

# TRUTH

The Alex Conner Chronicles  
Book Two

By  
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## CHAPTER 1



### Warrior

#### **Journal Entry:**

*There is always that one recurring dream. One that feels so real when I wake, and I can tell I've had the dream before as I am dreaming it again. The darkness of night, moss under my feet, and a glowing blue gown chasing after me as I follow sparks of fairy wings, dandelion seeds, and forest creatures down a winding path. I have never felt so free, so unafraid, and so protected. I laugh with the critters as the fairies bid me to follow them. Sparkling dandelion seeds tickle my skin and touch lightly on my nose, causing it to twitch. I am free. There are no worries or fear. It is as if I am one with the earth, Gaia's own child living in nature, within her world, one of magic and beauty, not of pain and man. I wish I could stay in these moments.*

*It has been years since I last had this dream, but this time it seems to mean something more than it used to. The tumbling down the trail and the skipping and singing slow to a stop as I come upon the soft glow of a greenhouse in the middle of the woods. I tiptoe on bare feet, feeling the warmth radiating off the glass, seeing the blurring of colors as the steam and age of the building hide the true treasures within. I can never find the door in my dream, no matter how many times I try. It feels like eternity as I move around the four sides, gliding my hand along the glass and metal bindings, searching for a way in, a secret door perhaps. Maybe if I push a pane just right, or hum the right tune or give the secret knock, the secret greenhouse—more like a giant treasure box—will open for me. But it never does, not for me anyway. It does always open for him, the boy, as young as I am, twelve, but taller, and with hair as dark as night.*

*He makes his presence known as a small squirrel runs toward him and up the length of him as if he were a tree. The darn thing squeals, squeaks, and swoons over him in each and every dream. Her fellow four-legged creatures and the flocks of various birds nearly roll their eyes at me and shake their heads, embarrassed by her obvious infatuation with the boy. All the while, these animals hover around my feet and take turns cuddling in the crook of my arm or finding a perch upon my shoulder to give me small nudges and pecks on my cheeks.*

*His laugh is comforting, free and innocent; not a man's laugh, but not nearly as childish as I know some may seem at our age. No, he is just perfect and steady. So steady it seems as though an earthquake wouldn't move him, and not even a raging bear would make him flinch. His eyes gaze into mine and I have to shake myself from getting lost in them as I realize he is asking me something.*

*"What? I'm sorry. Did you say something?" He gives me a laugh and a small shake of his head, not in a condescending way, but rather as though he is in awe—in awe of me?*

*"I've seen you before, here at this moment, in this time. We have been here before, haven't we?" As he talks, he moves toward the greenhouse, laying a single hand upon it as a door becomes visible and opens for the boy instantly. I nearly stomp my feet in annoyance at the ease at which*

*he has penetrated the secret treasure box. I quickly forget my jealousy as my eyes gaze upon the glorious array of flowers and water features inside.*

*“Well, are you going to come with me? You want to see what’s inside, right? Come on in; I’ll show you.” As he says the words, he turns to me with his hand open. I see the etchings of a tree limb tattooed from his wrist up his arm and into the sleeve toward his shoulder. I have seen that exact tree limb before and in an instant I am stumbling backwards as I realize that although I thought I had known someone else over the last year and a half, I may have known him for much longer. I reach out my hand and touch the markings on his arm, Justin’s arm. The tree tattoo responds to my touch, giving the impression of limbs waving in the breeze, leaves floating in the air, and I swear I see a speckling of dandelion seeds floating among the beauty. The boy smiles at me and grabs my hand. We are two children together, running into Gaia’s greenhouse surrounded by magic, colors, and smells.*

*The first time I had this dream was when I was twelve. I woke up sweating in my bed in my grandmother’s home, wondering what had just happened, my feet still tingling with dew from the moss on the trails, my face still warm from the greenhouse lamps, and the kiss I received on my cheek. A sweet kiss the mystery boy gave me while we gazed upon the orchids.*

*This time when I wake up, I am much older; I know Justin. Did I just put him into my recurring dream or has he been there all along? And if he has, then what does that mean? And what is he?*



The constant banging against my chest is my own damn fault. I should really try to get rid of this blasted thing again, but for some reason I can’t seem to make such an absolute decision. Desert sand flows around me as I exert more force, arcing and sending the staff into a spin, smacking balls of light out of the air. At first, Dana sends them to me all nice and sweet-like, spinning them around me lightly, giving me a chance to whack a few. In essence, I think she is trying to get me dizzy and off my game. I take the staff up then down to the left, sending a red ball sparking off into the distance. I then balance on the staff, kicking upward with my right leg and shattering another into sparks of purple and blue. The ring whips around on its chain, losing its place inside my shirt and spinning around to crack me on the cheek. Damn ring. Damn Ryan. The beautiful sterling silver ring with the endlessly chasing sun, moon, and stars constantly remind me of Ryan’s deceit. The anger gives me enough motivation to spin kick into the air and take out three more balls as I realize Dana is now dive-bombing me with them instead of playing solar system.

We’ve been in this desert outside of Dana’s RV park on and off for nearly three weeks now. And let me tell ya, using cell phones as a hot zone for doing my work remotely has been giving Carmen fits. As my best friend and business partner, she is in a constant state of worry about the state of things with our party-planning company, Feelyne Productions. What she worries about the most though, is what she perceives as my deteriorating mental health. Good thing my college buddy Shane is there to help her with Feelyne. With his new San Diego Gaslamp club Rapture opened, there have been plenty of people to cross over and help for both businesses. Shane gave me a set of keys to Rapture on opening night. We had spent countless hours creating the ultimate club in our heads, and Rapture is the result. I still have the keys in my bag, but I doubt I’ll ever be able to dedicate myself to being the business partner he needs, not since my whole world was flipped upside down. And now, instead of playing in the Gaslamp, I’m stuck out here playing ninja, busting vicious earthen balls of pain in the desert.

I told Carmen that I needed a little break from San Diego after having a successful hypnotherapy treatment from Dr. McAdams. Ya, that's what happened, at least that's what Carmen and my other friends Shane, Justin, and Nic need to think. Only my grandmother's most trusted, and dare I say a tad bit crazy friend Dana, my Seer friend Sandra, my mom, and Ryan know the truth about what really happened that night. This is how it has to be in my world, my world of danger, magic, and hiding the truth. But back to being out here...in the middle of nowhere, waiting for word from my mother so we know where she is, where my dad is, and what in the hell we are going to do next.

