

THE STONE OF  
THE AMAZONS



Joy Daly

## CHAPTER ONE

The black stone around Alex's neck began a slow burn as shouts drifted across the school oval. Sitting alone on the bench like she did every lunchtime now, she took a sip from her water bottle and tried to ignore the sounds. She couldn't afford any more trouble. Above the shouts, she heard a faint scream, and her feet began moving. Sprinting across the oval, she forced her way through the tight ring of boys crowded around a little kid pressed into the muddy bank. Zane's foot was on his back. "Let him go," she ordered.

He looked at her, and his expression was a mix of disdain and something else.

"Bugger off, Alex."

Alex didn't speak, didn't move, and the boys tightened the circle around them.

Zane was sixteen, a year older and although they were both just under six feet, he had the powerful physique of a wrestler with biceps twice the thickness of his forearms, while she had the lean muscles of an athlete. He flicked greasy hair from his forehead and smiled as he rammed the boy's head into the mud.

The boy struggled, trying to breathe and Alex lifted the scorching stone off her skin, reading Zane's face, reading the hate. He wasn't going to let him go – voluntarily. "Come on then," she said and raised her fists.

Zane shoved the boy aside and caught her wrists in a vice grip, and the boys began to cheer.

She stepped into the hold, forcing him to stumble backwards. He fell hard and she went with it, crashing down on him, her knees drilling his stomach.

He let out a blast of air and his huge hands locked around her neck.

She threaded her arms through his and broke the hold.

Zane punched the side of her head and she grunted. Then he yanked her braid, so her chin lifted, ready for his fist.

Tugging free, she sprang to her feet, shaking off the pain, making her face expressionless as she waited.

Zane slipped in the mud, then he was up, growling as he gouged for her eyes.

Moving so quickly, the boys almost didn't see it, Alex chopped into both sides of Zane's neck and hammered her knee into his groin.

Zane let out a high-pitched squeal and collapsed.

Dropping beside him, she grabbed a handful of greasy hair and drove his face into the mud. "Not as much fun now, is it?" she hissed into his ear as she lifted his head. Once more she shoved his face into the mud, and Zane's struggles became weaker.

The boys' excited shouts died away. Two ripped her off, while Connor dragged Zane from the bank and banged on his back until he managed some ragged breaths. He strode over to her as she struggled between the boys holding her tight. "You tried to kill him!" he yelled in her face before punching her in the stomach.

Alex barely flinched, her attention on the little kid as he made the edge of the oval and safety. The heat in her stone subsided, and her heart steadied.

"Arden, get to the principal's office now," said the duty teacher as she strode towards the group.

Alex gave a small, cynical smile. Right on time.

The PA picked up the phone and said, “She’s here, Mr. Hover,” He listened for a moment before replacing the receiver. “The principal will see you now.”

This’ll be fun, she thought as she pushed herself up and took a deep breath.

Hover’s office was almost as large as a classroom. A long teak bookcase lined one wall, while opposite plaques, diplomas, degrees, and letters of appreciation hung with military precision. Testimony to his greatness she thought. He was propped behind his desk like a Buddha with a thick folder in front of him and she recognized it, even from the doorway. Stuffed with warnings and detentions, and all hers. He tried to catch her gaze, but she wasn’t making that rookie mistake. She kept her eyes on his bookshelves, reading the titles as she passed. Most of them were devoted to child psychology. Fat lot of good they were doing him. She slouched into a seat in front of his desk and stared at the carpet. It had a spotted pattern she didn’t remember, and she smiled when she realized it was dried mud from her shoes. She knocked them together and more mud pattered to the floor. Good.

“This is the seventh time you have been in my office in the past six months and each time for the same offense – fighting,” said Hover.

Alex stayed quiet, staring at the mud.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

She shook her head. There was no point saying anything.

“You had your final warning last time. You knew the consequences.’

She shifted in her seat and her hands clenched in her lap. He wouldn’t dare. They both knew she was doing his job for him.

