

Chapter One



STONE ACADEMY
BOOK ONE
The First Chosen
by Melissa Lore
Lorelight Press

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DEDICATION PAGE

For the ones who feel something stirring long before they know its name. For the quiet hearts, the brave hearts, the lost hearts, and the ones who keep going anyway. And for the people who become our safe places in a world that doesn't always feel safe. You are the magic.

Series Page

Stone Academy is a five-book supernatural fantasy series about a girl who arrives at a school that isn't what it seems and a world that has been waiting for her far longer than she realizes. Book One is the mystery. It's the slow-burn unraveling, the whispers in the woods, the boys who know more than they say, and the feeling that something is shifting around Keeva even though she can't explain why. It's the breath before the reveal, the quiet, eerie, human beginning of a much bigger story. Book Two is the reveal. The supernatural world opens. The truth about the Gate, the rogues, the Shadowborn, and Keeva's place in it comes crashing into the light. Loyalties sharpen. Secrets break. Nothing stays hidden. Book Three is the awakening. Keeva steps into her identity, her power, and the danger that comes with both. The world expands. The stakes rise. The past refuses to stay buried. Book Four is the war. Alliances form. Enemies rise. Ancient forces stir. The cost of destiny becomes real, and every choice matters. Book Five is the truth. The final answers. The final battle. The ending Keeva was always meant to reach. Stone Academy is a story about magic, yes, but also about friendship, courage, longing, and the quiet bravery it takes to step into who you really are.

ALSO BY MELISSA LORE

The Stone Academy Series Book One: The First Chosen Book
Two: The Forgotten Realm Book Three: The Forgotten Light
Book Four: The Shattered Veil Book Five: The Celestial Gate

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CHAPTER ONE

First Day

The radio crackled through the kitchen like it didn't care it was morning. The reporter's voice sliced through the quiet, too sharp for the soft sunlight drifting across the counter and too grim for the smell of toast warming in the air. It was the kind of voice that belonged in a dark room with a detective and a single lamp, not next to my mom's sunflower mug and the half-burnt toast she always pretended wasn't burnt.

"Another victim was found early this morning. Authorities are calling it an animal attack. Injuries are described as severe. Locals are advised to stay indoors and avoid the woods."

My toast turned dry in my mouth. A cold prickle crawled up the back of my neck.

"Another attack?" I asked. "How many is that now?"

My mom sighed, the kind of sigh that carried worry and exhaustion. "A handful. Maybe more. They're not telling us everything."

She stepped closer and cupped my face, her thumb brushing my cheek like she was memorizing it. "Stay safe, Keeva. And stay out of the woods." She tapped my nose with each word. "Do. Not. Go. In. The. Woods."

I laughed, but her eyes didn't.

The radio droned on behind us. "Wild wolves and other wildlife have been spotted. Officials say there is no need to panic."

Right. Because "torn apart" definitely meant no need to panic.

I grabbed my keys, kissed her cheek, and headed out.

The morning air was crisp enough to make me pull my jacket tighter. Birds chirped like nothing was wrong, like people weren't being found in pieces. The neighborhood felt too quiet, like everyone was listening for something they didn't want to hear.

My car door creaked when I opened it, a reminder that I

still needed to fix the hinge. The familiar scent of old air freshener and Lennox's leftover glitter spray drifted out. I tossed my bag into the passenger seat and tried not to think about wolves or claws or the word torn.

A few minutes later, I pulled up to Lennox's house and honked twice.

She burst out the front door like she'd been launched, backpack bouncing, hair wild, grin already in place. She slid into the seat and buckled up with a dramatic sigh.

"Sweet cheeks," she said, "I need a large caramel vanilla iced coffee. Want one? My treat."

"It would be my pleasure, honey buns."

We cracked up as I backed out of her driveway.

The drive to Coffee City was its own chaotic ritual. Lennox hijacked the music and blasted a playlist that swung between pop anthems and dramatic movie soundtracks. She sang every lyric with the confidence of someone auditioning for a show that didn't exist. She drummed her fingers on the dashboard like she was summoning a storm.

Coffee City smelled like heaven. Warm pastries, roasted beans, cinnamon drifting through the air like it owned the place. The barista already knew Lennox's order, which said everything about her caffeine dependency. She winked at us as she handed over the drinks, lowering her voice like she was sharing a secret.

"Stay safe out there."

After grabbing our iced coffees, we headed to school.

The moment we pulled into the parking lot, we felt the buzz. Students clustered in groups, whispering about the attacks. Some kept glancing toward the woods. Others acted like it was just another Tuesday. A few kids were already filming TikToks about the "wolf aesthetic," because apparently nothing was sacred.

Stone Academy rose ahead of us, tall and old and wrapped in ivy. The stained-glass windows caught the morning light, throwing colors across the courtyard. The building always

looked like it had secrets. The kind of place where you expected a raven to deliver a message or a ghost to peek from behind a curtain.

Inside, the lobby opened wide with a sweeping staircase and the hum of too many conversations happening at once. The game room buzzed with laughter and the clack of cards hitting tables. Students lounged on beanbags or scrolled through their phones like the world outside wasn't falling apart.

The second floor held the normal stuff. Science, Math, History, and something called Mystical Studies, which sounded like a teacher got bored and renamed Social Studies to feel special.

The third floor was Literature and Band. Books and brass instruments. Normal.

But the fourth floor...

The air shifted the moment we stepped onto it. Warmer. Thicker. Like the hallway was breathing.

Murals of wolves and dragons stretched across the walls. Lanterns flickered overhead. The class list read like someone had raided a fantasy novel.

Mythology.

Wolves.

Dragons.

Lycanthrope.

Shifter Studies.

Wyvern and Hatchling Abilities.

I stopped walking.

"Lennox," I whispered, "is this real?"

She stared at a door labeled Shifter Studies. "If a dragon walks out of one of these rooms, I'm transferring to online school."

Inside the classrooms, desks were arranged in circles and spirals. One room had a sand pit. Another had a nest big enough to sit in. A third had glowing runes on the walls like someone had tried to summon something and then chickened

out halfway through.

It didn't feel like a school hallway.

It felt like a threshold.

We didn't stay long on the fourth floor. The whole place felt like it was watching us, and neither of us wanted to find out why.

The cafeteria was its own chaotic universe. Greasy pizza, loud laughter, and lunch ladies who could silence an entire room with one shout. The smell of fries and mystery meat hung in the air like a permanent fog. Someone dropped a tray, and the whole room erupted into applause like it was a sporting event.

Lennox and I stepped out of the cafeteria still laughing about the bead-throwing incident from last year when the air shifted.

A breeze slipped through the hallway even though no doors were open.

The hairs on my arms rose.

And somewhere in the distance, faint but unmistakable, a howl threaded through the air.

Low.

Long.

Wrong.

It didn't sound like a normal wolf. It sounded intentional, like it was calling out to something. Or someone.

Lennox froze. "Tell me you heard that."

"I'm pretending I didn't."

Students paused, whispered, shrugged it off. A few exchanged nervous glances. One girl clutched her necklace like it was a talisman. A teacher poked her head out of a classroom, frowned, and shut the door again.

But I felt eyes on me.

A heavy, prickling sensation crawled across my skin, like someone was staring straight through me.

I turned and saw him.

Draven.

Tall. Dark hair. Broad shoulders. Expression unreadable.

He wasn't looking at anyone else.

Just me.

His eyes were sharp, focused, like he was trying to solve a puzzle only he could see. Something flickered across his face, recognition or confusion or warning, before he masked it again.

Lennox elbowed me. "Uh... Keeva? Why is the hottest guy in school staring at you like you're a math problem he can't solve?"

"I don't know."

My voice came out softer than I meant it to.

Before I could overthink it, Jaxx slid into view like he was stepping out of a music video, smirk locked in place. His hair was perfectly messy, his backpack slung over one shoulder like he'd practiced the pose in a mirror.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Stone," he said. "Playing HARD this year?"

I groaned. "Please stop saying that."

Lennox held up nine fingers. Rule nine. Don't let anyone be mean to the other.

She smiled sweetly. "Stone has a HARD surface and never cracks. Unlike some people's egos."

Jaxx clutched his chest dramatically. "Ouch."

Draven pushed off the lockers, jaw tight, and stepped between us like a silent wall. His presence shifted the air, not in a supernatural way but in a he's-not-messing-around way.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly.

My heart flipped. "Yeah. I'm fine."

But he didn't look convinced. His eyes scanned my face like he was checking for something. Fear or injury or recognition. I couldn't tell.

The PA crackled overhead.

"Students, please avoid the east woods entrance. Wildlife officers are investigating activity in the area."

Activity.

Right.

Draven and Jaxx exchanged a sharp, tense look. A silent conversation passed between them, one I wasn't invited to. Their shoulders stiffened at the same moment, like they were bracing for something.

Lennox tugged my sleeve. "Mythology class. Before we get eaten."

We climbed the stairs, and another howl echoed through the woods.

Closer.

Too close.

The sound vibrated through the walls, through the floor, through my ribs. It felt like it was aimed at me.

We slipped into Mythology class. Fairy lights. Incense. Desks in a circle. The room smelled like sage and old parchment, like someone had tried to summon a spirit and then opened a window halfway through.

Mrs. Alder stood in the center, silver hair braided with charms. Her eyes were sharp, alert, like she'd been expecting something.

"Today we begin our unit on wolves, dragons, and the ancient bloodlines that shaped them."

Before she could continue, the door creaked open.

Draven walked in.

Every girl straightened.

Every guy tensed.

Even Mrs. Alder paused.

His eyes found mine instantly.

Then Jaxx strolled in behind him, smirk in place, and dropped into the seat beside me.

"Miss me?" he asked.

"No."

A shadow moved outside the window.

Huge.

Dark.

Watching me.

A claw scraped down the glass.

SCREEEECH.

Students screamed.

Mrs. Alder whispered, “Not again...”

Draven stepped in front of me.

Jaxx stood too.

Lennox grabbed my hand.

The wolf outside didn’t blink.

Didn’t move.

Didn’t look away.

He stared at me.

Only me.

Mrs. Alder snapped, “Everyone to the Myth Lab. Now.”

Her voice cracked like a whip, sharp enough to slice through the panic. Chairs scraped. Papers flew. Students bolted toward the back door, tripping over backpacks and each other in their rush to get away from the window.

We ran.

The hallway outside felt colder, like the temperature had dropped ten degrees in seconds. The lights flickered overhead, buzzing faintly. Every footstep echoed too loudly, bouncing off the stone walls as if the building itself were listening.

Lennox’s hand was still gripping mine, her palm clammy. “Keeva,” she whispered, breathless, “that thing wasn’t normal.”

No kidding.

Behind us, another howl ripped through the halls, louder this time, closer, vibrating through the floor. It didn’t sound like it came from outside anymore.

It sounded like it was inside the building.

My heart slammed against my ribs.

Students shoved through the Myth Lab door, and Mrs. Alder slammed it shut behind us. The lock clicked into place with a metallic snap that echoed through the room. The Myth Lab was dimly lit, filled with glowing runes, cauldrons, puzzle

stations, and shelves of dusty props. It looked like a cross between a museum and a wizard's basement, the kind of room where you expected a forgotten spellbook to whisper your name. The air smelled like sage, old parchment, and something metallic. Fear or adrenaline. Maybe both.

Mrs. Alder pressed her back to the door, chest rising and falling in quick, uneven breaths. "Everyone stay calm," she said, though her voice trembled. "We've trained for emergencies."

Lennox whispered, "When? I must've missed the wolf-scratching-through-the-window drill."

A few students laughed, but the sound died fast, swallowed by the heavy silence pressing in around us.

Draven and Jaxx stood near the center of the room, both tense, both watching the door like they expected it to burst open. Their shoulders were squared, their stances grounded. Not scared. Ready.

Too ready.

Like they'd done this before.

I swallowed hard. "Whatever that thing was... animals don't act like that... right?"

My voice sounded small in the cavernous room.

Jaxx didn't answer.

Draven didn't either.

They exchanged another one of those silent looks, the kind that said they knew something the rest of us didn't. Something they weren't saying. Something they didn't want to say.

Mrs. Alder moved toward the center of the room, her hands shaking slightly as she adjusted the charms woven into her braid. "Everyone gather around the rune table. Stay together."

We shuffled closer, forming a loose circle around the glowing symbols etched into the stone surface. The runes pulsed faintly, casting soft blue light across our faces. The light flickered like it was reacting to our fear, brightening with every shaky breath.

Lennox leaned in close. “Keeva... why was it staring at you?”

“I don’t know.”

But I did know how it felt.

Like the wolf recognized me.

Like it had been looking for me.

Like it had found me.

A chill rippled down my spine.

Mrs. Alder cleared her throat. “This is likely a displaced animal reacting to environmental stress. Nothing more.”

No one believed her.

Not after the way the wolf had looked at me.

Not after the way it had scraped its claws down the glass like it wanted inside.

Not after the way the howls kept getting closer.

A loud thud slammed into the hallway wall outside.

Everyone jumped.

A second thud followed, heavier, angrier, and dust drifted from the ceiling. A few students whimpered. Someone whispered a prayer. Someone else whispered a curse.

Lennox whispered, “Nope. Absolutely not. I’m dropping out.”

Jaxx stepped closer to me, his voice low. “Stay behind us.”

“Us?” Lennox echoed. “Since when are you two a team?”

Draven didn’t look away from the door. “Since now.”

The room fell silent.

Even the runes seemed to dim, like they were holding their breath.

Another howl tore through the hallway so loud it rattled the jars on the shelves. A few toppled over, shattering on the floor. The scent of crushed herbs filled the air, sharp and earthy.

Mrs. Alder whispered something under her breath. A prayer or a spell. I couldn’t tell.

The door shuddered.

Once.

Twice.

Then everything went still.

The silence was worse than the noise. It pressed against my ears, thick and heavy, like the air itself was waiting.

We waited.

Seconds stretched.

No one breathed.

Finally, footsteps echoed down the hallway. Slow. Heavy. Deliberate. Not claws. Not paws.

Boots.

Human.

The tension in the room snapped like a rubber band.

Mrs. Alder exhaled shakily. "Everyone stay here."

She unlocked the door and cracked it open just enough to peek outside. The hallway light spilled in, pale and flickering.

A voice murmured something to her, low and urgent. I couldn't make out the words, but the tone was sharp. Serious. Like something had gone very wrong.

She nodded quickly, then shut the door again.

"It's safe," she said. "For now."

But her eyes told a different story.

She wasn't relieved.

She was terrified.

And she kept glancing at me.

Like the danger wasn't gone.

Like it wasn't outside.

Like it was following me.

A cold weight settled in my stomach. The kind that didn't fade with deep breaths or logic. The kind that whispered you're not imagining this.

The runes on the table flickered again, brighter this time, casting long shadows across the room. The shadows stretched toward me like they were reaching. I stepped back instinctively, bumping into Lennox.

"Okay," she whispered, "I don't like that. Why are the

lights doing that? Why are the runes doing that? Why is everything doing that?"

I didn't have an answer.

Draven moved closer, not touching me but close enough that I felt the shift in the air. Protective. Watchful. His jaw was tight, his eyes locked on the door like he expected it to explode inward.

Jaxx stood on my other side, arms crossed, expression sharper than usual. The smirk was gone. His eyes kept darting between me and the door, like he was calculating something.

Mrs. Alder paced near the shelves, her fingers brushing over jars and books like she was searching for something she hoped she wouldn't need. Her braid swung behind her, charms clinking softly.

The room felt smaller. Warmer. Like the walls were inching closer.

A soft hum rose from the rune table. The symbols glowed brighter, pulsing in a steady rhythm. Almost like a heartbeat.

Lennox grabbed my hand again. "Keeva, it's reacting to you."

"No it's not," I whispered, even though I felt it too. The warmth. The pull. The strange awareness crawling across my skin.

Mrs. Alder stopped pacing.

Her eyes locked on me.

Not scared of me.

Scared for me.

"Keeva," she said softly, "stay close to your friends. Do not leave this room unless I tell you."

My throat tightened. "Why?"

She hesitated.

Just for a second.

But it was enough.

"There are things in these woods," she said, "that do not behave like animals."

The room went silent.
Draven's shoulders tensed.
Jaxx's jaw clenched.
Lennox squeezed my hand so hard my fingers tingled.
Mrs. Alder stepped closer, her voice barely above a whisper. "And some of them recognize bloodlines."
My heart stuttered.
Bloodlines.
The word echoed in my head, heavy and wrong.
Before I could ask what she meant, the lights flickered again. The runes pulsed brighter. A low rumble vibrated through the floor, faint but unmistakable.
The wolf wasn't gone.
It was still out there.
Waiting.
Searching.
And somehow, I knew exactly who it was searching for.
Me.
The runes pulsed once more, brighter than before, then dimmed all at once like someone had blown out a candle. Mrs. Alder pressed a hand to her forehead, exhaling shakily.
"We need to move," she said. "All of you. Now."
Students exchanged confused looks.
"Move where?" Lennox asked.
"Out of the Lab," Mrs. Alder said. "We need to relocate until the halls are secured."
That word secured made my stomach twist.
Draven and Jaxx stepped forward at the same time, both tense, both watching the door like they expected claws to punch through it.
Mrs. Alder ushered us toward the back exit. "Stay together. Do not fall behind."
The hallway outside was dimmer than before, lights flickering overhead. The air felt colder, heavier, like something had passed through moments before we opened the door.

We hurried down the hall in a tight cluster, students whispering, tripping over each other, glancing at every shadow. Mrs. Alder kept glancing over her shoulder, her braid swinging, charms clinking softly.

Halfway down the corridor, a howl ripped through the building closer than ever.

Students screamed. Someone dropped their books. Lennox grabbed my arm so hard my fingers tingled.

Mrs. Alder didn't hesitate. "Back. Everyone back. To the Lab now!"

We spun around and ran.

The howl echoed again, vibrating through the floor. Draven and Jaxx flanked me without a word, guiding me faster, their shoulders rigid with something that felt like fear and something that felt like recognition.

We reached the Myth Lab door. Mrs. Alder shoved it open, waving everyone inside.

"Hurry!"

Students poured in. I stumbled through the doorway, heart pounding, breath sharp.

Mrs. Alder slammed the door behind us and locked it — the metal clicking like a warning.

The room felt smaller now. Darker. The runes flickered weakly, like they were tired.

Lennox whispered, "I hate this. I hate all of this."

I didn't answer.

Because the moment the lock clicked, the wolf howled again right outside the door.

And I knew, deep in my bones, that it wasn't howling for the class.

It was howling for me.

CHAPTER TWO

Hallway Boy

I wasn't ready to be back in this room. Not after the wolf. Not after the runes pulsed like they knew my name.

The Myth Lab was dimly lit, filled with glowing runes, cauldrons, puzzle stations, and shelves of dusty props. It looked like a cross between a museum and a wizard's basement, the kind of room where you expected a dusty spellbook to whisper your name. Mrs. Alder locked the door behind us so fast the metal clicked like a warning.

The room felt smaller with all of us crammed inside, the air thick with incense and fear. Shadows flickered across the walls from the rune-lamps, stretching and shrinking like they were alive. Every student stood stiff, shoulders tight, breaths shallow.

Cara shrieked, "Why are we LOCKING the door? The wolf is OUTSIDE!"

Her voice cracked, bouncing off the stone walls. A few students flinched. Someone whimpered. The panic was contagious; it spread like static, prickling across the room.

Mya crossed her arms. "Unless Keeva invited it."

Lennox spun around so fast her braid whipped over her shoulder. "Say that again."

Cara shrank back, but her eyes glittered with the kind of mean-girl confidence that came from never facing consequences. "I'm just saying! It stared at her like she was a steak!"

Jaxx muttered, "Not helping."

Draven shot him a look. "Neither are you."

Jaxx smirked. "Relax. I'm not the one who let it get this close."

Draven's jaw tightened. "He's not here for me."

Jaxx's smirk faded. "No. He's here for her."

My stomach dropped. The words hit harder than they should have, like someone had punched the air out of my lungs.

"Why me?"

Lennox snorted. "Because you smell like iced coffee and anxiety."

I elbowed her. "Not helping."

"I'm helping emotionally."

"You're really not."

Mrs. Alder clapped sharply. "Enough. Stations. Now."

Her voice cracked like a whip, snapping everyone into motion. Students scattered toward the puzzle tables, though no one looked eager to touch anything. The room buzzed with nervous energy, whispers, shuffling feet, and the metallic clink of cauldrons being bumped.

The first puzzle lit up with glowing runes. A riddle shimmered across the surface:

The moon sees truth,
the flame sees lies.

Only the chosen
can open the skies.

I frowned. "What does that even mean?"

Draven stepped closer, his voice low. "It means you go first."

"Why me?"

He hesitated. "Because you're good at riddles."

Lennox snorted. "Smooth."

Jaxx leaned against the wall. "He's terrible at lying."

I stepped toward the runes, and the symbols flared brighter, pulsing like a heartbeat. The glow washed over my hands, warm and strangely familiar, like stepping into sunlight after being cold for too long.

Mrs. Alder inhaled sharply, her hand flying to her chest.

Cara gasped. "Why is it glowing like that?!"

Mya pointed. "It didn't do that for anyone else!"

Lennox whispered, "Keeva... that's weird."

"I didn't do anything," I said.

Draven's voice was barely audible. "You don't have to."

Before I could ask what that meant, a heavy THUD

slammed into the Myth Lab door.

The entire room jolted.

Students screamed. Chairs scraped. A cauldron rolled across the floor and clanged against the wall. Someone dropped a stack of rune cards, and they scattered like startled birds.

Cara shrieked, "IT'S GOING TO EAT US!"

But the moment everyone looked away, she leaned toward Mya and whispered, "Watch it be sniffing out Keeva's shampoo."

Mya snorted. "Coconut-vanilla wolf bait."

Serena added, "She should switch brands."

They giggled quietly, too quietly.

Lennox glared. "I can hear you."

Cara widened her eyes innocently. "We're just scared!"

"Terrified!" Mya added.

"Shaking!" Serena clutched her chest.

But the moment Lennox turned away, they smirked again, synchronized, practiced, wrong.

Lennox muttered, "Rule #9 is begging to be used."

I whispered, "Later. Preferably when we're not being hunted."

She nodded. "Fine. But I'm storing this in my emotional vault."

The wolf sniffed loudly, slowly, and deliberately. A deep inhale that echoed through the crack in the door like it was memorizing the air.

My heart hammered. "Why is it sniffing like that?"

Draven didn't answer.

Jaxx didn't either.

Both boys stared at the door like it was about to explode.

Lennox whispered, "Keeva... I don't like this."

"Same," I whispered back. "Ten out of ten would not recommend."

She squeezed my hand. "If it breaks in, I'm throwing my

iced coffee at it.”

“That won’t help.”

“It’ll confuse it.”

“Lennox.”

“Confusion buys time.”

Before I could argue, the wolf huffed a sharp, frustrated exhale that fogged the crack beneath the door.

Then, without warning, it turned and bolted. The sound of claws scraping tile faded down the hallway, leaving nothing but silence.

Cara whispered, “Did it leave?”

Mya blinked. “Just like that?”

Serena frowned. “Why?”

Lennox whispered, “Keeva, that was weird.”

“I know.”

But Draven and Jaxx exchanged a look sharp, tense, loaded that said they knew something I didn’t. Something they weren’t saying. Something they didn’t want to say.

Mrs. Alder exhaled shakily. “Everyone, remain calm. The danger has passed.”

Her voice didn’t match her eyes. Her hands trembled as she smoothed her skirt, and she kept glancing at the door like she expected it to burst open again. The runes on the nearest table flickered, dimming and brightening like they were reacting to the tension in the room.

Cara muttered, “Because it found something better to chase.”

Mya snickered. “Or someone.”

Serena smirked. “Maybe it smelled fear.”

Lennox turned slowly. “Say it again. I dare you.”

They shut up instantly, but the smugness didn’t leave their faces. They whispered among themselves, shoulders pressed together, eyes darting toward me like I was a walking punchline.

Mrs. Alder clapped her hands. “Back to your stations. We’re continuing.”

Cara groaned loudly. "Seriously?! After THAT?!"

But under her breath: "At least it didn't mess up my hair."

I shook my head. "They're unbelievable."

Lennox whispered, "They're lucky I'm in a good mood."

I nudged her. "You're never in a good mood."

"Exactly. They should be terrified."

The tension in the room didn't fade; it shifted. It settled into the corners, into the shadows, into the spaces between us. Every student moved more slowly and quietly, as if they were afraid of drawing attention. Even the cauldrons seemed to rattle less, as if the room itself was holding its breath.

Draven stepped closer, his voice softer than before. "Are you okay?"

His eyes searched mine, not in a dramatic, romantic way but in a serious way, like he was checking for something specific. Something he expected to find.

"Just confused."

Jaxx shoved his hands in his pockets. "He didn't attack. That's new."

Draven's jaw tightened. "It means something."

Jaxx nodded. "Yeah. And I don't like it."

"What does it mean?" I asked.

Both boys froze.

Not like they didn't hear me.

Like they did and didn't want to answer.

Mrs. Alder cut in quickly. "It means wolves are unpredictable. Now puzzles."

Her tone was too sharp, too fast, too rehearsed. She didn't want us asking questions. She didn't want us thinking. She wanted us distracted.

But Draven's eyes stayed on me, unreadable.

And Jaxx stayed in the hallway where the wolf had vanished, his jaw clenched like he was holding back a truth that would change everything.

The room buzzed with nervous whispers as students

returned to their stations. The runes glowed faintly, casting soft blue light across the tables. The air felt heavier now, like the wolf had left something behind: a presence, a warning, a question.

Something had shifted.

Something big.

And I had no idea I was standing in the center of it.

Mrs. Alder moved to the next puzzle station, her hands shaking slightly as she adjusted the glowing crystals. "This exercise," she said, "is meant to test your intuition. Your ability to sense patterns. Your connection to"

She stopped abruptly, catching herself.

"to the material."

Lennox raised an eyebrow. "Smooth save."

Mrs. Alder ignored her.

The second puzzle lit up, revealing a swirling pattern of symbols that rearranged themselves every few seconds. Students murmured, trying to make sense of it.

Cara groaned dramatically. "Ugh, this is impossible."

Mya flicked her hair. "It's a puzzle, not rocket science."

Serena added, "Just match the shapes, genius."

But none of them stepped closer.

They hovered behind the table, arms crossed, waiting for someone else to try first.

Lennox nudged me. "You want to do it?"

"No," I whispered. "I want to go home, hide under a blanket, and pretend wolves don't exist."

"Valid."

But the puzzle pulsed again, this time brighter, and the symbols shifted into a pattern that looked eerily like a moon phase chart.

Draven noticed too. "It's reacting to you."

"Stop saying that," I whispered.

"I'm not trying to freak you out."

"You're doing a terrible job."

Jaxx leaned in. "He means it's reacting to your energy."

"My what?"

"Your... presence."

"That's not better."

Lennox whispered, "I swear, if you turn out to be some chosen-one prophecy girl, I'm going to need a snack break."

I elbowed her again.

But the puzzle kept glowing.

And the glow kept pointing toward me.

Mrs. Alder cleared her throat. "Keeva, why don't you?"

"No," I said quickly.

But the symbols pulsed again, brighter, like they were calling me.

Draven stepped closer. "You don't have to touch it. Just stand near it."

"That sounds worse."

"It's safer."

"That also sounds worse."

Jaxx shrugged. "We can stand with you."

Lennox added, "And if it explodes, we die together. Friendship."

I groaned. "You're all terrible."

But I stepped forward anyway.

Because the puzzle wasn't going to stop glowing until I did.

The puzzle pulsed again, brighter, sharper, as if waiting for me to make a move. The symbols rearranged themselves into a pattern that almost looked like a constellation, then shifted again into something more abstract. The glow washed over my hands, warm and strangely familiar, like déjà vu wrapped in moonlight.

Lennox whispered, "Okay, that's officially creepy."

"Agreed," I murmured.

But I stepped closer anyway.

The moment I did, the runes flared not violently, but with purpose as they recognized me. Like they'd been waiting.

Mrs. Alder stiffened. "Everyone, give her space."

Cara scoffed. "Why? So she can explode?"

Mya snickered. "Honestly, it'd be entertaining."

Serena added, "Ten bucks says she cries."

Lennox turned slowly. "Ten bucks says you stop talking."

They shut up instantly.

I swallowed hard and reached out, not touching the puzzle, just hovering my hand above it. The glow intensified, swirling into a soft spiral of light that rose from the table like mist.

Gasps rippled through the room.

"What is that?" someone whispered.

"Is it supposed to do that?"

"No way. No way!"

Mrs. Alder stepped forward, her voice trembling.

"Everyone, stay calm. This is unusual, but not dangerous."

Jaxx muttered, "Debatable."

Draven didn't speak. He watched the light, his expression unreadable, but his posture was tense, as if he were ready to move at the slightest hint of trouble.

The spiral of light drifted upward, hovering between my hand and the puzzle. It shimmered, shifting colors silver, blue, pale gold before collapsing back into the runes with a soft pulse.

The room fell silent.

Completely silent.

Even Cara didn't breathe.

Mrs. Alder cleared her throat. "Well. That was unexpected."

Lennox whispered, "Keeva what did you do?"

"Nothing," I said. "I didn't even touch it."

Draven stepped closer. "That's the point."

I blinked. "What?"

He opened his mouth to explain, but Mrs. Alder cut him off sharply.

"That's enough for today. Everyone, step away from the puzzles."

Groans and whispers filled the room, but no one argued.

Students backed away from the tables like they were afraid the runes might jump up and bite them.

Mrs. Alder moved toward the door, unlocking it with a shaky hand. "We'll resume tomorrow. For now, return to your regular classes."

Cara muttered, "Finally."

Mya added, "About time."

Serena flicked her hair. "I need air."

Lennox rolled her eyes. "You need personality."

We filed out of the Myth Lab, the hallway feeling colder than before. The lights buzzed faintly overhead, and the shadows seemed longer, stretched thin across the floor like something had dragged them out.

Students whispered as they passed me.

"That was crazy."

"Why did it glow like that?"

"Did you see the light thing?"

"Do you think she did it on purpose?"

"Maybe she's cursed."

"Maybe she's dangerous."

Lennox glared at anyone who looked too long. "Keep walking."

Draven and Jaxx followed a few steps behind us, both silent, both tense. They weren't talking to each other, but they weren't ignoring each other either. It was like they were listening for something and waiting for something.

Watching me.

I hated how obvious it felt.

When we reached the end of the hallway, Draven finally spoke.

"Keeva."

I turned. "Yeah?"

He hesitated, actually hesitated, like he was choosing his words carefully.

"Stay close to people today. Don't walk anywhere alone."

My stomach tightened. “Why?”

Jaxx answered instead. “Because wolves don’t act like that unless something’s wrong.”

“Something like what?”

They exchanged another one of those silent looks.

Draven said nothing.

Jaxx said nothing.

Lennox stepped between us. “Okay, no. Someone needs to start explaining things before I start throwing iced coffee again.”

Jaxx smirked. “You wouldn’t.”

She raised her cup. “Try me.”

Draven exhaled slowly. “It’s complicated.”

“It always is,” Lennox muttered.

I crossed my arms. “Try anyway.”

Draven looked at me, really looked at me, and something flickered in his eyes. Not fear. Not anger.

Recognition.

“Keeva,” he said quietly, “wolves don’t sniff like that unless they’re tracking something.”

“Tracking what?” I whispered.

“You,” Jaxx said.

The hallway felt suddenly too small.

Too quiet.

Too cold.

“Why me?” I asked again, softer this time.

Neither boy answered.

Not because they didn’t know.

But because they did.

And they weren’t ready to tell me.

Lennox grabbed my arm. “Come on. We’re going to class before I lose my mind.”

I let her pull me away, but I glanced back once.

Draven was still watching me.

Jaxx too.

Both of them were standing in the hallway like guards posted at a door only they could see.

Something had shifted.

Something big.

And I had no idea I was standing in the center of it.

The hallway felt too bright after the dim glow of the Myth Lab. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, flickering just enough to make everything feel off. Students hurried past us, their conversations sharp and frantic, as if the whole school was vibrating with leftover fear.

Lennox tugged me forward. "Come on. If we stand here any longer, someone's going to start a rumor that you're secretly a wolf whisperer."

"Please don't manifest that into existence."

"No promises."

We walked, but my mind stayed behind in the Myth Lab. The glowing runes. The spiral of light. The way the symbols had shifted like they recognized me. The way Mrs. Alder had looked at me like she was seeing something she didn't want to see.

The way the wolf had sniffed the door like it was searching for my heartbeat.

A chill crawled up my spine.

Lennox noticed. "You're doing the face."

"What face?"

"The thinking face. The one that means you're spiraling."

"I'm not spiraling."

"You're absolutely spiraling."

I opened my mouth to argue, but a group of freshmen rushed past us, whispering loudly.

"That's her."

"The girl from the Lab."

"The one the wolf wanted."

My stomach twisted. "Great. I'm a school cryptid now."

Lennox looped her arm through mine. "At least you're a

cute cryptid.”

“That doesn’t help.”

“It should.”

We turned the corner, and the hallway stretched long and empty ahead of us. Too empty. The kind of empty that made your footsteps echo louder than they should. The kind of empty that made you feel watched.

I slowed. “Do you feel that?”

Lennox frowned. “Feel what?”

“The air. It’s weird.”

She inhaled. “Smells like old books and fear.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

But she wasn’t wrong.

A soft thud echoed behind us.

We both froze.

Another thud. Closer.

Lennox whispered, “Please tell me that’s a janitor.”

I turned slowly.

It wasn’t a janitor.

It was a boy.

Tall. Lean. Dark hair falling into his eyes. He stood at the far end of the hallway, half in shadow, half in light, watching us with an expression I couldn’t read. Not angry. Not curious. Something else. Something sharper.

Lennox whispered, “Who is that?”

“I don’t know.”

He didn’t move.

He didn’t blink.

He just watched.

A strange pressure

CHAPTER THREE

Spell Incident

After the chaos in the Myth Lab, the rest of the morning felt... normal.

Too normal.

Like the universe was trying a little too hard to pretend nothing had happened.

The hallways buzzed with the usual noise: lockers slamming, sneakers squeaking, people yelling across the hall about homework they definitely didn't do. Teachers rushed past with stacks of papers, and the smell of cafeteria pizza drifted through the vents like a warning. Everything looked the same.

But I didn't feel the same.

Lennox did her best to distract me, and honestly, she succeeded. She always did. That was the thing about us: we balanced each other without even trying.

I met Lennox on our fifth-grade field trip. We were assigned as partners on the bus and again as we wandered the zoo, pointing at animals and pretending we knew more than the tour guide. By the end of the day, we were glued together like two stickers that refused to peel apart.

That afternoon, we created our sacred Rules of Friendship, the ten commandments we still quoted like dramatic old ladies:

1. Share whenever possible.
2. Be happy, not jealous.
3. Make up within two hours after a fight.
4. Keep our secrets a secret.
5. Never judge, no matter what.
6. Friends before boys.
7. Listen to each other.
8. Stay friends for life.
9. Don't let anyone be mean to the other.
10. Be brutally honest if the outfit is hideous.

We'd mostly lived by them. Mostly.

Lennox always said, "I like clothes that hide my figure."

Comfort over everything.”

She was tall and gorgeous, with reddish-brown hair that fell in perfect waves and eyes as blue as polished crystal. I was her opposite in coloring golden-blonde hair, green eyes like Saint Augustine grass—but we were the same height and size, which meant our closets were basically communal property. Same style. Same favorite colors. Same everything.

Now we were seniors, and I still hadn’t decided what I wanted to do with my life. Veterinarian? Lawyer? My mom, a surgeon who loved reminding me she “knew her calling at ten,” kept pushing me toward medicine.

“Whatever you choose, I’m choosing the same field,” Lennox said as we walked to class.

“We’re taking Intro to Law this year. Maybe it’ll help me decide.”

She grinned. “Perfect. I like animals, and I’d make a great defense attorney. That way we don’t break any friendship rules.”

We were both in AP classes, college-level courses that made us feel smart and exhausted at the same time, the kind of classes where you questioned your life choices at least twice a week.

Lennox stopped to answer a friend’s question about an assignment she missed, so I kept walking.