Sometimes I wonder if Dana and my mom did all of this on purpose to get me worked up and out the door and away from my life in San Diego. I thought my life was finally going to start getting back to normal after Steven met his demise and my nightmares came to an end. Oh, but no! Wishful thinking! My life will never get back to normalcy. After all, there is still my wicked-ass foster brother Greg to catch, and let's not forget I have to find my father, who is goddess knows where. I've never known my father. Honestly, I had always been told he was dead, but apparently I'm not the only one who keeps secrets. And of course, let's not forget the cat is out of the bag about Ryan and I being forbidden to ever be together because of some stupid Council 'rule.' A rule that requires Earthen Protectors, like Ryan and me, to help spread our abilities through the generations by finding partners outside of our secret world. The Council, bah, some group of Earthen Protector leaders I have never met nor do I ever care to meet.

Yep, I thought things would be all hunky dory after Ryan and I caught up with Greg and saved my mom...ugh, who am I kidding? It was all a ruse. Greg never had my mom in captivity. His sniveling ass is in the wind, and my life is in shambles. Being in the desert right now may be the best thing for me and Dana and my mom knew it. Oh, and big shocker! Apparently I am not battle ready yet. I guess yoga, running on the beach, occasional kickboxing, and club dancing doesn't cut it when one decides to join this little good-versus-evil war instead of staying out of the game.

My 'being captured by Greg' stunt didn't really impress the seasoned Earthen Protectors, aka Mom and Dana. Being a descendant of powerful Earthen Protectors and Healers, I have the ability to harness power from the earth and bend it to my will. However, that isn't enough when it comes to protecting others, or in the case of what occurred three weeks ago, even keeping myself safe. As a result of my capture, Dana said it was Mom's orders to get me ready for what was to come, and to keep me from getting into that heap of a hot mess again.

In my defense, I was under duress from lack of sleep, migraines, and mind-assaulting nightmares, not to mention they had a Demon on their side. Who has a Demon on their side, anyhow? Don't get me started on that, or him for that matter. I'm still cringing from the idea of Valant coming to 'visit.' I left that topic out of my discussions with Dana, although I am fairly sure she smelled him on me. Yep, I said smelled. She is the Master, Mistress, High Priestess of Potions and Weaponry. I don't think much gets past her, which is probably why she told me my staffs were badass enough to kick even a Demon's ass.

So, little Miss Weapons and Potions has been kicking my booty day in and day out with her little toys-of-fun while my body screams in agony over newly torn and reformed muscles and burns from various colorful earthen power balls of light. My blisters are finally forming into calluses, accumulated by using my favorite weapon: Dana's hairpin staffs. Yep, they are exactly as they sound. Dana forged and ornately carved hairpins filled with tough-ass titanium metal. With the tiniest command from my power, these beautiful hairpins transform into fight-ready staffs. They

are twins. I call them Serenity and Chaos; the latter defines my life and the former I can only wish for.

Once I take the hairpins into my hands and call their names, they change from elegant pieces of wood into wicked fighting weapons. Their lengths, covered in intricate vine carvings reflecting the nature of my power, are intermingled with dandelion seeds to symbolize my grandma. Cresting waves encircle both ends of each staff, and a fox hiding in the foliage represents my beloved fox friend Vex. I haven't seen Vex in nearly two years. He has helped me more than I would have ever thought possible, bringing me back from the brink of insanity more than once. I wonder where he was during all the stresses of this past year. He always told me I wouldn't be alone, and to accept the help sent to me, but apparently that didn't mean from him.

Aside from being aesthetically beautiful, my staffs are tremendously powerful. They have the extraordinary ability to be shaped into various fighter-friendly lengths. My favorite options are to either use them as a couple of two-and-a-half-foot pieces, or meld them together to form a single five-foot ass-kicking staff. Their sickly trick, one that I rarely use, is accomplished by willing the titanium metal running within their center to protrude to a sharp point at either end. Honestly, it scares me a bit, but it's nice to know that if I ever need to up my game a notch, I can.

Dana gets a kick out of all of it. My obvious lack of ability to balance the large staff from the very beginning doesn't discourage her from sending those earthen balls of light at me at all times of the day and night, searching for ways to make me fall on my ass. If I ever put my weapons away and tried to use my kickboxing skills to take on the barrage of lights with feet and fists, she made the lights dense and painful, like rocks hitting my flesh and bones. This technique basically forced me to add the weapons to my repertoire, lest I find myself bloody and broken. She did tend to my injuries in the best ways possible, with natural remedies in the form of cooling and warming salves, teas, and delicious feel-good foods.

A silver ball of light grazes my hip, spinning me to the right and causing a slight growl to escape my lips. She has taken advantage of my reverie, and I'm paying for it dearly. The bitch about these balls is their target-reaching addiction, like little torpedoes locked on to me. Their weight not only knocks me in all different directions, but they shock or burn me as well. It really depends on how sadistic she's feeling. I eye her silhouette on the hill above me; it reminds me of Rafiki, that crazy baboon from the Lion King, except I am the one with the staff.

That's it. She and her little round weapons are going down tonight. I hold the five-foot staff with both hands parallel to the earth and call upon Gaia's energy. I command it to change into the two short staffs. I spin the staffs gently in my hands and take my stance, eyeballing the silver ball as it arcs back my way, while at the same time watching a bright pink ball form in Dana's hand before that too makes its way toward me. Trying to keep them both in sight becomes difficult as they adjust until one aims at my front and the other directly at my back. I need a distraction to allow me to face off with one at a time.

Holding the staffs tightly, I point my fingers to the ground, pulling energy into my being, willing it to grab brush and dead cactus from the ground. I fling the brush and cactus at the silver ball heading directly toward me before wheeling around and running to meet the pink ball of torture head on. I swerve and smack at it with my right staff before spinning left to give the pink glowing nightmare a crack with my left staff as it tries to redirect itself. After taking its licking, the ball hits the ground and sputters out of existence. A slight buzzing hits my awareness. I swiftly drop to the ground in a lunge before bringing both arms above my head, moving them in a figure eight as the silver ball attempts to whiz past me before meeting its demise. Sparks rain down around me, lighting up my eyes before vanishing, leaving me in nearly complete darkness

with the only light coming from the moon and a soft glow of green from the visual show of power blazing in my eyes. I stay in my lunge, muscles taut, awaiting another onslaught before I sense the force of rocks being kicked up by tires not more than five miles away.