Hover cleared his throat and straightened his navy tie. ‘You’re suspended for six weeks.’

She met his eyes for the first time, and he flinched. ‘No way. That’s not fair.’

“I warned you, handed you the red card. One more incident and you were out. I made that clear.”

“But Zane was picking on a little kid – again.”

Hover read the notes in front of him. “According to the boys playing with Zane, you almost suffocated him in the mud. He could have died.”

“Playing! They weren’t playing. They were torturing a kid. And if I wanted Zane dead, he’d be dead.”

“What?” Hover’s voice rose to a base roar. “What did you say?”

Alex gave herself a mental slap. Why couldn’t she shut her big mouth? “Nothing,” she muttered.

Hover’s lips thinned as he took up the attack. “You have serious behavioural problems, Alexandra, and it makes you a danger to yourself and others. I will insist that your parents obtain professional help at Prousts before you return to this school.”

“I was doing your job for you. If I hadn’t ...”

“That’s enough. Six weeks. Take a seat outside the office and wait for your parents to collect you.”

Parents? And she saw Dad’s cold, green eyes in the rear-view mirror as she’d pedalled after his car, calling out to him like some needy baby. Just thinking about it made her squirm. “I don’t have parents; I have a mother.”

Kal was sitting outside the office, waiting for her. ‘What happened?’ he said.

Kal looked like a younger version of Ronaldo, her favourite football player, and even though he was seventeen and a senior, they were best friends. She almost reached out to brush the thin white scar on his right cheekbone. He’d scored it during a sparring session at

the dojo when she hadn't quite pulled a punch. She dropped into the seat beside him, and her smile wavered only a little around the edges. "Suspended," she said, trying to sound like it was no biggie.

"Were you having a go at Zane again?"

Alex kept her head down as she nodded. She was starting to feel teary, and she didn't want him to see that.

"Why don't you come and get me before you do this stuff?"

"No time, and besides, I couldn't see you."

"I'm never far away. You know that." The bell rang for the start of class, and he squeezed her hand before he stood. "Good luck with your mom."

She took a deep breath. "I'll need it."

Alex was pretending to stare out of the car's windscreen, but she was watching her mother from the corner of her eyes. The knuckles were a dead giveaway, white around the steering wheel. Mom was furious. Of course, she was.

"What is wrong with you, Alex? Why do you do this?"

Alex ignored her. She was numb, tired, and her mother was doing it again. Every time she needed her in her corner, Mom let her down.

"What is wrong with you?" It was a shout this time, the words bouncing around inside the car.

Alex kept staring out of the window. "Nothing's wrong with me. I did the right thing."

Her mother almost hit a garbage bin perched in the gutter as she took a corner. "This might come as a surprise to you, but they don't suspend you for doing the right thing. You knew it was wrong and you did it anyway."

“Wrong, Mom? I protected someone?”

“The principal told you what to do if you saw an incident. Report it.”

“They’re not incidents. They’re little kids.”

“Well, it’s not your job, not your responsibility. Why strap on your Wonder Woman cape every time you see something? Why can’t you just leave it alone?”

Why? Alex’s hand curled around the black stone at her throat. For a moment, she toyed with the idea of slipping it over her mother’s head. Would she feel its demands, its expectations? Would she understand? No. Mom wouldn’t get it; she didn’t get anything. “I did the right thing. You should have stuck up for me, instead of sucking up to Hover.”

“You’re lucky I did. Otherwise, you’d be suspended for six weeks instead of the four he reduced it to,” snapped her mother.

“Am I supposed to thank you for that? You always take the easy way out. No wonder Dad left.”

Her mother’s voice iced. “You know what, Alex? Mr. Hover’s right, and I’m taking his recommendation. You have big problems. You need counseling, and I’m booking you into Prousts the second we get home.”