“Keeva Stone!” she yelled, jogging up to me.

“Why’d you leave me?”

“I needed to get to my locker before the hallway turned into a mosh pit.”

My locker squeaked like a dying robot when I opened it.

“Girl, you need WD-40 on that thing,” Lennox laughed.

She checked her watch. “We need to go. Law Studies waits for no one.”

I tried to shake off the lingering weirdness from earlier: the wolf at the window, the sniffing under the door, the way it left like it changed its mind. Nope. Not thinking about that.

Mrs. Whittle's class was the highlight of our day, with dramatic debates, wild topics, and the kind of energy that made you forget you were in school.

But before we could reach our seats, Jaxx intercepted us.

"Stone, you playing HARD this year?" he grinned.

I groaned. "Please stop. Ever since you started saying that, every guy repeats it."

"Oh? This line?" he said louder. "No need to play HARD, Stone!"

A few students snickered.

"Hey, Stone, acting HARD again?" Rafe joked.

"Don't play HARD, Stone. You love the attention," Cara added with a sour look.

Lennox held up nine fingers. Rule #9: Don't let anyone be mean to the other.

Then she smirked. "Stone has a HARD surface and never breaks easily. Remember that, sweet cheeks."

She walked to her seat like she owned the room.

Mrs. Whittle clapped her hands. "That's enough. Everyone sit. We have a lot to cover."

We opened our brand-new textbooks to Chapter 1: Dragons vs. Hatchlings.

I blinked. "What in the world is this?"

Lennox shrugged. "Let's have some fun today."

Mrs. Whittle paced dramatically. "Why do dragons have color on their scales?"

I raised my hand. "Their scales represent rare elemental powers and ancient lineage. They glow under the moon and shimmer when they find their mates. It's like a language of dragon love."

A few students murmured "oooooh."

Jaxx immediately jumped in. "Why did the dragon refuse to play cards? Because he was afraid of the knights!"

Groans and laughter filled the room.

Mrs. Whittle shook her head, smiling. "Alright, Jaxx."

Enough.”

Then she leaned forward. “If a dragon had a phone, which apps would it use?”

Lennox blurted, “Do dragons have Wi-Fi?”

The room erupted.

We went around the class:

- Me: “Fire-Breathing Flame App.”
- Serena: “Treasure Tracker.”
- Finn: “Dragon Language Translator.”
- Cara: “Friendship Forge.”
- Kael: “Dragon Quest Lodge.”
- Ronan: “Dragon’s Chief App.”
- Mya: “News App.”

The bell rang, and Draven stood with a sigh. “The whole dragon thing is done. I’m out.”

Mrs. Whittle called after us, “Read the next chapter! Quiz tomorrow, just kidding!”

But the second we stepped into the hallway, Draven grabbed Jaxx by the arm and pulled him aside.

His voice dropped to a low, dangerous tone. “Pack lands and Keeva are off limits.”

The words hit the air like a spark in a dry forest, sharp, hot, and ready to ignite something bigger. Draven’s posture shifted, shoulders squared, jaw tight, eyes locked on Jaxx like he was daring him to argue.

Jaxx smirked. “If those are the rules, I’ll just have to be creative.”

“Oh, really?” Draven arched a brow. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“If pack lands are off limits, that just makes them more interesting,” Jaxx said. “But if any of you rogues step foot there, you’re dead meat. Got it.”

The hallway felt suddenly too small, too quiet. Students passing by slowed down, sensing the tension even if they didn’t understand it. A few whispered. A few stared. Most pretended

not to notice.

Lennox and I stepped out of the classroom just in time to see the tension crackling between them like static.

They stopped arguing the second they saw us.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Draven cleared his throat. “We were just... uh...”

“Debating whether pineapple belongs on pizza,” Jaxx said smoothly.

Lennox laughed. “Seriously? That debate again.”

Both boys stomped off in opposite directions. Draven was heading toward the east wing, Jaxx toward the stairs, like magnets repelling each other.

I shook my head. “Boys will be boys.”

Lennox hooked her arm through mine. “Come on. Next class awaits.”

We walked down the hallway, weaving through clusters of students. The building hummed with its usual chaos: lockers slamming, someone yelling about a missing binder, a group of freshmen sprinting like they were late for the Olympics. But underneath it all, something felt off.

Like the air was thicker.

Like the shadows were watching.

Like the wolf from earlier had left a piece of itself behind.

“And just like that,” Lennox said, “the day pretended to be normal again.”

But it wasn’t.

Not really.

Because every time I blinked, I saw the wolf’s eyes staring through the window.

Every time I inhaled, I remembered the sound of it sniffing under the Myth Lab door.

Every time I exhaled, I felt the weight of Draven and Jaxx’s silence.

We reached the Spell Lab, a room that always smelled like lavender, chalk dust, and whatever potion someone spilled last

week. Shelves lined the walls, filled with jars of herbs, crystals, powders, and ingredients that definitely weren't FDA-approved.

The lights flickered as we walked in.

Lennox nudged me. "If this room explodes, I'm blaming you."

"Why me?"

"Because weird things keep happening around you today."

"That's not my fault."

"Tell that to the wolf."

I groaned. "Please don't bring up the wolf."

"Fine. I'll bring up Draven instead."

"Lennox."

"What? He was staring at you like you were a limited-edition collector's item."

I covered my face. "Stop."

She grinned. "Never."

Students filed into the Spell Lab, chatting, laughing, comparing notes. The room buzzed with energy, the good kind, the chaotic kind, the kind that made you forget the world outside was falling apart.

But then the door opened.

And Draven walked in.

The room didn't go silent, but it shifted. People straightened. A few girls whispered. A few guys stiffened. Even the air felt different, like it recognized him.

He didn't look at anyone.

Except me.

Again.

Lennox whispered, "Oh, this is getting juicy."

"Stop narrating my life."

"No."

Jaxx walked in right behind him, smirk in place, swagger dialed up to eleven. He shot Draven a look not hostile, but competitive, like they were keeping score.

And I was the scoreboard.

Great.

Mrs. Briar, our Spell Lab teacher, clapped her hands. "Everyone, take your seats! Today we're working with elemental reactions, so please try not to set anything on fire."

A few students laughed.

A few students looked nervous.

A few students, specifically Jaxx, looked excited.

Lennox and I took our usual seats near the middle. Draven sat two rows behind us. Jaxx sat directly across the aisle, spinning a crystal vial between his fingers like he was auditioning for a magician's guild.

Mrs. Briar passed out small bowls filled with shimmering powder. "This is moonstone dust. When mixed with heat, it reacts based on your energy signature."

Lennox raised a brow. "Energy signature?"

Mrs. Briar smiled. "Think of it like emotional fingerprints."

"Oh," Lennox said. "So mine will explode."

"Probably," I whispered.

She elbowed me.

Mrs. Briar continued, "When you place your hand over the bowl, the dust will respond. Color, movement, intensity, all of it reflects your internal state."

Jaxx leaned over. "Stone, yours is going to burst into flames."

"Why?"

"Because you're playing HARD this year."

I groaned. "Please stop saying that."

Draven muttered from behind us, "He's not going to stop."

Mrs. Briar clapped again. "Hands over your bowls, everyone. Let's begin."

Students leaned forward, palms hovering above the shimmering dust.

Lennox's bowl glowed bright blue, calm, steady, and confident.

Mine

Mine didn't glow.

It erupted.

A burst of silver light shot upward, swirling like a miniature tornado before collapsing back into the bowl with a soft crackle.

The entire room gasped.

Mrs. Briar froze. "Oh, my."

Draven stood.

Jaxx stopped smirking.

Lennox whispered, "Keeva what was that?"

I stared at the bowl, heart pounding.

"I don't know."

But Draven did.

I could see it in his eyes.

And whatever he knew

He wasn't ready to say it.

The bowl kept crackling softly, little sparks of silver dancing across the surface like static caught in moonlight. Students leaned in, whispering, staring, trying to pretend they weren't staring. Even Mrs. Briar looked as if she were trying to decide whether to take notes or run.

Draven stood slowly, his chair scraping the floor.

Jaxx stopped spinning his vial.

Lennox's mouth fell open.

"Keeva" she whispered. "That wasn't normal."

I swallowed. "I know."

But the bowl wasn't done.

The moonstone dust swirled again, not violently, but deliberately forming a spiral that rose from the bowl like a tiny galaxy. It hovered in the air, shimmering, pulsing, then dissolved into a soft glow that drifted toward my hand.

I jerked back.

The glow followed.

Mrs. Briar gasped. "Oh, dear."

“Oh, dear?” Lennox hissed. “Try ‘WHAT IS HAPPENING?’”

Students backed away from their tables, chairs screeching across the floor. A few ducked behind desks. Someone whispered, “Is she cursed?” Another said, “Is she chosen?” Another muttered, “I knew she was weird.”

Lennox snapped, “Rule #9, people! Back off!”

The glow faded at last, settling back into the bowl like nothing had happened.

But something had happened.

Something big.

Mrs. Briar cleared her throat, trying to regain control. “Everyone remain calm. Moonstone dust reacts differently for each student. Keeva’s reaction was strong.”

“Strong?” Cara scoffed. “It tried to leave the bowl!”

Mya added, “It chased her hand!”

Serena whispered loudly, “Maybe she’s part dragon.”

Lennox rolled her eyes. “Maybe you’re part annoying.”

Mrs. Briar clapped her hands. “Back to your seats! We still have a lesson to finish.”

But no one moved.

Not until Draven spoke.

“It’s fine,” he said quietly. “She’s fine.”

The room stilled.

His voice wasn’t loud, but it carried steady, certain, grounding. Students slowly returned to their seats, though they kept glancing at me like I might sprout wings or breathe fire.

Jaxx leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. “Well. That was dramatic.”

“Shut up,” I muttered.

He grinned. “You love the attention.”

“I really don’t.”

“Sure you don’t.”

Draven shot him a look. “Jaxx.”

“What? I’m just saying.”

“Don’t.”

Jaxx smirked but didn’t push it.

Mrs. Briar resumed the lesson, though her hands shook slightly as she demonstrated the next spell. Students followed along, but the energy in the room had shifted. Every flick of a wand, every spark of magic, every shimmer of dust made people flinch.

And every time something glowed, someone looked at me.

By the time the bell rang, I felt like I’d been microwaved.

Students rushed out of the room, whispering, glancing back, and nudging each other. Lennox grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the hallway.

“Okay,” she said, “we need to talk about that.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Well, too bad. Because that was not normal, that was not even in the same ZIP code as normal.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“No.”

She sighed dramatically. “Great. Love that for us.”

We stepped into the hallway, and Draven was already there.

Waiting.

He didn’t pretend he wasn’t. He didn’t pretend he just happened to be passing by. He stood with his hands in his pockets, shoulders tense, eyes locked on me like he’d been replaying the bowl explosion in his head.

“Keeva,” he said quietly. “We need to”

Jaxx appeared out of nowhere, slinging an arm around Draven’s shoulders like they were best friends instead of two seconds away from fighting earlier.

“Nope,” Jaxx said. “We’re not doing this in the hallway.”

Draven shrugged him off. “Jaxx—”

“Nope,” Jaxx repeated. “Not here. Not now.”

Lennox crossed her arms. “Okay, what is going on with you

two? Because you're acting weird. And not your usual weird. Extra weird."

Jaxx smirked. "We're always weird."

Draven ignored him. "Keeva, meet me after school."

My stomach flipped. "Why?"

"Because you need answers."

Jaxx leaned in. "Or you could meet me after school instead. I give better answers."

"No, you give chaos," Lennox said.

"Chaos is fun."

"Not today."

Draven stepped closer, lowering his voice. "Please."

The word hit harder than it should have.

I nodded before I could stop myself. "Okay."

Jaxx groaned. "Of course."

Draven exhaled, relieved. "I'll find you."

Then he walked away fast, purposeful, like he had somewhere important to be.

Jaxx watched him go, then turned to me with a grin that didn't reach his eyes. "You're in deep now, Stone."

I swallowed. "What does that mean?"

He winked. "You'll see."

Then he disappeared into the crowd.

Lennox grabbed my shoulders. "Okay. No. Absolutely not. You are not meeting mysterious wolf-adjacent boys alone after school."

"I won't be alone."

"You better not be."

I sighed. "Lennox"

"Nope. I'm coming. End of discussion."

And just like that, the day pretended to be normal again.

But it wasn't.

Not even close.

A strange pressure settled in the air, the kind that made the tiny hairs on my arms lift. It wasn't loud or dramatic. It was

subtle, like the hallway itself was holding its breath.

Students rushed past us, but their voices sounded distant, muffled, like someone had turned the world's volume down. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, flickering just enough to make the shadows stretch long across the floor.

Lennox glanced around. "Okay, why does it feel like we just stepped into a horror movie trailer?"

"I don't know," I whispered.

But I did know.

Something was watching.

Not the wolf.

Not Draven or Jaxx.

Something else.

Something I couldn't name.

We walked toward our next class, but the pressure followed, brushing against my shoulders like a cold draft. Every time I blinked, a strange pressure settled in the air, the kind that made the tiny hairs on my arms lift. It wasn't loud or dramatic. It was subtle, like the hallway itself was holding its breath.

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But I did know.

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Not the wolf.

Not Draven or Jaxx.

Something else.

Something I couldn't name.

We walked toward our next class, but the pressure followed, brushing against my shoulders like a cold draft. Every time I blinked, the hallway seemed a little darker. Every time I

exhaled, the air felt a little heavier.

Lennox slowed. "Keeva, look."

I turned.

At the far end of the hallway, a figure stood completely still. Not moving. Not talking. Just standing. The shadows clung to him like they didn't want to let go. His face was hidden, but I felt his eyes on me.

Watching.

Waiting.

The pressure tightened around my ribs.

"Who is that?" Lennox whispered.

"I don't know."

He didn't step forward. He didn't step back. He just stayed there, like a statue carved out of shadow.

A group of freshmen ran between us, laughing loudly, and when they passed

He was gone.

Vanished.

Like he'd never been there at all.

Lennox grabbed my arm. "Nope. Absolutely not. I'm filing a complaint with the universe."

I tried to laugh, but it came out thin. "Maybe it was just a student."

"Students don't teleport."

"Maybe he walked away."

"Without making a sound? In this school? Keeva, people here stomp like elephants."

She wasn't wrong.

I rubbed my arms, trying to shake off the chill. "Let's just get to class."

We hurried down the hallway, but the pressure didn't fade. It followed us like a shadow that didn't belong to either of us. By the time we reached the classroom door, my heartbeat felt too loud in my ears.

Lennox stopped me before I walked in. "Hey. Look at me."

I did.

“You’re okay,” she said firmly. “You’re freaked out, but you’re okay. And you’re not dealing with this alone.”

“I know.”

“Good. Because if something tries to eat you, I’m throwing myself at it like a dramatic movie sacrifice.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“It should be.”

I smiled weakly. “You’re ridiculous.”

“And you love me.”

“Unfortunately.”

She bumped her shoulder against mine. “Come on. Let’s survive one more class.”

We stepped inside, and the pressure finally loosened, like whatever had been watching us couldn’t cross the threshold. The room felt normal again. Loud. Bright. Safe.

But the feeling didn’t leave my chest.

Something had changed today.

Something had shifted.

Something was coming.

And deep down, I knew the wolf wasn’t the beginning.

It was the warning.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Warning

Keeva bounced down the stairs into the kitchen, grabbing a quick bite before heading out. Her mother leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“How was school, sweetheart?”

“It was good.” Keeva smiled, reaching for her bagel. “We should probably start talking about colleges soon. You know... figuring out where I want to go.”

Her mother’s eyes lit up. “When I was your age, I was already thinking about medicine.”

Keeva laughed softly. “I’m not sure I want to be in the operating room like you. I want to figure out what fits me, Mom.”

“That makes perfect sense,” her mother said, nodding. “Whatever path you choose, I’m here to help you find it.”

“Thanks, Mom. That means a lot.”

The kitchen felt warm and familiar, sunlight spilling across the counter, the faint smell of coffee lingering in the air, the hum of the refrigerator filling the quiet. It was the kind of morning that made everything feel safe. Normal. Like wolves and glowing runes and boys with secrets didn’t exist.

“So,” her mother continued, “what do you have planned for the weekend?”

“Well,” Keeva said, “I was thinking we could have a mother-daughter day. Do something fun.”

“Absolutely. That sounds wonderful. Maybe we could try that new café and have a picnic in the park?”

Keeva snorted. “No picnics. Let’s avoid any surprises and animal encounters.”

Her mom raised a brow. “Okay, fair point.”

“So café it is?” Keeva asked.

“Yeah, too many attacks have been happening for my liking.”

“Okay, okay, no picnics,” Keeva said, laughing. “Café

adventure it is.”

“Good,” her mom said with a teasing smile. “I don’t need any wild creatures chasing us while we’re trying to relax.”

“Fair enough.” Keeva shook her head, smiling. “Then the café it is. And maybe we can walk around somewhere with no wildlife.”

“Perfect.” Her mom grabbed her keys. “Let’s make it a little adventure just the two of us.”

Keeva slipped on her shoes, her smile softening. “I like that. It’s been a while since we’ve had a day like this.”

Her mom opened the front door. “Come on, sweetheart. If we leave now, we’ll beat the rush.”

Keeva tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Alright, no picnics. But if that café is crowded again, I’m voting we grab pastries and wander.”

“I heard they added a whole new menu section,” her mom said as she locked the door. “Something with those fancy little pastries you like.”

Keeva fell into step beside her, the cool air brushing her cheeks. “I’m just hoping they still have those cinnamon swirls. Last time they sold out in like five minutes.”

Her mom gave her a sideways look, amusement in her voice. “If they’re out of cinnamon swirls, we’re staging a polite protest. Or at least giving them a very disappointed look.”

Keeva snorted. “Mom, your ‘disappointed look’ could shut down an entire bakery.”

Her mom gasped dramatically. “Excuse me. My disappointed look is a finely honed parenting tool. It has power.”

“Oh, I know,” Keeva said, nudging her. “Half the time you were trying not to laugh while using it.”

Her mom narrowed her eyes playfully. “Well, someone had to keep you, kids, in line. And it worked, didn’t it?”

Keeva rolled her eyes with a grin. “Please. Half the time, you were barely holding it together.”

Her mom gave her a sideways glance, the corner of her mouth lifting. “Maybe. But you always made it hard not to laugh.”

Keeva’s steps slowed for a moment, her smile softening. “You always did,” she said quietly. “Even when I was being a lot.”

Her mother’s expression gentled. “Hey. You were never too much. Just full of life. I like that about you.”

At the red light, she reached over and gave Keeva’s hand a quick squeeze. “You were figuring yourself out. That’s what growing up is. I just tried to keep up.”

Keeva hugged her, letting out a breath that was half laugh, half relief. “Well... you did a decent job. I turned out alright.”

Her mom laughed under her breath. “Alright, alright. You turned out more than all right.” She gave Keeva a sideways look. “Though I’m not sure I can take credit for all of it.”

Keeva raised an eyebrow. “Oh, so now you’re being humble? Should I be writing this down? This feels historic.”

Her mom bumped her gently. “You did more than ‘alright,’ Keeva. You grew into someone I’m really proud of.”

Keeva blinked, caught off guard. Her throat tightened before she covered it with a crooked smile. “You’re gonna make me all mushy before my cinnamon swirl. That should be illegal.”

Her mom smiled. “Mushy is part of the job description. Besides, if a little affection takes you down before a sugar rush, that’s on you, not me.”

“Emotional strength training,” her mom added with a smirk. “Builds endurance.”

Keeva snorted. “Great. So this is like... cardio for my feelings.”

“Exactly. You’ll thank me when you’re emotionally ripped. Look at you now, practically an emotional Olympian.”

Keeva put a hand to her chest. “An Olympian? Should I start giving motivational speeches? Sign autographs? Do I need

a cape?”

“A cape would be fitting,” her mom said. “Though knowing you, you’d trip over it before making any grand emotional entrance.”

Keeva gasped dramatically. “An Olympian who trips over capes? Truly a complex character arc. I contain multitudes.”

Her mom winked. “At least one of those multitudes is dramatic. That one’s been around since you were three.”

Keeva groaned. “Three-year-old me had zero chill. I was basically a tiny tornado in sparkly shoes.”

“Tiny tornado is generous,” her mom said. “You were a full-scale weather event. People should’ve gotten alerts on their phones.”

Keeva pointed at her. “Okay, wow. A whole warning label? What would it even say? ‘Caution: may cause glitter storms and unsolicited opinions?’”

They pulled up to the café, its windows glowing soft gold in the early light.

Her mom nudged her toward the door. “Come on, Olympian. Let’s get you sugared up before you start doing emotional laps in public.”

Inside, the bell chimed overhead as the smell of fresh pastries wrapped around them. Warmth enveloped them like a soft blanket.

Keeva paused, taking in the cozy bustle, clinking mugs, low chatter, and the hiss of the espresso machine before her mom nudged her toward the counter.

“Go on,” she murmured. “Order your fuel. The world isn’t ready for uncaffeinated Keeva.”

Keeva rolled her eyes but grinned as they joined the short line. The smell of cinnamon and fresh bread curled around them.

Her mom leaned in. “If you start narrating the pastries like they’re a nature documentary, I’m walking out.”

“No promises,” Keeva snorted.

The barista smiled. “Morning! What can I get started for

you two?”

Keeva ordered a vanilla latte and a cinnamon braid. Her mom ordered a black coffee and a blueberry muffin.

They stepped aside to wait, jazz drifting softly through the speakers.

“I forgot how cozy this place is,” Keeva murmured.

“It’s always been your kind of cozy,” her mom said. “Just the right amount of chaos.”

They took their drinks to a window seat. Sunlight spilled across the table in a soft stripe.

Keeva wrapped her hands around her latte. The café’s gentle clatter filled the space between them.

Her mom tore off a piece of muffin and set it on a napkin in the middle of the table.

Keeva smirked. “You know I’m going to steal half of that anyway.”

“I’m pre-emptively negotiating,” her mom said.

“Keeva-proofing my breakfast.”

Keeva popped the piece into her mouth, leaning back as the latte’s steam curled up between them.

“You look a little more settled already,” her mom said softly.

“Coffee helps,” Keeva said, but the warmth in her chest wasn’t from the latte.

“It’s not just the caffeine,” her mom murmured. “You breathe easier in places like this.”

Keeva traced her cup sleeve. “Maybe.”

Outside, kids hurried past the window, their laughter muffled by the glass.

“Trying feels... weird,” Keeva admitted. “Like I’m waiting for something to go wrong.”

“That’s okay,” her mom said. “You don’t have to pretend it’s easy.”

“I don’t want to be stuck.”

“You’re not. You’re here. You’re trying. That’s movement.”

Keeva let the words settle.

"I don't always know what my pace is," she whispered.
"That's okay," her mom said. "You don't have to know. You have to notice when something feels a little easier than the day before."

Keeva gestured around them. "This feels easier."

"You deserve mornings that don't feel like a battle."

"Maybe today's just a skirmish."

"Progress."

A sharp ripple of sound cut through the café, claws skittering against the pavement.

Keeva's head snapped toward the window.

A blur of gray shot past. Then another. Then a third.

Wolves lean, wild-eyed, bristling with panic bolted down the street.

Gasps erupted. Chairs scraped. Someone dropped a spoon.

A second wave followed: larger wolves, moving together, but not in perfect formation, more like a group reacting to the same threat.

Her mom's coffee paused mid-air. "That's unusual."

The rogues darted past again, and closer, Keeva could see the fear in their eyes.

The café froze.

The larger wolves slowed, circling, confused and tense, uncoordinated, untrained, just reacting.

"They're not running for fun," her mom murmured.
"Something must've spooked them."

Keeva swallowed. "Like what?"

Before her mom could answer, a heavy thud echoed from farther down the street, deep and distant, impossible to identify.

The silverware rattled.

Keeva's breath caught.

"Maybe construction?" she whispered, though her voice wavered.

Her mom didn't look convinced. "Whatever it is, those

animals want nothing to do with it.”

Keeva pressed a hand to the glass, heart pounding.

“Okay,” she breathed. “This is officially the weirdest morning ever.”

The café buzzed with nervous whispers. A barista peeked over the counter, eyes wide. A couple near the door stood frozen mid-conversation. Someone fumbled with their phone, trying to record but too shaky to hold it steady.

Outside, the wolves regrouped at the end of the block, not attacking, not hunting, just... watching. Their ears flicked. Their bodies trembled. Their eyes darted toward the direction of the thud.

Keeva’s mom leaned closer to the window, her voice barely above a whisper. “They’re afraid.”

Keeva nodded slowly. “Yeah. I can see that.”

Another thud, closer this time, rolled through the street like distant thunder.

The wolves scattered.

All of them.

Gone in seconds.

The café fell silent again, but this silence felt different, stretched thin, as if the air itself were waiting for something else to happen.

Keeva’s mom reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “Sweetheart... we should go.”

Keeva didn’t argue.

She couldn’t.

Because deep in her chest, beneath the fear and confusion, something else stirred a pull, a pressure, a strange awareness she didn’t have a name for.

Something was coming.

And whatever it was...

The wolves were running from it.

The café’s quiet hum didn’t return right away. People stayed frozen in place, eyes glued to the windows as if expecting the

wolves to reappear. A barista whispered something to another employee, who shook their head and locked the side door.

Keeva's mom stood, her voice steady but low. "Let's get to the car. Slowly. No sudden movements."

Keeva nodded, grabbing her latte with trembling fingers. "Right. Slow. Calm. Totally normal morning."

They tossed their trash and stepped outside. The air felt different, charged, like the moment before lightning strikes. Keeva scanned the street, half expecting another blur of fur to streak past.

Nothing.

Just the faint echo of that distant thud still vibrating in her bones.

Her mom unlocked the car. "Get in, sweetheart."

Keeva slid into the passenger seat, heart still racing. Her mom started the engine, but didn't pull out yet. She stared through the windshield, brows drawn tight.

"That wasn't normal," she said quietly.

Keeva swallowed. "No. It really wasn't."

Her mom tapped the steering wheel, deep in thought. "Wolves don't run like that unless they're terrified. And terrified animals don't run toward town, they run away from something worse."

Keeva's stomach twisted. "Worse than what?"

Her mom didn't answer.

Not because she didn't hear the question.

But because she didn't know the answer.

Or maybe she did and didn't want to say it.

They drove in silence for a few blocks, the tension thick enough to feel. Keeva kept glancing out the window, searching for movement, shadows, anything. Every rustle of leaves made her flinch.

Her mom finally exhaled. "We're going home. I don't like this."

"Yeah," Keeva whispered. "Me neither."

They turned onto their street, and Keeva's breath caught.

A wolf stood at the end of the block.

Not running.

Not panicked.

Not wild-eyed.

Still.

Watching.

Waiting.

Its fur was darker than the others, almost black, with streaks of silver catching the light. Its eyes locked onto Keeva's through the windshield, unblinking.

Her mom's hand froze on the gearshift. "Don't move."

Keeva didn't.

The wolf took one slow step forward.

Then another.

Keeva's pulse hammered in her ears. "Mom..."

"I see it," her mom whispered.

The wolf stopped in the center of the road, head tilted slightly, not aggressive, not afraid. Curious. Intent.

Like it recognized her.

Like it had been looking for her.

Keeva's breath hitched. "Why is it?"

Before she could finish, the wolf's ears flicked sharply. Its head snapped toward the woods at the edge of the neighborhood.

A low growl rumbled from its chest, not at them.

At something else.

Something unseen.

Something approaching.

"Keeva," her mom said, voice tight, "we're going inside. Now."

The wolf backed away, step by step, never breaking eye contact with the tree line.

Then it turned and vanished into the woods.

Keeva stared at the empty road, heart pounding so hard it

hurt. “Mom... what is happening?”

Her mom didn’t answer.

She pulled into the driveway, shut off the engine, and grabbed Keeva’s hand with a grip that trembled.

“Sweetheart,” she whispered, “I think this is more than just animal attacks.”

Keeva swallowed hard. “More like what?”

Her mom looked toward the woods, the same woods the wolf had disappeared into, and her voice dropped to a whisper.

“A warning.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Glitch

The café erupted into chaos. Chairs scraped. Someone shouted. A barista dropped a tray of mugs that shattered across the tile like breaking ice. People rushed toward the back exit, some ducking behind tables, others frozen in place.

My mom grabbed my wrist. “Keeva stay close.”

“I’m right here,” I breathed, though my pulse was sprinting.

Outside, wolves tore past again, the smaller ones first, frantic and wild-eyed, then the larger ones behind them. They weren’t in perfect formation this time, just moving together in the same direction like they were reacting to the same threat.

It looked chaotic, not coordinated.

Instinct, not training.

Still... it was nothing I’d ever seen.

My mom’s grip tightened. “We’re leaving. Now.”

We slipped out the side door with a handful of other customers. The air outside felt charged, like the moment before lightning strikes. People stood on the sidewalk, staring down the street where the wolves had vanished.

A man whispered, “What the hell is going on?”

A woman clutched her purse to her chest. “They’re getting bolder. First the woods now the city.”

My mom guided me toward the car. “Get in. Don’t look back.” But I did.

And for a split second, just a heartbeat, I saw a pair of eyes watching from the alley across the street.

Not glowing.

Not monstrous.

Just startled.

Like an animal caught between fear and confusion.

Then they were gone.

My breath hitched. “Mom”

“I saw it,” she said, unlocking the car with shaking hands.

“We’re going home.”

We drove in tense silence, the radio crackling with emergency alerts.

“Multiple wolf sightings reported downtown”

“Residents advised to stay indoors”

“Animal control is responding”

“Please avoid unnecessary travel”

My mom exhaled shakily. “This is getting out of hand.”

“Yeah,” I whispered. “It really is.”

But the part I didn’t say?

The wolves weren’t running in a straight line.

They weren’t chasing anything.

They looked spooked.

Like something had startled them.

Something loud.

Something big.

But I didn’t know what.

Back at home, my mom paced the living room, phone pressed to her ear as she called the hospital to check if they needed extra hands. I sank onto the couch, staring at the muted TV as news anchors replayed shaky cell-phone footage of the chase.

Wolves sprinting.

People screaming.

Cars swerving.

A blurry shape at the edge of the frame, too fast to identify, too distorted to make sense of.

The camera shook so badly it could’ve been anything: a truck, a shadow, a trick of the light.

My stomach twisted anyway.

The news anchors kept replaying the same clip, slowing it down, zooming in, circling vague shapes with red markers.

None of it helped. If anything, it made everything worse.

My mom hung up. “They’re overwhelmed. I might have to go in later.”

“Do you want me to stay home?”

“No,” she said quickly. “You go to school. Stay with Lennox.

Stay in public places. Don't go anywhere alone."

"Mom, I'm fine."

She cupped my face, her eyes soft but scared. "Sweetheart... something's happening out there. I don't know what it is, but I need you to be careful."

"I will," I promised.

But the truth was I wasn't sure I believed myself.

I kept seeing those eyes in the alley.

Not wild.

Not feral.

Just scared.

Like the animal didn't know where to go.

The drive to school was quieter than usual. People hurried along the sidewalks, heads down, phones out, whispering urgently. A police car rolled past us, lights flashing but siren off. Two animal control trucks followed behind it.

My mom gripped the steering wheel tighter. "This isn't normal."

"No kidding."

We passed the café again. Yellow caution tape fluttered in the breeze. A news van was parked out front, a reporter speaking into a microphone while a cameraman adjusted his lens.

My mom muttered, "Great. Now it's going to be everywhere."

"It already is," I said, glancing at my phone.

Notifications were stacked like a text thread group chats, news alerts, and social media posts. Everyone was talking about the wolves. Everyone had theories. None of them made sense.

When we pulled up to the school, my mom hesitated.

"Keeva... if anything feels wrong today, anything at all, you call me. Immediately."

"I will."

She didn't look convinced, but she let me go.

The moment I stepped onto campus, the air felt different, tense, buzzing, like everyone was holding their breath. Students clustered in tight groups, whispering urgently.

"Did you see the video?"

“My mom won’t let me walk home anymore.”

“They were right outside the café.”

“What if they come here?”

Lennox spotted me and rushed over. “Keeva. Oh my gosh, are you okay? I saw the footage of your café.”

“I’m fine,” I said, though my voice wobbled. “Just shaken.”

She squeezed my arm. “We’re sticking together today.

Bathroom trips included.”

“Deal.”

We walked toward first period, but the moment we turned the corner, Draven and Jaxx came into view.

They weren’t arguing.

They weren’t smirking.

They weren’t even pretending to be normal.

They were standing shoulder-to-shoulder, tense, scanning the hallway like they were expecting trouble.

Lennox whispered, “Okay, why do they look like they’re about to tackle a threat?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered back. “But I don’t like it.”

Draven stepped forward. “Keeva. You’re okay.”

His voice was low, controlled, but there was something underneath it. Something sharp.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just confused.”

Jaxx shoved his hands in his pockets. “You shouldn’t have been there.”

My brows knit. “At a café.”

He winced. “I mean, yeah. Bad timing.”

Draven shot him a look. “Not now.”

Lennox crossed her arms. “Okay, what’s going on with you two? You’re acting like you’re in a spy movie.”

Jaxx smirked weakly. “Maybe we are.”

Draven ignored him. “Keeva, if anything feels off today, anything you find Jaxx or me. Immediately.”

My heart thudded. “Why?”

He hesitated. “Just promise me.”

Lennox stepped between us. "She's not promising anything until you explain why you're acting like secret service agents."

Draven's jaw tightened. "It's complicated."

"Try us," Lennox said.

But before he could answer, the PA crackled overhead.

"Students, please report to your first-period classrooms.

Teachers will review updated safety protocols."

Draven exhaled, frustrated. "Just be careful."

Jaxx nodded once. "Seriously, Stone. Don't wander."

They walked off before we could ask anything else.

Lennox stared after them. "Okay. That was weird."

"Everything is weird," I said quietly.

And as we headed to class, I couldn't shake the feeling that the wolves weren't the only ones on edge.

Something had spooked them.

Something big.

And somehow

I was caught in the middle of it without understanding why.

The first period felt like walking into a pressure cooker.

Teachers stood stiffly at their doors, ushering students inside

with tight smiles that didn't reach their eyes. Posters about

"safety protocols" were taped up everywhere, crooked, rushed, like someone had printed them five minutes ago.

Inside the classroom, the lights flickered once.

Then again.

A few students gasped.

Mrs. Alder, who was subbing for first period, clapped her hands sharply. "Everyone, settle. It's just a power fluctuation."

But her voice wavered.

Lennox leaned close. "Okay, that's comforting. Totally believable."

I tried to laugh, but it came out thin.

Students whispered across the room:

"My dad said they're calling in wildlife specialists."

"My cousin saw one near the gas station."

“What if they get inside the school?”

“Dude, shut up.”

The tension was thick enough to chew.

Mrs. Alder passed out worksheets with shaking hands. “We’re reviewing emergency procedures today. Please read the first page quietly.”

But no one read.

Everyone kept glancing at the windows.

At the door.

At me.

I sank lower in my seat.

Lennox nudged me. “Hey. Ignore them. They’re just freaked out.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I just I don’t know why I’m freaked out, too.”

“You were literally in the middle of a wolf stampede,” she said.

“You’re allowed to be freaked out.”

“Yeah, but”

Before I could finish, the lights flickered again.

This time, they didn’t come back on right away.

A ripple of panic moved through the room.

Someone whispered, “Oh no.”

Another said, “Not again.”

Someone else whimpered.

The emergency lights finally clicked on, dim, red, and eerie.

Mrs. Alder forced a smile. “See? Everything is fine.”

But her eyes darted toward the hallway.

And that’s when it happened.

A glitch.

Not in the lights.

Not in the power.

In the air.

For a split second, less than a blink, the room shimmered.

Like heat rising off asphalt.