“Your boy toy is here!” Shit! Dana is so damn quick and quiet she causes me to jump into a crouch and aim my staffs in her direction. She is right, of course. My heart flutters in my chest as I send my awareness outwards, picking up on flickers of Justin’s presence.

## CHAPTER 2



# Diffusion and Magnetism

### Journal Entry:

*“Think of it as ions flowing in and out of your cells, your neurons firing and sending transmitters from synapse to synapse.” I look at Grandma, confused of course, since I am only nine and have not even begun to get into that level of biology or psychology. She stops, realizing her error, and looks down at me.*

*“Of course, of course. I forget sometimes how young you are,” she scolds herself, shaking her head and digging around in that powerful mind of hers for a better method of explaining. Explaining to her granddaughter how the Earthen power works, and how we are able to pull it from the earth and water to have it do what can only be described as our bidding. It’s quite fantastical I must say, the amount of control I have over the world as a child really, but no, I was never much of a child with Stacy Conner as my mom. I had to grow up fast in her world.*

*“Okay, let’s try this.” She takes one of my play buckets and fills it with water as she tells me to fetch food coloring from inside the house. “I’ll show you how you are able to take up the power, but it’s harder to explain where it comes from since you cannot see the history. So I will lay it out for you. No, dear, our history is not what you learn in school.”*

*I return with the coloring and Grandma places a single blue drop into the bucket. We watch as the blue droplet moves as a globule, dancing through the water until it turns the crystal-clear liquid blue.*

*“You see, my dear, the high concentration...hum, let’s see, what’s a better word? How about deepness? Yes, the deepness of the blue coloring in the droplet moves to balance itself in the water. The amount of blue dye from that one drop wants to, or rather has to, make its color evenly distributed...ah, diffused is the word I want to use, in the water. Now it is all blue, not as blue or as vivid as the original source of course, but it has now spread to make all the water in the bucket blue. It’s as if the blue droplet is attracted to the clear water like a magnet. With Earthen power, or magic as some may call it, the levels of Earthen energy deep in the soil and our bodies of water is in such high concentration that Mother Earth would truly explode without us balancing it out. You see, without moving her deep blue droplets from her body into ours, the very nature of the negative and positive charges in our world would spin the earth out of control.” I think I understood where she is going with this...sort of.*

*“So, I’m a magnet?” She stops looking at the swirling blue liquid and smiles brightly.*

*“Alexis dear, you may truly be destined to be the strongest of us with that quick wit, ability to pull on the power, and your knack for healing. Really, I knew you were a keen observer from the day you were born, eyes wide open and alert as your mom held you.” Her eyes well up with tears just thinking about it. I know she misses my mom as much as I do. It has been a year since we last saw her. She was supposed to be in rehab, but she checked herself out and disappeared. I*

*can only hope she isn't falling back into industrial drugs and horrible men as a way to keep her fear of her own powers at bay, but I know I am only fooling myself.*

*Grandma always said observation has a lot to do with my ability. I always thought I was just a kid who couldn't relax for a minute, always seeing every movement, every change in a room, in the wind, in a smell drifting in the breeze. But how do those abilities help me with my powers? I need to ask her. I have to find out more about what makes me so different as an Earthen Protector.*

*"Grandma, you always say being observant has something to do with being able to use the Earthen power so well at such a young age, but how does that make me a stronger magnet?" And then it clicks in my brain and I instantly know the answer. I can sense the changes everywhere. I can find my opposite, the negative to my positive. The words tumble out of my mouth.*

*"Being observant makes me a better magnet, doesn't it? I can find the power even in the deepest and most hidden places, can't I?" I know I am right, but I want to hear it from her. She kneels down and takes my face into her hands, brushing a small brunette curl from my eyes.*

*"Yes, darling, you are an exceptionally strong magnet, pulling the power from the ancient gods and goddesses from the very body they have left us to live in. You, my dear, can adapt to the changes you observe. You don't get trapped in them by concern, worry, or doubt. You go with the flow of the changes and break free from the constraint others may feel from the path they are on. You move to survive and carry on. It's an ability that will keep you safe, one that your mom sadly never fully developed. She got stuck in worry and doubt too often."*

*I try to let the feelings these words about my mother conjure up inside me slide over me, the way they should if I really am the person my grandmom is describing, but my mom is my weakness. I miss her; I always do. Grandma's explanation about Earthen Protectors moving high concentrations of Earthen power in the earth to lower concentrations in ourselves makes me wonder how the evil wielders of our power, those who call themselves Absolute Protectors, can take power from others. Something Grandma told me they do quite often. Despite my sadness, my curiosity gets the better of me, and I move on to other questions, primarily focusing on those evildoers.*

*"But how do the Absolute Protectors get power from others if they have the highest concentration and steal power from those with lesser power? It goes against the explanation you just gave me, doesn't it?" I am dead serious, but she stands and chuckles.*

*"You never cease to amaze me, dear. Yes, you're right. It does go against the rule, if you will. That is why they are some of the most powerful beings because it takes an enormous amount of energy to take from a lower level to a higher level. It goes against the natural flow of the power. That is why many suffer bouts of insanity, sickness, and even death from trying. But to others it comes easily since they possess such large amounts of power. Levels close to what I feel you may have, but none of them nearly as pure or as strong. They are our enemies, Alexis dear. They are who we may need to face one day."*

*A chill runs through me at hearing these words. One day I will have to fight, won't I? I am only nine, but I can picture it clearly in my mind. I will face danger. I will face evil. My face curves into a Cheshire grin, and I look up at her before speaking.*

*"I'm not scared, Grandma, because I know we will win."*





Dana is always right, or if she isn't, I swear it's either because she lies on purpose to test me or out of pure boredom. Must suck to always be right. Yet, I know that even if she weren't one of my grandmom's oldest and dearest friends, I would still love and respect her as much as I do. However, right now, I don't have time to get into it with her about how I'm not focused enough to have picked up on Justin's presence before she did. Nope, I don't need another tongue lashing about how I am supposed to be the young whippersnapper with all these special abilities. The first of my kind in generations and yet I am constantly getting upstaged by her "old ass." Her words, not mine! It has been a recurring conversation since we got here, part of the training I suppose.

The bit of Arizona desert that Dana calls home, in the town of Why to be exact, is just desolate enough to find pockets of privacy where we can train without being noticed. Being an Earthen Protector and a Healer, I am apparently a unique mixture that only comes about every other generation, if that. Apparently even those two labels don't account for everything I am capable of doing. Dana thinks I must have inherited the most powerful parts of the ancient gods and goddesses that created our world. The power that very few can harness, let alone learn how to use. The life forces of the gods and goddesses never left the earth they created. They integrated into the body of our planet, allowing those of the Earthen power heritage to manipulate their powers and impact the world around them.

