look?" Sandra stands up and does a little twirl. She walks in heels as though they're a good pair of Pumas. Love her—she's insane, but I love her.

"So, are you going to let me read you tonight?" She smirks at me, already knowing the answer.

"I like to be surprised by life, but you already know that. Too much mystery and magic to find on my own, plus, I wouldn't want to go around getting all worked up about nothing when you start flipping those cards telling me of imminent doom or, for goddess's sake, love awaits me. Blech." At this, she gives me a kind of pouty look. I have never let her read me. Partly because of my fear of what she will find, but partly because of my fear that she already knows, and is holding off talking about it until I am finally willing to let her read me. Maybe someday I will, but not now.

"Okay, I just wanted to check on ya; time for me to go upstairs. You have fun now, but not too much." I hear her laugh, and I spin off to march upstairs. My smile is on, bright and ready to throw a sweet party. Static hits my ear.

"Honey, I found it! I've got just the thing. Now get your perky ass back down here ASAP."

"Thanks, Nicky. Be down in two shakes. I need to be here for the grand entrance."

More limos roll in and the boys from the team start pouring out. Security comes into view and I get a glimpse at the muscle for the night. Big guys, all in black, slide out of doors and line walls like mist. You gotta love an entrance and quite the entrance it is. The team is decked out to the nines, and I'm loving the camera flashes as our photographer snaps them all rolling in. The birthday boy (#3 we call him) comes up to me with a grin ear to ear.

"Havin' fun already, Marcus? Now, don't wear yourself out. We're just getting started." He gives me a smooth nod and cruises in with an entourage of players, friends and, of course, a line of ladies.

I'm just about to hightail it down the side alley and in the back door, thinking how nuts I am to be willing to jump out of a cake, and hoping like hell that Nic has a good wig for me, when I catch a glimpse of movement over my shoulder. As I spin around, I come face to face with a well-built man whom I've never seen before. He's gorgeous. A sound escapes my lips, not in the least bit smooth, rather more of a squeak. His reply is a bit subtler as the corners of his mouth turn up slightly. Now, I'm not saying I feel scared—for some reason I'm not even though I damn well should be—but something about his face just makes me calm.

"I'm Ryan. This is my security team here tonight. You're Alex Conner, right?" He gets straight to the point, looking as if this is his usual MO, and all I can do is nod. I think I've forgotten how to blink or even breathe. Ryan reaches down and brushes my waist to tap the radio clipped to my purse.

"We're on channel five. Let me know if you need anything." And then he vanishes, blending his fine body in with the night.

"Shit, shit, shit," I curse as I barrel into the woman's bathroom, nearly killing Nic as I haul ass into the back stall.

"Now, I hope no handicapped person needs this stall cause this may take a while. What are you waiting for, girl? Take your clothes off. Wait a minute. What is that look? Where is he? He must have been fine because you are glistening."

He was fine. Over six feet of pure muscle, but not over the top. Hard everywhere, and decked out in all black from head to toe. His skin looked like it had been dipped in a mix of cinnamon and mocha, but I couldn't place his heritage. Latino maybe, or maybe from some remote tropical heaven, or, goddess I don't care, he was gorgeous and terrifying—don't forget terrifying. He was like a taciturn, dark-eyed stone god,

but the air around him seemed to crackle with a promise of squashing anything or anyone who causes trouble tonight.

I am pulling my clothes off and putting the barely there clothes on, rambling about dark eyes, skin, and almost peeing myself.

“Alex, he sounds fine! I think I need to go check him out myself. I might be more his type anyhow.” He turns to leave, but I grab him by the neck of his shirt.

“No way! We need to camouflage me. You know, make me look different. Make-up and hair, please. Now!”

Okay, in times of panic I wish I had a surefire crisis cure. Some girls eat candy, cake, or cookie dough. I would prefer a drink; hell, even a shot would work, but I don’t have time for that, and watching little Miss Thing in the bathroom makes even a sip less appealing than it would have been an hour ago. Later, yes, after this, I’ll curl my fingers around a nice cold vodka drink in a dark corner somewhere away from this madness. Nic gives me tea. Ugh, I could go for my grandmother’s whiskey, honey, and lemon concoction over this drab drink. Next, he places a cordless mic in my hand. I do some warming up and try my best not to panic. I throw in a few “why me” sobs and take deep breaths for the next twenty minutes.

Crazy thoughts start swarming around in my head. I mean, so what if there is no singing girl jumping out of a cake. What girl? Was there supposed to be a singing cake girl? Huh? I don’t remember that. Who came up with that dumb idea? Earth to Alex, it was **your** bright idea! Stupid, stupid, stupid! Okay, breathe, you can do this, and no one will even recognize you. It’s time to get into the act. When you run your own company, you’ve got to be ready to do nearly anything to make things run smoothly, so get some courage dammit!

This outfit is unreal and way too tight! I have on a long, straight, blond wig with blunt-cut bangs, blue contacts, and a tight black leather bustier with matching little spank-me shorts. I take one quick look in the mirror and freeze. My mother stares back at me in the reflection. I know we look a little alike, but this is unnerving. I have her high cheekbones and the same sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of my nose, but it’s the hair color and eyes that are startling. My head starts to swim and an intense warmth causes beads of sweat to break out on my forehead. I think vertigo has settled in, but I don’t have time for it to stick around. Nic’s voice breaks through and I tear myself away from the mirage staring back at me.

“Okay girl, you’re almost on. Time to get in the cake, and I need the boys to help me wheel you out. Get in now and I’ll call them over.” Nic does some maneuvering and helps me into the cake, slamming the top down on me.