Like the world had hiccuped.
The edges of the desks blurred.
The posters on the wall warped.
The floor rippled like water.
Then everything snapped back.
Students gasped.
Chairs scraped.
Someone dropped a pencil that rolled in a perfect circle before
stopping.
Lennox grabbed my arm. "Did you see that?"
"Yeah," I whispered. "I did."
Mrs. Alder froze mid-step, her face pale. "Everyone stay
seated."
But she wasn't looking at the lights.
She was looking at me.
My pulse hammered. "Lennox... what was that?"
"I don't know," she whispered. "But I hated it."
The glitch had lasted less than a second, but it felt like the world
had peeled back a layer and then slammed it shut again.
Like something had pushed against reality.
Like something had tried to get through.
And the worst part?
When the shimmer happened
The moonstone bracelet on my wrist, the one I'd bought at a
craft fair last year, glowed.
Just for a moment.
Just long enough for me to see it.
Just long enough for Draven, who had appeared in the doorway
without me noticing, to see it too.
His eyes locked onto mine.
Sharp.
Alert.
Knowing.
He stepped into the room, ignoring Mrs. Alder's startled gasp.

“Keeva,” he said quietly. “We need to talk.”

My stomach dropped. “Now?”

“Yes.”

Lennox stood too. “She’s not going anywhere without me.”

Jaxx appeared behind Draven, leaning against the doorframe like he’d been there the whole time. “Relax, Lennox. We’re not kidnapping her.”

“Good,” Lennox said. “Because I bite.”

Jaxx smirked. “Noted.”

Draven didn’t smile. He didn’t even blink.

He just held out his hand.

“Keeva,” he said, voice low and steady, “something is happening. And you need to know what it is.”

My breath caught.

Because deep down beneath the fear, beneath the confusion I already knew one thing:

Whatever glitched

whatever shimmered

whatever made the wolves run

It wasn’t random.

It was connected.

To them.

To the woods.

To the wolves.

And somehow impossibly
to me.

The hallway outside first period buzzed with a strange, electric tension, as if the whole school were vibrating under the surface. Students moved in tight clusters, whispering, glancing over their shoulders, checking their phones for updates that never seemed to explain anything.

Lennox and I stepped out of the classroom with Draven and Jaxx flanking us like some mismatched security detail. They didn’t touch me, didn’t crowd me, but they stayed close enough that I could feel the heat of their presence.

“Okay,” Lennox muttered under her breath, “this is officially the weirdest day in the history of days.”

She wasn’t wrong.

The glitch still pulsed in my mind that shimmer, that ripple, that impossible moment when the world bent like a reflection in disturbed water. And the bracelet. The glow. The way Draven’s eyes had snapped to it like he’d been waiting for exactly that to happen.

I swallowed hard. “Draven what did you see?”

He didn’t answer.

Not right away.

He kept scanning the hallway, jaw tight, shoulders tense, like he was listening for something I couldn’t hear.

Jaxx finally broke the silence. “We need to get somewhere less crowded.”

Lennox scoffed. “Oh, sure. Let’s go somewhere private with the two guys acting like they’re about to fight a ghost.”

Jaxx smirked. “You say that like it’s a bad idea.”

“It is,” she snapped.

Draven stopped walking. “Keeva.”

The way he said my name, low, steady, threaded with something like urgency, made my breath catch.

“You felt it, didn’t you?” he said quietly.

I hesitated. “The glitch?”

He nodded once. “It wasn’t just a glitch.”

Jaxx crossed his arms. “It was a breach.”

Lennox blinked. “A what?”

Draven shot him a warning look, but Jaxx shrugged. “She was literally in the middle of it. She deserves to know.”

My pulse hammered. “A breach of what?”

Draven exhaled slowly. “Reality.”

The word hit me like a punch.

Lennox stared. “Okay, no. Absolutely not. We’re not doing sci-fi today.”

Jaxx leaned against a locker. “It’s not sci-fi. It’s...

complicated.”

“Then uncomplicate it,” Lennox snapped.

Draven looked at me, really looked at me, and something in his expression softened. Not pity. Not fear.

Recognition.

“Keeva,” he said, “the wolves weren’t running from people. They weren’t running from cars. They were running from something that shouldn’t exist.”

My stomach twisted. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Jaxx said, “that whatever glitched in your classroom? It’s connected to them.”

“And to you,” Draven added.

The hallway suddenly felt too small. Too loud. Too bright.

“Connected how?” I whispered.

Draven opened his mouth, but before he could speak, the PA crackled again.

“Students, please remain in your classrooms between periods. Teachers, lock your doors. This is a precautionary measure.”

The announcement was repeated twice.

Then the lights flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The air shimmered.

Not as strong as before, but enough to make the posters ripple and the lockers blur at the edges.

Lennox grabbed my arm. “Keeva”

Draven stepped forward instantly, positioning himself between me and the nearest wall as if shielding me from something invisible.

Jaxx’s eyes narrowed. “It’s happening again.”

The shimmer faded.

The hallway snapped back into focus.

Students screamed. Teachers slammed doors. Someone dropped a backpack and bolted.

My heart pounded so hard it hurt.

“Draven,” I whispered, “what is happening to me?”

He didn’t hesitate this time.

“You’re waking up.”

The words hit me like cold water.

Jaxx nodded. “And whatever’s coming? It knows.”

Lennox’s eyes widened. “Knows what?”

Draven looked at me, and for the first time, I saw fear in his eyes.

“Knows who she is.”

My breath caught.

“Who am I?” I whispered.

Draven didn’t answer.

Not because he didn’t know.

But because he wasn’t ready to say it.

Jaxx stepped closer, voice low. “Stone... you’re not in the middle of this by accident.”

The lights flickered again.

A faint shimmer rippled across the floor.

And deep in the distance, somewhere beyond the school walls, a howl echoed.

Not wild.

Not feral.

Not normal.

A warning.

A call.

A claim.

Draven’s jaw tightened. “We need to move. Now.”

And as they pulled me down the hallway, Lennox gripping my hand like a lifeline, one truth settled into my bones:

The wolves weren’t the glitch.

I was.

CHAPTER SIX

Almost-Fight

The cafeteria was a full-blown circus by the time we walked in. The noise hit us like a wall: trays clattering, chairs scraping, someone yelling about stolen fries, laughter bouncing off the high ceilings. The smell of greasy pizza, cinnamon rolls, and mystery-meat tacos swirled together, both comforting and questionable.

Lennox inhaled deeply. “Ahhh. Eau de caf  t  ria. Notes of cheese, chaos, and childhood trauma.”

I snorted. “You’re ridiculous.”

We grabbed trays and slid into the pizza line, which moved at the speed of a dying snail. Ahead of us, two lunch ladies were arguing over a tray of garlic bread like it was a hostage negotiation.

“Marge, I swear on my hairnet, if you put ONE more piece on that tray.”

“Gloria, the children need carbs! They’re growing!”

“They’re growing ATTITUDE, that’s what they’re growing!”

A third lunch lady zoomed past us with a ladle like it was a weapon. “MOVE, SWEETHEARTS! I GOTTA REFILL THE MASHED POTATOES BEFORE THERE’S A RIOT!”

Lennox whispered, “I love them. They’re like battle-hardened warriors.”

“They’ve seen things,” I whispered back.

Behind us, a group of freshmen argued loudly about whether the wolf sighting was real.

“It was HUGE!”

“No way, bro, it was a dog.”

“Dogs don’t have glowing eyes!”

“Maybe it had allergies.”

Lennox elbowed me. “See? Even the first-year students know something’s off.”

“Nope,” I said. “We’re sticking with the cheeseburger

theory.”

“Keeva. No one smuggles cheeseburgers to school.”

“You don’t know their lives.”

We finally got our food pizza slices that looked like they’d survived a minor explosion and headed to our usual table.

The moment we sat down, Lennox froze mid-sip of her iced coffee.

“Oh. My. God. Keeva. Look.”

I followed her gaze.

Two tables. Opposite sides of the cafeteria. Perfectly positioned like rival kingdoms.

On the left: Draven’s group.

Brooding. Intense. All dark clothes, sharp jawlines, and “don’t mess with us” energy.

On the right: Jaxx’s group.

Loud. Chaotic. Laughing too hard, talking too loud, acting like they owned the place.

And both groups?

Watching each other.

Hard.

Lennox whispered, “This is like watching two wolf packs fight over territory.”

“Lennox. No.”

“Fine. Two rival boy bands fighting over the same spotlight.”

“Better.”

She leaned in. “Okay, but seriously. That wolf earlier? It was HUGE.”

“Maybe it was a hybrid.”

“A hybrid?”

“Yeah. Like wolf plus gym membership.”

Lennox stared. “Keeva. Wolves don’t lift weights.”

“You don’t know their lives.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Denial is a warm blanket, and I’m wrapped in it.”

“Fine. It wasn’t a shifter.”

“Thank you.”

“It was probably just a genetically mutated super-wolf.”

I groaned. “Lennox.”

“What?”

“That’s worse.”

“At least it’s not magic.”

I put my head on the table. “I hate it here.”

Cara, Mya, and Serena strutted past like they were walking a runway instead of a cafeteria aisle.

Cara gasped dramatically, “I’m STILL shaking from that wolf!”

Mya clutched her chest. “I thought it was going to break in!”

Serena nodded dramatically. “I almost fainted!”

But as they passed our table, they leaned in.

Cara whispered, “Imagine thinking a wolf wants YOU.”

Mya giggled. “It probably smelled her shampoo.”

Serena smirked. “Or her fear.”

They snickered and kept walking.

Lennox rolled her eyes. “They’re like raccoons. Loud, messy, and always digging through trash.”

I laughed. “Stop.”

Across the cafeteria, Draven’s group watched the mean girls walk away. Ronan muttered something. Kael cracked his knuckles. Torren glared at the rogue table.

Meanwhile, at Jaxx’s table, one of his friends elbowed him.

“Your stepdad sniffed her out earlier. Maybe he’s onto something.”

Jaxx glared. “Shut up.”

Another rogue smirked. “You jealous Draven’s beating you to it?”

“I said shut up.”

Draven heard that.

And Draven stood.

Lennox gasped. “Oh no. Keeva. Keeva. He’s coming over here.”

I froze. “What do I do?”

“Act natural.”

“WHAT IS NATURAL?”

“Not that.”

Draven walked toward our table with the confidence of someone who knew exactly how good he looked doing it. Students whispered. Someone dropped a fork. Cara nearly tripped trying to watch.

He stopped in front of me.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

“Um. Yes?”

Lennox nodded too fast. “She’s fine. We’re fine. Everything’s fine.”

Draven ignored her. “If anything happens, you come find me.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay.”

He gave me one last, intense, unreadable look, then turned and walked back to his table.

Lennox fanned herself. “Girl. He is down BAD.”

“Stop.”

Not to be outdone, Jaxx stood up from the rogue table.

“Oh great,” Lennox muttered. “Here comes trouble.”

Jaxx sauntered over, hands in his pockets, smirk locked and loaded.

“Stone,” he said, leaning on the table. “You surviving lunch without me?”

“Yes, Jaxx.”

“Good. Wouldn’t want you getting bored.”

“She’s not bored,” Lennox muttered.

Jaxx winked. “Relax, Lennox. I’m not stealing your girl.”

I choked. “I’m not”

“Just checking in. You know... after earlier.”

I frowned. “Why did the wolf run away?”

Jaxx's smirk faltered. "No idea."

But Lennox saw the flicker in his eyes.

He was lying.

"Anyway," Jaxx said, straightening, "if you need anything at all, you know where to find me."

He walked back to his table, the rogue pack cheering like he'd just scored a touchdown.

Draven glared at him.

Jaxx smirked back.

"Keeva," Lennox whispered, "you are living in a love triangle, and you don't even know it."

"I want to go home."

"Too late. This is your life now."

I dropped my forehead onto the table. "I didn't sign up for this."

"No one signs up for a love triangle," Lennox said. "They just happen. Like acne. Or pop quizzes."

I groaned louder.

But before Lennox could tease me again, the cafeteria atmosphere shifted.

Not gradually.

Not subtly.

Instantly.

The noise dipped.

The laughter thinned.

The air tightened, as if someone had pulled a cord around the room.

I lifted my head. "What now?"

Lennox's eyes widened. "Oh no. Oh no no no."

Draven's group had stood up.

Jaxx's group had stood up too.

Two tables.

Two groups.

Two storms about to collide.

Students scrambled out of the way as if evacuating a natural

disaster.

Torren cracked his knuckles.

Kael rolled his shoulders.

Ronan muttered something sharp.

Across the room, Jaxx's rogues leaned forward like they were ready to pounce.

Jaxx himself stood slowly, eyes locked on Draven.

"This is about you," Lennox whispered.

I nearly choked. "WHAT. Why."

"Because boys are dramatic," Lennox said. "And you're the plot twist."

Draven stepped forward first, jaw tight, eyes blazing.

Jaxx mirrored him, smirk fading into something colder.

The cafeteria held its breath.

"Stay away from her," Draven said, voice low.

"Or what?" Jaxx asked.

Torren growled. "Don't test him."

One of the rogues laughed. "Relax. We're just talking."

Kael snapped, "You don't talk to her."

Jaxx raised a brow. "Funny. She didn't seem to mind."

Draven's eyes flashed.

"Lennox," I whispered, "they're not actually going to fight, right?"

"Oh, they absolutely are."

Just as Draven and Jaxx stepped closer, only inches apart, the cafeteria doors slammed open.

Mrs. Alder.

Her silver braid swung behind her like a whip, her eyes sharp enough to cut glass.

"ENOUGH."

Her voice cracked through the cafeteria like thunder.

Every student froze.

Even the boys.

Mrs. Alder's gaze swept the room, landing on Draven, then Jaxx, then me.

“Sit. Down.”

The command wasn’t loud.

It wasn’t angry.

But it hit the room like a shockwave.

Both groups obeyed instantly.

Mrs. Alder exhaled slowly, then looked at me.

“Keeva Stone,” she said softly. “Avoid the drama. Please.”

“I’m trying,” I whispered.

“Try harder.”

She turned and walked away.

Lennox grabbed my arm. “Come on. Before round two starts.”

As we headed to class, I muttered, “I hate lunch.”

Lennox grinned. “Welcome to high school. It only gets worse.”

The hallway outside the cafeteria buzzed like a shaken beehive. Students spilled out of the doors in clusters, talking over each other, reenacting the almost-fight with dramatic hand gestures and terrible impressions.

Lennox and I slipped into the flow of bodies, her iced coffee sloshing dangerously close to the rim.

“I swear,” she muttered, “if they start round two in the hallway, I’m throwing this at someone.”

“Please don’t,” I said. “It’s the only thing keeping you alive.”

“It’s keeping them alive,” she corrected. “Barely.”

We passed a group of sophomores huddled near the vending machines.

“Draven was totally gonna punch him.”

“No way, Jaxx would’ve dodged.”

“Dude, Jaxx doesn’t dodge. He leans.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means he’s dramatic.”

Lennox snorted. “At least someone gets it.”

I tried to laugh, but my stomach was still twisted. The

cafeteria felt like a pressure cooker, one spark away from exploding. And the spark had been me.

Again.

We turned the corner toward our lockers. The hallway lights flickered once, then steadied. A few students paused, glancing up nervously.

"Okay," Lennox said, "that's the third flicker today. I'm starting to think the school is haunted."

"By what?" I asked. "Bad wiring?"

"By your emotional turmoil."

I elbowed her. "Not funny."

"It was a little funny."

I opened my locker, the metal door squeaking like it was protesting the day as much as I was. I swapped out my books, trying to ignore the way my hands trembled.

Lennox leaned against the locker beside mine. "Hey. You okay?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Everything feels off."

"Off how?"

"Like the world is glitching. Like something's wrong and I'm the only one who can feel it."

Lennox's expression softened. "You're not the only one. I feel it too."

"You do?"

"Yeah. It's like the air is weird. Heavy. Like the school is holding its breath."

I swallowed. "That's exactly it."

Before she could say more, a loud crash echoed from down the hall, a locker slamming so hard it rattled the row.

We both jumped.

Draven stood there, jaw clenched, hands braced on the metal door. Jaxx stood across from him, arms crossed, smirk gone.

Students scattered like startled birds.

"Oh great," Lennox muttered. "Round two."

I stepped forward instinctively. "Draven"

He held up a hand without looking at me. "Stay there."

Jaxx scoffed. "You don't get to tell her what to do."

Draven turned slowly. "I'm telling you to back off."

"Why?" Jaxx asked. "Because you think she's yours?"

My breath caught.

Draven's eyes flashed. "This isn't about that."

"Sure it isn't."

Lennox whispered, "Oh my god, they're actually going to fight."

"No," I whispered back. "They can't."

But they could.

And they would.

Draven stepped forward. "You're reckless. You don't think. You don't listen. And you're going to get her hurt."

Jaxx's jaw tightened. "You think you're the only one who cares what happens to her?"

The hallway went silent.

Completely silent.

Even the air felt frozen.

My heart hammered. "Guys"

Neither of them looked at me.

Draven's voice dropped. "Stay away from her."

Jaxx stepped closer. "Make me."

Lennox grabbed my arm. "Keeva. We need to move."

But I couldn't.

I was rooted to the floor, watching two storms collide.

Draven's fists clenched.

Jaxx's shoulders squared.

The tension snapped like a wire pulled too tight.

And then

A locker at the end of the hall slammed open on its own.

Hard.

The sound echoed like a gunshot.

Everyone jumped.

Even Draven and Jaxx.

The lights flickered again, longer this time, buzzing, dimming, then flaring back to life.

A ripple of cold swept down the hallway.

Not a breeze.

Not AC.

Something else.

Something wrong.

Draven's head snapped toward me instantly.

"Keeva," he said, voice sharp, "did you feel that?"

I swallowed. "Yes."

Jaxx's eyes narrowed. "It's getting worse."

Lennox whispered, "What is?"

Neither boy answered.

Because they didn't need to.

We all felt it.

The glitch.

The shift.

The wrongness.

And it was getting closer.

The hallway didn't calm down after the glitch. If anything, the tension doubled, as if the air itself were bracing for something else to go wrong. Students whispered in frantic bursts, darting glances at the flickering lights, at the lockers, at me.

Lennox squeezed my arm. "Okay. We're leaving. Now. Before the universe decides to throw another supernatural tantrum."

I nodded, but my legs felt like they were moving through syrup. Every step felt too loud, too slow, too exposed. Draven and Jaxx stayed a few feet apart, both watching the hallway like they expected something to leap out of the shadows.

We turned the corner toward the science wing, and the moment we did, the temperature dropped.

Not dramatically.

Not enough for anyone else to scream.

Just enough for the hairs on my arms to rise.

Lennox shivered. "Why is it cold. Why is it cold inside a school built in 1998 with zero functioning AC?"

Draven stopped walking. "Because something's here."

Jaxx's jaw tightened. "It's close."

My breath hitched. "What is?"

Neither answered.

Of course they didn't.

A locker at the far end of the hallway rattled softly at first, then harder, like something inside was trying to get out. Students nearby froze, staring at it with wide eyes.

"Don't," Draven warned, stepping forward.

But a sophomore, brave or stupid, I couldn't tell, reached for the handle.

The locker door slammed open with a metallic crack.

The kid screamed and fell backward. Books spilled out onto the floor, but the air around the locker shimmered the same ripple I'd seen earlier, the same distortion that made the world bend.

The glitch.

It pulsed once.

Twice.

Then vanished.

The hallway erupted into chaos.

Students ran. Teachers yelled. Someone pulled the fire alarm even though nothing was on fire.

Lennox grabbed my hand. "Keeva, we need to go!"

But Draven stepped in front of me, blocking my path. "No. She stays with us."

Jaxx nodded. "Yeah. She's not going anywhere alone."

Lennox bristled. "Excuse me? I'm literally right here."

Draven didn't look away from me. "It's not about you."

"Wow," Lennox muttered. "Rude."

But I barely heard her.

Because the moment the glitch faded, my bracelet warmed against my wrist not glowing this time, but pulsing like a heartbeat.

My heartbeat.

I pressed my fingers to it. “Draven, why does this keep happening around me?”

He hesitated, and that hesitation told me everything.

He knew.

He’d always known.

And he’d been waiting for this.

“Keeva,” he said quietly, “you’re not causing the glitches.”

Jaxx added, “But you’re connected to them.”

My stomach dropped. “Connected how?”

Draven opened his mouth, but the intercom crackled overhead.

“Students, please remain in your current classrooms. Teachers, initiate lockdown protocol. This is not a drill.”

The hallway lights flickered again.

The glitch rippled across the ceiling.

And somewhere outside, faint but unmistakable, a howl echoed.

Not a normal howl.

Not a warning howl.

A calling howl.

Draven’s eyes snapped to mine. “We need to move. Now.”

Jaxx stepped closer. “Stone, stay between us.”

Lennox grabbed my other arm. “And between me. I’m not letting you get dragged into a supernatural turf war without me.”

The hallway buzzed with panic—alarms, footsteps, shouts but it all felt distant, muffled, like I was underwater.

Because deep in my chest, something else stirred.

Something that wasn’t fear.

Something that wasn’t confusion.

Recognition.

The howl outside echoed again, this time louder.
Draven's voice dropped to a whisper. "It's looking for
you."

My breath caught. "What is?"

He didn't answer.

He didn't need to.

Because I already knew.

Whatever was glitching reality...

whatever was chasing the wolves...

whatever was calling out from the woods

It wasn't coming to the school.

It was coming for me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Woods — Dusk

Stone Academy felt wrong the moment I stepped through the doors. Not dangerous, wrong. Just off. The air felt thicker, like someone had turned the humidity up to Louisiana-in-August levels. The lights hummed louder. My heartbeat felt weird, like it was trying to sync with something that wasn't there.

I pressed a hand to my sternum. "What is happening to me?"

Lennox walked beside me, chattering about our upcoming biology quiz, her backpack bouncing with every step. "And if Mr. Halpern puts mitochondria on the test again, I swear Earth to Keva. You're spacing."

I blinked. "Sorry. Just tired."

"Liar," Lennox said, linking our arms. "You've been weird since yesterday. Spill."

I opened my mouth

A locker slammed down the hall.

Jaxx.

He looked wrecked. Not just tired, haunted. His eyes were bloodshot, his shoulders tight, like he hadn't slept. Like he'd run all night. Like something was chasing him.

His gaze softened when he saw me.

Then hardened when he saw Lennox.

"Hey," he said, voice rough. "Can we talk?"

Lennox raised a brow. "About what?"

Jaxx hesitated. "It's private."

Lennox crossed her arms. "Then it's not happening."

Jaxx's jaw tightened. "This isn't about you."

"It is if it's about her."

I stepped forward, ready to intervene.

But the air shifted.

A presence.

Warm.

Electric.

Pulling at me like a tide.

Draven.

He didn't walk into the hallway. He arrived like the air parted for him, like the building itself made room. Students stepped aside without even realizing they were doing it. A few stared. A few whispered. One freshman dropped his binder.

Lennox whispered, "Why does he walk like he owns the place?"

I swallowed. "Because maybe he does."

Draven's gaze locked on me, and the world narrowed to a single point.

My chest tightened.

My pulse stuttered.

Something inside me fluttered like nerves or adrenaline or... something else.

Lennox snapped her fingers in my face. "Hello. Why are you looking at him like that?"

I flushed. "I'm not."

"You are."

Jaxx stepped closer, tension rolling off him. "Keeva, please. Stay away from him today."

Draven's eyes sharpened. "She stays with me."

Lennox blinked. "Okay, what is happening. Did I miss a memo? Did you two start some weird rivalry club?"

Neither boy answered.

Because at that moment, a faint sound drifted from the woods behind the school.

A howl?

A siren?

A dog?

Too soft to tell.

Draven stiffened.

Jaxx paled.

And something tugged at my chest familiar, impossible, wrong.

Lennox frowned. "Did you hear something?"

“I think so,” I whispered.

Draven stepped closer, voice low. “Keeva, you need to come with me.”

Jaxx grabbed my arm. “No. She’s safer with me.”

Lennox shoved between them. “Back up. Both of you. She’s not going anywhere.”

But the hallway lights flickered.

The air thickened.

A cold hush swept through the school.

Students stopped mid-sentence.

Teachers paused mid-step.

Even the vents seemed to hold their breath.

Draven’s jaw clenched.

Jaxx’s eyes darted toward the windows.

My heart pounded. “What’s happening?”

Draven didn’t look away from the tree line. “Something’s going on in the woods.”

Jaxx swallowed. “Yeah. And it’s not good.”

Another distant sound echoed closer this time.

A dog?

A siren?

A weird echo?

The windows trembled. Or maybe that was just me.

I grabbed the locker beside me.

Lennox grabbed my arm. “Keeva? Hey. Hey. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “It feels like something is pulling me.”

Draven stepped closer. “You shouldn’t be near the windows.”

Jaxx shook his head. “She shouldn’t be near you.”

Draven glared. “Back off.”

Jaxx glared right back. “Make me.”

Lennox groaned. “Oh my God, not this again.”

The lights flickered again harder.

A gust of cold air swept through the corridor, rattling lockers and sending papers flying.

Students screamed.

Teachers shouted.

Someone yelled, "Is it another wolf?"

Draven tensed.

Jaxx backed up a step.

The tug in my chest yanked harder, pulling me toward Draven like gravity.

I stumbled.

Draven caught me.

His hands were warm.

Too warm.

I gasped. "What is happening to me?"

Draven swallowed. "You're overwhelmed. It's just adrenaline."

Jaxx stepped forward. "She's not going anywhere with you."

Draven's jaw flexed. "I'm not arguing with you."

"You already are."

"Both of you STOP," I snapped.

They froze.

Another distant sound echoed closer, sharper.

The windows rattled again.

Students screamed.

Teachers herded people into classrooms.

The hallway dissolved into chaos.

Draven stepped in front of me.

Jaxx stepped beside me.

Lennox whispered, "Oh my God."

I whispered, "Why do I feel like something is pulling me toward you?"

Draven's breath hitched.

Jaxx's face fell.

But neither answered.

Because the hallway doors slammed open.

Mrs. Alder.

She stormed in, braid swinging like a weapon.

“ENOUGH.”

Her voice cracked through the hallway like thunder.

Every student froze.

Even Draven and Jaxx.

Mrs. Alder’s gaze swept the room, landing on Draven, then Jaxx, then me.

“All three of you,” she said sharply. “My office. Now.”

Lennox whispered, “You’re dead.”

I whispered back, “I know.”

And as we followed Mrs. Alder down the hall, that tug in my chest didn’t fade.

It got stronger.

Mrs. Alder didn’t slow down as she marched us through the hallway. Her heels clicked like a countdown, sharp and irritated, echoing off the lockers. Students parted around her like she was a storm front rolling through the building.

Lennox leaned close, whispering, “She’s walking too fast. This is the stride of a woman who’s about to ruin your entire life.”

“I can’t feel my legs,” I whispered back.

“You don’t need legs,” she said. “You need a lawyer.”

“Do you know a lawyer?”

“No, but I can Google one.”

Draven and Jaxx followed behind us, both silent, both tense, both radiating enough energy to power the school’s failing lights. Every few steps, Draven’s gaze flicked toward the windows. Every few steps, Jaxx’s jaw clenched like he was fighting the urge to bolt.

Mrs. Alder pushed open her office door and pointed. “Inside.”

We obeyed.

Her office was small but intimidating, with shelves of old books, a wall of certificates, and a giant plant that looked like it ate sunlight and dreams. A single window overlooked the woods behind the school, the tree line dark and dense.

The moment I saw the trees, my chest tightened.

That tug again.

That pull.

Like invisible fingers curling around my ribs.

I tore my gaze away.

Mrs. Alder shut the door and turned to face us, arms crossed. "Explain."

Silence.

She raised a brow. "Wonderful. A trio of silent statues."

Lennox cleared her throat. "Technically, I'm not part of the trio. I'm just."

"You're part of it now," Mrs. Alder said without looking at her.

Lennox deflated. "Okay. Cool. Love that for me."

Mrs. Alder's gaze snapped to Draven. "You. Start talking."

Draven straightened. "There was a disturbance in the hallway."

"A disturbance," she repeated. "That's what we're calling it."

Jaxx scoffed. "It wasn't just a disturbance."

Mrs. Alder's eyes narrowed. "Then what was it?"

Jaxx hesitated which was new. He always had something to say. Always had a smirk ready. But now? He looked unsure.

Draven stepped in. "It's complicated."

Mrs. Alder pinched the bridge of her nose. "Everything is complicated with you boys."

Then her gaze shifted to me.

"Keeva."

My stomach dropped. "Yes?"

"What happened?"

I opened my mouth, but the truth tangled in my throat.

The pull.

The flickering lights.

The cold air.

The way the world felt like it was glitching around me.

“I don’t know,” I said softly. “Everything just feels wrong.”

Mrs. Alder studied me for a long moment, too long, like she was searching for something in my expression.

Then she sighed. “Sit.”

We sat.

Draven on my left.

Jaxx on my right.

Lennox perched on the edge of her chair like she was ready to leap into battle.

Mrs. Alder paced behind her desk. “There have been... incidents. Reports. Strange behavior. Animals acting out. Students fainting. Lights malfunctioning. And now this.”

She gestured toward the hallway.

Draven’s jaw tightened. “It’s not Keea’s fault.”

Jaxx nodded. “Yeah. She didn’t do anything.”

Mrs. Alder’s eyes flicked between them. “I didn’t say she did.”

But something in her tone made my skin prickle.

Lennox leaned toward me. “Why do I feel like she knows something?”

I whispered, “Because she does.”

Mrs. Alder stopped pacing. “Keea, have you felt different lately?”

My heart stuttered. “Different how?”

“Physically. Emotionally. Sensory changes. Strange dreams. Unusual instincts.”

I swallowed hard. “Why are you asking me that?”

Draven and Jaxx exchanged a look a loaded one.

Mrs. Alder didn’t blink. “Because whatever is happening in this school seems to be happening around you.”

My breath caught.

Lennox grabbed my hand. "She didn't ask for that."
"I know," Mrs. Alder said gently. "But she's in the middle of it."

The room felt smaller.

The air felt heavier.

The window behind Mrs. Alder rattled once as something brushed against it.

We all froze.

Mrs. Alder turned slowly toward the glass.

The woods outside were still.

Too still.

Like the trees were holding their breath.

Draven stood. "We need to move her away from the window."

Jaxx stood too. "Yeah. Now."

Mrs. Alder didn't argue.

That scared me more than anything.

She stepped forward, voice low. "Keeva, has anything followed you from the woods?"

My blood ran cold.

Because the answer was yes.

I didn't know what.

The room went still.

Not quiet still.

Like the air thickened.

Like the walls leaned in.

Like the world itself was waiting for my answer.

Mrs. Alder's question hung between us:

"Has anything followed you from the woods?"

My throat tightened. "I... I don't know."

But I did know.

Something had.

Something was.

Draven stepped closer, voice low and steady. "She doesn't

have to answer that.”

Mrs. Alder didn’t look away from me. “She does.”

Jaxx bristled. “Why? So you can drag her into whatever secret you’re hiding?”

Mrs. Alder’s eyes snapped to him. “I’m hiding nothing. I’m trying to prevent a disaster.”

Draven scoffed. “You’re too late.”

The room temperature dropped a few degrees.

Lennox whispered, “Okay, I’m officially uncomfortable.”

Mrs. Alder exhaled slowly, then turned toward the window. The woods behind the school were darker now, shadows pooling between the trees, branches swaying even though there was no wind.

A faint sound drifted through the glass.

Not a howl.

Not a siren.

Not an animal.

A pulse.

Like a heartbeat.

My heartbeat.

I pressed a hand to my chest. “It’s happening again.”

Draven moved instantly, stepping between me and the window. “She needs to get away from the woods.”

Jaxx shook his head. “No. She needs answers.”

Mrs. Alder turned back to us, her expression unreadable. “All of you. Sit.”

No one moved.

She raised a brow. “I wasn’t asking.”

We sat.

Draven reluctantly.

Jaxx defiantly.

I was shaking because my legs were shaking.

Mrs. Alder folded her hands on her desk. “Keeva, the woods behind this school are not normal.”

Lennox muttered, “No kidding.”

Mrs. Alder continued, ignoring her. "There have been disturbances for weeks. Animals fleeing. Strange sounds. Electrical malfunctions. Students reporting sensations."

"Sensations," Lennox repeated. "That's vague and terrifying."

Mrs. Alder nodded. "Yes. It is."

Draven leaned forward. "Tell her the truth."

Jaxx crossed his arms. "She already knows something's wrong."

Mrs. Alder hesitated and that hesitation was worse than anything she could've said.

Finally, she spoke.

"Keeva the woods are reacting to you."

My breath caught. "Reacting how?"

Draven answered before she could. "They're waking up."

Jaxx added, "Because you're waking up."

My pulse pounded in my ears. "What does that mean?"

Neither boy answered.

Mrs. Alder did.

"It means," she said softly, "that whatever is happening out there is connected to you. Directly."

The room tilted.

Lennox grabbed my hand. "Hey. Breathe. You're okay."

But I wasn't sure I was.

Mrs. Alder continued, "We don't know what it wants. We don't know why it's happening now. But we do know this"

She pointed toward the woods.

"It's getting stronger."

A deep rumble echoed from outside.

Not thunder.

Not construction.

Something else.

Something alive.

The window rattled.

The lights flickered.

The floor vibrated beneath our feet.
Draven stood so fast his chair scraped the floor. "It's here."
Jaxx's eyes widened. "No. Not this close."
Mrs. Alder moved toward the door. "We need to get you
somewhere safe."
But before she could reach it
The lights went out.
All of them.
The room plunged into darkness.
Lennox gasped.
Jaxx cursed.
Draven grabbed my arm.
Mrs. Alder whispered something sharp under her breath.
And from the woods
A howl rose.
Long.
Low.
Echoing.
But not like the wolves from before.
This one was deeper.
Older.
Wrong.
It vibrated through the walls, through the floor, through my
bones.
My bracelet burned against my wrist.
Draven's grip tightened. "Keeva, don't move."
Jaxx stepped closer. "Stay between us."
Lennox whispered, "I hate this. I hate this so much."
Mrs. Alder's silhouette moved in the dark. "Everyone, stay
calm."
But I couldn't.
Because the howl wasn't just outside.
It was inside me.
Pulling.

Calling.

Claiming.

And in that moment in the dark, with the woods roaring and the world glitching, I knew one thing with absolute certainty:

Whatever was coming

It wasn't coming to the school.

It was coming for me.

The darkness wasn't silent.

It pressed in. Thick. Heavy. Like the air itself had weight.

Someone's breathing hitched maybe Lennox's, maybe mine and the floor vibrated again, just enough to make the chair legs tremble.

"Don't move," Draven whispered, so close I could feel the warmth of him even in the dark.

Jaxx shifted on my other side. "She's between us. She's fine."

"I'm not fine," I whispered.

No one argued.

Another rumble rolled through the ground, deeper this time, like something massive shifting its weight just outside the building. The window rattled again, harder, like something brushed against it with purpose.

Lennox grabbed my sleeve. "Keeva, I swear, if something breaks through that window"

"Nothing is breaking through," Draven said, but his voice wasn't steady. Not even close.

Mrs. Alder moved somewhere in the dark I heard the soft scrape of her shoes, the rustle of her skirt and then her voice, low and sharp:

"It's too close. We need to move her."

Jaxx hissed, "Move her where? It's outside."

"It's not outside," Draven said quietly.

My stomach dropped. "What does that mean?"

No one answered.

Because the howl came again.

Closer.

So close it felt like it was inside the walls. Inside the floor. Inside me.

My bracelet burned, not warm, not pulsing, burning. Like someone had pressed a hot coin against my skin. I gasped and grabbed my wrist.

Draven's hand closed over mine instantly. "Don't take it off."

"I wasn't— it hurts—"

"I know. Don't take it off."

Jaxx stepped closer, voice low. "It's reacting to her."

"No," Draven said. "She's reacting to it."

The room tilted. My vision blurred even in the dark. The pull in my chest tightened, twisting, tugging, like something was hooking itself into me and dragging.

"I can't" I choked out. "I can't breathe."

Lennox's hands were on my shoulders. "Hey. Hey. Look at me. Look at okay, you can't see me, but pretend you're looking at me."

The floor vibrated again.

Harder.

Mrs. Alder's voice cut through the dark. "Everyone, stay calm."

"No one is calm!" Lennox snapped.

A crack split through the air, sharp, loud, like a tree snapping in half. The window shuddered violently. Something slammed against it from the outside.

I screamed.

Lennox screamed.

Jaxx swore.