Not knowing my father, being taken away from my addicted yet powerful mother, and then at the age of thirteen losing my guardian and guide in the form of my grandmother, didn't leave me with anyone to help navigate my capabilities but my own damn self. I had done okay but now, with Dana's help, I am becoming the warrior worthy of my heritage.

The terrifying experiences with my foster brother Greg and his father Steven's attempt to return to his fierce glory have awoken the fighter within me. Realizing my father is alive, and finally working with my mom to find him, blazed that spark to a full-on raging fire.

Then there is Ryan; well, there was Ryan. He was the first person who was like me that I had been around since I banished Steven to some alternate hell dimension fourteen years ago. Ryan was my guardian, the man who saved me from Steven, who killed him for me. It was only three weeks ago, but it feels like an eternity since that dreadful day in the basement where Steven perished. Unfortunately, I created another monster in the form of Greg. I'll never forget the night I finally found the person who was responsible for my year in hell, of monstrous nightmares and psychological torment.

I was truly astonished that Greg, aka Dr. McAdams, was the catalyst and the person who trapped me in his cellar, forcing me to help him free the evil Absolute Protector, Steven. Greg's whole plan was to free his father from the bind that I banished him to. But of course, in order to do so, I needed to be sacrificed. I tried to talk some sense into him about why Steven needed to stay banished, but he was too far gone with Steven's brainwashing, so he had to learn the hard way. Steven turned on Greg, hating him even. Their demon friend Valant took way too much pride and joy in telling Greg that Steven was not his real father. Yep, Mrs. Nestrour hated her husband enough to bump uglies with his brother. Yet even that little wake-up call didn't help temper Greg's anger toward me. He blamed me for his misery because I was the easiest, and really the only, target.

If Ryan hadn't found me when he did, if his ring that I continue to wear around my neck hadn't led him to me...who knows what would have happened. The thought makes me shudder. The knowledge that Steven is gone for good doesn't really faze me. There was no other way but to

kill Steven. If we had shown mercy, Steven would have never left me alone. No, he wouldn't have given up until I was in perpetual torture at the hands of my own Demon, or dead myself.

Valant has kept his word for the most part, after releasing Greg from his control. Valant promised to never pop in on me as long as I keep my end of the bargain and invite him to observe my disaster of a life from time to time. I think it is how Demons are able to survive. Apparently, they feed and get nourishment from the hurt and pain felt by others. Gross! I guess it's better than having to feed a vampire. Wait: are vampires real, too? Ah crap, I don't want to know. Greg is enough of a real vampire to me. That weasel collaborated with Steven and Valant to torture me with vicious REM-stealing nightmares and migraines. Greg was still MIA after we realized, too late, that he didn't have my mom locked up somewhere in a deep, dark dungeon. No, he's probably sucking down Mai Tais on an island in the Pacific. That asshole is at the top of my who-needs-an-ass-kicking list, but right now it is time to focus on learning how to fight harder, faster, and stronger to help find my father.

I did digress from the point, didn't I? Ryan. I haven't called him back or answered a single text despite his multiple attempts to contact me. I'm sure he was stunned when he returned to my house expecting us to take off after Greg together. Instead, Ryan found it empty with only a note telling him to pretty much piss off. Instead of taking Ryan's calls, I answered Justin's calls instead. Safe, truthful, reliable Justin, who is nearly at Dana's campground entrance and I'm still up here in the Pozo Redonido Mountains with a massive staff in my hands and a crazy lady dancing around snatching up fiery balls of death like they are squishy marshmallows.

I have to focus and get back to her trailer before Justin gets there. I place my ear buds in as the Red Hot Chili Peppers' lead vocalist Anthony Kiedus transports me over the bridge downtown; the lyrics take over my mind and I start to move. I tug on the Earthen power and use it to force the staff in two before shrinking them into my unassuming little wooden hairpins. I place them delicately in my hair, turning my ponytail into an intricate braid in the process. I look down at my nearly destroyed and smoking clothes, wondering if they can stay intact enough for me to run at top speed back to the trailer. I see no point in changing now, so I hope for the best and take off at a jog.

The sterling silver chain clinks around my neck as I swing my backpack on and start moving toward the trailer. I have a good two miles ahead of me so I transition into a run, feeling the ring swing around and tap my chest in rhythm with my stride. I take one more pull on the earth to help catapult me faster through the desert terrain while also working on changing Ryan's ring into the pendant Justin knows, a glorious arching dolphin with the ring's sun, moon, and stars etched in its body.

For some reason, I cannot get rid of the ring. What else can I do? I tried to leave the ring in San Diego the night I left with Dana instead of following the plan to find Greg with Ryan. I placed the ring in an envelope and left it on my coffee table with a note, knowing Sandra or Ryan would find it, but I woke in Dana's car to find it snugly attached to my right ring finger again.

Ryan's ring, the one with a life of its own that attached to me the night we spent together in Scottsdale, Arizona, when I thought he would be by my side always. But Dana has made it perfectly clear that Ryan can never be with me. The Council would never allow it.

What a bunch of bullshit! Bullshit that Ryan kept from me. So I left without warning and haven't communicated with him since. I am sure Dana could find a way to permanently rid me of the ring, but I haven't pulled the trigger and asked her for help. Obviously, the ring is a comfort as well as an annoyance. After all, the ring saved my life that night in San Diego by summoning Ryan.

Enough about Ryan; I need to focus on Justin. Justin has been doing work in Puerto Penasco, Mexico, only about two hours from here. I met up with him a couple of times after our kiss on that fateful night I was taken by Greg. I had ignored his texts for a while, just as I have Ryan's, but my feelings for him never fully faded. The desert seems to revive and enhance my feelings for Justin. We quickly started up our relationship again, but something is different this time around. Something I didn't notice before. Maybe because of all of Steven's shit being in the mix pretty much from the very beginning of our relationship a little over a year ago. Whatever the case, there exists what I can only describe as an undeniable flow of energy between us. Something similar to what I feel when I pull on the Earthen power, like Justin and I are being pulled together like magnets. When we touch now, I feel something similar to what I felt with Ryan, but still somehow different.