The car was still rolling in the driveway when Alex jumped out. She ignored her mother’s shouted, “Get back here,” and ran for her bedroom, locking the door behind her. As she lay on the bed and stared at the dirty cream ceiling, her fingers rubbed the stone, tracing the tree on its surface. The minute she’d slipped it over her head six months ago, she’d changed. Everything had changed. Maybe once, she could have let things go. But not anymore. She didn’t belong here. Not at school, not at home, not with Mom, and definitely not with Zete. Mom called Zete friendly. Right. She’d sooner stake herself over an ants’ nest covered in honey than spend a minute alone with Mom’s new boyfriend and his friendly hands.

Her mobile was charging on the bedside table, and she put in her earphones and cranked up Pink. She began singing, *Gunna burn it down*, her voice cracking.

Blu, her Yorkshire Terrier, was lying beside the bed on the orange rug she'd bought at the Op Shop, and she tapped the mattress to call him up. For her eighth birthday, she and Mom had picked him out at the pound, and they'd been sharing his licks and love ever since. Dad had never warmed to him, but Blu hadn't exactly warmed to Dad either. "What am I going to do," she murmured. He whined as she buried a sob in his coat.



## CHAPTER TWO

Alex ignored the receptionist's chirpy, "See you 9am. Don't forget," as she shoved open the doors of Prousts Children's Psychology and slammed them behind her. Less than a week into the suspension and Mom had forced her to come. She'd told her it would be a waste of time and she was right. The clueless therapist had fired stupid questions at her for an hour, then made an appointment for another pointless hour tomorrow.

Her hands were shaking so much she had trouble swiping her Go-card, and she raced for the platform with seconds to spare. Throwing herself between the doors of the empty carriage, she didn't notice the girl slipping in behind her. The train, a new one, smelled of plastic and canned air, and Alex wished there were windows she could open. She stretched out on a bench and flicked through the workbook the therapist had asked her to complete. Why was she doing this? It was a stupid waste of time, and nobody cared anyway. The school could suspend her for the next forty years if they wanted, but she wasn't going back to Prousts. She shoved the workbook into her pack and slid down in the seat. Damn, she was tired, so tired of everything.

The robot voice recited the stops as Alex drifted away.

Cait sat at the other end of the carriage and watched the dozing girl. Then she glided down the aisle to settle into the seat directly in front. She'd have to work fast. Her bike was parked at the next station.

Leaning over the seat's backrest, Cait studied the girl for a moment. A long, dark braid hung over one shoulder, and she had a beauty spot high on her right cheek. She stirred in her sleep and Cait whipped a mobile from her jacket pocket and focused it. The girl's shirt was unbuttoned at the throat, but asleep was no good. Her chin had to be raised.

She slapped the girl's face, and as her head jolted up Cait took her photo but couldn't avoid the girl's hand as it locked around her forearm.

"What the hell?" the girl said as she applied pressure.

It was a strong grip and Cait approved. She twisted away and slid from the seat. The girl followed, and they stood toe-to-toe in the aisle. Cait smiled at the red handprint on the girl's cheek.

"Delete it," the girl said, glaring with the bluest eyes Cait had ever seen.

"No," said Cait.

The girl snatched at the mobile, but Cait was already stepping back and slipping it into her pocket.

"Give it," said the girl as she lunged.

Cait swept the girl's legs, and she crashed to the floor. "I wouldn't get up if I were you." She leapt onto the platform and as the train pulled out of the station, she could feel the girl's stare through the window.

Vaulting the ticket gate, she made for her Duke parked in the motorbike section. Straddling the seat, she gave it a poke, then pulled an all-black, open-faced helmet over her head. The full-throated roar made her smile. Jap bikes might be faster off the mark, but they sounded like sewing machines. Hogs were okay, but nothing came close to the meaty roar of a Ducati.

Before pushing send, she magnified the picture of the girl to study the stone. Looked like it, but Colonel Enyo would make the call. She transmitted the photo to HQ and sat on the bike seat, legs splayed on either side, waiting.