Draven moved so fast I didn't see it just felt him shove me back, shielding me with his body as the window groaned under the pressure of whatever was out there.

Mrs. Alder shouted something a word I didn't recognize and the lights flickered once, twice

Then blazed back on.
The room was flooded with harsh fluorescent light.
And everything froze.
The window was cracked.
Not shattered, cracked.
A long, jagged line running from the top corner to the center, like a claw had dragged across it.
Outside, the woods were still again.
Too still.
Like nothing had happened.
Like everything had happened.
My bracelet stopped burning.
My chest loosened.
But the pull didn't fade.
It settled deeper.
Heavier.
Like something had found me.
Mrs. Alder turned slowly, her face pale, her eyes sharp.
"We're out of time."
Draven's jaw clenched. "We need to get her out of here."
Jaxx nodded. "Yeah. Before it comes back."
Lennox grabbed my hand. "Before WHAT comes back?"
No one answered her.
Because they were all looking at me.
Like I was the problem.
Like I was the reason the woods were waking up.
Like whatever was calling was calling me.
My voice shook. "What's happening to me?"
Draven didn't look away. "You're waking up."
Jaxx swallowed hard. "And it's coming for you."
Mrs. Alder stepped closer, her expression grim. "Keeva whatever is in those woods has chosen you."
My heart stopped.
Lennox whispered, "Chosen her for what?"

Mrs. Alder didn't blink.

"That," she said quietly, "is what we need to find out."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Unwanted Attention

The hallway didn't calm after the weird howl-sound-thing. If anything, it got worse. Students rushed in every direction, teachers tried to herd them into classrooms, and the lights flickered like the building was trying to decide whether to stay conscious. Someone dropped a backpack, and three textbooks exploded out like shrapnel. A kid tripped over them and yelled, "I'M TOO YOUNG FOR THIS," before sprinting away.

I clung to Lennox's arm as the floor vibrated again, subtle but real.

"Okay," Lennox whispered, "that wasn't normal. Earthquakes aren't a thing here, right?"

"Not that I know of," I said, gripping a locker for balance. "Maybe the school is settling."

"Settling into what?" Lennox snapped. "The underworld."

Draven and Jaxx stood on either side of me like mismatched bodyguards, both tense, both listening to something I couldn't hear. Their eyes kept darting toward the windows facing the woods.

Another tremor rolled through the floor.

A ceiling tile shifted, and dust rained down on a group of sophomores, who screamed like ghosts were attacking them.

Lennox yelled. "Nope. Nope. Absolutely not. I did not sign up for surprise earthquakes."

"It's probably construction," I said, though my voice wobbled. "Or pipes. Or something."

Draven didn't answer. His jaw flexed, his eyes narrowing like he was tracking something beneath the surface.

Jaxx muttered, "This is bad."

Lennox spun on him. "Bad how. Bad like 'the cafeteria ran out of cinnamon rolls' bad, or bad like 'the school is sinking into the earth' bad."

"Somewhere in between," Jaxx said.

"That is not comforting," Lennox snapped.

The hallway lights flickered again, harder this time.

A few students screamed. Papers flew off bulletin boards. A teacher shouted for everyone to get into the classrooms, but no one listened. A kid ran past holding a Chromebook over his head like a shield. Another yelled, "SAVE YOURSELVES," while dragging his confused friend behind him.

I felt a weird flutter in my chest, like nerves, or adrenaline, or maybe the beginnings of a panic attack. I pressed a hand to my sternum.

"I feel weird."

Draven's eyes snapped to me. "You okay?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "It feels like something is under us."

Lennox's eyes widened. "Like... a basement. Keeva, that's called a basement."

"No," I said. "Like movement."

Jaxx swore under his breath. "Of course she feels it."

"Feels what?" I demanded.

"The vibrations," Draven said quickly. "You're just sensitive to them."

"Sensitive," Lennox repeated. "She's not a seismograph."

Another tremor shook the floor, this one sharp enough to make lockers slam open. A stack of worksheets flew into the air like confetti. A teacher dove for cover behind a recycling bin.

Someone screamed, "THE SCHOOL IS HAUNTED," and sprinted down the hall.

Lennox pointed. "See? This is why we can't have nice things."

A group of juniors huddled near the vending machines, arguing about whether they should grab snacks in case this was "the end."

One kid punched the machine and yelled, "IF I'M GOING DOWN, I'M GOING DOWN WITH A SNICKERS."

I stumbled as another vibration rolled through the floor.

Draven reached for me instinctively. "Careful."

I steadied myself against him, breath catching. His hands were warm. Too warm.

Jaxx stepped forward, panic flashing across his face. "She shouldn't be near the windows."

"She shouldn't be near you," Draven shot back.

"Both of you STOP," I snapped.

They froze.

Another distant sound echoed closer, sharper.

A dog?

A siren?

A weird echo?

The windows rattled slightly.

Students screamed.

Teachers herded people into classrooms.

The hallway dissolved into chaos.

A teacher tried to blow a whistle, but it cracked in half. Another yelled, "FORM AN ORDERLY LINE," while students trampled past her like a stampede.

Draven stepped in front of me.

Jaxx stepped beside me.

Lennox whispered, "Oh my God, this is like a disaster movie. Do we duck and cover? Do we run? Do we sacrifice someone to the tremor gods?"

"No one is sacrificing anyone," I said.

"Speak for yourself," someone yelled from down the hall. "I volunteer, Kyle!"

"HEY," Kyle shouted.

The intercom crackled overhead.

"Students and staff, please remain calm. All classes are suspended until further notice. Please proceed to the nearest safe room."

Lennox blinked. "Safe room. Since when do we have safe rooms?"

"Since always," Jaxx muttered.

"Since never," Lennox corrected. "I've been here for years."

I would know if we had panic bunkers.”

Draven pointed down the hall. “We need to move.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Away from the windows,” he said.

“Away from the east wing,” Jaxx added.

“Away from literally everything,” Lennox said. “Great. Perfect. Love that for us.”

Another tremor hit, sharp, jarring, like something heavy had slammed into the ground outside. Lockers rattled. Ceiling tiles shifted. A few students ducked as something might fall.

A kid screamed, “THE FLOOR IS BREATHING,” which was not helpful.

I grabbed Lennox’s arm. “We need to go.”

Draven grabbed my hand. “This way.”

Jaxx stepped in front of him. “No. That hallway’s blocked off.”

“Move,” Draven growled.

“Make me,” Jaxx snapped.

Lennox groaned. “Oh my God, not this again.”

The hallway lights flickered one more time and then steadied.

The tremors stopped.

The air went still.

Too still.

Students froze mid-step.

Teachers paused mid-shout.

Even the vents seemed to hold their breath.

Draven’s jaw clenched.

Jaxx’s eyes narrowed.

I whispered, “What now?”

Lennox whispered, “Plot twist incoming.”

And then

The hallway doors slammed open.

Mrs. Alder stormed in like a hurricane in a cardigan.

“ENOUGH.”

Her voice cracked through the hallway like thunder.

Every student froze.

Even Draven and Jaxx.

Mrs. Alder's gaze swept the room, landing on Draven, then Jaxx, then me.

"All three of you," she said sharply. "My office. Now."

Lennox whispered, "You're dead."

I whispered back, "I know."

And as we followed Mrs. Alder down the hall, I couldn't shake the feeling that whatever was happening under the school

It wasn't done yet.

Mrs. Alder didn't slow down as she marched us through the hallway. Her heels clicked like a countdown, sharp and rhythmic, echoing off the lockers. Students parted around her like she was a storm front rolling through the building.

Lennox leaned close to me, whispering, "She's walking too fast. This is the stride of a woman who's about to ruin your entire life."

I whispered back, "I can't feel my legs."

"You don't need legs," she said. "You need a lawyer."

"Do you know a lawyer?"

"No, but I can Google one."

Draven and Jaxx followed behind us, both silent, both tense, both radiating enough energy to power the school's failing lights. Every few steps, Draven's gaze flicked toward the windows. Every few steps, Jaxx's jaw clenched like he was fighting the urge to bolt.

Mrs. Alder pushed open her office door and pointed. "Inside."

We obeyed.

Her office was small but intimidating, with shelves lined with old books, a wall of certificates, and a giant plant that looked like it ate sunlight and dreams. A single window overlooked the woods behind the school, the tree line dark and dense.

The moment I saw the trees, my chest tightened.

That tug again.

That pull.

Like invisible fingers curling around my ribs.

I tore my gaze away.

Mrs. Alder shut the door and turned to face us, arms crossed. "Explain."

No one spoke.

She raised a brow. "Wonderful. A trio of silent statues."

Lennox cleared her throat. "Technically, I'm not part of the trio. I'm just"

"You're part of it now," Mrs. Alder said without looking at her.

Lennox deflated. "Okay. Cool. Love that for me."

Mrs. Alder's gaze snapped to Draven. "You. Start talking."

Draven straightened, but his voice stayed calm. "There was a disturbance in the hallway."

"A disturbance," she repeated. "That's what we're calling it."

Jaxx scoffed. "It wasn't just a disturbance."

Mrs. Alder's eyes narrowed. "Then what was it?"

Jaxx hesitated, which was new. He always had something to say. Always had a smirk ready. But now? He looked unsure.

Draven stepped in. "It's complicated."

Mrs. Alder pinched the bridge of her nose. "Everything is complicated with you boys."

Then her gaze shifted to me.

"Keeva."

My stomach dropped. "Yes?"

"What happened?"

I opened my mouth, but the truth tangled in my throat.

The pull.

The flickering lights.

The cold air.

The way the world felt like it was glitching around me.

"I don't know," I said softly. "Everything just feels wrong."

Mrs. Alder studied me for a long moment, too long, like she was searching for something in my expression.

Then she sighed. "Sit."

We sat.

All four of us.

Draven on my left.

Jaxx on my right.

Lennox perched on the edge of her chair like she was ready to leap into battle.

Mrs. Alder paced behind her desk. "There have been incidents. Reports. Strange behavior. Animals acting out. Students fainting. Lights malfunctioning. And now this."

She gestured toward the hallway.

Draven's jaw tightened. "It's not Keeva's fault."

Jaxx nodded. "Yeah. She didn't do anything."

Mrs. Alder's eyes flicked between them. "I didn't say she did."

But something in her tone made my skin prickle.

Lennox leaned toward me. "Why do I feel like she knows something?"

I whispered, "Because she does."

Mrs. Alder stopped pacing. "Keeva, have you felt different lately?"

My heart stuttered. "Different how?"

"Physically. Emotionally. Sensory changes. Strange dreams. Unusual instincts."

I swallowed hard. "Why are you asking me that?"

Draven and Jaxx exchanged a look, a loaded one.

Mrs. Alder didn't blink. "Because whatever is happening in this school seems to be happening around you."

My breath caught.

Lennox grabbed my hand. "She didn't ask for that."

"I know," Mrs. Alder said gently. "But she's in the middle of it."

The room felt smaller.

The air felt heavier.

The window behind Mrs. Alder rattled just once as something brushed against it.

We all froze.

Mrs. Alder turned slowly toward the glass.

The woods outside were still.

Too still.

Like the trees were holding their breath.

Draven stood. "We need to move her away from the window."

Jaxx stood too. "Yeah. Now."

Mrs. Alder didn't argue.

That scared me more than anything.

She stepped forward, voice low. "Keeva, has anything followed you from the woods?"

My blood ran cold.

Because the answer was yes.

I didn't know what.

Mrs. Alder's office door slammed shut behind us with a finality that made my stomach twist. The hallway noise faded instantly as the walls swallowed it whole, leaving only the hum of the overhead lights and the faint creak of the old building settling.

Except it wasn't settling.

Not really.

The tremors had stopped, but the air still felt charged, like static clinging to my skin.

Mrs. Alder rounded on us. "Sit."

We sat.

Draven dropped into the chair like he was ready to spring back up at any second.

Jaxx slouched, but his eyes stayed sharp.

Lennox perched on the edge of her seat like she was prepared to throw hands with the principal if necessary.

I sat in the middle, feeling like a human lightning rod.

Mrs. Alder folded her arms. "Do either of you want to explain why the school is experiencing seismic activity?"

Draven's jaw tightened. "It's not us."

Jaxx nodded. "Yeah. We're not the problem."

Mrs. Alder's gaze slid to me. "Then what is?"

My breath caught. "I don't know."

But the truth pulsed under my skin that tug, that pull, that strange awareness humming in my bones.

Mrs. Alder sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "This school is not equipped for whatever this is."

Lennox raised her hand. "Hi. Hello. Student here. What exactly is this?"

Mrs. Alder ignored her.

Draven leaned forward. "We need to get her away from the east wing."

Jaxx nodded. "And away from the windows."

Mrs. Alder's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Neither boy answered.

Because they didn't have to.

The window behind Mrs. Alder rattled again, harder this time.

We all froze.

Lennox whispered, "Nope. Absolutely not. I'm not dying in a principal's office. That's embarrassing."

Mrs. Alder moved toward the window slowly, cautiously, like she expected something to leap out of the trees.

The woods outside were still.

Too still.

Like they were listening.

A faint vibration rolled through the floor, not enough to shake anything, but enough to feel.

I pressed a hand to my chest. "It's happening again."

Draven stood instantly. "She needs to get out of here."

Jaxx stood too. "Yeah. Now."

Mrs. Alder turned sharply. "Sit down."

They didn't.

She exhaled. "Fine. Then listen. Whatever is happening under this school and in those woods is escalating. And Keeva is at the center of it."

My stomach dropped. "Why me?"

Mrs. Alder hesitated, and that hesitation was worse than anything she could've said.

Finally, she spoke.

"Because the disturbances started the day you arrived."

The room tilted.

Lennox grabbed my hand. "Hey. Breathe."

But I couldn't.

Because the window rattled again, harder this time.

A shadow flickered between the trees.

Draven stepped in front of me. "We need to move her. Now."

Jaxx nodded. "Before it gets closer."

Mrs. Alder didn't argue.

That scared me more than anything.

She opened the door. "We're going to the west wing. It's reinforced."

Lennox blinked. "Reinforced with what. Hope and drywall."

Mrs. Alder didn't answer.

We stepped into the hallway, and the air felt wrong again. Heavy. Thick. Like the building was holding its breath.

Students were gone.

Teachers were gone.

The hall was empty.

Too empty.

Draven's shoulders tensed. "This isn't right."

Jaxx's voice dropped. "It's close."

I swallowed hard. "What is?"

Neither answered.

A low rumble vibrated through the floor deeper than before,

like something massive shifting underground.

Lennox grabbed my arm. "Keeva, I swear, if a demon mole pops out of the floor, I'm transferring schools."

I tried to laugh, but it came out shaky.

Mrs. Alder quickened her pace. "Move. Now."

We followed her down the hall, Draven in front, Jaxx behind, Lennox glued to my side.

Another tremor hit sharply, jarring.

The lights flickered.

The vents rattled.

A locker door slammed open on its own.

Jaxx swore. "It's right under us."

Draven grabbed my hand. "Run."

We ran.

Down the hall.

Past classrooms.

Past flickering lights.

Past lockers that rattled like something was pounding from the inside.

Mrs. Alder threw open a heavy door at the end of the hall. "Inside!"

We stumbled into a dim, reinforced room with thick walls, no windows, and emergency lights glowing faintly.

The moment the door shut, the tremors stopped.

Silence.

Heavy.

Unsettling.

Wrong.

Lennox collapsed onto a bench. "I hate this school."

Jaxx leaned against the wall, breathing hard. "It's getting stronger."

Draven didn't look away from me. "And it's getting closer to her."

Mrs. Alder locked the door. "We're safe for now."

But the way she said it made my skin crawl.

Because it didn't feel safe.

Not even a little.

I pressed a hand to my chest to the strange, fluttering pull beneath my ribs.

Whatever was happening under the school

It wasn't done yet.

And it wasn't random.

It was coming for me.

The reinforced room felt too small the moment the door shut behind us. The air was thick and heavy, as if the walls were pressing inward. The emergency lights cast everything in a dim orange glow, making everyone look a little haunted.

Lennox slumped on the bench, legs sprawled out like she'd given up on dignity. "I hate this school," she muttered.

Jaxx leaned against the wall, arms crossed, breathing hard. "It's getting stronger."

Draven didn't look away from me. Not once. "And it's getting closer to her."

My stomach twisted. "Can we not say it like that? Like I'm bait?"

Lennox pointed at me. "You're not bait. You're a main character. Main characters don't get eaten. Usually."

"That's not comforting," I said.

Mrs. Alder locked the door with a heavy click. "We're safe for now."

But the way she said it made my skin crawl. "Safe for now" didn't sound safe at all.

The room hummed with silence. Not peaceful silence, waiting silence. Like the air itself was listening.

I pressed a hand to my chest, to that strange fluttering pull beneath my ribs. It wasn't fading. It wasn't calming. It was growing. Like something was waking up inside me, stretching, reaching.

Lennox nudged me gently. "Hey. You okay?"

"No," I whispered. "I don't think I am."

Draven stepped closer, voice low. “Keeva”

The floor vibrated.

Just once.

Soft.

But enough to make every single person in the room freeze.

Jaxx straightened. “It followed us.”

Mrs. Alder’s jaw tightened. “Impossible. This room is reinforced.”

Another vibration rolled through the floor.

Stronger.

Lennox squeaked. “Reinforced with WHAT, exactly? Cardboard and optimism?”

The lights flickered.

Draven moved in front of me again, instinctive, protective. “It’s right under us.”

Jaxx cursed under his breath. “Of course it is.”

Mrs. Alder stepped toward the door like she was listening for something. “Everyone, stay calm.”

“No one is calm!” Lennox snapped.

The floor vibrated again, harder this time. The bench rattled. Dust drifted from the ceiling.

My bracelet burned.

Not warm.

Burned.

I gasped and grabbed my wrist.

Draven’s hand closed over mine instantly. “Don’t take it off.”

“I wasn’t, it hurts”

“I know. Don’t take it off.”

The room shook again, sharper, like something massive had slammed into the ground beneath us.

Lennox screamed. “NOPE. NOPE. I’M DONE. I’M DROPPING OUT.”

Jaxx grabbed the wall for balance. “It’s trying to get to her.”

Mrs. Alder spun around. “We need to move her again.”

“Where?” I cried. “There’s nowhere left!”

The floor vibrated so hard the emergency lights flickered.

Draven grabbed my shoulders. “Keeva, look at me.”

“I am looking at you!”

“Good. Stay with me.”

The tremor hit again.

Hard.

The whole room shook.

Something cracked in the wall.

Lennox shrieked. “WE’RE GONNA DIE IN A BUNKER.
I KNEW IT.”

Mrs. Alder shouted, “Everyone to the far wall!”

We stumbled backward just as another vibration rolled through the floor, deep and heavy, like something enormous was shifting beneath us.

My chest tightened.

The pull inside me snapped taut.

Like something had hooked into me.

Like something was calling me.

Claiming me.

I pressed a hand to my sternum, gasping. “It’s— it’s inside me”

Draven’s eyes widened. “Keeva”

The floor went still.

Completely still.

The silence that followed was worse than the shaking.

Worse than the howls.

Worse than everything.

Because it wasn’t silence.

It was waiting.

Jaxx whispered, “It found her.”

Mrs. Alder’s face went pale. “Everyone, stay back.”

Lennox grabbed my arm. “Keeva, don’t you dare pass out.
I can’t carry you. I have noodle arms.”

But I wasn't passing out.

I was waking up.

The pull inside me surged bright, hot, electric as something ancient had just opened its eyes.

I gasped.

The room flickered.

The lights dimmed.

And for one terrifying heartbeat, I felt something in the dark beneath the school...

...reach back.

CHAPTER NINE

Party Invitation

The lockdown shutters slammed down over the windows, plunging the hallway into dim, humming emergency light. Students screamed and scattered into classrooms, teachers shouting orders, but Lennox, Draven, Jaxx, and I were still frozen near the window where something had slammed into the building moments earlier.

The metal shutters rattled as they locked into place.

The hallway lights flickered, then steadied into a dim red glow.

The air felt charged, humming with something I didn't have a name for.

Lennox clutched my hand so tightly our knuckles whitened. "We need to hide. Like, now. Preferably somewhere with walls. And doors. And zero things that go bump."

Draven didn't move.

His eyes stayed locked on the tree line outside, even though the shutters blocked the view now. He looked like he was listening to something far away, something only he could hear.

Jaxx was the same tense, alert, jaw tight.

They weren't panicking.

They weren't confused.

They were prepared.

Too prepared.

Footsteps thundered down the hallway. Three boys rounded the corner: Ronan, Torren, and Kael. They didn't look scared. They didn't even look surprised. They moved like they'd been waiting for this exact moment.

Ronan scanned the hallway with sharp, assessing eyes. "Draven."

Torren cracked his knuckles. "You're seeing what I'm seeing."

Kael tilted his head, listening. "It's close."

Lennox stared at them. "Okay, what is happening. Why are

you all acting like you're in a tactical training video?"

None of them answered.

Draven stepped forward, slipping into a tone I'd never heard from him: calm, commanding, steady. "We need to secure the building."

Ronan nodded like this was normal. "East wing first."

Torren smirked. "I'll take the exits."

Kael jerked his chin toward the classrooms. "I'll sweep the halls."

Lennox blinked. "Sweep the halls? What are you, mall cops?"

Torren winked at her. "Better."

Lennox sputtered. "I want no."

Kael gave me a long, unreadable look. "Stay close to Draven."

My pulse jumped. "Why?"

Kael didn't answer.

He didn't need to.

The boys split off, moving with silent, practiced precision, not running, not panicking, but patrolling. Their footsteps were soft, controlled, purposeful. They moved like they owned the space.

Because apparently they did.

Draven turned back to us. "You two need to come with me."

Lennox crossed her arms. "Why should we trust you?"

Draven's jaw tightened. "Because something hit the building, and you're safer with me than wandering around."

Jaxx stepped forward. "She's safer with me."

Draven shot him a look sharp enough to cut glass. "No, she's not."

"You don't get to decide that," Jaxx snapped.

"Neither do you," Draven snapped back.

Lennox groaned. "Oh my God, not this again. Boys, please, I beg you, pick a different hobby."

Another crash shook the building.

Something slammed into the gym doors, hard enough to dent the metal. Students screamed from inside classrooms. A teacher yelled, "STAY AWAY FROM THE WINDOWS," which was hilarious because the shutters were already down.

Lennox yelped. "Nope. Nope. Nope. I'm done. I'm out. I'm"

"Keeva," I whispered, "breathe."

She inhaled like she was preparing for battle. "Okay. Breathing. But also panicking."

Ronan's voice echoed from down the hall. "Draven! West side!"

Draven's eyes sharpened. "Go," he told Jaxx. "Get them somewhere safe."

Jaxx hesitated. "You trust me with her."

Draven's voice dropped. "I trust you not to screw this up."

Jaxx swallowed hard. "I won't."

Draven turned to me, eyes softening in a way that made my stomach flip. "I'll come back for you."

My heart stuttered. "Draven"

But he was already gone, sprinting down the hallway with Ronan and Torren like shadows.

Kael's voice echoed from the stairwell. "Draven! Over here!"

Lennox whispered, "Why does he run like that?"

"Like what?" I whispered.

"Like he's the main character."

Before I could answer, a deep, echoing thud shook the floor.

Not a tremor impact.

Jaxx flinched. "We need to move. Now."

Lennox grabbed my arm. "Where are we even going?"

Jaxx scanned the hallway. "There's a reinforced room near the science wing. It's meant for"

A deafening crash cut him off.

Something slammed into the building again, closer this time. The floor vibrated. Dust drifted from the ceiling. A kid down the hall screamed, "I KNEW THIS SCHOOL WAS CURSED," and sprinted away.

Lennox pointed after him. "Honestly, same."

Jaxx tugged my wrist. "Come on."

But before we could move, a voice boomed from the far end of the hallway.

"Draven!"

We all spun.

A tall man strode toward us, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, eyes sharp as steel. Even in the dim emergency lights, he radiated authority. Not supernatural. Not magical. Just commanding. Like a principal who could end your entire academic career with one raised eyebrow.

Lennox whispered, "Who is that?"

Draven's voice came from behind him as he reappeared, breathless but steady. "My father."

The man stopped in front of us, gaze sweeping over Lennox and me with a weight that made my skin prickle.

"You two," he said, voice deep and steady. "Come with me."

Lennox bristled. "Uh, no. Stranger danger."

Draven's father didn't even blink. "You're not safe in the hallway."

Jaxx stepped forward. "Sir"

"Not now," the man said, cutting him off with nothing but tone.

Jaxx shut up instantly.

Lennox's eyes widened. "Okay, terrifying dad energy. Noted."

Draven's father looked at me again, something unreadable in his expression. "You especially."

My stomach dropped. "Why me?"

He didn't answer.

Draven stepped closer, voice low. "Keeva, stay with me."

Lennox tugged my other arm. "No. Stay with me. I'm the only sane one here."

Jaxx stepped between them. "She's coming with me."

"She's not," Draven said.

"She is," Jaxx said.

"She's staying with me," Lennox said.

"I hate all of you," I whispered.

Another crash shook the building.

Draven's father straightened. "We're out of time."

He gestured sharply. "Move."

And as we followed him down the hallway, my heart pounded so hard it felt like it might crack my ribs.

I didn't know what was happening.

I didn't know why the boys were acting like trained soldiers.

I didn't know why the building felt like it was breathing.

I didn't know why Draven looked at me like I was something fragile.

I didn't know why Jaxx kept stepping in front of me like he expected something to burst through the walls.

I didn't know why Lennox kept muttering, "I should've stayed home."

I didn't know anything.

Except for one thing.

Whatever was happening

I was in the middle of it.

And I had no idea why.

Draven's father didn't slow down as he led us through the dim hallway. His stride was long, purposeful, and terrifyingly calm, the kind of calm that meant he'd seen worse than this and wasn't impressed.

Lennox leaned close to me, whispering, "Okay, I'm sorry, but why does he walk like he's about to fire half the school board?"

I whispered back, "Because he probably could."

Jaxx kept pace behind us, tense and silent, eyes flicking to every shadow like he expected something to lunge out of the walls. Draven stayed close to my other side, matching his father's speed with ease, his expression carved from stone.

The emergency lights cast everything in a red glow, making the hallway look like a scene from a horror movie. Lockers rattled occasionally as something brushed against them from the inside. The air vibrated with a low hum not loud enough to hear, but strong enough to feel.

Lennox clutched my sleeve. "I swear, if a demon raccoon jumps out, I'm suing the school."

Draven's father didn't look back. "Stay close."

His voice was deep, steady, and carried the weight of someone who expected to be obeyed. Even Lennox shut up for a full three seconds, which was a record.

We turned a corner, and the hallway widened into a corridor lined with reinforced doors, thicker metal, heavy locks, and small windows covered with mesh. I'd never seen this part of the school before.

Lennox whispered, "Okay, what is this, Area Fifty-School?"

Jaxx answered without looking at her. "Emergency wing."

"Emergency for what?" Lennox demanded.

He didn't answer.

Draven's father stopped at a door near the end of the hall. "Inside."

We stepped into a room that looked like a cross between a panic shelter and a conference space: thick walls, no windows, a heavy metal door, and a long table surrounded by chairs. Emergency lights glowed faintly overhead.

The moment the door shut, the hallway noise vanished.

Like someone had flipped a switch.

Lennox exhaled shakily. "Okay. I hate this room. I hate this day. I hate this school. I hate"

Draven's father raised a hand.

She stopped mid-rant.

He turned to Draven first. "Report."

Draven straightened. "Multiple impacts on the east and west wings. Something's testing the perimeter."

Jaxx added, "And it's getting closer."

Draven's father nodded once, like this confirmed something he already suspected. Then his gaze shifted to me.

Not unkind.

Not harsh.

But heavy.

"You," he said quietly, "are the reason it's here."

My breath caught. "What?"

Lennox stepped in front of me like a feral guard dog. "Okay, no. Absolutely not. She didn't do anything."

Draven's father didn't flinch. "I didn't say she did."

Jaxx crossed his arms. "Then what are you saying?"

"That whatever is outside," Draven's father said, "is drawn to her."

My stomach twisted. "Why?"

He hesitated, and that hesitation was worse than any answer.

Draven stepped closer to me, voice low. "It's not your fault."

Jaxx nodded. "Yeah. You didn't cause this."

Lennox grabbed my hand. "And if anyone tries to blame you, I will fight them."

Draven's father ignored all of them. His gaze stayed on me, assessing, calculating, almost searching.

"You've felt it, haven't you?" he said softly. "The pull."

My pulse jumped. "How do you know about that?"

"Because," he said, "you're not the first."

The room went silent.

Draven stiffened.

Jaxx's jaw clenched.

Lennox whispered, "What does that mean?"

Before anyone could answer, a deep, echoing thud shook the building.

Not a tremor.

Not a vibration.

An impact.

The lights flickered.

Dust drifted from the ceiling.

Draven's father straightened. "It's found the west wing."

Jaxx swore under his breath. "We don't have much time."

Draven moved closer to me, protective instinct radiating off him. "We need to get her somewhere safer."

Lennox threw her hands up. "Safer than a panic bunker? What do you want, a titanium vault?"

Draven's father didn't blink. "That's exactly what I want."

Lennox froze. "Oh. You were serious."

Another impact shook the building closer this time.

Draven's father turned to me again. "Keeva. There's something you need to know."

My heart pounded. "What?"

He opened his mouth

And the lights went out.

The lights didn't just go out.

They died.

A sharp click, a low hum, and then nothing.

Darkness swallowed the room whole, thick and absolute, like someone had draped a heavy blanket over the world.

Lennox gasped. "Nope. Nope. I reject this. Turn the lights back on."

Jaxx cursed under his breath. "It's here."

Draven moved instantly, stepping in front of me, shielding me with his body. I could barely see him, just the faint outline of his shoulders in the emergency glow leaking under the door.

Draven's father didn't panic. He didn't even flinch.

He said, "Stay still."

Which was hilarious, because my legs were shaking so hard

I was basically vibrating.

A low rumble rolled through the floor deeper than before, like something massive shifting beneath the building. The table rattled. A chair tipped over. Lennox grabbed my arm with a death grip.

“Why is the floor making noises?” she whispered. “Floors shouldn’t make noises.”

Jaxx’s voice was tight. “It’s not the floor.”

Another rumble.

Closer.

Heavier.

Draven’s father stepped toward the door, placing a hand flat against the metal like he could feel something through it.

He could.

I could tell by the way his shoulders tensed.

“What is it?” I whispered.

He didn’t answer.

Draven did.

“Something that shouldn’t be here.”

My breath hitched. “Because of me.”

Draven turned, and even in the dark, I felt his gaze lock onto mine. “Not because of you. Because of what you are.”

My heart stuttered. “What am I?”

Silence.

Not because they didn’t know.

Because they weren’t ready to say it.

A sudden, violent slam hit the wall outside the room.

The entire shelter shook.

Lennox screamed.

Jaxx grabbed the table to steady himself.

Draven’s father didn’t move.

Another slam.

Then another.

Then a dragging sound, like claws scraping along the metal.

Lennox whispered, “I’m going to pass out. I’m actually

going to pass out.”

Jaxx stepped closer to me. “Stay behind us.”

Draven’s father finally spoke. “It’s testing the walls.”

My stomach dropped. “Testing them for what?”

“To see if it can get through.”

Lennox made a strangled noise. “I hate this school. I hate this town. I hate nature. I hate”

A final, thunderous impact shook the entire room.

The lights flickered back on for half a second just long enough for me to see the fear in Draven’s eyes.

Then darkness again.

Draven’s father exhaled slowly. “It’s moving away.”

We all froze, listening.

The rumbling faded.

The scraping stopped.

The air settled.

Silence.

Real silence.

Lennox sagged against the table. “Is it gone?”

Draven’s father didn’t answer right away. He pressed his ear to the door, listening with an intensity that made my skin crawl.

Finally, he stepped back. “For now.”

Jaxx let out a shaky breath. “That was too close.”

Draven turned to me, his voice low. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I whispered. “Not even a little.”

Lennox nodded vigorously. “Same.”

Draven’s father straightened, his expression unreadable. “We need to move you somewhere more secure.”

Lennox threw her hands up. “More secure than a panic bunker? What do you want, a titanium vault?”

He didn’t blink. “Yes.”

Lennox froze. “Oh. You were serious.”

Draven stepped closer to me, his voice softer than I’d ever heard it. “Keeva, there’s something you need to know.”

My heart pounded. “What?”

He hesitated.

Jaxx looked away.

Lennox squeezed my hand.

Draven’s father finally spoke.

“You’re not in danger because you were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

He paused.

“You’re in danger because something out there is looking for you.”

My breath caught. “Why?”

Draven’s father met my eyes.

“Because, Keeva, you’re not ordinary.”

The room tilted.

Lennox whispered, “Plot twist.”

Jaxx muttered, “Understatement of the century.”

Draven stepped closer, voice barely above a whisper. “And whatever’s out there? It knows.”

My pulse hammered. “Knows what?”

Draven swallowed hard.

“Knows who you are.”

The emergency lights flickered back on, bathing the room in a soft red glow.

Draven’s father opened the door.

“Come,” he said. “We have much to discuss.”

And as we stepped into the hallway, the air still humming, the walls still trembling faintly, the building still breathing one truth settled deep in my bones:

Whatever was happening at Stone Academy...

It wasn’t random.

It wasn’t a coincidence.

It wasn’t a mistake.

It was connected to me.

And I had no idea why.

CHAPTER TEN

Spell Malfunction

Something felt wrong before anything actually happened. Not loud or dramatic, just a shift in the air, like the hallway exhaled and forgot to inhale again. The lights hummed a little too sharply. The floor vibrated under my shoes, so faint I almost convinced myself I imagined it.

Then Jaxx's crew rounded the corner.

Eight of them, moving like they owned the hallway. Tessa. Serena. Mya. Max. Rafe. Cara. Finn. Brystin. They didn't look supernatural or monstrous. They didn't need to. Their intensity did all the work. It pressed against the walls, made the air feel thinner, made my pulse jump even before they opened their mouths.

Mya spotted me first. Her smirk was sharp enough to cut. "Well, well. If it isn't Stone."

Cara snorted. "Appropriate name. Solid like a rock. Thick like one too."

Heat crawled up my neck, but Lennox stepped forward before I could react.

"Say that again," she said, "and I'll show you how solid my fist is."

Finn laughed. "Relax, Lennox. We're just having fun."

"Yeah," Max added, "Stone Academy's very own Stone. Bet the school was named after her ancestors."

Brystin elbowed him. "Or maybe she's just the mascot."

My stomach twisted, but Lennox didn't let me take a single hit alone. She planted herself between me and them like she'd been waiting for this moment.

"Back off," she snapped. "All of you. Go bark at a tree or something."

Cara's eyes narrowed. "You talk big for someone who doesn't know what's going on."

"I know enough to see you're all insecure."

Mya stepped closer, her voice dripping venom. "We're not

insecure. We're annoyed. Because Jaxx keeps looking at her like she's something special."

I froze.

Lennox's jaw dropped. "Oh, so that's what this is. Jealousy. Cute."

Cara scoffed. "Please. Jaxx doesn't even like her."

A voice cut through the tension.

"Cara. Enough."

Jaxx.

His crew stiffened instantly. Jaxx's eyes flicked to me, conflicted, then away again, like looking at me hurt. Or like he was afraid of what he'd see.

Mya folded her arms. "We're just saying what everyone's thinking."

"No," Lennox shot back, "you're saying what you're thinking. Because Keeva's pretty and kind and you're not."

Cara's face twisted. "Watch it."

"Make me."

The tension snapped tight.

Before anyone could move, another voice sliced through the hallway like a blade.

"Step away from them."

We all turned.

Draven stood at the end of the hall, Ronan, Torren, and Kael flanking him like a wall of controlled fury. They didn't look scared or confused. They looked ready. Their presence shifted the air again, sharper this time, like the hallway itself braced for impact.

Ronan's eyes were cold. "This is our hallway. You don't get to intimidate anyone here."

Torren cracked his knuckles. "Especially not humans."

Kael's gaze locked on me. "You okay?"

I nodded, though my heart was racing.

Cara rolled her eyes. "Oh, look. The princes of Stone Academy."