Ryan is a strong Earthen Protector so I could feel that connection even though Steven, Greg, and Valant were jerking me around. That powerful trio nearly drove me insane and almost ruined my relationship with my best friend Carmen, and with Justin. Although I did have a hand in that as well by almost falling for Ryan, a man I hardly know. Stupid, stupid, Alex. It is a mistake Dana doesn't let me forget as she tests my body, mind, and spirit daily. Maybe that is why I sense Justin differently now. More than ever, I am poised to find out everything and anything about a person. I have always been a deeply intense observer, but now I must be able to feel the Earthen energy in him, what some may call an aura or spirit. Boy, does he feel good, pure, and loving. Yep, that has to be it...right?

As for Ryan, I am over him, or will be sooner rather than later, I hope. My anger at his massive omission and the distance and time away from him has been helping me. I hope when I do see him again, as I am sure I will, those feelings will be gone for good. Though there's no denying that Ryan will always hold a special place in my heart. How could he not? After all, he saved me and even killed for me. That's something I will never forget and will be forever grateful.

## CHAPTER 3



### A Desert Wind

#### **Journal Entry:**

*Even with the thin layer of my eyelids closed the twinkling light catches my eyes, and I can still see and, in turn, feel the sparkling light flashing in and out of my vision. The click of metal turns my dull attention to a more alert awakening as I fall away from my dream and into the growing brightness of my room. Bear stands on my bed nearby, the silver circle of his tag catching the light rays as they pierce through the cracks of existence between the drapes and the windowpane. His large Labrador eyes smile at me urgently as he lets out a whine and jumps off the bed.*

*“Bear, you know it’s too early for a pee run. Remember, full daylight please, daylight.” He spins in a circle, yips, and heads out of my bedroom before standing in the hall and giving a low bark.*

*“Okay, okay! Don’t wake Grandma! I’m coming.” Grandma was up at four a.m. like she is every morning. Unable to sleep, she sits in her reading chair and cuddles up to a book or does a crossword puzzle before turning in again for what I call her morning nap from five to seven.*

*Since it is a school day, Bear wakes me up at six a.m., an hour before my bus comes to take me to the hell that is 7th grade. I’m an early riser, partially to have enough time to mentally prep for the onslaught of teasing by my peers about everything from my brace face to my skinny legs. I try to hide behind textbooks, waiting for the bell to ring to signal the end of my torment. The glorious final tone means I can run far away from it all for miles and miles at track practice. My early wake-up call is also to spend time with Bear on our morning walk. Spring has been mild in Western Colorado, so it is merely brisk and not freezing.*

*Bear practically drags me down our long, rocky driveway; my sneakers trudge on the red sand and rock mix as we head toward the road. I hear the mewling before we make it to a large sage bush along the left side of the road. A rock goes skidding off into the brush when I nick it with my toe, the commotion setting four quick-footed quails off in a scurried line to the opposite side of the road, their plumes comically bouncing around the tops of their heads. The mewling brings my attention back to the bush as Bear circles around it and whines in time with his laps.*

*As I get closer, I notice portions of the bush ripped and torn about; a predator has been here, and whatever was its prey may or may not have gotten away with their lives. At least one is trapped in there still, most likely traumatized, hurt, and scared. I crouch down to look and catch sight of a white ball of fur trembling under a large root where the animal is trapped. I use the weight of my hiking boots to carefully stretch the bush to one side, trying to make a small amount of room to pull the critter out. The light gloves I’m wearing won’t protect me from a bite, so I try to get a good eyeball on the location of the nape of its neck. Having already experienced my ability to heal my first fox and other small animals, birds, and plants, I know I need to send soft*

tendrils of Earthen energy into the little body, willing it to be calm. Hopefully, whatever it is won't remove a chunk of my fingertips in the process.

I gently take hold of soft fur and safely maneuver the small body out from under the ensnaring root, and turn the creature so I can look into its dark blue eyes. The kitten is tiny, shivering, and bloodied. I continue to reach out with my healing power, sweeping over the little body as Bear sits, tilting his head at the subtle change in the charge of the air as the powerful Earthen energy shifts into my being, allowing me to work my magic on this baby creature. As my senses pick up on her gender and her injuries simultaneously, I know two legs and some impossibly small ribs are broken, and her heart is fluttering out of control. I continue to calm her and hold her close to me as Bear and I make our way back home. My power flows around her as I hum softly, letting the tones of my voice mimic the musical flow of my energy as I heal her. As I continue on my path home, I make a list in my head of what Grandma should get at the pet store to help us raise this kitten, in case I can't track down her mom, if she is even still alive. Grandma will love this little girl; she loves her cats, half wild though they are, as they prefer to live in our backyard and in 'their' sunroom. They are definitely smart enough not to run off into the desert and become victims like this little one.

As I approach the front door I see it creak open, and my lips part into a smile at the billowing glow that breaks through the barrier of our closed door. Grandma's eyes lock with mine before she falls to the ground. Bear dashes off ahead of me as I try to keep up, only managing to see dust kick up from his heels. I simultaneously pull the gloves from my hands, creating a nest for the kitten and cozying her in them before placing her tiny body in my pocket. All the while, I push my healing power into my grandma as I close in on her location. Before I can reach her, an immense wave of power strikes through me in my panic, and I stumble to the ground, bracing my body so as to not harm the little life in my pocket.

Strong hands turn me over gently, and I look into my grandmom's eyes, searching them for an answer as to what happened, if she was okay.

"My dear Alexis, you are the strongest of us, aren't you? Truly amazing, my dear. Thank you for your help, my sweet child. Now come inside and let's take a look at that sweet little girl you've found." I look at her, shaking my head, tears in my eyes.

"But what...are you okay, Grandma? You just fell to the ground. What happened? We need to take you to a doctor." I take her hand and stand up. She brushes my curls away from my eyes and holds my head in her hands, speaking to me with such love and emotion.

"No, dear, I'm just fine now. All thanks to you." She turns, taking the little kitten and cradling her in her weathered hands. She glances once over her shoulder into the distance and then heads into the house. I begin to follow her when I hear a faint rumble and then a whine from Bear's chest, so low even Grandma doesn't hear it. I turn and follow his eyes in the direction he is fixating on and feel something, like someone is there, watching us. We are in a remote piece of land, no neighbors nearby, and this is not a presence I have ever sensed before, yet it feels familiar all the same. I step toward the source but Bear steps in front of me, raising his hackles and huffing. Just like that, whatever or whoever is gone. A chill runs through me and I reach down to pet Bear's large Labrador head, letting him lead me back to the house.



