

THE STONE

Chapter 1

If I hadn't held his Ducis in my hand, none of this would have ever happened.

My junior year was about as normal as I'd hoped. Casey and I were both driving now and able to date, but we never did. The boys at Chappersville High School were immature, and we were sophisticated. At least that's what we told ourselves.

That all changed the third week of school. The day Saxon walked into my astronomy class.

"Who's that?" Casey asked.

"How should I know," I replied.

"He's smokin' hot." Casey mastered the art of pointing out the obvious.

We listened as Ms. Peterman talked with the new arrival.

"What's your name?" Ms. Peterman asked the tanned guy standing in front of the class.

"Saxon." He handed her what looked like a class schedule.

Ms. Peterman eyed the paper, turned her attention to Saxon, and then scouted the room. "Over there," she said, pointing to the table up and to the right from where Casey and I sat. We were hunkered down in the back.

"Goody," Casey said. "He's going to be sitting close to me."

I didn't say anything as Saxon walked to the table where Melissa sat. Melissa grabbed her purse and slid it over. My guess was that she was afraid this guy would steal it or something. I could understand why. His hair hung just below his brow in the front and had that just-got-out-of-bed look. He wore a pair of blue jeans and a red, V-neck t-shirt that hung loose on his muscular frame. His square jaw framed a smile of beautiful white teeth.

When Saxon sat on the stool, Melissa scooted hers over ever so slightly, but Saxon picked up on it. "I'm not going to bite, ya' know," he said.

"I know," Melissa said. "Just giving you more room."

"He could bite me all he wants," Casey whispered. She bit at the air and licked her lips.

"You're sick," I said.

"Don't pretend you wouldn't let that guy bite all over you, Talon."

I elbowed her into silence. She was right, though. If given the chance, I'd definitely take him up on that offer.

"Now that we're all settled in," Ms. Peterman said, "where were we?"

"You were talking about tomorrow," some kid up front said. "The field trip."

"Oh, yes, the planetarium," Ms. Peterman said. "Digital Dome is tomorrow. That means we have to leave at the crack of dawn. Anyone not on the bus at six a.m. will be left behind."

Just about the time she was going to say something else, the bell rang, releasing us from the cosmic hell we endured at the end of each day.

"Don't forget," she called out as students bolted for the door. "Six a.m."

Casey and I hung back and let everyone leave. We were never in a hurry to go. Most of the time we stayed back and did our homework for the next day. It was easier to do it together, since we had five out of six classes together, than it was to go home and do it alone.

Casey and I grew up together. We moved here the same weekend. She lived a few houses down the street from me, so it seemed only natural that we bonded so quickly. She was the sister I never had.

"Want to grab a snack before heading to the library?" I asked. "I'm hungry."

"That's fine. When aren't you hungry?" Casey asked as she stuffed her astronomy book into her bag.

I noticed that Saxon hadn't left the room, either. He and Ms. Peterman were talking by her desk.

"Think he'll go on the trip tomorrow?" I asked.

"Why? You interested?"

"I didn't say that," I said. "I'm just making conversation."

"Yeah, right," she said. "Maybe he will. If he goes, does that mean you're going to push me out of the seat to make room for him?"

"You're nuts," I said. "He didn't even notice me. Besides, he'll probably want to sit with Melissa like all the other boys."

"I doubt it," Casey said. "He hasn't found out that she's a slut, yet."

I didn't know if the rumors about Melissa were true or not, but I really didn't care. She was one of those girls. The head varsity cheerleader, rich beyond belief, who dated a new guy every week. I figured that after she sat next to Saxon for a few days she'd give him a go. Another name to add to her list.

The weather for September in Charleston was about as good as it was going to get. I didn't want to be cramped in a musty old library after all.

"Want to go to the park instead?" I asked Casey.

"You must've been reading my mind," she said, a crooked smile draped across her face.
"Are you one of those witches our English teacher keeps droning on about?"

"Very funny," I said. "Let's go."

I loved the little park about a mile from our house. It provided all the entertainment a kid needed. A massive playground, park benches, walking paths, and a little pond where people fed the ducks. Woods surrounded the park on three sides, giving it a remote feel even though we were smack dab in the middle of Charleston.