Mya smirked. "Come to rescue your little human?"

Draven didn't rise to the bait. He didn't need to. He stepped between the rogues and me, and the air shifted again, heavier, charged. The kind of charged that made the hairs on my arms lift.

"You're done here," he said quietly.

Jaxx's jaw clenched. "Draven."

"Not now."

The two boys locked eyes in a silent, dangerous exchange. Not loud. Not dramatic. Just sharp enough to cut the air between them. A quiet threat. A history I didn't understand.

Lennox tugged me back. "We're leaving. Before someone starts marking territory."

Torren snorted. "Trust me, sweetheart, if we were marking territory, you'd know."

Lennox blinked. "I don't even want to know what that means."

"Keeva," I whispered, "let's just go."

But as we turned, Cara muttered under her breath, just loud enough for me to hear.

"Stone. More like Stolen."

I froze. "What?"

Cara smirked. "You'll figure it out."

Draven's expression darkened. "Cara. Walk away."

Jaxx's crew backed off reluctantly, resentfully, but not defeated. Their eyes lingered on me like I was a puzzle they were dying to solve. Or a secret they weren't supposed to say out loud.

Jaxx lingered a moment longer. His eyes met mine, full of something raw and unguarded.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

Then he followed them.

The hallway fell quiet, but not peaceful. The air still hummed with tension and danger and something I couldn't name. Something that felt like it was pressing against my ribs from the

inside.

Draven exhaled, tension still coiled in his shoulders. "Keeva, stay close."

Lennox muttered, "Oh, she's not going anywhere."

But I barely heard them. My pulse was racing. My chest felt tight. My skin buzzed like static. Something was wrong. Something was shifting, not physically but deeper, like the world was rearranging itself around me.

I pressed a hand to my sternum. "Why did she call me that?"

Draven's jaw tightened. "Ignore her."

"I can't," I whispered. "What does it mean?"

He didn't answer. Not because he didn't know. But because he didn't want to say it.

Ronan jogged back from the east wing. "Teachers are trying to move everyone to the safe rooms. We need to go before they lock this hallway down."

Torren appeared behind him. "Gym doors are dented. Something hit them hard."

Kael's voice echoed from the stairwell. "Second floor's a mess. People are freaking out."

Draven nodded once, then turned to me. "Keeva, whatever they think they know about you, whatever they believe, it doesn't matter. You're with us."

Lennox squeezed my hand. "And with me. Always."

I swallowed hard. "I just don't understand any of this."

Draven's expression softened just barely. "You will."

Another distant crash echoed through the building. Students screamed from somewhere down the hall.

Lennox grabbed my arm. "We need to go. Now."

I nodded, but my gaze drifted back to the hallway where Jaxx's crew had disappeared.

Stolen.

The word echoed in my mind like a warning. Or a secret. Or a truth I wasn't supposed to hear.

Draven stepped closer, his voice low and steady. “Keeva, stay with me.”

Jaxx’s voice echoed faintly from down the hall.

“Keeva!”

I turned.

Two boys.

Two crews.

Two storms colliding.

And I was caught between them again.

This time, it didn’t feel like a coincidence.

It felt like fate tightening its grip.

Torren grinned like he’d been waiting for an excuse to fight. “We’d chart.”

“Not the point,” Lennox snapped, though her voice shook with nerves she was trying to hide.

Even she didn’t fight the urgency in our movements. The air felt wrong again—thick, humming, charged. Draven turned to me, voice low and steady. “Stay close.”

“I am,” I said, but my mind wasn’t. It was still stuck on Cara’s word.

Stolen.

It echoed in my head like a bell struck too hard. Stolen. Stolen. Stolen. Why would she say that? Why would she look at me like she knew something I didn’t?

My chest tightened. “Why did she call me that?” I whispered.

Draven’s jaw flexed. “Ignore her.”

“I can’t,” I said. “What does it mean?”

He didn’t answer. Not because he didn’t know. But because he didn’t want to say it.

Jaxx’s voice echoed again, closer this time. “Keeva!”

Lennox groaned. “Oh my God, does he have a tracking device on you?”

Torren muttered, “Wouldn’t be surprised.”

Ronan shot him a look. “Not helping.”

Kael stepped closer to me, his presence steady and grounding. “Don’t let him pull you away.”

My pulse jumped. “Pull me away from what?”

Kael didn’t answer.

Draven did. “From us.”

The hallway lights flickered again—not violently like before, but enough to make the shadows stretch long across the floor. The shift made my skin prickle. The building felt like it was breathing again, slow and uneven.

Lennox grabbed my hand. “Okay, I’m officially done. We’re moving. Now.”

Ronan nodded. “East wing is clear for the moment. Let’s go.”

Torren cracked his knuckles. “I’ll take point.”

Kael fell into step behind me. “I’ve got the rear.”

Draven stayed at my side, close enough that I could feel the heat radiating off him. It wasn’t comforting. It was... something else. Something that made my breath catch for a second before I forced myself to look away.

Jaxx’s voice echoed again, faint but urgent. “Keeva!”

I turned instinctively, but Draven caught my wrist, gentle but firm.

“Don’t,” he said softly.

My breath hitched. “Why?”

His eyes softened for a heartbeat. “Because you’re not safe with him right now.”

Lennox muttered, “She’s not safe with anyone right now.”

Torren snorted. “She’s safe with us.”

“Debatable,” Lennox shot back.

But she didn’t let go of my hand. None of them did.

We moved down the hallway as a unit—Lennox gripping me, Draven shielding me, Ronan and Torren scouting ahead, Kael watching our backs. Students peeked out of classrooms as we passed, whispering and staring, their teachers trying to usher them back inside even though they looked just as rattled.

The building hummed again, a low vibrating thrum that made the lockers tremble.

Lennox whispered, "Why does it feel like the school is breathing?"

No one answered, because the truth was worse than anything she could imagine. And I could feel it. Deep in my chest. A pull. A tug. A strange electric awareness.

Something was coming.

Something was close.

Something was looking for me.

Draven's voice was still echoing in my ears when Jaxx's shout cut through the hallway again.

"Keeva!"

This time, it wasn't angry or teasing or possessive. It was scared.

Lennox stiffened. "Okay, that's new. Jaxx doesn't do scared."

Ronan, Torren, and Kael all reacted at once. A shift in posture. A tightening of shoulders. A shared look that said they heard something we didn't.

Draven stepped closer, his voice low. "Don't move."

I didn't, because something in his tone and something in the air told me that if I took even one step, everything would change.

The hallway lights flickered again, dimming to a low pulsing glow. The shadows stretched across the floor in ways shadows shouldn't stretch. They bent, curved, reached.

Lennox whispered, "Why does it feel like the building is watching us?"

Torren muttered, "Because it is."

Lennox blinked. "I'm sorry, what?"

Ronan shot him a look. "Not now."

Kael's gaze stayed locked on the far end of the hallway. "It's getting closer."

My pulse jumped. "What is?"

No one answered, because they didn't need to. The air shifted with a subtle pressure change, like the moment before a storm breaks. My skin prickled. My chest tightened. That strange electric pull inside me flared again, stronger this time, as if something were reaching for me.

Lennox grabbed my hand. "Okay, I'm officially done. I want a refund for this entire day."

Draven stepped in front of me, blocking my view of the hallway. "Stay behind me."

Jaxx's voice echoed again, closer and breathless. "Keeva!"

I turned instinctively, but Draven caught my wrist again, gentle but firm.

"Don't," he whispered.

My breath hitched. "Why?"

His eyes softened. "Because you don't know what's calling you."

A chill ran down my spine. Calling me. Not chasing. Not hunting. Calling.

Lennox whispered, "Okay, that's enough supernatural foreshadowing for one day."

Ronan jogged back from the east wing. "Teachers are locking down the labs. We need to move before they seal this hallway."

Torren nodded. "Gym doors are dented. Something hit them hard."

Kael added, "Second floor's a mess. People are panicking."

Draven turned to me, his voice steady. "Keeva, whatever they think they know about you, whatever they believe, it doesn't matter. You're with us."

Lennox squeezed my hand. "And with me. Always."

I swallowed hard. "I just don't understand any of this."

"You will," Draven said softly.

Another crash echoed through the building, closer and sharper, as if something massive had slammed into the wall.

Students screamed from somewhere down the hall.

Lennox grabbed my arm. "We need to go. Now."

I nodded, but my gaze drifted back to the hallway where Jaxx's crew had disappeared.

Stolen.

The word echoed in my mind like a warning. Or a secret. Or a truth I wasn't supposed to hear.

Draven stepped closer, his voice low. "Keeva, stay with me."

Jaxx's voice echoed faintly again. "Keeva!"

I turned.

Two boys.

Two crews.

Two storms colliding.

And I was caught between them again.

But this time, it didn't feel like a coincidence.

It felt like fate tightening its grip.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Forbidden Tension

Cara glared. "Including Draven."

Jaxx stiffened. "Enough."

Cara was not finished. "He is losing control over her. You heard him. He sounded like" She cut herself off, but the implication hung in the air. Something dangerous. Something not human.

The candles flickered again, casting long shadows across the walls.

Jaxx stepped closer to me, lowering his voice. "Keeva, do not listen to them. You are not doing anything wrong."

"I know," I whispered. "But something is happening."

Lennox squeezed my hand. "We will figure it out."

The door rattled again, not violently this time but with a controlled, deliberate knock.

Kael's voice came through, calm and firm. "Everyone step back from the door."

Cara and Mya scrambled away instantly.

Lennox pulled me with her. "Yes. Great idea. Let us not get crushed."

Jaxx stayed close, posture tense and ready.

The door clicked, not opening, but unlocking from the outside.

Draven's voice came through, low and steady now, but still edged with something wild beneath the surface. "Keeva, open the door. We need to talk."

Lennox whispered, "Why does that sound like both a threat and a love confession?"

Cara muttered, "Because he is obsessed."

Mya nodded. "And it is getting worse."

Jaxx's jaw tightened. "He is not obsessed."

Lennox raised a brow. "Sweetheart, he tried to Kool Aid Man his way through the wall."

Jaxx did not argue. He could not.

The runes pulsed again, brighter than before, illuminating the entire room in silver light. The mist around my ankles tightened. The candles leaned toward the door. The shelves rattled.

Something in the air shifted. A pull. A pressure. A recognition. Like the room itself was waiting for me to choose.

Draven's voice came again, softer this time. "Keeva, please."

My heart stuttered.

Lennox whispered, "Oh no. He said please. That is worse."

Jaxx stepped closer, voice low. "You do not have to open it."

Cara hissed, "Yes, she does."

Mya nodded. "We all heard what the room said. The moon chooses."

Lennox glared. "Be quiet."

But the truth was already humming through the floorboards, through the mist, through my chest. Something was choosing. Something was shifting. Something was calling. And it wanted me.

The room went still. Not silent, but expectant. The air thickened. The candles held their breath. The walls felt like they leaned in to listen.

Draven's voice lingered in the air, vibrating through the shelves, through the floor, through my chest. "Keeva, open the door. We need to talk."

Lennox's grip on my arm tightened. "No. Absolutely not. He sounds like he is one emotional earthquake away from ripping the hinges off."

Cara scoffed. "He is losing it over her."

Mya nodded, eyes wide. "I did not think it was real. But it is. He is actually" She stopped, but the meaning was clear.

Jaxx stepped between me and the door, shoulders squared and jaw tight. "Draven, she is fine. Back off."

Draven's voice came through again, lower and controlled, but still edged with something wild. "I am not leaving until she

opens this door.”

The candles flickered violently, flames bending toward the door as if drawn to him. The mist around my legs tightened, swirling faster and warmer, reacting to his voice.

Lennox whispered, “Why does it feel like the room ships you two?”

Cara glared. “Because it does.”

Mya muttered, “Everything does.”

Jaxx shot them both a look sharp enough to cut glass. “Enough.”

But even he could not hide the tension in his voice, the way he kept glancing at the door, the way his jaw clenched every time Draven spoke.

The runes pulsed again, brighter and faster, almost frantic.

“The moon chooses what the world cannot see.”

The words glowed so intensely they cast silver light across the entire room, illuminating every face with fear, jealousy, confusion, and awe.

Lennox stepped closer to me. “Keeva, I think this room knows something about you.”

Jaxx swallowed hard. “So do some people outside this room.”

Cara and Mya exchanged a look, no longer just jealous but unsettled. They were finally realizing they were standing in the middle of something bigger than hallway drama.

The door rattled again, not violently, but with a slow, deliberate pressure. Like someone resting their hand against it.

Draven’s voice came through, softer than before. “Keeva, please.”

My breath caught.

Lennox whispered, “He said please again. That is worse. That is so much worse.”

Jaxx stepped closer, lowering his voice. “You do not have to open it.”

Cara hissed, “Yes, she does.”

Mya nodded. "We all heard what the room said. The moon chooses."

Lennox glared. "Be quiet."

But the truth was already humming through the floorboards, through the mist, through my chest. Something was choosing. Something was shifting. Something was calling. And it wanted me.

The candles flared. The mist rose. The runes pulsed in time with my heartbeat.

The door clicked again, unlocking from the outside.

Kael's voice came through, calm and firm. "Everyone step back."

Lennox yanked me behind her. "No stepping forward. No stepping back. No stepping anywhere."

Jaxx did not move. He stayed planted between me and the door, muscles tense and ready.

Cara and Mya huddled near the shelves, eyes wide, suddenly aware they were out of their depth.

The door handle turned. Slowly. Deliberately.

Draven's voice came through one last time, steady now but still carrying that dangerous edge that made the candles flicker. "Keeva, open the door. We need to talk."

My pulse hammered. My chest tightened. The mist curled around my ankles like a tether.

Lennox whispered, "Babe, whatever you do, do not faint. I cannot carry you and fight a supernatural boy at the same time."

Jaxx's voice dropped to a whisper. "You are not alone."

Cara muttered, "She is never alone. That is the problem."

Mya nodded. "Everyone wants her."

The runes pulsed again, brighter than ever.

The moon chooses.

And I felt it deep in my bones, deep in my chest, deep in the strange electric pull that had been growing stronger every day. Something was choosing. Something was awakening. Something was waiting on the other side of that door.

I stepped forward. Just one step.

The candles flared. The mist rose. The runes glowed.

And Draven exhaled as if he felt it too, as if he had been waiting for that step.

“Keeva,” he whispered through the door, “please.”

And I knew that whatever came next, whatever truth was about to break open, there was no going back.

Cara glared. “Including Draven.”

Jaxx stiffened. “Enough.”

Cara was not finished. “He is losing control over her. You heard him. He sounded like something dangerous.” She stopped herself, but the implication hung in the air. Something not human.

The candles flickered again, casting long shadows across the walls.

Jaxx stepped closer to me, lowering his voice. “Keeva, do not listen to them. You are not doing anything wrong.”

“I know,” I whispered. “But something is happening.”

Lennox squeezed my hand. “We will figure it out.”

The door rattled again, not violently this time but with a controlled, deliberate knock.

Kael’s voice came through, calm and firm. “Everyone step back from the door.”

Cara and Mya scrambled away instantly.

Lennox pulled me with her. “Yes. Great idea. Let us not get crushed.”

Jaxx stayed close, posture tense and ready.

The door clicked, not opening, but unlocking from the outside.

Draven’s voice came through, low and steady now, but still edged with something wild beneath the surface. “Keeva, open the door. We need to talk.”

Lennox whispered, “Why does that sound like both a threat and a love confession?”

Cara muttered, “Because he is obsessed.”

Mya nodded. "And it is getting worse."

Jaxx's jaw tightened. "He is not obsessed."

Lennox raised a brow. "Sweetheart, he tried to Kool Aid Man his way through the wall."

Jaxx did not argue. He could not.

The runes pulsed again, brighter than before, illuminating the entire room in silver light. The mist around my ankles tightened. The candles leaned toward the door. The shelves rattled.

Something in the air shifted. A pull. A pressure. A recognition. Like the room itself was waiting for me to choose.

Draven's voice came again, softer this time. "Keeva, please."

My heart stuttered.

Lennox whispered, "Oh no. He said please. That is worse."

Jaxx stepped closer, voice low. "You do not have to open it."

Cara hissed, "Yes, she does."

Mya nodded. "We all heard what the room said. The moon chooses."

Lennox glared. "Be quiet."

But the truth was already humming through the floorboards, through the mist, through my chest. Something was choosing. Something was shifting. Something was calling. And it wanted me.

The room went still. Not silent, but expectant. The air thickened. The candles held their breath. The walls felt like they leaned in to listen.

Draven's voice lingered in the air, vibrating through the shelves, through the floor, through my chest. "Keeva, open the door. We need to talk."

Lennox's grip on my arm tightened. "No. Absolutely not. He sounds like he is one emotional earthquake away from ripping the hinges off."

Cara scoffed. "He is losing it over her."

Mya nodded, eyes wide. "I did not think it was real. But it

is. He is actually losing control.”

Jaxx stepped between me and the door, shoulders squared and jaw tight. “Draven, she is fine. Back off.”

Draven’s voice came through again, lower and controlled, but still edged with something wild. “I am not leaving until she opens this door.”

The candles flickered violently, flames bending toward the door as if drawn to him. The mist around my legs tightened, swirling faster and warmer, reacting to his voice.

Lennox whispered, “Why does it feel like the room ships you two?”

Cara glared. “Because it does.”

Mya muttered, “Everything does.”

Jaxx shot them both a look sharp enough to cut glass. “Enough.”

But even he could not hide the tension in his voice, the way he kept glancing at the door, the way his jaw clenched every time Draven spoke.

The runes pulsed again, brighter and faster, almost frantic.

“The moon chooses what the world cannot see.”

The words glowed so intensely they cast silver light across the entire room, illuminating every face with fear, jealousy, confusion, and awe.

Lennox stepped closer to me. “Keeva, I think this room knows something about you.”

Jaxx swallowed hard. “So do some people outside this room.”

Cara and Mya exchanged a look, no longer just jealous but unsettled. They were finally realizing they were standing in the middle of something bigger than hallway drama.

The door rattled again, not violently, but with a slow, deliberate pressure. Like someone resting their hand against it.

Draven’s voice came through, softer than before. “Keeva, please.”

My breath caught.

Lennox whispered, "He said please again. That is worse. That is so much worse."

Jaxx stepped closer, lowering his voice. "You do not have to open it."

Cara hissed, "Yes, she does."

Mya nodded. "We all heard what the room said. The moon chooses."

Lennox glared. "Be quiet."

But the truth was already humming through the floorboards, through the mist, through my chest. Something was choosing. Something was shifting. Something was calling. And it wanted me.

The candles flared. The mist rose. The runes pulsed in time with my heartbeat.

The door clicked again, unlocking from the outside.

Kael's voice came through, calm and firm. "Everyone step back."

Lennox yanked me behind her. "No stepping forward. No stepping back. No stepping anywhere."

Jaxx did not move. He stayed planted between me and the door, muscles tense and ready.

Cara and Mya huddled near the shelves, eyes wide, suddenly aware they were out of their depth.

The door handle turned. Slowly. Deliberately.

Draven's voice came through one last time, steady now but still carrying that dangerous edge that made the candles flicker. "Keeva, open the door. We need to talk."

My pulse hammered. My chest tightened. The mist curled around my ankles like a tether.

Lennox whispered, "Babe, whatever you do, do not faint. I cannot carry you and fight a supernatural boy at the same time."

Jaxx's voice dropped to a whisper. "You are not alone."

Cara muttered, "She is never alone. That is the problem."

Mya nodded. "Everyone wants her."

The runes pulsed again, brighter than ever.

The moon chooses.

And I felt it deep in my bones, deep in my chest, deep in the strange electric pull that had been growing stronger every day. Something was choosing. Something was awakening. Something was waiting on the other side of that door.

I stepped forward. Just one step.

The candles flared. The mist rose. The runes glowed.

And Draven exhaled as if he felt it too, as if he had been waiting for that step.

“Keeva,” he whispered through the door, “please.”

And I knew that whatever came next, whatever truth was about to break open, there was no going back.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Before Shifted

The cauldron's silver glow pulsed brighter, casting rippling light across the room. I stood frozen with the ladle still in my hand. The mist curled around my ankles like it had chosen me, like it had been waiting for me specifically. The air felt charged, humming with something I couldn't name.

Lennox whispered, "Keeva, I love you, but this room is flirting with you harder than half the boys here."

Cara scoffed. "It's malfunctioning."

Mya crossed her arms. "Or she's doing something to it."

"I'm not doing anything."

The runes on the wall shimmered again, revealing the next puzzle.

"Only the one touched by moonlight
may reveal what others cannot see."

Lennox blinked. "That sounds like a riddle written by a dramatic theater kid who didn't get cast as the lead."

Jaxx stepped closer, voice low. "It's not supposed to say that."

Cara narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean not supposed to?"

Jaxx hesitated. "The puzzles are preprogrammed. They don't change."

Mya's gaze snapped to me. "Then why is it changing for her?"

"I don't know."

The cauldron bubbled again, forming a glowing silver orb that floated upward and hovered in front of my face. The light reflected in my eyes, soft and shimmering like moonlight on water.

Lennox grabbed a fake potion bottle like it was a weapon. "Touch her and I swear I'll smash you."

The orb pulsed twice, then drifted toward a stone pedestal in the corner. A hidden compartment slid open with a soft click.

Inside was a small vial labeled:

“Moon’s Tear

Level 3 Puzzle Item.”

Lennox gasped. “Keeva, it’s giving you loot. You’re the main character.”

Cara lunged for it. “I’ll take that.”

The moment her fingers touched the vial, the pedestal snapped shut, nearly catching her hand.

Mya snorted. “Karma.”

“Shut up.”

Lennox smirked. “Try not to lose a finger next time.”

The runes pulsed again.

“Only the chosen player
may claim the Moon’s Tear.”

Cara rounded on me. “Chosen for what?”

“I don’t know.”

Jaxx stepped between us. “Back off.”

Mya sneered. “The traitor defends her.”

“I’m not a traitor.”

“Your stepfather thinks you are,” Cara shot back.

Jaxx flinched.

My heart twisted. “Jaxx.”

Before he could answer, the door rattled violently. A deep, guttural thud echoed from the hallway like someone slamming into the wall.

Lennox froze. “That’s not part of the game.”

Jaxx’s face drained of color. “Someone’s trying to get in.”

Cara and Mya shrieked and backed away from the door.

My pulse hammered. “We’re trapped.”

The door shook again, harder.

Then a voice tore through the hallway.

“Keeva.”

Draven’s voice hit the room like a storm breaking open. Raw. Furious. Uncontrolled. He slammed into the door again, rattling the hinges so hard the shelves trembled. Bottles clinked.

Candles flickered. The cauldron's glow wavered.

Ronan's voice followed, strained. "Draven, stop."

Torren shouted, "You're going to break the whole wall."

Kael added, "You can't do this in front of them."

Inside the room, something inside me pulled tight, like a string I didn't know existed snapping straight to him.

Lennox whispered, "Why does he sound like he's about to explode?"

Jaxx muttered, "Because he is."

Cara's eyes widened. "He's losing it over her."

Mya gasped. "No way."

I stepped toward the door. "Draven."

The door shook again. Draven's voice came through rough and strained. "Keeva, step back."

Lennox yanked me away. "No. We are not opening that door until he is fully clothed and fully sane."

Jaxx pressed his forehead to the door. "Draven, she's safe. Calm down."

A low, dangerous sound vibrated through the wood. Not quite a growl. Not quite human. Full of emotion.

Kael's voice cut through. "Draven, breathe. You can't do this here."

Torren added, "Focus on her voice, not the panic."

I swallowed hard. "Draven, I'm okay."

Silence followed. Then a slow exhale, shaky but controlled. The pounding stopped. The growling faded. The door went still.

Lennox whispered, "Holy crap. You just calmed him down."

Cara muttered, "Of course she did."

Mya glared. "Why her?"

Lennox snapped, "Because she's awesome and you're not."

The runes pulsed again, revealing the next clue.

"The truth is hidden

in the one who stands beside the moon."

Lennox blinked. "Wait. Is it talking about me?"

"Maybe."

She stepped toward the pedestal. The runes glowed brighter.

Cara's jaw dropped. "No. No way."

Mya hissed, "She's not special."

Lennox grinned. "The room disagrees."

She touched the pedestal. A second compartment slid open, revealing a glowing teardrop-shaped crystal.

Jaxx whispered, "That's not part of the standard puzzle."

I stared. "Lennox, why did it react to you?"

Lennox shrugged. "Maybe I'm magic. Maybe I'm chosen. Maybe I'm just fabulous. Honestly, it's probably all three."

Cara sputtered. "This is rigged."

"She's literally a human," Mya muttered.

"A human who just unlocked a glowing crystal," Lennox said. "What did you do today?"

The pedestal lit up, revealing two slots: one shaped like a moon, the other like a flame.

I held the Moon's Tear vial. Lennox held the glowing crystal.

She nudged me. "Ready."

I nodded. "Let's do it."

We placed the items into the slots. The room shook, not violently but as if something ancient were powering up. The cauldron glowed silver and gold. The runes spiraled across the walls. A hidden panel slid open, revealing a carved stone circle with swirling patterns.

Jaxx stepped forward, eyes wide. "That's new."

Cara's jaw dropped. "Why is that in a school escape room?"

"It's not supposed to be," Mya whispered.

Draven's voice came through the door, steady now but still edged with something wild. "Keeva, open the door. We need to get you out of there."

For the first time, I realized this wasn't a game glitch. This wasn't a weird puzzle. This wasn't Stone Academy being dramatic.

Something was happening.

Something the others understood.

Something I wasn't supposed to.

The carved stone circle wasn't decoration. It hummed with a low, vibrating resonance that made the air feel thicker, as if the room itself were waking up.

Lennox stepped back, eyes wide. "Keeva, I'm not saying this is a portal, but this is giving major portal vibes."

Cara shook her head hard. "No. This is special effects. Animatronics. Something."

Mya pointed at the swirling patterns. "Animatronics don't hum."

Lennox smirked. "Neither do you, but here we are."

Mya glared. "I swear."

She didn't finish because the cauldron pulsed again, a deep silver glow that rippled across the room like a heartbeat.

The cauldron pulsed again, a deep silver glow that rippled across the room like a heartbeat. My heartbeat. The mist tightened around my ankles, swirling faster and warmer, almost protective. Almost possessive.

Jaxx noticed. His eyes flicked from the mist to my face. "It is responding to your pulse."

I froze. "How do you know that?"

He hesitated too long. "Because I have seen it before."

Cara's head snapped toward him. "What do you mean you have seen it before?"

Jaxx didn't answer.

Lennox stepped between us. "No. We are not doing cryptic right now. Someone explain why Keeva is suddenly the chosen one of the magical fog, because I did not sign up for a prophecy side quest."

No one spoke. No one wanted to be the one to say it.

The runes on the wall pulsed again, brighter and faster, almost urgent.

“Only the one touched by moonlight may reveal what others cannot see.”

The words shimmered like liquid silver, casting reflections across the shelves and bottles.

Cara backed up. “This is wrong. This is all wrong.”

Mya nodded. “This room is broken.”

Lennox pointed at the glowing pedestal. “Then why is it working perfectly for us?”

Cara snapped, “Because it is rigged.”

Lennox grinned. “If it is rigged, it is rigged in our favor. Tough luck.”

The cauldron bubbled louder. The silver orb flickered back to life and hovered above the stone circle like a tiny moon.

Jaxx stepped closer, voice low. “This is not part of the curriculum.”

Lennox gasped. “You mean the school did not plan for a magical moon meltdown. Shocking.”

But Jaxx wasn’t joking. His expression was tight, focused, afraid. He looked at the stone circle like it was dangerous, something he recognized.

Cara noticed. “Why do you look like you have seen this before?”

Jaxx didn’t answer. Again.

The silence was worse than anything he could have said.

The orb pulsed twice, then shot a beam of silver light into the swirling patterns on the stone circle. The carvings lit up, spiraling outward like a blooming flower.

Lennox whispered, “Keeva, I am not saying this is a prophecy room, but this is giving major prophecy room energy.”

Cara shook her head. “No. This is not happening.”

Mya backed up until she hit a shelf. “This is not normal. This is not school. This is something else.”

A deep thud shook the hallway outside. Not a knock. Not

a footstep. A hit.

Lennox froze. "That is not part of the game."

Jaxx's face drained of color. "Someone is trying to get in."

Cara and Mya shrieked and scrambled away from the door. The shelves rattled. The candles flickered. The cauldron dimmed, then flared again.

My pulse hammered. "We are trapped."

The door shook again, harder, the hinges groaning.

Then Draven's voice tore through the hallway.

"Keeva."

Raw. Furious. Uncontrolled.

He slammed into the door again, rattling the entire room. Bottles clinked. The cauldron's glow wavered. The orb flickered.

Ronan's voice followed, strained. "Draven, stop."

Torren shouted, "You are going to break the wall."

Kael added, "You cannot do this in front of them."

Inside the room, something inside me pulled tight, like a string snapping straight to him.

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The runes pulsed again.

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in the one who stands beside the moon."

Lennox blinked. "Wait. Is it talking about me?"

"Maybe."

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I nodded. "Let's do it."

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Jaxx stepped forward, eyes wide. "That is new."

Cara's jaw dropped. "Why is that in a school escape room?"

"It is not supposed to be," Mya whispered.

Draven's voice came through the door, steady now but still edged with something wild. "Keeva, open the door. We need to get you out of there."

The stone circle hummed louder, vibrating through the floor. The air thickened. The mist tightened around my legs like a tether.

This was not a game glitch.

This was not a weird puzzle.

This was not Stone Academy being dramatic.

Something was happening.

Something the others understood.

Something I was never supposed to see.

The stone circle flared with silver light.

And everything in the room shifted.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Unexpected Spark

The Spell Lab looked like a magical tornado had thrown a tantrum. Glitter coated the floor like someone had murdered a unicorn. Potion bottles, thankfully plastic, were shattered everywhere. The cauldron still glowed faintly, like it had not decided whether to power down or rise from the dead. The LED runes flickered along the walls, glitching in and out like a dying video game.

And in the middle of the chaos stood Draven.

Breathing too hard.

Eyes too bright.

Jaw clenched like he was holding back a storm.

He looked like he wanted to tear the entire school apart to make sure I was okay.

Jaxx noticed.

And he smirked.

Not big. Not obvious.

Just enough to say:

I see you losing your mind over her.

Cara staggered to her feet, hair full of glitter. "This is all her fault."

Mya jabbed a shaking finger at me. "Yes. She is the reason everything glitched."

Jaxx did not even bother looking at them. "Relax. She is not mine."

I blinked. "What?"

Jaxx shrugged, casual as ever. "I do not want her."

Draven's jaw flexed, a sharp and dangerous movement that made Lennox whisper, "He hated that."

Jaxx continued, voice smooth and almost bored. "She is not my type."

Cara's face fell. "But you always."

Jaxx cut her off with a lazy smirk. "I only paid attention to her because it annoys Draven."

Draven made a low, involuntary, furious sound. The candles flickered like they were afraid of him.

Lennox leaned toward me. "He is doing this on purpose."

My cheeks warmed. "Why?"

"Because boys are idiots."

Jaxx leaned against the wall like he had all the time in the world. "Besides, Draven is the one who wants her."

"Jaxx."

"What? I am telling the truth."

Cara glared at me. "So you are not even interested in her?"

"No."

Mya blinked. "Then why did you defend her?"

Jaxx's smirk sharpened. "Because watching Draven lose his mind is entertaining."

Draven took a step toward him. "Say that again."

"Enter. Tain. Ing."

Lennox whispered, "This is better than reality TV."

My heart pounded. "Jaxx, you do not like me?"

He looked at me, and for a moment something soft flickered in his eyes. Something real. Something he did not want anyone to see.

Then he shut it down.

"No," he said. "I do not."

But the way he said it, the way he avoided my gaze, the way his jaw tightened.

He was lying.

And Draven knew it.

Draven stepped closer to me, voice low. "Ignore him."

Jaxx smirked again. "See? He cannot stand it."

Cara stomped her foot. "This is ridiculous."

Mya hissed, "We should leave her here."

Draven's eyes snapped to them, sharp and cold and lethal in a very human way. "Try it."

The room went silent. Even Cara backed up, hands raised. "Okay. Fine."

Lennox muttered, "That is what I thought."

The glitching runes flickered again, casting strange shadows across the room. The cauldron let out a sad little hiss, like it was giving up on life. The decorative stone circle on the wall buzzed faintly, its LED lights pulsing like a heartbeat.

I stared at it. "Why does it keep lighting up when I am near it?"

Draven answered without hesitation. "Because you are important."

Jaxx rolled his eyes. "Here we go."

Draven ignored him. "Keeva, something about you is triggering the system."

Lennox nudged me. "And apparently I am triggering it too. We are a glitchy duo."

Cara muttered, "This is insane."

Mya whispered, "We should tell someone."

"No."

Jaxx's voice dropped cool and sharp.

Cara blinked. "But."

"I said no."

Mya swallowed. "Why not?"

Jaxx's eyes flicked to me for a second before he looked away. "Because she is not the problem. And she is not anyone's to blame."

His gaze slid to Draven. "But she might be yours."

Draven froze.

My breath caught.

Lennox whispered, "Oh. My. God."

Cara shrieked, "What?"

Mya gasped, "No way."

Jaxx smirked. "Told you. Entertaining."

Draven took a step toward him, voice low and lethal. "Jaxx."

Before he could finish, Ronan's voice shouted from the hallway. "Draven. We have a situation."

Torren added, "Teachers are coming."

Kael yelled, "We need to clean this up before they see it."

Draven turned to me, eyes softening in a way that made my knees weak. "I will be back."

I nodded, heart racing.

Lennox grabbed my hand. "We are not getting detention for this. I refuse."

Cara and Mya huddled together, terrified and glitter covered.

Jaxx pushed off the wall, expression shifting to cool and unreadable. "Stay here. I will deal with my crew."

Draven growled. "Do not make this worse."

Jaxx smirked, the kind that meant trouble. "Relax. I am not doing this for you."

His eyes flicked to me. "I am doing it for her."

Then he was gone, slipping through the shattered doorway with effortless confidence, leaving glitter, chaos, and stunned silence behind him.

The runes dimmed.

The cauldron cooled.

The decorative stone circle flickered one last time.

And I realized this was not the end of the chaos.

It was the beginning of something I did not understand.

The hallway outside the Spell Lab should have been loud. Students should have been complaining about homework or arguing over who stole whose enchanted pencil.

Instead, it was quiet.

Too quiet.

Like the Academy itself was holding its breath.

Lennox tugged me forward. "Come on. If the teachers see glitter on us, we are dead."

But the moment we stepped into the hall, the air shifted cooler and heavier, humming with something I did not have a name for. The LED sconces along the walls flickered in a slow, pulsing rhythm, syncing to a heartbeat that was not mine.

Draven felt it too.

He stopped midstride, shoulders tensing, eyes narrowing at the far end of the corridor.

Jaxx, halfway down the hall with his crew, paused as well. His posture changed, still casual, still leaning into that rogue confidence, but his eyes sharpened, scanning the shadows like he expected something to step out of them.

Lennox whispered, "Why does it feel like the building is vibrating?"

I swallowed. "Because it is."

A low hum rolled through the floorboards, subtle but unmistakable. Not enough to knock anyone off balance, but enough to make every student freeze.

Cara clutched Mya's arm. "What is happening?"

Mya shook her head. "This is not normal. This is not even magical normal."

Draven stepped closer to me, voice low. "Stay behind me."

Jaxx scoffed. "She is not a puppy, Draven."

"Be quiet," Draven snapped, not looking away from the end of the hall.

Jaxx's smirk faded. "I am serious. Something is off."

That alone made my stomach drop.

Jaxx did not admit fear.

He did not even admit concern.

The hum deepened.

The lights flickered again.

Then the decorative stone crest above the hallway arch lit up.

Not LED lit.

Not glitch lit.

Not fake magic lit.

Lit.

A real glow.

Warm.

Ancient.

Alive.

Lennox whispered, "That is not supposed to happen."

Draven's jaw tightened. "No. It is not."

Jaxx stepped forward, eyes narrowing. "It only reacts to"

He stopped.

Everyone looked at me.

My heart slammed against my ribs. "No. I did not do anything."