I round the corner of Dana's metal-working hut, aka weaponry, potions, and mischief making, and tear past her trailer toward a smaller one she got on loan from a friend. I suppose it is smart

to have a pretty convincing cover when one is creating some seriously dangerous stuff in the Arizona desert. Although she has been known to give the retirees more than just the occasional iron art piece, I swear a love potion of hers is going around this place.

The trailer I am staying in is on loan, so I have my own space, or as Dana calls it, my “boom-chicka-bow-wow” space for Justin and me. I kick my boots off onto the faux grass mat and slam the metal door behind me as I quickly undress and toss my filthy clothes into the hamper. I might as well torch them at this point, but there is no time for that now. My awareness makes Justin’s tires crunching the rocks underneath seem like they are right outside, but I probably have a good five minutes before he arrives.

I try washing my face by looking in the tiny mirror in my cabinet and hoping I don’t miss anything major. My hair is another story as my brush snags in it in all places, and I find myself carefully picking a sharp cactus needle out of my ponytail. Hazards of the job, I guess. Boy, do I miss the full time work and stressful days of party planning! At least I wasn’t in physical danger most of the time.

I really need to check in with Shane and Carmen today. It’s been about a week since we verbally talked. Emails and texts don’t really do the job, especially when we are best friends as well. Actually talking to each other gives us the much needed support and understanding that can’t be done through typing of any sort. Hearing someone’s voice and being able to judge what he or she is feeling makes it much easier on everyone. I know that is the reason things continue to go so well. We all know we have to make time for each other.

With my ponytail redone and face somewhat clean, I am only left with what clothes to find and a pointless longing for a shower. I really need to hit up the laundromat down the road. There isn’t much of a selection in the tiny closet to choose from.

As I start to put on some hardly-can-be-called-clean yoga pants, I see bruises forming, scratches, and even some oh-so-stingy burn marks all over my legs. The effort required to pull on my pants has me cursing up a storm, and I swear I can hear Dana hooting and hollering outside. I’m sure my little camper is rocking as I hop on one foot to shimmy into the other pant leg. I throw on a bra and cami that are really for sleeping, but I don’t have much choice. After grabbing a sweater, I haul ass out of there to meet Justin with a smile. I rethink my process and run back in to grab gum and some lip-gloss. Hey, I can still look purdy while roughing it, right? I only hope the dancing of the firelight from Dana’s sparking fire will make me look less disgusting than I feel.

Justin’s white truck comes into view and tingles shoot up into my happy places as I swear I can smell his earthiness even from this distance. Being a child of Gaia, I am probably more in tune with the smells of his botanical projects than the normal person, and I am not complaining. His dedication to making the world a better place by understanding the way our ecosystems work together in the oceans, estuaries, and other waterways will truly protect us in the long run. I guess we are sort of similar in that respect. We are both protectors of Mother Earth.

His hat sits low over his brow, giving him an air of mystery and sexiness that fits nicely with how kind, intelligent, and strong he is. The days he spends outside give him a natural rugged glow and, despite all his labors, his hands are soft, even in my most delicate of places. I have to get it together, or I am going to drag him into the camper right now and there is no way Dana would ever let me live that down. I can tell she is in her camper and out of sight, but I know she is watching; she always is in one way or another. Justin exits the truck and grabs his bag behind his seat, which is my sign that he’s staying here tonight. I figured he would because of the lateness of the hour, but when we last spoke he wasn’t sure since he has to be back in Mexico so early tomorrow.

“I thought for sure you weren’t coming when I didn’t hear from you. You may have been greeted by a whole different me, at least a clean me.” I embrace him, dirt, burns, and all. I know he doesn’t care. We are both used to being in the muck. Hell, our first date was trudging through an estuary, for goodness sake!

He holds onto me, weary I can tell. Some of his interns didn’t turn out to be what he had hoped, and he is picking up some of their serious slack. He has too many of his employees tied up with dissertations to come help him with fieldwork this far out, especially the low-pay kind. I need to remind him to let me work on his website and program advertising to get him more eager students. He says he doesn’t need the help but I can tell he does, and I want to do this for him. After all, I need an energetic Justin in my tiny, I-can’t-believe-you-can-call-that-a-queen bed. Classy lady right here!

“Sorry about that, Alex. My phone got wrecked trying to tie up the boats, and I just felt I needed to get on the road and just drive. It’s been a long day. You know I’m happy to see any version of you. Besides, sweaty, dirt-caked Alex is my favorite.” He rubs some remnants of my tango in the desert off my neck and follows it with a kiss. My jelly legs wobble a bit and not only from my physical exertion.

When I tell you something is different between us this time around, I am not making that up. He taps into parts of me that never used to stand to attention before. Don’t get me wrong, sex with Justin has always been amazing, but I never got the chance to connect with him as much as we have now. No, he doesn’t, and may never know my secrets, but it doesn’t bother me as much now because I’m clear headed. I know how much he loves me, and I trust him completely. Trust has always been a huge issue for me, and now, with Justin it isn’t even a question. Someday I may finally be able to say I love him too. Not yet, of course, but I have teased it around in my head. Having not loved many men, I think it is pretty obvious that I may and probably always have loved Justin. I’m just not ready to tell him yet.

“Eh-hem.” Ah, Dana, right on cue to ruin my moment. “Sorry to interrupt your thoughts, but I’m sure Justin wants a shower and some food, am I right? I have some steaks and peppers on the grill; should be ready in about fifteen minutes. Justin, you are more than welcome to use my shower, Alexis always does. Well, not tonight apparently.” Smart-ass. Regardless of how I feel about snarky-ass Dana, she is right. Justin looks like he is daydreaming wistfully about hot water and delicious grilled meat. So I help him along in case he is lingering on my account.

“Go ahead, Professor, you deserve it. I’ll be here when you’re done.” I place a kiss full of promises on his cheek, and let Dana lead him to her camper door. Once Justin is inside and the water running, Dana returns to interrupt my reverie as I stare into the pyro-kinetic light show.

“Okay, Alexis dear, we need to talk. All was fine and dandy when I was under the delusion that maybe I could count on Justin to just be an occasional booty call to keep you from going stir crazy, but now I’m picking up on some overly obvious love vibes from you, and it has to stop.” I turn from the fire to stare at her, shocked more by someone calling me out on the ‘L’ word than a sixty-some-year-old using the term “booty call.”