“Shit, sorry Alex. What channel again? Five? That’s right, three for us on the DL and five for the rest of ’em.” I hear Nic’s radio static and I know my time has almost come. “Hey, any boys there? I need some help backstage. It’s cake time!”

Thunderous steps signal their arrival, and I feel the cake start to roll. I hear Danny’s music start while I continue to remove the image of my mother from my mind. The feelings keep swirling inside me and I feel the power that I rarely use around other people unfurl from my being, sparked to life by memories of my mother in the reflecting glass. Just a little can’t hurt. I use the energy stored within me to create just a bit more camouflage from my everyday appearance, and then *Bam!* I’m out. I

don't see a single face in the room at first, but I begin to sing all the same. Suddenly, I hear a crackle in my ear.

"To the left, he's on the left, you're looking in the wrong-ass direction!" God, this is humiliating. "Hey girl, that doesn't even look a lick like you. Am I good or am I good?!"

I step out of the cake and lower my gaze onto Marcus, the lucky birthday boy. Yep, he is hammered. That sure was quick. I only hope that his dazed look means he won't recognize me. I feel the magic soar through me, making my features flutter and shift so that I never look quite the same. I'm like a desert snake in the shifting sands, there one minute and gone the next. Now, a little dance here, there, and the song is almost over. I ease down to sit on Marcus's lap, giving him a light touch on his face. Almost done. I sing the final "TO YOU!," give Marcus a smooch on the cheek, and hustle my ass back stage.

I feel an invisible tug as I fly through the curtain. I look to my left and see Ryan; well, part of him at least. His back is against the wall and he's almost melting into the darkness while he looks out through the side curtain with his arms crossed in front of him. I see a glint in his eyes when he looks my way. Ryan holds my gaze for two long, deep breaths, and I see a slight smile.

"Hee, hee, that was great!" exclaims Nic as he comes running up, spinning me around. I look over my shoulder, and there is no Ryan. Like smoke, sexy-ass smoke. Nic briskly ushers me into the back office and I let the magic wash off me while trying to extinguish the fire in my eyes. I know they're blazing green fire, and even though he can't see them, the energy charging the air will make him uneasy.

"We got kicked out of the bathroom, so here we are." I do a quick change and look at myself in Nic's hand mirror.

"Cool. I'm *sooo* glad that's over. Move the channel back to five and let's see what's going on out there." Only Nic and I were on channel three; well, maybe Ryan was too.

The party goes right along and the crowd has a blast. I stay in the back, hiding in the shadows, sipping my cucumber-infused martini while the event unfolds around me. I'm ready if I am needed, but my crew is damn good, so things go off smoothly without me having to lift an extra finger. Most people hate working late hours. I honestly don't truly wake up till about five or six P.M., so this two A.M. stuff is great for me. True, I can't do it *every day*. A girl has got to be able to enjoy the beach and not be face down sleeping, working on a burn instead of a tan. I notice Nic heading and hiccupping in my direction.

"I can't find this mystery man of yours. Are you sure you saw him? None of his boys will talk to me—so serious and not very friendly—hot, though, hahaha."

I agree with Nic—I'm no longer sure if I had seen Ryan for real, either. The man is a ghost; I haven't seen him since the song of humiliation.

Things wind down and I make sure the guest of honor is carried out unscathed to his limo.

"Best birthday ever! Alex, you rock. Oh, and tell the cake girl to call me!" Geez, I'll make sure to do that.

Catering is nearly broken down, and Danny is thumbing his albums back into some sort of sensible order that I can never understand. I say goodbye to Nicky and walk out with Sandra. The valet brings her car first, so I give her a hug goodbye.

"I'm reading you soon, girly. You'll be so much more aware of what's going on in your life if I do. Something's happening with you, and I just *know* I can help. Don't you want to get rid of your nightmares? Don't you trust me?" One of the ball players comes up behind her and gives her a little tap on the butt.

"Oh, he's coming too. Thanks, this party was great. Always is with you, Alex." She gives me a wink and slides into the driver's seat.

My car pulls up next, so I pop the trunk and load my essential event bags of mystery. As I move to close the trunk, I feel a tingle of awareness, like a warning buzz before a static shock. The perception stills me, and soon after I feel heat on the back of my neck.

"Hey, party girl. Are we done partying?" I spin around and find myself face to chest with a gorilla of a man with no neck, no hair, and no idea of what is what.

"Ah, nice to see you and I'm so glad you enjoyed the party, but it's time for me to head home."

Moving away from the trunk, I reach for my car door, but his big hands stop me. I'd seen him with the group, and recognize him as one of the players. The big guy comes in close and I dig into my purse. I have pepper spray in there, and I'm not afraid to use it. I come out swinging with it, but he catches my wrist before I can hit the trigger.

"What the hell?" He is not happy, and his next move is too quick for me as he gives me a ferocious smack across the face with the back of his hand, knocking me ferociously to the ground.

"Now, that's not a nice party girl. What's the matter? You get all sexed up and now you don't want to share? Come on, let's get back up and start this over."

He reaches for me, but then I see him seize up. His eyes roll around a bit before he falls in a heap on the ground. I can't breathe and an uncontrollable shaking takes over my body. Just then, a pair of warm, firm hands grabs me, lifting me up gently. My vision is blurred, but I barely make out deep, dark eyes. My fingers slide along my face and come away slick and warm.

"I think there's blood," I mumble. Then the world spins and everything goes black.