Draven's voice softened. "You did not have to."

The crest pulsed again, brighter this time, casting a wash of gold light across the hall. Students gasped. Someone dropped their books. Cara whimpered.

Then the crest cracked.

A thin, jagged line split down the center, glowing like molten metal.

Lennox grabbed my arm. "Keeva, why is the school breaking around you?"

"I do not know."

But something inside me stirred quietly, ancient and aware. Like it recognized the glow.

Like it had been waiting for it.

Draven stepped in front of me, protective and furious and terrified all at once. "Everyone, back up."

Jaxx's voice dropped to a whisper. "It is waking up."

Mya squeaked, "What is?"

Jaxx did not answer.

Because the crest answered for him.

The crack widened.

Light spilled out.

And something behind the stone moved.

A soft grinding sound echoed through the hall, like gears turning after centuries of stillness. The air thickened, charged with static that raised the tiny hairs on my arms.

Lennox whispered, "We need to leave. Now."

Draven did not move. “No one goes near it.”

Jaxx’s crew backed up. Cara and Mya clung to each other. Students down the hall started whispering, panicking, pulling out their phones even though they knew magic messed with the cameras.

The crest pulsed again, once, then twice, like a heartbeat.

Then everything went still.

Silent.

Waiting.

Holding its breath.

Just like the rest of us.

The silence after the crest’s last pulse felt wrong. Not peaceful. Not relieved. Just waiting. Like the hallway itself was holding its breath.

Lennox tugged my sleeve. “I am done. I am officially done. We are leaving before the school decides to explode again.”

Draven did not move. His eyes stayed locked on the cracked crest, jaw tight, shoulders tense like he was ready to throw himself between me and whatever was behind that stone.

Jaxx stepped closer too, expression unreadable. “It is not finished.”

My stomach twisted. “What do you mean it is not finished?”

He did not answer. He did not have to.

Because the crest gave one final, faint pulse. Barely a flicker, barely a glow, but enough to make the air shift again. Enough to make the floor hum beneath my feet. Enough to make something inside me respond, like a tuning fork vibrating to a frequency I did not understand.

Draven swore under his breath. “We need to get her out of here.”

Jaxx’s eyes snapped to him. “Do not tell me what to do.”

“Then do not make me,” Draven growled.

Lennox stepped between them, hands up. “Boys. Not the time. Not the place. Not the vibe.”

Cara whimpered. “Can we please go before the teachers

show up and blame us for whatever that is?”

Mya nodded rapidly. “Yes. Leaving. Leaving sounds great.”

Jaxx’s crew started backing away, muttering, glancing nervously at the crest like it might leap off the wall and chase them.

Draven turned to me, voice low. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, even though I was not sure. “I think so.”

His eyes softened. “Good. Stay close to Lennox. Do not wander anywhere alone.”

Jaxx scoffed. “She is not a toddler.”

Draven shot him a look sharp enough to cut stone. “She is in danger.”

Jaxx’s smirk faded. “Yes. I know.”

Something passed between them, tense and unspoken, something that made my pulse jump for reasons I did not want to examine.

Lennox grabbed my wrist. “We are leaving. Now.”

Draven hesitated, like he wanted to follow, but Ronan’s voice echoed from down the hall.

“Draven. We need you.”

Torren added, “Teachers are almost here.”

Draven’s jaw clenched. He looked at me one more time, as if memorizing my face, as if he hated turning his back on me, then he nodded once.

“I will find you later.”

Jaxx’s eyes flicked to me too, softer than before, then he turned and disappeared with his crew, slipping into the chaos like he belonged to it.

Lennox tugged me down the hall. “Come on before we get dragged into a three hour interrogation about glitter safety protocols.”

I let her pull me, but my eyes kept drifting back to the crest. The crack still glowed faintly. The air still hummed. And something inside me still felt awake.

We rounded the corner, leaving the Spell Lab wing behind.

The noise of the Academy slowly returned: voices, footsteps, laughter, but it all felt distant and muffled, as if I were underwater.

Lennox squeezed my hand. "Hey. You are okay."

"I know," I whispered. "It is just that something is happening."

"Yeah," she said lightly. "It is called trauma. We will unpack it later."

I laughed weakly, but the unease did not fade.

Every shadow felt deeper.

Every light flicker felt intentional.

Every breath felt charged.

By the time we reached our dorm building, the sun had dipped low, painting the sky in streaks of gold and rose. Students rushed past us, heading to dinner, to clubs, to parties. Normal things. Safe things.

But the woods at the edge of campus rustled again.

Not with wind.

Not with animals.

With something else.

Something big.

I stopped walking. "Lennox, do you hear that?"

Lennox did not turn around. "No. And even if I did, I am ignoring it."

But I could not ignore it.

The trees seemed to lean closer.

The shadows stretched longer.

The air hummed again, vibrating through my bones.

My fingertips tingled.

I shook my hands out. "I feel weird."

"You are anxious," Lennox said quickly. "Adrenaline. Spell Lab chaos. Glitter poisoning. Pick one."

I tried to laugh, but the feeling did not fade.

It was not fear.

It was not excitement.

It was something else.

Like the world was shifting under my feet.

“New rule,” Lennox said, tugging me toward the dorm entrance. “We are going inside, we are going to breathe, and we are going to pretend you are not having a main character awakening.”

I snorted. “Deal.”

But as we climbed the stairs to our floor, the tingling in my fingertips spread up my arms, across my shoulders, settling somewhere deep in my chest.

Something inside me was changing.

Not magic.

Not power.

Just something.

Something I did not have a name for.

We reached our door. Lennox fumbled with the keycard, muttering about glitter in her eyelashes.

I exhaled slowly, trying to steady myself. Trying to feel normal. Trying to pretend the world was not shifting around me.

The lock clicked.

The door swung open.

We stepped inside.

And just as the door shut behind us, three sharp knocks hit the wood. Firm. Controlled. Unmistakably not Lennox’s style.

The sound echoed through my chest.

Lennox froze. “That is not a girl knock.”

My heart stuttered. “Do not open it.”

Lennox opened it anyway.

Lennox opened the door anyway.

And standing on the other side was Draven.

Not furious.

Not shaking.

Not losing control.

Worse.

He looked calm.

Too calm.

His eyes locked on mine the second the door opened, and something in his expression softened in a way that made my breath catch. He stepped inside without waiting for permission, filling the doorway with heat and tension and something I did not have a name for.

Lennox crossed her arms. "You know, knocking is usually followed by waiting."

Draven ignored her completely. His attention stayed on me. "I needed to make sure you were safe."

"I am," I said quietly. "We made it back fine."

He shook his head. "That is not what I meant."

Lennox's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, this is going to be good."

Draven stepped closer, slow and deliberate, like he was afraid I might vanish if he moved too fast. "Something is happening in the Academy. Something old. Something that reacts to you."

My pulse jumped. "I did not do anything."

"I know," he said. "That is the problem."

Lennox muttered, "Fantastic. Love that for us."

Draven's jaw tightened. "You felt it in the hallway. The crest. The hum. The pull."

I swallowed. "Yes."

His eyes softened again. "And you feel it now."

I hesitated, then nodded. "A little."

Lennox snorted. "A little? You almost passed out in the stairwell."

"I did not almost pass out."

"You wobbled like a baby deer."

Draven shot Lennox a look that was half annoyance, half gratitude. "She should not be alone right now."

Lennox planted her hands on her hips. "She is not alone. I am literally right here."

"That is not what I meant."

Lennox blinked. "Oh. Oh. I see. You mean emotionally

alone. Spiritually alone. Cosmically alone. You are being dramatic.”

Draven did not deny it.

He looked at me again, and the room felt smaller. Warmer. Charged.

“I need to tell you something,” he said quietly.

Lennox raised a hand. “Before you confess your undying devotion, can we please acknowledge that she has had a long day and maybe does not need a dramatic monologue right now.”

Draven’s eyes narrowed. “It is not a monologue.”

“It is absolutely a monologue,” Lennox said. “You have monologue energy.”

I pressed my fingers to my temples. “Lennox, please.”

She sighed. “Fine. I will be quiet. But only because I am invested.”

Draven stepped closer until he was only a breath away. “Keeva, the crest reacted to you because it recognizes something in you. Something that should not be awake yet.”

My stomach twisted. “What does that mean?”

“It means you are not just a student here. You are connected to something older than this school. Older than any of us.”

Lennox whispered, “Main character awakening. I called it.”

I glared at her. “Not helping.”

Draven’s voice dropped lower. “You need to be careful. People will notice. People will talk. And some people will not want you to know what you are capable of.”

My breath caught. “Do you know what I am capable of?”

He hesitated. “Not yet.”

“Then why are you acting like you do?”

“Because I can feel it,” he said. “The same way the crest did. The same way the mist did. The same way the entire building did.”

Lennox let out a low whistle. “Well. That is not terrifying at

all.”

I stepped back, overwhelmed. “I do not want any of this.”

Draven’s expression softened. “I know. But it is happening anyway.”

A knock sounded from down the hall. Loud. Sharp. Official.

Lennox’s eyes widened. “Teachers.”

Draven’s posture snapped straight. “Do not tell them anything.”

“Why not?” I whispered.

“Because they will not protect you,” he said. “Not from this.”

Another knock. Closer.

Lennox grabbed my arm. “We need to look normal. Sit on the bed. Pretend we are doing homework. Pretend we are boring.”

Draven stepped back toward the door. “I will handle them.”

“Draven,” I whispered. “Wait.”

He paused.

“Why are you doing all this?”

His answer was quiet. Honest. Dangerous.

“Because something is waking up in you. And I am not letting anyone get to you before I do.”

Lennox mouthed, “Oh my God.”

The knock came again, louder.

Draven opened the door and slipped out, closing it behind him with a soft click.

Lennox stared at me, eyes wide. “So. Do we panic now or later?”

I sank onto the bed, heart racing. “I do not know.”

But deep in my chest, the humming returned.

Warm.

Alive.

Awake.

Something inside me was changing.

And whatever it was, it was not done.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Edge

A knock hit the door. Three sharp taps, firm and controlled, unmistakably not Lennox's style.

Lennox raised a brow. "That is not a girl knock."

I whispered, "Do not open it."

Lennox opened it anyway.

Draven stood there. Tall. Brooding. Jaw tight. Eyes locked on me like I was the only thing in the hallway. He did not even glance at Lennox. His gaze swept over me, the shimmer on my skin from the Spell Lab glitter, the way my breath caught when I saw him, and something in his expression shifted.

Not anger.

Not jealousy.

Something protective.

Something fierce.

"Keeva," he said quietly, voice low enough that Lennox had to lean in to hear. "We need to talk."

Lennox stepped between us, arms spread like a human traffic cone. "She is busy glowing. Make it quick."

Draven did not blink. "Something is happening in the woods. You need to stay inside tonight."

I frowned. "Why?"

Draven hesitated, and that alone made my stomach twist. Draven never hesitated.

"There has been movement," he said finally. "People wandering where they should not. Teachers are on alert."

Lennox crossed her arms. "Movement or trouble?"

Draven's jaw tightened. "Just be careful."

He looked at me again, softer this time, almost pained, then turned and walked away, disappearing down the hall like a shadow pulled by instinct.

I exhaled shakily. "That was intense."

Lennox nodded. "Girl, he is down astronomically bad."

I did not answer. I could not. My heart was still racing, my

skin still tingling where his gaze had lingered.

My phone buzzed.

Jaxx.

Lennox leaned over my shoulder. "This is going to be good."

I opened the message.

Stay inside.

I frowned. "Why does he sound like he is warning me about a horror movie?"

"Because he is dramatic," Lennox said.

Another message popped up.

Just trust me. Stay inside.

My stomach tightened. "Why would he say that?"

Lennox's eyes widened. "Because he knows something. And he is being cryptic on purpose."

We stepped outside to head toward the party, the sky streaked with deep orange and violet. The air felt heavier, charged, as if the world were holding its breath. Students laughed in clusters, music thumped from a distant dorm, and the scent of bonfire drifted from somewhere near the quad.

But the woods at the edge of campus rustled.

Not with wind.

Not with animals.

With something else.

Something big.

I stopped walking. "Lennox, do you hear that?"

Lennox nodded slowly. "Yes. And we are ignoring it."

But I could not ignore it.

The trees seemed to lean closer.

The shadows stretched longer.

The air hummed a low vibration I felt in my bones.

My fingertips tingled.

I shook my hands out. "I feel weird."

Lennox grabbed my wrist. "You are anxious. That is all. Adrenaline from the Spell Lab. You almost got crushed by a

malfunctioning cauldron.”

I laughed weakly. “True.”

But the feeling did not fade.

It was not fear.

It was not excitement.

It was something else.

Like the world was shifting under my feet.

“New rule,” Lennox said, tugging me forward. “We are going to this party, we are going to have fun, and we are going to pretend you are not having a main character moment.”

I laughed. “Deal.”

But as we walked toward the party house, the woods behind us rustled again.

And even though I did not turn around, I felt it.

Eyes on me.

Watching.

Waiting.

Measuring.

By the time we got back to our dorm room, the sun was dipping low, painting the sky in streaks of gold and rose. The whole campus buzzed with Friday energy, doors slamming, music thumping from someone’s speaker, laughter echoing down the hall.

Lennox kicked the door shut with her foot. “Emergency meeting. We need outfits.”

I dropped my backpack. “We do not even know if we are going.”

“Oh, we are going. We are going so hard we might need seatbelts.”

I laughed despite myself. “Fine. But nothing too attention grabbing.”

Lennox opened the closet like she was unveiling a treasure chest. “Sweetie, you have two boys ready to fistfight over you. Attention is happening whether you like it or not.”

I groaned. “I hate it here.”

“You love it.”

Our room exploded into a whirlwind of clothes, makeup, hair tools, and Lennox’s playlist blasting through the speakers. Lennox danced while curling her hair. “We need to look like we did not try, but also like we tried harder than everyone else.”

“That is impossible.”

“Not with me.”

I laughed. “You are ridiculous.”

“And fabulous. Do not forget fabulous.”

We tried on outfits, rejected half of them, swapped tops, swapped again, and ended up in the first ones we picked. Lennox wore a black crop top, ripped jeans, and boots that could stomp a man’s ego. I chose a soft, shimmery top and dark jeans, simple, but the shimmer caught the light, making my skin glow.

Lennox froze. “Keeva, your arms.”

I looked down.

My skin shimmered faintly. Not glowing. Not magical. Just catching the light in a way that made it look almost luminous.

“It is the glitter from the Spell Lab,” Lennox said quickly. “It is everywhere. It is in your pores. It is in your soul.”

I exhaled. “Good. Glitter I can handle.”

Lennox softened. “Something is happening. Not wrong. Just happening. And we will figure it out.”

I nodded, but my stomach twisted.

Because something inside me was shifting.

Not magic.

Not power.

Just something.

Something I did not have a name for.

Something that felt like the edge of something new.

Lennox tossed her curling wand onto the bed. “Outfits are locked. Hair is locked. Vibes are locked. Now we need”

A soft thump echoed from outside the window.

We both froze.

Lennox whispered, "Tell me that was a squirrel."

"It was too heavy for a squirrel."

"Tell me it was a fat squirrel."

"It was not a squirrel."

We crept toward the window, but the blinds were already half closed, the room dim except for the warm glow of Lennox's string lights. The hallway outside buzzed with students getting ready for the night, but the sound felt distant, muffled, as if the world outside our room had shifted to a different frequency.

Lennox peeked through the blinds. "I do not see anything."

I joined her.

The quad below looked normal. Students walking and laughing toward the party house. The sky deepening into twilight. Lamps flickering on one by one.

But the woods at the edge of campus were too still.

Too dark.

Too aware.

A shiver crawled up my spine. "Something is out there."

Lennox let the blinds fall shut. "And that is why we are not going out alone. We are going to the party, we are going to have fun, and we are going to pretend the forest is not acting like it wants to eat you."

I tried to laugh, but the sound came out thin.

My phone buzzed again.

Jaxx.

Do not ignore me. Stay inside.

Another buzz.

I am serious.

Lennox read over my shoulder. "That is not flirty Jaxx. That is cryptic, stressed, I know something and I am not telling you Jaxx."

I stared at the messages, pulse quickening. "Why will he not just say what is going on?"

"Because boys are allergic to communication."

I paced the room, trying to shake off the tingling in my fingertips. It was not painful, just strange, like my nerves were waking up from a long sleep.

Lennox watched me carefully. "You are doing that thing again."

"What thing?"

"The thing where you look like you are about to float off the ground."

"I do not feel floaty."

"You look floaty."

I pressed my palms against my thighs. "I am fine."

"You are glowing."

"It is glitter."

"It is not glitter."

I froze.

Lennox's voice softened. "Keeva, something is happening to you. And I do not think it is bad. I think it is just new."

My chest tightened. "New how?"

She shrugged helplessly. "I do not know. But Draven knows something. And Jaxx definitely knows something. And the school is acting like it is possessed. And you are sparkling like a magical disco ball."

I groaned. "This is too much."

"Welcome to Stone Academy."

I sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing my arms. The shimmer was faint, but it was there, catching the light in a way that did not feel like glitter anymore, more like something under my skin.

Something was waking up.

Lennox plopped down beside me. "Real talk. Do you want to go to the party?"

I hesitated.

The woods rustled again, faint but unmistakable.

My phone buzzed.

Stay inside.

Draven's warning echoed in my head.

Something is happening in the woods.

"I think we should stay in," I whispered.

Lennox blinked. "Wait. Really?"

"Yes. Just for tonight."

She studied me for a long moment, then nodded. "If you are staying in, I am staying in."

"You do not have to"

She flicked my forehead. "Best friend clause. I go where you go."

I smiled weakly. "Thanks."

She stood, stretching. "Pajamas, snacks, and a movie. We will have our own party."

I nodded, but my mind was not on movies or snacks.

It was in the woods.

The humming air.

The crest cracking.

The way Draven looked at me like he was afraid for me.

The way Jaxx texted like he was afraid of something else.

Something bigger.

Something coming.

I walked to the window again, pulling the blinds open just enough to peek through.

The woods were still.

Too still.

The shadows between the trees seemed deeper than before, like they were swallowing the last of the daylight.

A shape shifted.

Not a person.

Not an animal.

Something else.

Something tall.

Something watching.

My breath hitched.

Lennox called from behind me, "Popcorn or chips?"

I did not answer.
Because the shape stepped forward just enough for the faint
glow of the path lights to catch the edge of it.
A silhouette.
Broad shouldered.
Unmoving.
Facing our building.
Facing me.
My heart slammed against my ribs.
Lennox turned. "Keeva?"
I stepped back from the window. "Someone is out there."
Lennox's face paled. "A student?"
"No."
"Teacher?"
"No."
"Then who?"
A knock hit the door.
Not loud.
Not frantic.
Three sharp taps.
The same pattern as before.
Lennox whispered, "That is not a girl knock."
My pulse roared in my ears. "Do not open it."
Lennox opened it anyway.
She swung the door open with zero hesitation because
Lennox had the survival instincts of a golden retriever.
But instead of Draven, no one stood there.
Just the empty hallway.
Quiet.
Still.
Too still.
Lennox blinked. "No. Absolutely not. I am closing that."
She reached for the door and froze.
Because a shadow moved at the far end of the hall.

Slow.

Deliberate.

It was not walking so much as gliding.

My breath caught. "Lennox."

"I see it," she whispered.

The shadow paused, as if it heard her. As if it sensed us.

The hallway lights flickered once, twice, then steadied.

But the shadow did not move again.

It just stood there.

Watching.

Waiting.

Measuring.

My skin prickled. The shimmer along my arms brightened, catching the hallway light in a way that made Lennox swear under her breath.

"New plan," she whispered. "We are closing the door, locking it, and pretending we did not see that."

She reached for the handle again.

Another knock hit the door.

This time from the inside.

From the wood itself.

Like something pressed against it.

My heart slammed into my ribs. "Lennox."

"I know."

She shoved the door shut and locked it in one motion, then backed away as if the door might explode.

We stood there, frozen, staring at the wood.

Nothing happened.

No more knocks.

No footsteps.

No shadows moving under the door.

Just silence.

Lennox exhaled shakily. "I am done with today. I am retiring. I am moving to a non haunted school. Maybe one that teaches accounting."

“Something is wrong,” I whispered.

“No kidding.”

“No, I mean with me.”

Lennox turned, her expression softening. “Keeva.”

I held out my hands.

The shimmer was not faint anymore.

It was not glitter.

It was not light.

It was not a trick of the room.

It was coming from under my skin.

A soft, pulsing glow, subtle but unmistakable.

Lennox’s eyes widened. “That is new.”

“I do not know what is happening.”

She stepped closer, examining my arms like she was checking for a rash. “Does it hurt?”

“No.”

“Does it feel weird?”

“Yes.”

“Does it feel dangerous?”

I hesitated. “No. Just awake.”

Lennox nodded slowly. “Then we are not panicking.”

“I am panicking.”

“I am panicking too, but we are panicking together, which makes it fine.”

I laughed weakly, but the sound trembled.

Because the glow was not fading.

It was spreading up my arms, across my shoulders, settling in my chest like a heartbeat I did not recognize.

A soft hum filled the room.

Not from the lights.

Not from the hallway.

From me.

Lennox stepped back. “Keeva.”

“I know.”

The hum deepened.
The glow brightened.
And then my phone buzzed violently in my pocket.
I flinched, pulling it out.
A message from Jaxx.
Do not open the door again.
Whatever you do, do not open it.
Another message appeared instantly.
And do not go near the window.
My stomach dropped. "Lennox."

She was already backing away from the blinds. "No. No.
No."

A third message popped up.
I am coming. Do not move.
Lennox's eyes widened. "He is coming here?"
Before I could answer, another buzz.
Draven.
Stay away from the windows.
I am on my way.
My pulse roared in my ears.
Two boys.
Two warnings.
Two different reasons to be afraid.

Lennox whispered, "Why are they both acting like you are
being hunted?"

I did not know.

But the glow under my skin pulsed again, stronger this time,
as if responding to something outside.

Something was calling it.
Something was calling to me.

Lennox grabbed my hand. "We are staying right here. We
are not moving. We are not opening anything. We are not"

A shadow passed across the window.
Slow.

Heavy.
Deliberate.
Lennox's voice dropped to a whisper. "Oh my God."
I did not breathe.
Neither did she.
The shadow paused.
Right outside.
Right behind the blinds.
My skin glowed brighter.
The hum deepened.
The shadow leaned closer.
And then a voice echoed down the hallway.
Low.
Sharp.
Familiar.
"Keeva."
Draven.
Followed by another voice, rougher and angrier.
"Do not let her near it."
Jaxx.
The shadow outside the window shifted.
The glow under my skin surged.
And the world tilted like something inside me recognized
something outside.
Something dangerous.
Something ancient.
Something waiting.
Lennox grabbed my shoulders. "Keeva, what is
happening?"
I did not know.
But I knew one thing.
Tonight was not normal.
The woods were not normal.
The boys were not normal.

And I definitely was not normal.
Something was waking up.
Inside me.
Outside me.
Around me.
Something that felt like the edge of something new.
Something I could not stop.
Something I was not sure I wanted to.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Everything Changed

The world did not settle after that moment. It did not calm down. It did not return to normal. Everything felt sharper. The air. The sounds. The way the ground vibrated under my feet, like the whole campus was humming with a secret I was not supposed to hear.

By the time the sun dipped below the treeline, the tension in my chest had not faded. It had grown, stretching inside me like something waking up and testing the edges of my skin.

Then the music started.

A deep, pulsing bass rolled across campus, vibrating through the ground and shaking loose whatever fragile calm I had left. Laughter echoed between buildings. The smell of cheap beer and bonfire smoke drifted through the air.

Students streamed toward the old lake house like moths to a flame, voices rising with excitement, the whole campus buzzing with Friday night electricity.

Lennox looped her arm through mine. "We are going. We are going now before you talk yourself out of it."

"I am not talking myself out of it."

"You are absolutely talking yourself out of it."

I was not. Not exactly. But the woods rustled again, a low and deliberate shift, and my skin prickled.

Lennox tugged harder. "Party. Now. Before you start glowing again."

I groaned. "I was not glowing."

"You were glowing."

I did not argue.

We followed the sound down the gravel path, the lake shimmering behind the trees, lights strung across the porch flickering like fireflies. Silhouettes danced behind the windows, shadows swaying and stumbling in the glow of string lights.

Lennox grinned. "This is going to be a disaster."

I tugged at my shimmery top. "I already regret everything."

“Good,” Lennox said. “That means we are doing it right.”

The moment we stepped inside, the noise hit us like a wave.

Music blasted something bass heavy and reckless. People danced in clusters, grinding, laughing, shouting over the music. Couples made out against walls like they were auditioning for a teen drama. Someone was doing a keg stand in the kitchen. Someone else was crying on the stairs. A group of guys chanted around a beer pong table.

It was chaos.

It was perfect.

It was exactly the distraction Lennox wanted for me.

But the moment I crossed the threshold, something inside me tightened. A tug low in my chest, like a string pulling me toward something I could not see.

I shook it off.

Lennox grabbed my hand. “We need drinks.”

“I do not know.”

Lennox shoved a red cup into my hand. “It is Friday. You survived a glitchy escape room, two boys fighting over you, and a teacher who might be a witch. Drink.”

I took a sip.

It was strong. Very strong.

Lennox whooped. “Atta girl.”

After two cups, I felt warm and floaty, the music vibrating through my bones, the lights blurring into soft halos. Lennox dragged me to the living room, where bodies moved as one organism.

“Dance with me,” she shouted.

I laughed and let myself go, hips swaying, hair falling over my shoulders, the shimmer on my skin catching the lights like I was dusted in moonlight.

I did not notice the guys watching me.

But they did.

A group near the wall nudged each other. Two football players whispered. Someone whistled. Someone else muttered,

“Who is that?”

I was obviously lost in the music, laughing with Lennox, spinning under the lights.

But Draven was not oblivious.

He appeared in the doorway like a storm cloud, tall and tense, jaw clenched so hard it could crack. His eyes locked on me instantly. My dancing. My shimmery skin. The guys staring at me like I was a prize.

His expression darkened.

Torren muttered behind him, “Uh oh.”

Kael smirked. “He is going to lose it.”

Draven did not move at first. He just watched me, chest rising and falling like he was trying to control something inside him. His hands curled into fists. His shoulders tightened.

Then someone brushed against me, a guy I did not even notice, and Draven snapped.

He pushed through the crowd, eyes fixed on me like I was the only person in the room.

Lennox spotted him first. “Incoming.”

I turned and froze. “Draven?” I said, breathless.

His voice was low. “You should not be here.”

“It is a party.”

“You are drunk.”

“You are bossy.”

He stepped closer. “You do not understand what is out there tonight.”

“Then explain it.”

He hesitated again, jaw tightening. He could not. Or would not.

Before he could answer, the front door slammed open.

Jaxx stormed in, hair messy, eyes blazing, breathing hard like he had run the whole way. His friends followed behind him, tense and alert, scanning the room like they expected trouble.

Lennox whispered, “Great. The other idiot is here.”

Jaxx scanned the room, and the moment he saw me

dancing, saw Draven standing too close, saw the guys staring, something snapped in him too. He marched straight toward us.

“Keeva,” he said, voice rough. “We need to talk.”

Draven stepped between us. “Not happening.”

“Move.”

“No.”

Jaxx’s jaw clenched. “My stepdad made me text you.”

I blinked. “What? Why?”

“I do not know. He is acting weird. He is watching.”

Draven stiffened. “He is here?”

Jaxx did not answer.

He did not have to.

Because the air shifted.

A sudden hush fell over the party, not inside, but outside.

The music still blasted.

People still danced.

But something in the night changed.

And I felt it first.

A tug.

A pulse.

A warmth spreading through my chest.

I stumbled toward the back porch, drawn by something I could not name.

The porch lights buzzed overhead, flickering like they were struggling to stay alive. The air outside was cooler than it should have been, sharp and metallic, like the night itself had teeth.

I stepped onto the wooden boards, my breath catching as the sensation in my chest intensified. It was not pain. It was not fear. It was a pull. A magnetic tug that made my pulse stutter and my skin prickle.

Lennox grabbed my arm. “Where are you going?”

“I do not know.”

The backyard stretched out before us, dim and hazy, lit only by the fading sunset and the string lights drooping across the porch. The lake shimmered in the distance, dark and glassy.

The woods loomed beyond the fence, dense and silent, as if holding their breath.

Something moved between the trees.

A shadow.

A shape.

A presence.

My fingertips tingled again, the shimmer beneath my skin brightening like it was responding to whatever was out there.

“Keeva,” Lennox whispered, “you are freaking me out.”

“I know.”

The feeling was not fear.

It was not excitement.

It was something else.

Like the world was shifting under my feet.

“Keeva.”

I spun around.

Draven.

Jaxx.

Both were running toward me, pushing through the crowd like they were fighting the current of a river.

But something else moved faster.

A group of drunk girls stumbled onto the porch, laughing loudly, bumping into Lennox. Lennox stumbled. “Hey.”

I reached for her, but the crowd swallowed her back inside.

“Lennox,” I shouted.

I tried to push through the people, but the porch suddenly filled with bodies, moving and laughing, blocking my path. I lost sight of Lennox. I lost sight of the house.

I was alone.

The woods rustled again.

A chill crawled up my spine.

“Keeva.”

Draven burst through the crowd, Jaxx right behind him.

Draven grabbed my arm, breathless. “Do not go near the woods.”

Jaxx's voice was sharp. "Stay with us."
I swallowed hard. "What is happening?"
Neither of them answered.
But both of them looked at the trees.
And for the first time, I realized they were not looking at me.

They were looking for something else.
Something I could not see.
Something I did not understand.
Something that made the night feel different.

The music inside the house thumped on, oblivious. People laughed, shouted, danced, unaware that the air outside had shifted into something colder, heavier, wrong.

Draven's grip tightened on my arm. "We need to get you away from here."

Jaxx stepped closer, eyes scanning the tree line. "It is too late. It is already here."

My heart slammed against my ribs. "What is here?"

Draven did not answer.

Jaxx did not either.

But the woods did.

A low, resonant sound rolled through the trees, not a growl, not a howl, not anything human or animal. Something deeper. Older. Like the earth itself was speaking.

The porch lights flickered violently.

My skin glowed.

Draven swore under his breath. "Not now."

Jaxx grabbed my other arm. "Keeva, listen to me. Whatever you feel pulling you, fight it."

"I am trying."

The pull intensified, a warm magnetic tug in my chest, like invisible hands were reaching for me, calling me, claiming me.

The shadows between the trees shifted.

Something stepped forward.

Not fully visible.

Not fully real.

Just a silhouette.

Tall.

Broad.

Wrong.

The air vibrated.

Draven moved in front of me, shielding me with his body.

“Get back.”

Jaxx mirrored him on my other side. “Do not let it see her.”

My voice trembled. “See me? Why would it?”

The silhouette leaned forward.

And the pull inside me snapped tight.

Like a cord connecting us.

Like recognition.

Like destiny.

I gasped, stumbling.

Draven caught me. “Keeva.”

Jaxx’s voice dropped to a whisper. “It is reacting to her.”

The silhouette took another step.

The porch lights blew out.

The night swallowed us whole.

For a heartbeat, there was nothing.

No music.

No laughter.

No wind.

Just darkness, thick and absolute.

I could not see Draven.

I could not see Jaxx.

I could not see the house.

But I felt everything.

The cold air pressing against my skin.

The warmth pulsing in my chest.

The electric hum vibrating through my bones.

The pull was stronger now, sharper, like invisible fingers

curling around my ribs.

“Keeva.” Draven’s voice cut through the dark, rough and urgent. “Stay where you are.”

I tried.

I really did.

But the pull yanked again, harder, and my knees buckled.

Jaxx grabbed my arm. “Fight it.”

“I am trying.” My voice cracked.

The silhouette in the woods shifted closer, clearer, as if the darkness itself were shaping into something with weight and intention.

The string lights flickered back on for a split second.

Just long enough for me to see:

Draven’s face, pale, furious, terrified.

Jaxx’s jaw clenched, eyes locked on the trees.

The crowd behind us still partying, oblivious.

And the silhouette standing at the tree line.

Tall.

Broad.

Wrong.

The lights blew out again.

Draven swore. “Jaxx.”

“I know,” Jaxx snapped. “I see it.”

“What is it?” I whispered.

Neither answered.

Because the woods answered for them.

A low, resonant sound rolled through the trees, deeper than before, vibrating through the ground, through the air, through me. My skin lit up again, the shimmer brightening into a soft glow that illuminated the porch around us.

Jaxx’s breath hitched. “She is reacting.”

Draven grabbed my shoulders. “Keeva, look at me. Stay with me.”

But I could not.

The pull was too strong.

The silhouette stepped forward.
The glow under my skin surged.
And something inside me, something ancient and buried,
snapped awake.

A shockwave of warmth burst through my chest, radiating outward in a pulse that made the air ripple. Draven stumbled back. Jaxx cursed under his breath. The porch boards creaked as if straining under invisible pressure.

“Keeva.” Draven reached for me again.

But the pull yanked harder.

My vision blurred.

The world tilted.

The woods leaned closer.

Jaxx grabbed my wrist. “Do not go to it.”

“I am not.” My voice broke. “I am not trying to.”

The silhouette stepped fully into the open.

And for the first time, I saw its eyes.

Not glowing.

Not human.

Not anything I recognized.

But they locked onto me with a certainty that made my stomach drop.

Like it knew me.

Like it had been waiting.

Like it had finally found what it came for.

Draven shoved me behind him. “Get back.”

Jaxx mirrored him, blocking me from both sides. “It is not getting near her.”

The silhouette tilted its head.

The pull inside me tightened painfully now, like a hook lodged in my chest.

I gasped, clutching my ribs. “It hurts.”

Draven turned, panic flashing across his face. “Jaxx, we need to move her. Now.”

Jaxx nodded. “On three.”

But before they could lift me, the silhouette took one more step.

The ground trembled.

The air cracked.

And the pull inside me snapped so violently I cried out.

Draven caught me before I hit the ground. "I have you. I have you."

Jaxx crouched beside us, eyes locked on the woods. "It is coming closer."

The silhouette raised an arm.

Not fast.

Not threatening.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Like it was reaching for me.

My glow brightened again, uncontrollably, pulsing in time with the thing's movements.

Draven's voice dropped to a whisper. "Keeva, whatever you do, do not answer it."

"I am not." My breath hitched. "I do not know how to stop it."

Jaxx leaned in, voice low and fierce. "Then we will stop it for you."

The silhouette stepped over the fence.

The porch lights exploded in a shower of sparks.

The music inside the house cut out.

Every student went silent.

Every head turned.

Every breath held.

And the entire night shifted.

Like the world had been waiting for this moment.

Like everything before had been a warning.

Like everything after this would be different.

Draven pulled me against his chest. "Stay with me."

Jaxx stood in front of us, shoulders squared. "Come on

then. Try it.”

The silhouette paused.

The pull inside me twisted.

And I realized with a cold, sinking certainty:

This was not random.

This was not a coincidence.

This was not an accident.

It was coming for me.

And tonight was the night everything changed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Woods Edge

The walk back from the lake house felt longer than it should have. The music still thumped behind us, muffled by trees and distance, but the night air was too quiet. Too still. Like the world was holding its breath.

Lennox looped her arm through mine. "That was a lot."

I nodded, though my mind was still spinning. Draven showing up. Jaxx showing up. Both of them acting like the woods were about to swallow me whole. Both refusing to explain anything. Both looking at the trees instead of me.

Lennox squeezed my arm. "You good?"

"I do not know."

We reached the edge of campus, where the gravel path met the tree line. The woods loomed darker than usual, a wall of shadow and branches that seemed to lean closer the longer I stared at them.

A chill crawled up my spine.

Lennox noticed. "Hey. Do not do that thing where you stare into the void like it is going to wink back."

"I just feel weird."

"Yeah, well, you had two drinks and danced like a goddess in front of half the school. Weird is expected."

I laughed softly, but the unease did not fade.

The trees rustled. Not with wind. Not with animals. Something heavier. Something deliberate.

Lennox froze. "No. We are walking faster."