“I thought you liked Justin, Dana. Why does it matter how serious our relationship is? He isn’t interfering with anything we’re trying to do here. Here in this desert alone, with no word from Mom in how long? If we’re going to start airing our issues with the current state of things, let’s start with waiting with no word from a woman who claims to know where my previously believed to be dead father is. Is this just some charade? A hot pile of steaming crap? If you and Mom wanted to train me, I would have come willingly you know. Hell, you could have trained me in San Diego where I could still run my company and the new club!” I take a breath,

watching her closely for any indication that I've hit the nail on the head. So far it looks like I haven't even come close, so I continue.

"I'm a grown woman and I can see who I like and love who I want to love. Oh, except for Ryan, of course, that was made perfectly clear, but now Justin too? Am I not on my game? Am I not giving my all to you, to this desert, to this supposed mission prep? I'm in a hundred percent, but you can't take everything from me." I am shaking a bit, feeling the adrenaline from our training session still pumping through my blood.

"It's simply this, Alexis. I need...we need you focused and on the balls of your feet in more ways than one. We need you to be ready to hightail it out of here at a moment's notice to wherever your mother tells us to go, whether that be the Amazon, Antarctica, or China. We will need to go, and love makes that extremely difficult for most people, even people like us with all our power and talents. Your mom is well aware, all too familiar with the tangles of love, and the mistakes, treachery, and pain it can cause. You may want to consider dialing things back a bit. We don't need Dr. Jones following us on our mission when we get out of Dodge, which can be any day now." Ha, any day now! She's been saying that every day since I got here. I sense the water turning off in the camper, so I decide to bring this little dance to an end.

"Okay, Dana, I hear you. I completely understand the delicate game we're playing. I won't let my relationship with Justin cloud my judgment. I'm smart enough to make sure I have an exit strategy that's clean and without question. Now, I'd like to take a shower as well, if that's okay with you, eat some delicious food and then maybe, just maybe, use that trailer for the very thing you so lovingly named it. But what I will not do is blindly turn my back on another man I care about when there are ways to have both of my worlds without letting them collide. I'm not my mother, I've never been my mother, and I don't have her fear or addictions. So please, don't worry. I've got this." I place my hand on her shoulder and squeeze it enough to let her know I respect and care for her, but also that I am capable of not totally fucking up my life like Mom. Before I completely move past her, I step back to whisper in her ear now that I know Justin is on his way to the door handle.

"I know now is not the time, but I hope tomorrow, when Justin is gone, we'll talk further about my mother and her mistakes. I think it's time I know what really happened to her and my father. It is him you are speaking of, isn't it?" She smiles at me and nods as I slip past her, hoping to grab a quick shower myself while he dresses in my dinky trailer.

After dinner and some wine, Justin and I say goodnight to Dana and make our way to my RV. I barely hear the last echoes of the door click beneath my hands as I push the old door shut when I feel Justin's arm around my waist as his right hand grabs the back of my thigh. His warm, strong touch sends a throbbing urge clinching inside my body. I feel myself moisten instantly under the sway of his touch and the memories of how he feels inside me. The expectation is palpable as I feel his breath on my neck, alternating back and forth between wanting to turn around and taste his lips on mine, or working on removing my pants and having him take me right here and now. With my face inches from the door, I have to steady my weakening knees by holding on tightly to the wall with both hands. I allow my right arm to ease off the wall and snake behind me to grip the back of his neck as I arc back slightly, moaning upwards as his hand feels boiling hot against the sensitive area nestled between my thighs. Nope, I'm not leaving this spot until I have him right here, hard and held tightly against him and the cold aluminum door, the chilled metal making my nipples hard and sensitive.

My hair, still wet from the shower, begins untangling from its haphazard ponytail, the wet strands sending additional chills along my neck. Yet, before I can grab a hold of it to free the



fleeing hair completely, Justin takes it gently, delicately putting it back in its spot, before tugging rougher than required to keep it in place. I don't mind it a bit as his aggressive touch turns me on even more than I already am. My legs rub together in his hands' absence, the friction releasing a moan of need as his hands shove my legs apart before one finds my spot again. Justin's other hand works to remove my yoga pants, the urgency I feel making my body annoyed that I'm not getting out of them quickly enough.

I attempt to move my right hand backward to touch him, but he grabs it, forcing it back to its spot on the wall. I feel his fingers lifting the soft cotton of my underwear, allowing others to find their way in, diving into my flesh, pulling out and rubbing all in perfect timing and succession. The wetness is overwhelming. I move against him, causing his fingers to go in deeper and harder. His left hand reaches up, grasping my breast and lightly circling my already aroused nipples in such a way that I have to beg.

"Please let me touch you, I want to feel you." I try to reach back again, but am taken off track by the sound of his zipper followed by his jeans hitting the floor. He takes my hand in his again, this time pressing it lightly to the door before trailing his fingers from my hand to my elbow, then my waist, and lastly to grip my thigh. He lifts my leg slightly to allow him some leverage as he angles inside me. My body floods with warmth, beautiful pressure, and a teasing throbbing. I clench against his hard smoothness as I work against him just as he moves slowly against me, his breath quickening until his lips trail kisses along my neck, silencing it.

"I love the way your skin tastes, the temperature of it under my lips, your smell. Alex, you're perfect." His words only send my body further into a frenzy, pushing and arcing against him in a rhythm, our rhythm. He lets my right thigh go, and I fold over while pressing my face further away from the wall allowing him easier access to the deepest parts of me.

"I love the way you feel inside me," I gasp. His hands continue to excite me as they move over my back, lowering until his hands hold firmly to both cheeks, pulling and pushing them against him causing even more excitement to shoot through me.

Justin continues to hold me close with his left hand while his right finds its way to the front of me, teasing the sensitive skin of my clitoris, driving me nearly mad with intense pleasure that teeters on the edge of pain. My body heats up even more from an intense flame to a raging hot fire, building to the inevitable climax. I know he is right with me as he fills me even more, moaning with desire.

I grit my teeth, careful not to cry out; such a sound would echo throughout this entire RV park. Trust me, I've heard it before. Justin's soft lips press hard into my back as his groans of satisfaction are smothered by my skin, before planting kisses along my back. I lift and turn to him, my body shaking and sated. He holds my face in his hands, searching my eyes before kissing me. He draws back, looking at me again with an expression as if he thought he saw something. For a minute, I worry my power had trickled out, and he could see my eyes change to an emerald glow, but my worry eases as he smiles and then speaks.

"Your eyes never seem to be the same color, yet I always see you in them. You're amazing. Your body feels unreal at times. I don't ever want to lose you again. Seeing you healthy and happy is all I ever wanted, and now you're just that." I smile back at him and wrap my arms tighter around him.