We took our usual spot. Under the covered awning, just off of the water. I like this place the best because I could hang out here even when it rained. The splattering of raindrops on the water reminded me of a beautiful ballet with dancers all around. Casey told me I was ridiculous, because I could relate nearly everything in the world to dance. After all, I'd been dancing since I was three.

Casey and I spent some of the afternoon doing homework, but most of it centered on the new guy.

"Where do you think he comes from?" His accent was peculiar, so it only made sense he wasn't from Charleston.

"No idea. You?"

"England maybe? Australia?"

"Oooh...an Aussie hottie. You should put his shrimp in your barbie, mate." Casey chewed the end of her pen.

"Shut up!" The truth of the matter was that I wasn't anything like Melissa. Nothing had gotten even remotely close to my barbie. Not that I wasn't curious about it, though. It was more like I felt the need to wait. I had plans for college and had seen what having me at such a young age did to my parents.

"You know you want to."

Casey was right, but I knew we don't always get what we want. "Let's just finish our homework."

As the sun dipped behind the tree line, I wandered over to the pond. The ducks clamored for the bread a few of the kids tossed into the water. No matter how sweet and innocent they looked, ducks were vicious when it came to food.

"I've got to go, Talon." Casey stood next to our study table and slung her bag over her shoulder. "My parents will kill me if I come home late again."

Normally I'd hug her bye, but she was too far away, so I just waved. "See you in the morning."

She turned to go, and I slipped my shoes off, so I could walk along the edge of the lake. The water was still warm from the hellacious summer we'd had but felt better than the humidity of the day. Living in Charleston felt like living inside a mouth. Heck, anywhere in the south felt like your body was being French kissed all the time humidity.

Wading on the edge of the pond put me at ease. Though I had a test coming up, homecoming right around the corner, and applications to fill out for college my mind kept swimming back to one thing. Saxon.

Chapter 2

The snap of tree branches caught my attention as I walked along the sidewalk toward my house. My body tensed slightly under the glow of the moon that cast shadows everywhere. Quickening my step, I tried to wipe the sound of something trudging through the woods from my mind. *It's just the wind*, but there was no wind. *Hurry up and get home*.

I wasn't sure exactly what was making its way through the woods, but it was getting louder.

Which meant closer.

The coolness of the night and the fear of the unknown sent chills down my spine.

A few blocks from home, he burst through the tree line and stood no more than twenty feet away. Dark skin blended into the night. His tall, lean frame heaved from exhaustion.

"I need your help." Saxon gasped and doubled over on the sidewalk. "Take this, please."

Frozen in the night, I didn't know what to do. Blood was splattered across his face and chest. Thin, scissor-like slices in his face still bleeding.

"I...I..." I stumbled across my words as he limped closer to me.

"Please." Saxon reached out a weak hand. "I won't hurt you. I just need your help."

"Help with what?"

"They're going to kill me if they catch me." His eyes filled with fear, the trickle of blood oozed from the slices and streaked the side of his face. Blood dripped onto the white t-shirt that framed his muscular chest. His blue jeans were ripped just above the knee, and I couldn't tell if it was the style or because he traipsed through the woods.

"Who's trying to kill you?"

"That's not important." His breathing labored. "They just...can't find...this." Saxon clutched his chest just below his throat. An amulet tied to a leather string hung around his neck.

"What's going on? We need to call the cops." He pressed his bloody finger to his lips.

"I need you to remain calm and quiet." Saxon seemed much calmer than he should be for someone bleeding and running for his life.

"I didn't mean to... I mean..." I mouthed, "I'm not even sure what's going on."

“You don’t have to be *that* quiet.” Saxon laughed. “Their hearing isn’t that good. Listen, I need you to do something for me.”

“Who’re they? What’s going on? You need a hospital and the cops.” My mind raced at incredible speeds. *Who is this guy?*

Branches cracked again and we both looked into the darkness. “Listen, I have to go. They’re almost here.”

“Umm...uhhh...what am I supposed to do?”

“Take this and run?” He reached to his neck again and pulled the amulet over his head. He grabbed my hand and opened my palm, then kissed the amulet before pressing it against my palm.

“What am I going to do with this?”

He pressed his finger to his lips again and peered into the trees.

I fingered the amulet.

“I’ll find you later.” Saxon’s words were eerily calm as he focused on the trees, but only for a moment. “RUN! And don’t look back,” he yelled as he pressed his lips against my forehead. “Run...just run.”