We hurried across the quad, the dorm lights glowing warm and safe in the distance. Students laughed somewhere behind us. Someone shouted about losing their shoe. A couple stumbled past us holding hands and giggling.

Normal.

Human.

Safe.

So why did the night feel wrong?

When we reached our dorm room, Lennox shut the door with her foot and locked it twice. "Emergency meeting. Sit."

I sat on my bed, still buzzing with adrenaline.

Lennox paced. "Let us recap. Draven shows up at your door like a brooding vampire."

"He is not a vampire."

"Fine. A brooding whatever. Then Jaxx storms into the party like he is in an action movie. Both of them tell you not to go outside. Both of them look at the woods like something is out there."

I swallowed. "Yes."

"And you felt what? Pulled? Weird? Off?"

"All of the above."

Lennox stopped pacing. "Keeva, something is going on."

My heart thudded. "You think so too?"

"Yes. I am not blind. Or stupid. Or oblivious like half the student body." She sat beside me. "But whatever is happening, it is not your fault. And you are not alone."

I exhaled shakily. "I just do not understand why they are acting like this."

"Boys are dramatic. Especially tall, broody ones with jawlines sharp enough to cut glass."

I laughed, tension easing for a moment.

But then my mind flashed back to the woods.

The rustling.

The stillness.

The feeling of eyes on me.

I rubbed my arms. "Do you think someone was actually out there?"

Lennox did not answer right away. She looked at the window, at the dark trees beyond it, then back at me.

"I think," she said slowly, "that Draven and Jaxx know something we do not."

A chill rippled through me. "Like what?"

"I do not know." Lennox leaned back on her hands. "But

whatever it is, it is circling you.”

My breath caught. “Circling me?”

“Yes. Like you are the center of something. And everyone else knows it except you.”

I did not know what to say.

Because deep down, in a place I did not want to admit existed, I felt it too.

Something was shifting.

Something was coming.

Something was waking up around me.

Not magic.

Not power.

Just something.

Lennox nudged me gently. “Hey. Do not spiral. We are not doing that tonight.”

I nodded, though my stomach twisted.

She stood and stretched. “New plan. We are going to sleep. And tomorrow, we are going to pretend we are normal teenagers until the universe decides to stop being cryptic.”

I smiled weakly. “Deal.”

We turned off the lights. The room fell into soft darkness, the hum of the hallway fading as people settled in for the night.

But long after Lennox’s breathing evened out, I lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

Listening.

Waiting.

The shadows in the corners of the room felt deeper than usual. The air felt heavier. My heartbeat felt too loud in my ears.

I rolled onto my side and looked toward the window.

The trees outside swayed gently, but not with the wind.

There was no wind.

A faint rustle drifted through the glass.

Soft.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Like something was moving.
Like something was pacing.
Like something was waiting for me.
I pulled the blanket up to my chin, breath shallow.
For the first time, I did not feel drunk.
Or overwhelmed.
Or dramatic.
I felt certain.
Something was coming.
And whatever it was, it had already found me.
Sleep did not come.

I lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening to Lennox breathe softly in the bed across from mine. The room was dark, but not the comforting kind of dark. Not the kind that wrapped around you like a blanket.

This was the kind of dark that watched.
The kind that waited.

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the silhouette at the tree line.

The way it moved.
The way it did not move.
The way it felt like it knew me.
My chest tightened.

I rolled onto my back again, staring at the faint glow of the digital clock on Lennox's nightstand.

12:41 AM.

Too early to be morning.
Too late to pretend I was asleep.
A soft creak echoed from the hallway.
I froze.

Another creak.
Closer this time.

Lennox did not stir.

I sat up slowly, heart pounding, listening.

The building was old. It made noises. Pipes. Floors. Doors.
Students sneaking back from parties.

Normal things.

But this was not normal.

This was deliberate.

A slow, steady weight shifting across the hallway
floorboards.

Not stumbling.

Not drunk.

Not human.

My skin prickled.

I slipped out of bed, feet touching the cold floor, and crept
toward the door. I did not open it. I pressed my ear against the
wood.

Silence.

Then

A soft inhale.

Right outside.

I jerked back, hand flying to my mouth to keep from
gasping.

Something was standing on the other side of the door.

Something breathing.

Something waiting.

My glow flickered under my skin, faint but real, and I
slapped my hand over my arm as if I could hide it.

The breathing stopped.

The hallway went silent again.

I backed away from the door, pulse racing, and climbed
back into bed, pulling the blanket up to my chin.

Lennox mumbled in her sleep, rolling over. "Keeva, stop
thinking so loud."

I almost laughed. Almost.

But then

A soft tap hit the window.

Not loud.

Not sharp.

Just enough to make my blood run cold.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

I turned my head slowly.

The blinds were closed, but the faint outline of the window frame glowed with moonlight.

Tap.

Something brushed the glass.

My breath caught.

I did not move.

I did not blink.

I did not breathe.

The tapping stopped.

Silence.

Then

A shadow passed across the blinds.

Slow.

Heavy.

Deliberate.

My heart slammed against my ribs.

I reached for Lennox's bed. "Lennox," I whispered. "Wake up."

She groaned. "If this is about snacks, I swear."

"Lennox."

Something scraped against the glass.

Her eyes snapped open. "Okay. I am up."

We both stared at the window.

Neither of us moved.

Neither of us spoke.

The shadow lingered for a moment longer, then slid away.

The room stayed silent.

Too silent.

Lennox whispered, "I hate this. I hate everything about this."

"Me too."

She sat up, hair sticking out in every direction. "Do we call someone? Draven? Jaxx? Campus security? A priest?"

I shook my head. "No. If we call them, they will show up and make it worse."

Lennox blinked. "Worse than something pacing outside our window like it is shopping for snacks?"

I did not answer.

Because the truth was worse than anything I could say out loud.

Whatever was out there was not looking for Lennox.

Or the dorm.

Or the school.

It was looking for me.

And it was not leaving.

Lennox rubbed her face. "New plan. We are staying awake. We are staying alert. And we are not letting anything drag you into the woods."

I swallowed. "Okay."

We sat there in the dark, backs pressed against our headboards, blankets pulled up to our chins, listening to the night breathe around us.

Minutes passed.

Then an hour.

Then two.

The tapping did not return.

The shadow did not return.

But the feeling did not fade.

The certainty did not fade.

Something was out there.

Something was watching.

Something was waiting.

And deep down, in the place I did not want to admit

existed, I knew:

Tonight was not the end.

It was the beginning.

The room stayed dark and still, but my mind would not stop racing. Every rustle outside, every creak in the hallway, every shift of shadow felt like a warning. Like the night itself was whispering my name.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to breathe, trying to calm the pounding in my chest.

It did not work.

Minutes passed.

Then more.

Time blurred into a slow, heavy crawl.

Lennox eventually drifted back to sleep, or at least pretended to, but I could not. My body felt wired, alert, as if every nerve ending were tuned to a frequency only I could hear.

A soft vibration buzzed against my leg.

My phone.

I flinched, grabbing it quickly so the screen would not light up the room.

A message.

From Draven.

Are you awake?

My breath caught.

Another message followed instantly.

Do not go near the window.

My stomach twisted. I typed back with shaking fingers.

Why? What is out there?

Three dots appeared.

Then disappeared.

Then appeared again.

He was hesitating.

Draven never hesitated.

Finally, a message came through.

Just stay away from the glass. I am coming.

Coming here.

Now.

In the middle of the night.

Before I could respond, another vibration buzzed against my palm.

Jaxx.

Do not open the door.

Do not look outside.

Do not move.

My pulse spiked.

Another message.

I mean it, Keeva. Stay put.

I swallowed hard, staring at the two threads on my screen, both boys sending the same warning, both sounding more afraid than I had ever heard them.

Lennox stirred. "Who is texting you at" She squinted at the clock. "one in the morning?"

"Draven," I whispered. "And Jaxx."

She sat up instantly. "That is never good."

I showed her the messages.

Her eyes widened. "Why are they both acting like you are about to get kidnapped by a tree?"

"I do not know."

But deep down, I did.

Or at least I felt it.

The pull.

The glow.

The way the woods seemed to breathe with me.

The way the silhouette moved, as if it recognized me.

Something was connecting us.

Something I did not understand.

Something I did not ask for.

Lennox grabbed her pillow like it was a weapon. "If something tries to break in, I am hitting it with this."

I almost laughed. "That is not going to help."

“It will make me feel better.”

A soft thump echoed outside the window.

We both froze.

Another thump.

Closer.

Heavier.

Lennox whispered, “No. No. No.”

I could not move.

The glow under my skin flickered again, faint but real, and Lennox’s eyes darted to my arms.

“Keeva.”

“I know.”

The thumping stopped.

Silence.

Then

A low, resonant sound drifted through the glass.

Not a growl.

Not a voice.

Something in between.

Something that made my bones vibrate.

Lennox grabbed my hand. “What was that?”

“I do not know.”

But I did.

It was the same sound I heard at the lake house.

The same sound that made the porch lights explode.

The same sound that made the silhouette step forward.

The same sound that woke something inside me.

My phone buzzed again.

Draven.

Do not answer it.

Do not react.

I am almost there.

Jaxx’s message came a second later.

Whatever you hear, do not go to it.

My breath shook.

Lennox whispered, “Why does it sound like you are being hunted?”

I did not answer.

Because the truth was sitting heavy in my chest.

I was not being hunted.

I was being called.

The glow under my skin pulsed again, stronger this time, and I clutched my arms, trying to smother it.

Lennox scooted closer. “Hey. Look at me. You are okay. You are here. You are safe.”

But the room did not feel safe.

The night did not feel safe.

And the thing outside definitely was not safe.

Another thump hit the window, harder this time, and Lennox yelped, scrambling backward.

I grabbed her wrist. “Stay behind me.”

“Behind you? You are the one it wants.”

“I know.”

The words slipped out before I could stop them.

Lennox stared at me, eyes wide. “Keeva, what do you mean you know?”

I swallowed. “Because I can feel it.”

The glow brightened.

The air thickened.

The shadows outside the window shifted.

And then

A voice echoed down the hallway.

Sharp.

Commanding.

Familiar.

“Keeva.”

Draven.

Followed by another voice, rougher and angrier.

“Do not let her near the window.”

Jaxx.

Lennox grabbed my arm. “That is our cue to panic.”

But I did not panic.

I stood.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

Drawn toward the window by something I could not fight.

Something ancient.

Something inevitable.

Something that had been circling me for days.

Lennox’s voice trembled. “Keeva, do not.”

I did not answer.

Because the truth was terrifying.

I was not sure I could stop myself.

And I was not sure I wanted to.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gate Stirred

I did not sleep. Not really. I drifted in and out of shallow dreams, flashes of trees, shadows, footsteps, whispers I could not quite hear. Every time I closed my eyes, the woods pressed in behind them, dark and watchful.

By the time dawn crept through the blinds, my head felt heavy and my chest felt tight, like I had been holding my breath all night.

Lennox was still asleep, sprawled across her bed like she had fought a war in her dreams. Her hair was a halo of chaos. Her mouth hung open. She snored softly.

Normal.

Comforting.

Human.

I slipped out of bed quietly and crossed the room to the window.

The woods were still.

Too still.

The trees stood rigid, branches unmoving, even though the early morning breeze brushed across the quad. A faint mist clung to the ground, curling around the roots like fingers.

Something about it made my skin prickle.

I pressed my palm to the glass.

Cold shot through me, sharp and sudden and electric.

I jerked back. "What the hell."

The glass was not cold.

My hand was.

I rubbed my palm, trying to shake off the sensation. It did not fade.

A soft knock hit the door.

Three taps.

Firm.

Controlled.

My stomach dropped.

Lennox shot upright. "If that is Draven again, I swear I am throwing him out the window."

I opened the door.

It was not Draven.

It was Jaxx.

His hair was damp, like he had run through the morning fog. His hoodie was half zipped, his breathing uneven, his eyes scanning the hallway like he expected something to jump out.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

Lennox groaned. "Of course it is him. Of course."

I stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind me. "What is wrong?"

Jaxx did not answer right away. He looked rattled. Not his usual cocky grin. Not his practiced smirk. Something raw flickered behind his eyes.

"I did not sleep," he said quietly.

"Me neither."

He nodded once, like that confirmed something he had already suspected.

"Did you hear anything last night?" he asked.

I swallowed. "Like what?"

He hesitated. "Footsteps. Voices. Something moving in the woods."

My heart thudded. "You heard it too?"

Jaxx exhaled shakily. "Yes."

We stood there in the hallway, silence stretched tight between us.

Then he said the thing I had been trying not to admit.

"Keeva, something is happening around you."

My breath caught. "I know."

"And I do not think it is done."

A chill rippled through me.

Footsteps echoed down the hall. Draven turned the corner, hair damp, shirt wrinkled, eyes locked on me like he had been searching since sunrise.

He stopped when he saw Jaxx standing close.

His jaw tightened. "What is going on?"

"Nothing," Jaxx said.

"Does not look like nothing."

"Then stop looking."

"Make me."

"Oh my God," I muttered. "Not this again."

Lennox cracked the door open behind me. "If you two start chest bumping at eight in the morning, I am calling campus security."

Draven tore his gaze from Jaxx and focused on me. "Did you sleep?"

"No."

He nodded, unsurprised. "Did you feel anything?"

Jaxx shot him a look. "Why would she feel something?"

Draven ignored him. "Keeva?"

I hesitated. "I had a dream. Or something like a dream."

"What kind of dream?" Draven asked.

"I do not know. Trees. Shadows. A voice I could not hear."

Draven's expression darkened.

Jaxx stiffened.

Lennox stepped fully into the hallway, arms crossed.

"Someone explain why all three of you look like you saw a ghost."

Neither boy spoke.

Neither boy moved.

Neither boy blinked.

Lennox threw her hands up. "Unbelievable."

I rubbed my arms. The cold sensation had not faded. It sat beneath my skin like a warning.

"I think something happened last night," I whispered.

"Something in the woods."

Draven and Jaxx exchanged a look. Not hostile this time. Tense. Worried. Like they were silently confirming something neither wanted to say out loud.

Draven stepped closer. "Keeva, if anything feels wrong today, anything at all, you come find me."

Jaxx's jaw clenched. "Or me."

Lennox groaned. "Or me, obviously. I am the only one here with a functioning brain."

But I barely heard them.

Because something tugged at me, a faint pull, low and steady, like a heartbeat beneath the earth.

I turned toward the window at the end of the hall.

The woods were still.

But the mist had thickened.

The shadows had deepened.

And for a split second, just a blink, I thought I saw something move between the trees.

A shape.

A flicker.

A presence.

When I blinked again, it was gone.

But the cold in my palm pulsed once, sharp and certain.

Lennox touched my shoulder. "Keeva?"

I swallowed hard. "Something is coming."

The hallway fell silent.

Draven's expression hardened.

Jaxx's breath hitched.

Lennox's hand tightened on my arm.

And deep in the woods, though I could not hear it or see it or name it, something shifted.

Something old.

Something waiting.

Something waking.

The first crack in the world.

The first whisper of truth.

The first sign that nothing would ever be the same.

Jaxx and Draven stared at me like I had spoken a prophecy instead of a sentence. Lennox hovered behind me, arms

crossed, hair wild, eyes sharp with the kind of fear she tried to hide behind sarcasm.

The hallway felt too narrow.

Too bright.

Too exposed.

I stepped back toward our door. "Can we go inside? Please."

Draven nodded immediately.

Jaxx hesitated, then followed.

Lennox muttered, "Great. Both idiots are in our room. My dream morning."

But she stepped aside anyway.

The moment the door shut behind us, the air shifted. Heavier. Charged. As if the room itself knew something was wrong.

Jaxx paced.

Draven stood rigid near the window.

Lennox flopped onto her bed like she was preparing for a disaster briefing.

I stood in the center of the room, rubbing my cold palm.

Draven noticed. "Your hand. It is still happening?"

I nodded.

Jaxx stopped pacing. "Show me."

I hesitated, then held out my hand.

The cold pulsed once, faint but sharp, like a heartbeat under ice.

Jaxx's expression darkened. "That is not normal."

Lennox threw a pillow at him. "Nothing about this is normal, Sherlock."

Draven stepped closer, eyes locked on my palm. "Did it start last night?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When I touched the window."

Jaxx swore under his breath. "Of course it did."

Lennox frowned. "What does that mean?"

Neither boy answered.

Of course.

I crossed my arms. "Enough. One of you needs to start talking."

Draven's jaw flexed. "It is not that simple."

"It is," I snapped. "Because something is happening to me, and you both know more than you are saying."

Jaxx ran a hand through his hair. "Keeva, if we tell you the wrong thing, we could make it worse."

"How?"

He did not answer.

Draven did.

"Because whatever is waking up, it is connected to you."

The room went silent.

My breath caught. "Connected how?"

Draven looked away.

Jaxx looked at the floor.

Lennox looked like she wanted to strangle both of them.

"Oh my God," she said. "Just say it."

Jaxx finally spoke. "There are things in the woods that should not be awake."

Draven added quietly, "And they only wake when something else does."

My stomach twisted. "Something else like me?"

Neither boy denied it.

Lennox whispered, "I hate that."

I swallowed hard. "What does that mean? What is waking up?"

Draven opened his mouth, then froze.

Jaxx stiffened.

Lennox sat up straighter. "What? What now?"

A low vibration rolled through the floor.

Soft.

Subtle.

Unmistakable.

The lights flickered.

My cold palm pulsed.

Jaxx moved to the window in three long strides. “No. No, no, no.”

Draven joined him, pulling the blinds aside just enough to see.

Lennox grabbed my wrist. “Do not look.”

But I already felt it.

The pull.

The hum.

The presence.

I stepped closer despite myself.

The woods were still.

But the mist had thickened into a low, swirling fog that curled around the roots like smoke. The shadows between the trees shifted. Not with wind. Not with animals.

With intention.

Draven’s voice dropped to a whisper. “It is early.”

Jaxx’s jaw clenched. “It should not be this close to campus.”

Lennox whispered, “What should not?”

Draven did not answer.

Jaxx did.

“The Gate.”

My heart stuttered. “Gate?”

Draven shot him a warning look. “Jaxx.”

“She deserves to know,” Jaxx snapped. “It is already reacting to her.”

My pulse roared in my ears. “What gate?”

Draven exhaled slowly, like the truth was a weight he had carried too long.

“There is a place in the woods,” he said quietly. “A boundary. A barrier. Something old. Something dangerous.”

Jaxx added, “And last night, it stirred.”

The cold in my palm pulsed again, harder this time.

Lennox whispered, "Oh hell."

I swallowed. "Why me?"

Draven looked at me, then really looked, and something in his expression softened, as if he wished he could shield me from the answer.

"Because," he said quietly, "the Gate only stirs when the thing it is tied to wakes up."

Jaxx's voice dropped to a whisper.

"And Keeva, it is tied to you."

The room stayed silent.

The mist outside swirled.

The shadows shifted.

The cold in my palm pulsed again.

I whispered, "What does the Gate want?"

Draven hesitated. "Not what."

Jaxx's voice was barely audible.

"Who."

My stomach twisted. "Me."

Neither boy denied it.

Lennox muttered, "Fantastic. Love that for us."

A sudden vibration rolled through the floor, faint but strong enough to make the lights flicker.

Draven stiffened. "It is getting closer."

Jaxx moved toward the door. "We need to get her somewhere safe."

Lennox grabbed my arm. "She is not leaving this room."

Jaxx shook his head. "The room is not safe."

Draven added, "Nowhere on campus is safe if the Gate is active."

My breath hitched. "Active how?"

Draven opened his mouth but froze.

Jaxx's eyes widened. "Do you feel that?"

I did.

A low hum, not sound, not vibration, something deeper

thrummed through my chest. My cold palm pulsed in time with it, like a heartbeat syncing to something outside.

Lennox backed up. "No. No. No."

The hum deepened.

The mist outside the window swirled faster.

The shadows between the trees shifted closer again.

Draven grabbed my shoulders. "Keeva, listen to me.

Whatever you feel pulling you, fight it."

Jaxx stepped to my other side. "Do not look at the woods."

But I could not help it.

My gaze drifted toward the window.

The mist parted.

Just for a second.

Just long enough for me to see

A shape.

Tall.

Still.

Watching.

My breath caught.

The hum inside me surged.

Draven swore. "She is reacting again."

Jaxx grabbed my wrist. "Keeva, stay with us."

Lennox's voice trembled. "What is that thing?"

The shape did not move.

But the mist curled around it like it was part of the forest itself.

My cold palm pulsed again, harder and sharper, like something inside me was answering something outside.

I whispered, "It is calling me."

Draven's grip tightened. "Do not answer."

Jaxx's voice was fierce. "Do not even think about it."

But the truth was terrifying.

I did not know how to stop it.

The hum grew louder, not in the room, not in the air, but

inside me.

The shape in the woods tilted its head.

The mist swirled.

The cold in my palm flared.

And then

A crack echoed through the trees.

Soft.

Sharp.

Ancient.

The boys froze.

Lennox grabbed my arm.

And I knew with a certainty that made my blood run cold

The Gate was not just stirring.

It was waking.

The crack echoed again, louder this time, rolling through the trees like something ancient shifting beneath the earth. The mist rippled outward in a slow wave, curling around the trunks as if the forest itself were exhaling.

Lennox backed up until she hit her bed. “I am officially done. I am packing my bags and transferring to a school that teaches accounting.”

Jaxx didn’t look away from the window. “It is not crossing the boundary. Not yet.”

Draven’s jaw tightened. “It should not be able to get this close.”

I swallowed hard. “What happens if it does?”

Neither boy answered.

Lennox threw her hands up. “Why do I even ask questions. You two are like walking red flags with secrets.”

The cold in my palm pulsed again, stronger this time, and I pressed my hand against my chest as if I could hold it still. It didn’t help. The hum inside me deepened, vibrating through my ribs like a second heartbeat.

Draven turned toward me. “Keeva, look at me.”

I tried. I really did. But my gaze kept drifting back to the

window, drawn by something I couldn't name. Something that felt familiar in a way that made my stomach twist.

Jaxx stepped in front of me, blocking my view. "Do not look outside."

"I am not trying to," I whispered.

He shook his head. "You are reacting to it. That is how it starts."

"How what starts?" I asked.

Draven and Jaxx exchanged another look. Not angry. Not competitive. Something closer to fear.

Lennox groaned. "If one of you does not start explaining, I am throwing both of you out the window."

Jaxx rubbed the back of his neck. "The Gate is not just a place. It is a threshold. A point where things bleed through."

Draven added quietly, "And when it wakes, it looks for the one it is tied to."

My breath caught. "Me."

Jaxx nodded. "It is responding to you. That is why it is stirring early."

Lennox pointed at me. "Okay, but she is a person. A human person. Not a magical forest key."

Draven hesitated. "We do not know what she is yet."

My heart dropped. "What do you mean you do not know?"

Jaxx stepped closer. "Keeva, listen. There are signs. Patterns. Things that only happen when someone is connected to the Gate."

"What kind of signs?" I asked.

Draven gestured to my hand. "The cold. The glow. The pull. The dreams."

Jaxx added, "And the way it reacts when you are near."

Lennox shook her head. "No. No. She is not some chosen forest girl. She is Keeva. She likes iced coffee and glitter and not dying."

I almost laughed, but the sound caught in my throat.

The cold in my palm pulsed again, harder this time, and the

hum inside me surged like a wave crashing against a shore.

Draven stepped forward. "Keeva, breathe. Stay with us."

"I am trying," I whispered.

The mist outside thickened, swirling faster now, rising higher along the trunks. The shape in the woods shifted again, a slow tilt of its head, as if it were listening to something only it could hear.

Or something only I could hear.

Jaxx cursed under his breath. "It is answering her."

Lennox grabbed my arm. "Tell it to stop answering."

"I do not know how."

The hum inside me grew louder, filling my chest, my throat, my skull. It wasn't painful, but it was overwhelming, like standing too close to a speaker turned up too high.

Draven reached for my other arm. "Keeva, focus on my voice."

I tried. His voice was steady, grounding, but the pull was stronger. It tugged at me like a current, like the woods were calling my name without sound.

Jaxx stepped closer. "Do not let it in."

"I am not," I whispered, but my voice shook.

The cold in my palm flared again, bright and sharp, and the mist outside the window surged upward in a sudden rush, swirling like a storm forming in slow motion.

Lennox stumbled back. "No. Absolutely not. I am not doing haunted fog today."

Draven's eyes widened. "It is opening."

Jaxx moved to the window, fists clenched. "It is too early. It should not be opening."

"What is opening?" I asked.

Draven swallowed hard. "The Gate."

The room seemed to tilt.

The mist outside split down the center, parting like curtains drawn back by invisible hands. The shadows between the trees deepened, stretching into a narrow, dark line that pulsed with

faint light.

My cold palm pulsed in perfect rhythm.

Lennox whispered, "That is not normal fog. That is murder fog."

Jaxx didn't look away. "It is forming a threshold."

Draven's voice dropped to a whisper. "It is calling her."

My breath hitched. "Why me?"

Jaxx turned toward me, eyes fierce. "Because you woke it."

"I did not do anything."

"You did," Draven said softly. "Not on purpose. But something inside you did."

The hum inside me surged again, and my knees buckled. Draven caught me before I hit the floor.

"Keeva," he said urgently. "Stay with me."

Jaxx crouched beside us. "Fight it."

"I am trying," I whispered.

The mist outside glowed faintly now, a soft, eerie light pulsing in time with the cold in my palm. The shape in the woods stepped closer, still half hidden, still watching.

Lennox pressed her back against the wall. "I hate this. I hate everything about this."

The hum grew louder.

The cold grew sharper.

The pull grew stronger.

And then

A sound rolled through the trees.

Not a crack.

Not a growl.

Something deeper.

A low, resonant tone that vibrated through the floor, through the walls, through my bones.

Draven's grip tightened. "It is waking fully."

Jaxx's voice was barely a whisper. "We are out of time."

The cold in my palm flared so bright it felt like fire and ice at once.

I gasped.
The Gate answered.
And the world shifted.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

First Fracture

The rest of the morning blurred into a haze of tension and half-spoken warnings. Draven and Jaxx walked me to class. Not together. Not willingly. A stiff, silent truce hung between them, the kind that made Lennox whisper, “This is the worst buddy cop movie ever.”

Students stared as we passed.

Not because of the boys.

Because of me.

Whispers followed us down the hallway.

“Is that the girl from the party?”

“She was glowing.”

“No, seriously, I saw it.”

“Something weird happened last night.”

“Did you hear the woods?”

I kept my head down, my cold palm tucked into my sleeve.

Draven noticed. “Ignore them.”

Jaxx added, “They do not know anything.”

Lennox muttered, “Neither do we, apparently.”

Draven shot her a look.

She shot one right back.

We reached the door to my first class. Students filtered in, laughing and talking, oblivious to the tension radiating from the three of us.

Draven stepped in front of me. “Stay where people can see you.”

Jaxx crossed his arms. “And do not go near any windows.”

Lennox groaned. “She is going to class, not summoning demons.”

Draven did not smile.

Jaxx did not either.

I swallowed. “Is it really that dangerous?”

Draven hesitated. The kind of hesitation that meant yes.

Jaxx answered for him. “If the Gate is waking, then yes. It is

dangerous.”

My stomach twisted. “For me?”

Draven’s jaw tightened. “For everyone.”

Before I could ask what that meant, the bell rang. Students rushed past us, filling the classroom.

Draven stepped back. “We will be right outside.”

Jaxx nodded. “Do not leave the room.”

Lennox rolled her eyes. “She is not a toddler.”

But when I walked into class, she followed me. Not because she needed to. Because she was not letting me out of her sight.

We took our seats.

The teacher started talking.

But I did not hear a word.

The cold in my palm pulsed again, faint but steady, and the hum in my chest returned. Low and rhythmic. A heartbeat that was not mine.

Lennox leaned over. “You okay?”

I nodded.

I lied.

The windows along the far wall rattled softly, though no one else seemed to notice. A faint mist curled at the edges of the glass, like the morning fog was pressing against it from the outside.

My breath caught.

Lennox followed my gaze. “No. No. Absolutely not.”

She grabbed my hand under the desk.

The cold pulsed again.

The mist thickened.

And then

A shadow flickered across the window.

Not a person.

Not a bird.

Not anything that belonged on campus.

My heart slammed against my ribs.

Lennox whispered, "Keeva. It is here."

The hum inside me surged.

The lights flickered.

The teacher paused mid sentence. "Is there a problem with the?"

A crack echoed through the glass.

Soft.

Sharp.

Ancient.

The same sound from the woods.

The same sound from last night.

The same sound that meant the Gate was stirring again.

Lennox squeezed my hand. "We need to get out of here."

But I could not move.

Because the cold in my palm was not cold anymore.

It was burning.

The burn spread fast, a sharp, searing heat that shot up my wrist and into my forearm like someone had lit a fuse beneath my skin.

I sucked in a breath.

Lennox's eyes widened. "Keeva, your hand."

"I know," I whispered.

The teacher kept talking, oblivious. Students scribbled notes, whispered, laughed. No one else felt the shift in the air. No one else saw the mist thickening outside the windows. No one else heard the low hum vibrating through the floor.

But I did.

And Lennox did.

She grabbed my arm under the desk. "We need to leave. Now."

Before I could answer, the lights flickered again. Once. Twice. Then steadied.

The class went quiet.

The teacher frowned. "Is there a problem with the?"

A crack split across the window.

A thin, jagged line.

Like something had tapped the glass from the outside.

The teacher froze. "What was that?"

Students murmured. Chairs scraped. Someone laughed nervously.

Lennox whispered, "We are leaving. I do not care if we get expelled."

She started to stand.

But the hum inside me surged, slamming me back into my seat.

I gasped, clutching my burning palm.

Lennox grabbed my shoulders. "Keeva."

The crack in the window deepened.

Another line splintered outward.

The mist outside swirled violently, curling against the glass as if trying to seep through.

The teacher stepped back. "Everyone, stay calm."

A shadow flickered across the window.

Not a person.

Not an animal.

Not anything that belonged in daylight.

The room erupted into chaos.

Students screamed.

Chairs toppled.

Someone ran for the door.

Someone else ducked under a desk.

Lennox pulled me to my feet. "Move."

But the hum inside me pulsed again. Stronger. Deeper. As if something were answering something outside.

My vision blurred.

The room tilted.

The burning in my palm flared white hot.

Lennox's voice sounded far away. "Keeva, stay with me."

The door slammed open.

Draven.

Jaxx.

Both breathless.

Both pale.

Both terrified.

Draven's eyes locked on me instantly. "Do not touch the window."

Jaxx shoved past a group of panicking students. "Get her away from it."

Lennox dragged me toward them, but my legs buckled. Draven caught me before I hit the floor.

My palm burned against his chest.

He flinched. "She is reacting."

"No," Jaxx snapped, grabbing my other arm. "The Gate is reacting to her."

The crack in the window spider webbed outward.

The mist pressed harder.

The shadow outside leaned closer.

Students screamed again.

The teacher shouted for everyone to evacuate.

Draven pulled me against him. "We have to move. Now."

Jaxx nodded. "Before it breaks through."

Lennox grabbed my backpack. "If something comes through that window, I am transferring schools."

But I barely heard them.

Because the burning in my palm was not just heat anymore.

It was a pulse.

A rhythm.

A heartbeat.

Not mine.

Something else.

Something calling.

Draven lifted me into his arms. "Do not look at it."

Jaxx shoved desks aside, clearing a path. "Get her out."

The window cracked again, louder this time.

The mist surged.

The shadow pressed closer.

And the hum inside me roared.

I clutched Draven's shirt, breath shaking. "It is coming."

He did not deny it.

Jaxx did not either.

Lennox whispered, "Run."

And we did.

The hallway outside the classroom was chaos. Students spilled out of doorways. Teachers shouted orders. Alarms blared in the distance. But all of it felt muffled, distant, like I was underwater.

The only thing I could hear clearly was the hum inside me.

Low.

Steady.

Growing stronger.

Draven carried me down the hall, muscles tense, jaw clenched. Jaxx ran ahead, clearing a path, shoving panicked students aside with a force that made them stumble.

Lennox sprinted behind us, breathless. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere without windows," Jaxx said.

"Somewhere it cannot see her," Draven added.

My voice trembled. "What is it?"

Neither answered.

The building shook again with a subtle tremor, enough to make the ceiling tiles rattle and the lights flicker.

Students screamed.

Someone cried.

Someone else shouted, "Earthquake."

But this was not an earthquake.

This was something else.

Something older.

Something waking.

Draven tightened his grip on me. "We are almost there."

"Where?" Lennox demanded.

"The east stairwell," Jaxx said. "It is reinforced."

Lennox blinked. "Reinforced for what? A tornado? A monster? A"

She stopped.

Because the hum inside me surged so strongly again, the air vibrated.

I gasped, clutching Draven's shirt. "It is getting closer."

Jaxx cursed under his breath. "We need to move faster."

We reached the stairwell door. Jaxx yanked it open, and Draven carried me inside. The heavy metal door slammed shut behind us, muffling the chaos outside.

The stairwell was dim, lit by a single flickering bulb. The concrete walls felt cold, damp, and claustrophobic.

Draven set me down gently on the bottom step. "Breathe."

I tried.

But the hum inside me pulsed again. Harder. Sharper. Like something was knocking from the inside.

Lennox crouched beside me. "Keeva, look at me. You are okay. You are here. You are"

She froze.

Because my palm, the one that had been cold all morning, was glowing.

Not bright.

Not obvious.

But enough.

A faint, shimmering light pulsed beneath my skin, spreading across my wrist like veins of molten gold.

Lennox whispered, "Oh hell no."

Jaxx stepped back. "It is starting."

Draven's voice dropped to a whisper. "No. Not yet. It is too soon."

My breath shook. "What is starting?"

Neither boy answered.

The stairwell lights flickered.

The hum inside me roared.

And then

A crack echoed through the building.

Not from the window.

Not from the hallway.

From the woods.

Even from inside the stairwell, I felt it as a deep, resonant shift in the earth, like something massive had moved.

Jaxx pressed his hand to the wall. "It is close."

Draven's eyes snapped to mine. "Keeva, listen to me. Whatever you feel pulling you, you have to fight it."

"I am trying," I whispered.

The glow in my palm brightened.

The hum deepened.

The stairwell lights flickered violently.

Lennox grabbed my shoulders. "Stay with us. Do not go all chosen one on me right now."

But the pull inside me tightened. A magnetic force dragging at my ribs, my lungs, my bones.

I doubled over, gasping.

Draven caught me. "Jaxx, help me hold her."

Jaxx knelt on my other side, gripping my arm. "Do not let it take you."

The glow spread up my forearm.

The hum vibrated through the floor.

The air thickened.

And then

A sound echoed through the stairwell.

Soft.

Sharp.

Ancient.

The same sound from the woods.

The same sound from the window.

The same sound from the Gate.

Lennox's voice trembled. "What was that?"

Draven's expression hardened. "The first fracture."

Jaxx nodded grimly. "The Gate is waking."

My vision blurred.

The glow surged.

The hum roared.

And I realized with a cold, sinking certainty

This was not just happening around me.

It was happening because of me.

The realization hit like a punch to the chest. Not metaphorical. Not emotional. Physical. A sharp, crushing pressure radiated outward from my sternum, stealing my breath. I doubled over, clutching my ribs as the hum inside me surged into a low, resonant thrum that vibrated through the concrete floor.

"Keeva." Lennox grabbed my shoulders, panic sharpening her voice. "Look at me. Stay with me."

But I could not look at anything.

My vision blurred at the edges, colors smearing together like wet paint. The stairwell tilted. The air thickened. The glow beneath my skin brightened until I could see it through my sleeve.

Draven swore under his breath. "It is accelerating."

Jaxx pressed his palm to the wall again, jaw clenched. "The Gate is pulling harder. It can feel her."

Lennox snapped, "Stop talking like she is a magnet for forest demons."

Neither boy corrected her.

That was the worst part.

The hum inside me deepened again, a low, ancient vibration that felt like it came from the earth itself. My bones ached. My teeth buzzed. My heartbeat stuttered, syncing to a rhythm that was not mine.

I gasped. "Make it stop."

Draven knelt in front of me, gripping my arms. "Keeva, listen. You have to fight it."

"I am trying."

"Try harder."