"You have a lot to do with my happiness, you know. You didn't have to come back to me after how bad things got. I know how lucky I am. How lucky we both are for being able to come back to each other after all the craziness." I can't help but feel my heart pound inside from both the

excitement of having a second chance with Justin, and from the tingle of fear that trickled up my spine knowing that the craziness has just begun.

What he doesn't fully know won't hurt him, right? I can only hope so. Maybe once things die down with my father and Greg, I can seriously look at our future. I mean, I am supposed to 'mate' with a non-magic wielder, right? Well, the most amazing one is right in front of me, and he isn't going anywhere.

I nestle my head in the crook of Justin's neck as the feelings of warmth and pleasure send my satisfied self into a peaceful sleep. The last thing I hear is the relaxed ebb and flow of Justin's breathing, its ease sending me off to my dreams.

I suddenly feel cold and reach for the covers I share with Justin, only to have my fingers grab onto cold, smooth pebbles. I instantly lift myself up in a panic. Fur nestles alongside me as Vex, my mysterious fox friend and possible animal spirit guide, puts his head under my hand and pushes into me. It is an odd feeling, not only due to the fact that I should be cuddling with a hunk of a man instead of with a fox, but also because Vex usually mock nips my fingers when I try to pet him. When he speaks, I hear worry in his voice, which is far from his usual smart-ass self.

"Not good, Alex. Not good at all. Do you feel that? Something is wrong. I can't place it, but something is happening, and I don't think this is the beginning. I hope we aren't too late." As I am about to ask Vex what he is rambling about, where in the hell we are, and what he is feeling, I am struck by an intense level of pain. It feels like my very soul is being pulled from my body.

"Alex, Alex, oh shit! Alex, what's wrong? What's happening?" The tugging is so intense I crumble back to the rocky bed and my muscles fire, spasming to the point of having me completely paralyzed in a fetal position. I concentrate on anything but the pain, and get my head right enough to start pulling energy into my being, demanding it to tether my soul down, to keep me with my body. It starts to work, and my eyes open as feather-like fern fronds in a kaleidoscope of dark greens float around bright emerald vines. Vex's power is shining through as he works with me to fight off whatever is happening.

In the next moment a scream blasts through the sky, and we look across the darkness to see a dark form outstretched in the distance, floating two feet above the ground, head thrown back—the obvious source of the tortured sound. At first I think the person to be my assailant, but then I notice bright balls of light being pulled from her like orange water droplets, arcing away into the distance before vanishing. It is obvious now that it is a woman. I swear she turns in our direction before her last living sound is uttered, and her body given back to the goddess. Bones, muscle, all of it is transferred instantly into the cold, rocky ground. The shaking that ensues after the ghastly sight is like an uncontrollable chill that has taken over my muscles, the fear keeping me from taking a hold of myself. Vex's eyes come into focus, and I try to concentrate on his bronze irises as his mouth moves, my ears not hearing him at first.

"Alex, Alex! Snap out of it! We need to get out of here. Something is coming." I slow my breathing and concentrate again on pulling energy carefully and slowly into me, calming my reaction and forcing me up from the ground. I stand shakily and place my hand on Vex's head before looking down at him.

"Did you hear what she said, Vex? 'Help us.' What in the world just happened and where are we?" I kneel down to look into his eyes, both hands caressing his face to show my gratitude for him being here and for my own selfishness as his soft fur continues to calm my nerves.

"We're on a Dreamwalk. We just witnessed a woman's power being ripped from her. You're obviously an Empath on this journey, actually feeling what was happening to her as well. Even though we're only visitors to this vision, this isn't some ordinary power play. That woman was

one of the strongest Healers we have, and she wasn't even able to fight back, let alone survive the attack. We need to get out of here before whoever did this senses that they have company." His eyes skirt around, and I move to have my back to him so we can both make a good scan of the area.

"Do you sense it?" Vex's question pops into my head at the same time as another power source becomes very apparent. I try to calm myself of the worry that Steven is somehow still alive. He was one of the most powerful Absolute Protectors I knew, and even though I saw him die, this was his MO for sure. The power signature comes back different from Steven's, although the feeling of desperation, need, and desire is the same. Whoever did this isn't done. They want more and Vex and I need to get the hell out of this place now!

"Yes, I feel it, Vex. We need to move, but how do we get out of here?" I kneel beside him again, holding him to me and shivering from the cold.

"Close your eyes; concentrate on where you were before we met here. Keep your hand touching me, and we'll work on this together." A cold wind pierces my skin. I am in the same barely-there clothes from the RV, which don't lend much protection. I'm just thankful I put something on instead of my usual nothing bedtime attire! Another blast of cold hits me, and I feel Vex shiver.

"We need to move now, Alex! Concentrate! Where were you? What did it feel, sound, and smell like?" I use the same observant and empathic abilities that allowed me to feel the healer's pain to recall Justin. The recollection of what he feels like, smells like, sounds like. I draw a picture in my head of him lying next to me, of hearing his breath coming in and out of his lungs. The icy wind picks up and almost feels like frosty fingertips caressing my arms and legs.

"Almost there, Alex. Okay, this might feel a little strange," Vex said. A loud pop in my ears is followed by the howling of a pack of coyotes as I sit up abruptly. I can feel the covers on top of me, my shivering subsiding as the warmth of Justin's skin sends the chills away. I look around for Vex, only seeing a trail of fern fronds floating off toward the RV door. I slowly lay back down, shaken by my experience, my mind reeling. I thought I would never fall back asleep, but the sounds of the coyotes in the distance lull my eyes shut.

"Do you hear that?" Justin's voice startles me, and my mouth won't move as I speak the answer in my mind instead.

"They sound close by, but the echoes out here make them only appear so." Geez, like he can hear me. Speak, dummy.

"Ya, I'm sure we could mathematically figure out their distance, but I'm too tired now. Good night, Alex. I love you." Justin's words connect with my brain instead of my ears. Is this really happening? Is this a dream? How is he able to speak to me? And seriously, could this night get any weirder?

"Good night..." is all I manage to mumble. I don't think I can handle much more weirdness tonight. I'll deal with this new development, hallucination, or whatever it is, tomorrow. It must be some sort of dream; my mind must be beyond traumatized. I feel stunned, tired, and scared—not of Justin, but of what I witnessed in that rocky, cold, vast mystery land. The last thing I remember is the women's plea filling my head before I fall into a thankfully dreamless sleep.

*"Help us!"*