Jaxx crouched beside him. "Do not let it take control. You hear me? Do not let it in."

Let it in.

The words echoed in my skull, twisting into something darker. Something older. Something that felt like a memory I did not have.

The glow surged again, bright enough that Lennox flinched back.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "She is lighting up like a Christmas tree."

Draven's voice dropped to a whisper. "It is not light."

Jaxx finished the thought. "It is resonance."

The stairwell lights flickered violently.

The hum roared.

And then

A crack split through the concrete wall behind us.

Not a small crack.

Not a hairline fracture.

A deep, jagged fissure that ran from the ceiling to the floor, dust drifting from the edges like the building itself was exhaling.

Lennox stumbled back. "No. Absolutely not. I am done. I am out. I am transferring to a school with zero haunted trees."

Draven did not move.

Jaxx did not breathe.

Both stared at the crack as if it were a countdown.

The hum inside me pulsed again, harder and sharper, and the fissure widened with a groan of shifting stone.

My breath hitched. "What is happening?"

Draven's voice was tight. "The Gate is breaching."

Jaxx shook his head. "Not fully. Not yet. But it is close."

Lennox grabbed my hand. "We need to get her out of

here.”

Draven stood, pulling me up with him. “We cannot move her until it stops.”

Jaxx added, “If we drag her away while it is pulling, it will only pull harder.”

My knees buckled. Draven caught me again, holding me upright as the glow beneath my skin flared bright enough to illuminate the stairwell.

The hum crescendoed.

The crack in the wall deepened.

The air vibrated.

And then

Everything stopped.

The hum cut out.

The glow dimmed.

The pressure vanished.

The stairwell fell silent.

I collapsed against Draven’s chest, gasping for air.

Lennox rushed to my side. “Keeva, breathe. You are okay. You are okay.”

Jaxx pressed his hand to the wall again.

The crack was still there.

Deep.

Jagged.

Wrong.

But the vibration was gone.

He exhaled shakily. “It is retreating.”

Draven nodded, still holding me upright. “For now.”

I swallowed hard, my voice barely a whisper. “What does it want?”

Draven did not answer.

Jaxx did not either.

Lennox looked between them, eyes blazing. “One of you better start talking before I start swinging.”

Draven finally met my gaze.

His voice was quiet.

Heavy.

Certain.

“It wants you.”

The stairwell went silent.

My heart dropped.

And deep in the woods, though I could not hear it or see it
or name it, something shifted again.

Waiting.

Watching.

Waking.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Wall Warning

The stairwell stayed silent long after the hum faded. Too silent. Like the building was holding its breath.

Draven still had one arm around me, steadying me even though the glow beneath my skin had dimmed to a faint shimmer. Jaxx hovered close, jaw tight, eyes flicking between me and the crack in the wall like he expected it to split open again.

Lennox stood in front of us, hands on her hips, breathing hard. "Someone explain why the school is cracking open like a haunted egg."

Neither boy answered.

Of course.

I pushed away from Draven, legs shaky but holding. "I am fine."

"You are not fine," Draven said quietly.

"You are glowing," Jaxx added.

Lennox pointed at my arm. "And humming. Do not forget the humming."

I pulled my sleeve down, hiding the faint shimmer. "It stopped."

"For now," Draven said.

Jaxx nodded grinning. "It will come back."

My stomach twisted. "Why?"

They exchanged a look. The kind that said they knew exactly why and hated that they knew.

Before either could answer, the stairwell door slammed open.

A faculty member burst in with one of the senior wardens, tall and stern in the dark navy jacket that marked campus security. His eyes swept the stairwell, landing on the crack in the wall, then on me.

His expression changed instantly.

Not fear.

Recognition.

“Which one of you was closest when this happened?” he demanded.

Draven stepped forward. “She was.”

Jaxx moved in front of me. “Back off.”

The warden ignored him. “Name.”

I swallowed. “Keeva.”

His jaw tightened. “You need to come with me.”

Lennox stepped between us. “Absolutely not. She is not going anywhere with you.”

“This is not optional,” the warden said. “Protocol requires”

Draven cut him off. “Protocol does not apply here.”

“It does now,” the warden snapped. “A structural breach of this magnitude means the Headmaster must be informed immediately.”

Jaxx swore under his breath. “Perfect. Exactly what we needed.”

My pulse spiked. “Why? What does the Headmaster have to do with this?”

The warden did not answer.

He did not have to.

Because the moment he said Headmaster, Draven and Jaxx both stiffened the same way they had when the Gate stirred.

Lennox grabbed my hand. “We are not going.”

The warden’s voice hardened. “You do not have a choice.”

He reached for my arm.

Draven stepped between us so fast the air shifted. “Touch her and I will break your hand.”

Jaxx moved to my other side. “Try it.”

The warden’s eyes narrowed. “You two do not have the authority to interfere.”

Draven’s voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. “Watch me.”

The tension snapped tight.

The warden reached for the radio clipped to his belt. “I am

calling for backup.”

Jaxx swore. “We need to move. Now.”

Draven grabbed my wrist. “Keeva, stay close.”

Lennox grabbed my other hand. “If we get expelled for running from a man with a walkie talkie.”

But she did not let go.

The warden lifted the radio to his mouth.

Draven pulled me toward the back exit of the stairwell.

Jaxx shoved the door open.

Lennox dragged me through.

The warden shouted after us.

But we were already running.

The stairwell door slammed behind us, echoing down the empty hallway. Draven did not slow. Jaxx did not look back. Lennox clutched my hand like she was afraid I would vanish if she let go.

My legs felt shaky, but adrenaline kept me moving.

Students spilled out of classrooms, confused and panicked. Some shouted questions. Others pressed against the walls to get out of our way. A few stared at me like I was the reason the alarms were blaring.

Maybe I was.

Draven led us down a side corridor, one of the older wings of the Academy, where the lights flickered and the paint peeled. Jaxx shoved open a door marked Maintenance Only and motioned us inside.

Lennox hesitated. “Seriously? This is your brilliant plan? Hide in a janitor’s closet?”

“It is not a closet,” Jaxx snapped. “It is a service tunnel.”

Lennox peered inside. “It looks like a closet.”

Draven pushed her gently but firmly through the doorway. “Move.”

The door shut behind us, plunging the narrow tunnel into dim, flickering light. Pipes lined the ceiling. Dust coated the floor. The air smelled like metal and old stone.

Jaxx locked the door from the inside.

Lennox crossed her arms. "Now someone explain why we are hiding from a grown man with a badge."

Draven turned to me instead. "How do you feel?"

I swallowed. "Like something is still pulling."

Jaxx cursed under his breath. "It did not stop."

"It paused," Draven corrected. "There is a difference."

Lennox threw her hands up. "Fantastic. Love that for us."

The hum inside me was not loud anymore, but it was there. A faint vibration beneath my ribs. A whisper under my skin. A reminder.

The Gate was not done.

Draven stepped closer, lowering his voice. "Keeva, listen carefully. The Headmaster cannot find you right now."

My stomach dropped. "Why?"

Jaxx answered before Draven could. "Because he will know."

"Know what?"

Draven hesitated. The kind of hesitation that meant the truth was dangerous.

"That you are connected to the Gate," he said quietly.

Lennox blinked. "Connected how? Magically? Emotionally? Wi Fi?"

Jaxx ignored her. "If the Headmaster sees you like this, glowing, resonating, reacting, he will lock you down."

My breath caught. "Lock me down?"

Draven nodded. "For your safety."

Jaxx added, "And everyone else's."

Lennox stepped in front of me. "No one is locking her anywhere."

Draven's expression softened. "Lennox, this is not about punishment."

Jaxx's voice dropped. "It is containment."

The word hit me like ice.

Containment.

Like I was dangerous.

Like I was infected.

Like I was something they needed to control.

My chest tightened. "I did not do anything."

Draven met my gaze. "We know."

Jaxx nodded. "But the Gate does not wake without a reason."

Lennox glared at both of them. "And you think she is the reason?"

Draven did not answer.

Jaxx did not either.

The silence was answer enough.

I backed up until my shoulders hit the cold concrete wall. "I do not want this."

Draven stepped toward me. "We are not letting anything happen to you."

Jaxx added, "Not the Headmaster. Not the Gate. Not anything."

Lennox crossed her arms. "Good. Because if anyone tries to take her, I am biting them."

Jaxx blinked. "Biting."

"It is effective," she said.

Draven ignored them both. "We need to get her somewhere safe."

"Where?" I whispered.

Jaxx exchanged a look with Draven, a silent conversation I was not part of.

Then he said it.

"The old observatory."

Draven nodded. "No windows. Reinforced walls. Off the main grid."

Lennox frowned. "Why does that sound like a bunker?"

"Because it is," Jaxx said.

Before I could respond, the lights in the tunnel flickered. Once.

Twice.

Then the hum inside me surged again, sharp and sudden.

I gasped, clutching my arm.

Draven grabbed my shoulders. "Keeva."

Jaxx pressed his hand to the wall. "It is moving again."

Lennox whispered, "The Gate."

The hum deepened.

The pipes overhead rattled.

Dust drifted from the ceiling.

And then

A low, resonant crack echoed through the tunnel.

Not from the building.

Not from the woods.

From beneath us.

Draven's voice dropped to a whisper. "We need to move.
Now."

Mist surged upward through the widening crack, curling like a hand reaching through the floor.

Jaxx stepped forward, planting himself between us and the fissure. "It is testing the boundary."

Lennox grabbed my arm. "Testing what? Our sanity."

But the mist did not stop.

It pulsed.

Once.

Twice.

In perfect sync with the hum inside my chest.

My breath hitched. "It is matching me."

Draven's head whipped toward me. "Do not say that."

"I am not saying it," I whispered. "I am feeling it."

The glow beneath my skin brightened again, faint but unmistakable. The mist responded instantly, swirling faster, rising higher, drawn to the light as it recognized it.

Jaxx swore under his breath. "It is keyed to her resonance."

Lennox threw her hands up. "Why does everything in this school want to key into her. She is not a Wi Fi router."

But her voice trembled.

Because the mist was inches from the ceiling now, filling the tunnel with a cold, shimmering haze.

Draven grabbed my shoulders, forcing my gaze to his.
“Keeva. Listen to me. You have to shut it down.”

“I do not know how.”

“You have to try.”

The hum inside me surged again, sharp and overwhelming. My knees buckled. Draven caught me, holding me upright as the glow beneath my skin flared.

The mist lunged.

Not fast.

Not violent.

Deliberate.

Reaching for me.

Jaxx moved instantly, slamming his palm against the crack in the floor. A faint shockwave rippled outward, pushing the mist back a few inches.

He gritted his teeth. “I cannot hold it.”

Draven pulled me tighter against him. “Keeva, focus on me. Not the Gate. Not the pull. Me.”

His voice cut through the hum, sharp and grounding.

Lennox grabbed my hand. “And me. Focus on me too. I am way more fun than a creepy forest portal.”

The hum faltered.

Just a little.

The glow dimmed.

The mist hesitated.

Jaxx gasped, sweat beading on his forehead. “She is doing it. Keep going.”

I squeezed Lennox’s hand, clung to Draven’s voice, forced my breath to steady.

The hum inside me wavered.

The mist recoiled.

The crack in the floor stopped widening.

For a moment, everything held still.

Then

A deep, resonant boom echoed through the tunnel.

The mist snapped backward, sucked into the crack like a breath pulled in reverse. The glow beneath my skin flickered, then faded. The hum inside me cut out completely.

Silence.

Cold.

Heavy.

Absolute.

Jaxx collapsed to one knee, breathing hard. "It retreated."

Draven did not let go of me. "For now."

Lennox exhaled shakily. "I hate this school."

My legs gave out. Draven caught me again, lowering me gently to the floor.

I swallowed hard. "What was that?"

Jaxx wiped his forehead. "A warning."

Draven nodded grimly. "The Gate is done stirring."

Lennox frowned. "Meaning what?"

Draven met my eyes.

"It is waking."

"Stay back," Draven snapped, pulling me behind him as the mist surged again, curling upward in slow, deliberate coils.

Jaxx planted his feet, muscles tensed, eyes locked on the widening crack. "It is pushing harder. It wants through."

Lennox tightened her grip on my arm. "Well, it cannot have her. Tell it to go haunt someone else."

The mist pulsed again, rising higher, brushing the ceiling. The air grew colder, sharp enough to sting my lungs. The hum inside me answered, low and steady, syncing to the rhythm of the mist like two heartbeats trying to match.

My knees buckled. Draven caught me again. "Keeva, stay with me."

"I am trying," I whispered, but the pull inside me tightened, dragging at my ribs, my spine, my breath.

Jaxx stepped closer to the crack, jaw clenched. "It is reacting to her again."

Lennox snapped, "Stop saying that. She is not a magnet."

But the mist pulsed again, stronger this time, and the glow beneath my skin brightened in response.

Draven swore under his breath. "It is not just reacting. It is tracking her."

My stomach twisted. "Tracking me how?"

Jaxx did not look away from the mist. "By resonance. By whatever is waking inside you."

Lennox threw her hands up. "Fantastic. Love that for us. Love that for her. Love that for my blood pressure."

The crack in the floor widened with a groan of shifting stone. A cold wind rushed upward, carrying the scent of damp earth and something older. Something wrong.

The mist surged again, reaching toward me like a hand.

Draven stepped in front of me. "You are not touching her."

Jaxx slammed his palm against the floor again, sending another shockwave through the tunnel. The mist recoiled, but only for a moment.

"It is learning," he said quietly. "It is adapting."

Lennox's eyes widened. "Mist cannot learn. Mist cannot adapt. Mist cannot do anything except be mist."

"This is not mist," Draven said.

The hum inside me deepened again, vibrating through my ribs. My vision blurred. The tunnel tilted. The glow beneath my skin brightened until I could see it through my sleeve.

Lennox grabbed my face, forcing me to look at her. "Hey. Look at me. You are here. You are not going anywhere."

But the pull inside me tightened again, sharp and sudden, like something was hooking into my chest.

I gasped. "It is pulling harder."

Draven's grip tightened. "Fight it."

"I do not know how."

"Try," he said, voice low and fierce. "Try for me."

The mist surged again, rising higher, swirling faster, drawn to the glow beneath my skin.

Jaxx stepped between us and the crack. "We need to move. Now."

"There is nowhere to go," Draven said. "Not until she stabilizes."

Lennox pointed at the mist. "She is not stabilizing. She is glowing like a radioactive firefly."

The hum inside me roared again, drowning out everything else. My heartbeat stuttered, syncing to the rhythm of the Gate. My breath hitched. My knees buckled.

Draven caught me before I hit the floor. "Keeva. Stay with me."

Jaxx pressed his hand to the wall again. "It is spreading. The crack is moving."

Lennox looked down. "Moving where?"

The floor beneath us trembled. A thin line of light snaked outward from the main fissure, crawling across the concrete like a glowing vein.

Straight toward me.

My breath caught. "It is coming to me."

Draven pulled me back. "Jaxx."

"I see it," Jaxx snapped. "I am trying."

He slammed his palm against the floor again. The shockwave rippled outward, but the glowing line only flickered before continuing its slow, deliberate crawl toward my feet.

Lennox swore. "No. No. No. Absolutely not."

The hum inside me surged again, sharp and overwhelming. The glow beneath my skin flared bright enough to light the tunnel.

The mist responded instantly, swirling faster, rising higher, drawn to the light like it recognized me.

Draven grabbed my shoulders. "Keeva. Shut it down."

"I cannot."

"You can," he said. "You did it before."

“That was luck,” I whispered.
Jaxx shook his head. “It was not luck. It was you.”
The glowing line reached my shoe.
The mist surged.
The hum roared.
And then
A voice echoed through the tunnel.
Low.
Resonant.
Ancient.
Calling.
Claiming.
My vision blurred. My breath caught. My chest tightened.
Lennox grabbed my hand. “Do not listen to it.”
Draven pulled me closer. “Stay with us.”
Jaxx stepped forward, blocking the mist with his body.
“You are not taking her.”
The voice echoed again, deeper this time, vibrating through
the floor, the walls, my bones.
The glow beneath my skin flared.
The mist lunged.
And the crack split wider.
The tunnel shook.
Dust rained from the ceiling.
The hum inside me roared so loudly I could not hear
anything else.
Draven’s voice cut through the noise. “Keeva. Look at me.”
I tried.
The mist surged again.
The glow flared.
The crack widened.
And then
Everything stopped.
The mist froze midair.

The glow beneath my skin flickered.

The hum inside me cut out.

Silence.

Cold.

Heavy.

Absolute.

Jaxx exhaled shakily. "It paused."

Draven nodded. "But it is not done."

Lennox squeezed my hand. "Then we move. Now."

Draven lifted me again. "The observatory. Before it wakes again."

Jaxx took the lead.

Lennox stayed at my side.

And the crack behind us pulsed once.

Like a heartbeat.

Like a warning.

Like a promise.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Line Breaks

We did not stop running until the tunnel curved sharply and the mist finally thinned behind us, retreating into the crack like a tide pulling away from shore. Jaxx slowed first, chest heaving. Draven did not stop until he was sure the mist was not following. Lennox bent over, hands on her knees, gasping.

I pressed my back to the cold concrete wall, trying to steady my breathing. The glow beneath my skin had faded, but the echo of the hum still lingered as a phantom vibration under my ribs.

Lennox straightened, hair wild, eyes wide. "I am officially done. I am dropping out. I will become a barista. Or a florist. Or a hermit."

Jaxx ignored her. "We need to get her to the observatory before it tries again."

Draven nodded. "It is the only place strong enough to hold the resonance."

I swallowed hard. "Hold me, you mean."

Both boys froze.

Lennox stepped in front of me instantly. "No. No one is holding you anywhere. Not a room. Not a bunker. Not a creepy observatory."

Draven's expression softened. "Keeva, that is not what we meant."

Jaxx rubbed the back of his neck. "It is not about locking you up. It is about shielding you."

"From what," I whispered.

They exchanged a look. The kind that meant everything and explained nothing.

Draven stepped closer. "From the Gate."

My stomach twisted. "Why me."

Jaxx hesitated, and that hesitation was worse than any answer.

Lennox crossed her arms. "Because she is special. Because

she is chosen. Because the forest has a crush on her. Someone better start talking before I start throwing punches.”

Draven exhaled slowly. “It is not that simple.”

“It never is,” Lennox muttered.

The tunnel lights flickered again. Once. Twice. Then steadied.

Jaxx stiffened. “We need to move. Now.”

Draven grabbed my hand. “Stay close.”

Before we could take a step, a sharp metallic click echoed through the tunnel. A door unlocking. A latch sliding. A shadow shifting at the far end of the corridor.

Lennox whispered, “Oh no. Oh no no no.”

Draven pulled me behind him.

Jaxx stepped forward, shoulders squared.

Footsteps echoed toward us. Slow. Deliberate. Unhurried.

Not the Gate.

Not the mist.

Not the woods.

Something worse.

Someone with authority.

Someone who knew exactly where we were.

A figure stepped into the dim light.

Tall.

Composed.

Unshaken.

The Headmaster.

His eyes swept over the four of us, lingering on me last. He did not look surprised. He looked like he had been expecting this.

“Miss Keeva,” he said calmly. “We need to talk.”

Draven tensed.

Jaxx swore under his breath.

Lennox whispered, “Run.”

But I could not move.

Because the hum inside me, the one that had finally gone

quiet, pulsed once.

Hard.

Like it recognized him.

Like he recognized it.

The Headmaster's gaze sharpened. "It seems the Gate has chosen to wake early."

My breath caught.

He stepped closer.

"And it seems," he said softly, "it has chosen you."

The Headmaster's footsteps echoed through the tunnel as he approached, each one slow and deliberate. Draven shifted subtly, placing himself between the Headmaster and me. Jaxx mirrored him, shoulders squared, jaw tight. Lennox did not move, but her stance sharpened, ready to launch herself at the man if he so much as breathed wrong.

The Headmaster stopped a few feet away.

His gaze settled on me. Calm. Assessing. Far too knowing.

"You felt it, did you not," he asked softly. "The pull."

My throat tightened. "I do not know what I felt."

"You do," he said. "You just do not understand it yet."

Draven's voice was low, dangerous. "She does not need to understand anything right now."

The Headmaster did not look at him. "You cannot protect her from what she is."

Jaxx stepped forward. "Watch your tone."

The Headmaster finally turned his gaze to the boys. Not angry. Not intimidated. Disappointed.

"You two were supposed to prevent this."

Draven stiffened.

Jaxx's jaw clenched.

Lennox blinked. "Prevent what. Her glowing. The floor cracking. The creepy mist. Because I am pretty sure none of us signed up for that elective."

The Headmaster ignored her completely.

His eyes returned to me.

"The Gate responds only to those it recognizes," he said.
"Those it remembers."

A chill ran down my spine. "Remembers. I have never."

"You have," he said quietly. "You simply do not recall."

My breath caught. "What does that mean?"

Draven stepped closer to me. "Do not answer him."

The Headmaster's gaze sharpened. "You are interfering with something far older than you, Draven."

"And you are scaring her," Draven snapped.

Jaxx moved closer too. "Back off."

The Headmaster sighed. Not annoyed. Not angry. Weary, like he had had this argument before.

"You cannot outrun this," he said. "Not the Gate. Not her connection to it. Not what she is."

Lennox stepped forward, fists clenched. "She is Keeva. That is what she is."

The Headmaster's eyes softened just a fraction.

"That is what she has been," he said. "Not what she will become."

My stomach twisted. "What am I becoming?"

He did not answer.

Instead, he extended a hand.

"Come with me," he said. "Before the Gate calls again."

Draven grabbed my wrist. "She is not going anywhere with you."

Jaxx stepped in front of me. "Over our dead bodies."

Lennox nodded. "Same."

The Headmaster's expression did not change.

"Then you leave me no choice."

He lifted his hand.

The tunnel lights flickered.

The air shifted.

The hum inside me pulsed once, sharp and involuntary, as though something within me recognized the gesture.

Draven swore. "Keeva, do not move."

Jaxx braced himself.
Lennox grabbed my hand.
The Headmaster's voice dropped to a whisper.
"It has already begun."
The tunnel trembled.
The crack behind us pulsed with faint light.
The mist stirred.
And deep beneath the Academy, far below the concrete
and the pipes and the tunnels, something answered.
A low, resonant boom.
Ancient.
Heavy.
Final.
The Headmaster lowered his hand.
His eyes met mine.
"You cannot run from the Gate," he said softly. "Because it
is not chasing you."
He stepped closer.
"It is calling you home."
The words hung in the tunnel like smoke. Heavy.
Suffocating. Impossible to breathe around.
Home.
The Gate.
The mist.
The hum.
The glow beneath my skin.
None of it felt like home.
Draven stepped in front of me so fast the air shifted. "She is
not going anywhere with you."
Jaxx moved beside him, shoulders squared. "You do not get
to decide her fate."
Lennox planted herself on my other side. "Back off,
Gandalf."
The Headmaster did not flinch. He did not raise his voice.
He did not threaten. He did not even look annoyed.

He looked resigned.

“As long as she remains untrained,” he said quietly, “the Gate will continue to breach.”

My pulse spiked. “Breach. You mean break through.”

“Yes.”

The tunnel lights flickered.

The crack behind us pulsed faintly.

“And each breach,” the Headmaster continued, “will be stronger than the last.”

Draven’s jaw tightened. “We will handle it.”

“You cannot,” the Headmaster said. “Not this. Not anymore.”

Jaxx stepped forward. “Watch us.”

The Headmaster’s gaze sharpened. “Your loyalty is admirable. But misguided.”

Lennox scoffed. “Everything about this school is misguided.”

The Headmaster ignored her.

His eyes returned to me. Calm. Steady. Unbearably knowing.

“You felt it,” he said. “The resonance. The pull. The recognition.”

I swallowed hard. “I did not ask for any of this.”

“No one ever does,” he said softly.

The hum inside me pulsed once. Faint but undeniable.

The Headmaster’s expression shifted. Not triumph. Not fear. Confirmation.

“It is already beginning,” he said. “The Gate has marked you.”

Draven snapped, “Stop talking.”

But the Headmaster did not.

He stepped closer. Not threatening. Not aggressive. Simply certain.

“You cannot outrun what you are,” he said. “And you cannot hide from what is waking.”

My breath caught. "What am I."

Silence.

The kind that says everything.

The kind that breaks something inside you.

The Headmaster exhaled slowly. "You are the reason the Gate stirs."

Draven flinched.

Jaxx swore under his breath.

Lennox whispered, "No. No, she is not."

The Headmaster's voice softened. "You are the one it remembers."

My knees buckled.

Draven caught me instantly, pulling me against him. "Do not listen to him."

Jaxx stepped closer. "He does not know anything."

But the Headmaster did.

I could see it in his eyes.

He lifted a hand. Not toward me. Toward the crack in the floor.

The faint light pulsed again.

The mist stirred.

The hum inside me answered.

The Headmaster lowered his hand.

"It will not stop," he said. "Not until you face it."

Draven's voice broke. "She is not ready."

"No," the Headmaster agreed. "She is not."

He turned to leave.

"But the Gate does not care."

He walked away, footsteps echoing down the tunnel.

Jaxx cursed and punched the wall.

Lennox grabbed my hand, voice shaking. "Keeva, breathe. Just breathe."

Draven held me tighter, forehead pressed to mine. "We will figure this out. I swear."

But the hum inside me pulsed again. Soft. Steady. Certain.

And I knew, with a cold clarity that made my skin prickle:

The Gate was not waiting for me to be ready.

It was waking.

Because of me.

The tunnel stayed silent long after the Headmaster's footsteps faded. Too silent. Like the whole Academy was listening.

Draven still held me, his breath uneven against my hair. Jaxx paced in a tight line, fists clenched, jaw locked. Lennox hovered close, eyes darting between the crack in the floor and the direction the Headmaster had gone.

No one spoke.

No one moved.

Because we all knew something had shifted.

Something we could not undo.

Finally, Jaxx stopped pacing. "We cannot stay here."

Draven nodded, but he did not let go of me. "Keeva, can you walk."

I swallowed hard. "I think so."

He helped me to my feet slowly, carefully, as if I might break. Lennox grabbed my hand instantly, squeezing tight.

"We are getting out of this tunnel," she said. "And then we are going to pretend none of this ever happened."

Jaxx snorted. "Good luck with that."

But he led the way anyway.

We moved through the tunnel in silence, the air still cold, the walls still humming with something ancient. Every flicker of the lights made my heart jump. Every echo made Lennox swear under her breath.

When we finally reached the end of the service corridor, Jaxx pushed open a rusted metal door. Fresh air rushed in. Cool. Sharp. Real.

The Academy courtyard stretched out before us. Quiet and empty.

Too quiet.

Draven stepped out first, scanning the area. “We need to get her somewhere safe.”

Lennox tugged my sleeve. “My dorm.”

“No,” Jaxx said immediately.

Draven shook his head. “The Headmaster will check there first.”

Lennox frowned. “Then where.”

Jaxx hesitated.

Draven did not.

“The observatory.”

Lennox groaned. “The creepy bunker with no windows. Fantastic.”

But she did not argue.

We crossed the courtyard quickly, sticking to the shadows. The Academy loomed around us, tall and ancient, watching. The windows were dark. The air was still. Even the trees at the edge of the grounds seemed to be holding their breath.

Halfway across the lawn, the hum inside me pulsed again.

Soft.

Subtle.

Real.

I stopped walking.

Draven turned instantly. “Keeva.”

I pressed a hand to my chest. “It is starting again.”

Jaxx swore. “We do not have time.”

Lennox grabbed my other hand. “Look at me. Do not listen to it.”

But the hum deepened. A low vibration rippled through the grass beneath our feet.

The boys froze.

Lennox’s grip tightened.

The air shifted.

And then

A faint crack echoed from the direction of the woods.

Not loud.

Not close.

But unmistakable.

The Gate.

Calling.

Draven stepped in front of me. "Do not move."

Jaxx moved behind me. "Do not look at the trees."

Lennox squeezed my hand. "Do not you dare go toward that sound."

But the hum inside me pulsed again. Stronger this time.

My breath hitched.

My knees buckled.

Draven caught me before I hit the ground. "I have you. I have you."

Jaxx crouched beside him. "It is pulling harder."

Lennox knelt in front of me, eyes wide. "Keeva, stay with us. Stay here. Stay here."

I tried.

I really tried.

But the hum roared.

The crack echoed again.

And deep in the woods, something shifted. Something ancient. Something waiting. Something waking.

The boys exchanged a look of fear and anger and helplessness.

Lennox whispered, "What do we do."

Draven's voice was barely a breath. "We hold her."

Jaxx nodded. "And we pray it is enough."

But I knew, with a cold sinking certainty, that it would not be.

Because the Gate was not calling the Academy.

It was not calling the boys.

It was not calling the woods.

It was calling me.

And it was not going to stop.

EPILOGUE

Not A DREAM

Night settled over Stone Academy with a strange, breathless stillness, the kind that did not feel like rest but like the world was bracing for something it could not name. The campus, usually alive with late-night chatter and music and the soft glow of dorm windows, had gone quiet in a way that felt unnatural. Even the wind seemed to hesitate before crossing the grounds, as if unsure whether it was welcome.

The forest at the edge of campus stood darker than usual, its towering pines rising like ancient sentinels. Mist curled low across the ground, weaving between roots and stones, drifting in slow, deliberate patterns that did not match the breeze. The trees leaned inward, their branches arching over the forest floor as though listening for something.

A faint pulse rippled through the earth. Small. Subtle. Unmistakable. It traveled through the soil like a whisper, brushing against roots and stones and the old, buried things that slept beneath them. The woods shivered without wind, leaves trembling in a way that felt more like recognition than movement.

Far beyond the campus boundary, deep in the tangle of pines where moonlight rarely reached, a pair of amber eyes snapped open. A rogue wolf lifted his head from the forest floor, ears pricking sharply as he scented the air. His breath fogged in the cold night, each exhale a soft plume of white.

Something had shifted.

Something had awakened.

Not fully. Not loudly.

But enough to stir instincts older than language.

He growled low in his throat, not in anger but in acknowledgment, then turned and vanished into the shadows, paws silent on the forest floor as he ran to warn the others.

In a place darker than night and older than memory, the shadows stirred. They did not have form, not truly, but they pressed against the edges of the world like a tide testing the

shore. A tremor rippled through the dark, a vibration, a heartbeat, a call.

The shadows leaned toward it, stretching thin and long, listening with an ancient patience. They remembered this feeling. They remembered the warmth of it, the brightness of it, the danger of it. They did not speak. They did not move. But they noticed.

And that was enough to shift the balance.

High in the Headmaster's tower, a single candle guttered violently, its flame bending sideways as though pushed by an unseen hand. Headmaster Aldren looked up from his desk, quill pausing mid stroke. The wards carved into the stone walls hummed faintly, a low vibration that crawled across the floor and up the legs of his chair.

He stood slowly, the weight of old knowledge settling across his shoulders like a cloak. Crossing to the window, he stared out at the forest. The trees were still. Too still. The mist clung to the ground like a warning. His breath fogged the glass.

"It is beginning," he whispered, though no one was there to hear it.

In their dorm room, Keeva slept curled beneath her blanket, her breathing soft and even. Lennox slept beside her, one arm thrown protectively across Keeva's waist, a silent promise even in dreams. The room was dim, lit only by the faint glow of the hallway light slipping under the door.

Neither girl stirred.

Neither girl saw the shimmer that flickered across the windowpane, a ripple of light so faint it could have been imagined.

Neither girl heard the distant howl echoing through the trees, long and low and threaded with something ancient.

Neither girl felt the pulse beneath the earth, like a heartbeat answering her own.

Keeva shifted once, brow furrowing, her fingers curling slightly as though reaching for something she could not grasp. But she did not wake. She did not know the world had changed

around her. She did not know the forest had listened. She did not know the rogues had noticed. She did not know the shadows had stirred. She did not know the Academy had felt the shift.

She slept unaware, unawakened, unprepared.

But not untouched.

Never untouched.

Far away, in a place between places, something ancient opened its eyes. Not fully. Not yet. Just enough to sense her. Just enough to recognize the spark. Just enough to feel the faint ripple she had sent through the world without meaning to.

The darkness around it curled inward, listening. Watching. Waiting.

And then, soft as a breath and cold as a blade, it whispered into the void:

“Found you.”

END OF BOOK ONE

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Stone Academy exists because of all of you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Lore writes stories filled with magic, courage, and heart. She believes books should feel like safe places—warm, welcoming worlds where readers can breathe, dream, and discover pieces of themselves they didn't know were missing.

She lives in Louisiana with her husband, her grown children, and her beloved (and very large) dogs, who remain convinced they are the true rulers of the house. Inspiration finds her in everyday moments: a quiet walk beneath the trees, a memory that refuses to fade, a spark of wonder that insists on becoming a story.

When Melissa isn't writing, she's dreaming up new worlds, collecting small bits of magic from ordinary days, and cheering on readers of all ages who are discovering their own strength. She believes deeply in the power of stories—especially the ones that help people feel brave, seen, and never alone.

Stone Academy is her debut series, created with love, hope, and the belief that every person carries a light worth protecting.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I began writing *Stone Academy*, I thought I was telling a simple story about a girl trying to find her place in a new school. But the deeper I went, the more I realized this book wasn't just about a school, or a mystery, or even the supernatural world waiting beneath the surface. It was about the quiet moments before everything changes—the breath before the reveal, the spark before the fire, the shift before the awakening.

Book One is intentionally slow, intentionally human, intentionally grounded. It's the story of a girl who feels the world tilting around her long before she understands why. It's about friendship, fear, longing, and the strange sense that something is coming even when you can't see it yet.

Thank you for being here for the beginning.

Book Two will open the door.

Melissa Lore

A NOTE TO THE READER

Thank you for walking with Keeva through the shadows, the whispers, the tension, and the moments that didn't make sense. Thank you for trusting the slow burn, for letting the mystery unfold one heartbeat at a time, and for believing in a girl who doesn't yet understand the world shifting around her.

This story was written for readers who feel things deeply, who sense the change before it arrives, and who carry quiet courage even when they don't realize it. You matter. You belong here. And the journey is only beginning.

ABOUT THE STONE ACADEMY SERIES

Stone Academy is a five-book supernatural fantasy series about a girl who arrives at a school that isn't what it seems—and a world that has been waiting for her far longer than she realizes.

Book One is the mystery: the slow-burn unraveling, the whispers in the woods, the boys who know more than they say, and the world shifting around Keeva while she remains unaware.

Book Two is the reveal: the supernatural world opening, the truth about the Gate, the rogues, the Shadowborn, and Keeva's place in it.

Book Three is the awakening: power, identity, danger, and the consequences of being chosen.

Book Four is the war: alliances, betrayals, ancient forces rising, and the cost of destiny.

Book Five is the truth: the final answers, the final battle, and the ending Keeva was always meant to reach.

Stone Academy is about magic, yes but it's also about friendship, loyalty, fear, longing, and the quiet courage it takes to step into who you really are.

PREVIEW OF BOOK TWO

The forest was too quiet. Even the wind seemed to hold its breath as the rogue pack gathered in the clearing, their eyes reflecting the fractured moonlight. Riven crouched near the treeline, fingers pressed to the cold earth. He felt it again that faint pulse, that ripple of warmth that didn't belong to the night.

"She's waking," he murmured.

Talon stepped beside him, jaw tight. "Then we're running out of time."

In the distance, something howled not wolf, not human, not anything that should have been awake. The shadows shifted. The world tilted. And far away, in a dorm room she thought was safe, Keeva slept on, unaware of the storm rising around her.

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

Keeva survived her first semester at Stone Academy the whispers in the woods, the strange warnings, the tension she couldn't explain, and the night the world shifted beneath her feet. She doesn't know what's coming. She doesn't know what she is. She doesn't know who is watching her, or why the forest seems to breathe around her, or why the boys who shouldn't care keep showing up at exactly the right moment.

But the world knows her.

The shadows know her.

The rogues know her.

And the Gate sealed but not silent has begun to stir.

In Book Two, Keeva will step into the truth she never asked for.

The supernatural world will open.

The danger will rise.

The boys will choose sides.

And Keeva will learn that the thing she's been running from is the thing she was born for.

The journey continues.

And the world is waiting.

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