They came back to her within minutes. She listened to the barked orders and wondered if they gave her the crap assignments because she was a Metic. “Yes Ma’am,” she acknowledged in a neutral tone before ending the call. They could say what they wanted. It was babysitting. She hated babysitting.

Pacing in her bedroom, Alex could hear the TV blaring downstairs, but it didn’t matter. She couldn’t sleep anyway. Who was the girl on the train? Thin and wiry, at least a head shorter, around eighteen. She could recall every detail of her, down to the mother-of-pearl combs which held her spiked, blonde hair off her face. What did she want? Why had she slapped her? What was the picture about? The questions kept coming, and she massaged her temples, hoping a migraine didn’t start. Dropping into her chair, she hoisted Blu onto her lap and fondled his ears. “This is stupid, Blu. I don’t belong here. I should be with Dad.”

Blu gave a small yap and looked at her with liquid eyes.

She nodded. “I know, but Mum’s lying. Dad does want me.”

The Prousts workbook was lying on the desk, and she flung it across the room, so it hit the window with a solid whack. “I can hop on a bus, catch a couple of trains and be at Dad’s place first thing in the morning.” She stroked Blu’s back and the pressure building in her head eased a little. “Kal can look after you until I’m settled. You’ll be safe with Kal.”

### CHAPTER THREE

When Alex missed her morning appointment, her file was uploaded to Prousts headquarters in London. A feature recognition program ran her digital image in the basement, and an alarm triggered.

Leon Manning, Global Chairman of Prousts, was in his office on the 25th floor staring out at the snow laden trees in Hyde Park when his watch tinkled like a butler's bell. Tapping its face to silence it, he activated the shutters and waited until they closed before returning to his desk. He placed the fingertips of his left hand on a panel beneath the leather blotter, and there was a hydraulic hiss as the bottom drawer of his desk slid open. Extracting a laptop, he keyed in the code to connect with the system in the basement, and the image of a girl with a black stone around her neck opened. He stared at her for a long moment, his gaze malevolent, before he punched in another code. In less than a minute, the seamless face of a spectacularly ugly, old woman with a fiery helmet of hair filled the screen.

"What?" said the Strategos as she picked something from her tooth with a pointed nail, lacquered to match her hair.

"Possible Amazon in Australia," he said.

"Is everything organized?"

"Not yet, Strategos."

“Let me know when it is done.”

The screen went black, and Leon Manning’s face was a mix of fear and adoration as he let out a sigh. “Of course, My Strategos,” he whispered.

Just after 9am, Alex found her father’s place on a street full of expensive homes. The train trip had been an all-nighter, and her eyes were gritty. She sniffed her pits and flinched. She’d been sweating for most of the journey, not able to sleep and not able to stop thinking either. And the walk had been a long one. She shouldn’t have come. Zete and his sleazy hands flashed into her mind. She had to come. Had to get away from him. It was the first time she’d been here, and she stood at the wooden paling fence looking at the stacked blocks soaring into the sky. It was huge, plenty of room for one girl and a small dog. Dad had never been trendy, and she wondered what was going on as she stared at the geometric house, then she shook her head. It didn’t matter. She was wasting time. Still, it took her another ten minutes to gather the courage to knock on the glossy, red front door.

It felt like years before her straining ears heard fumbling on the other side, then he was in front of her dressed in his pajamas, his brown curls mussed, smelling of sleep. He just stood there, only his eyes moving, flicking over her like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Even his lips were a frozen line, and she didn’t know what to do. She threw herself at his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist. It felt like ages before he returned her hug. But that was okay. He’d be surprised, and besides, she’d woken him up. She should have called first. But if she had...

“Who is it, Rhaegar? What do they want?” A warm, sleepy voice floated down the hallway, and Alex let go.

“Oh sorry,” she mumbled, feeling her face heat up. “I didn’t know you had a visitor.”

“It’s nothing, Ginny. Go back to sleep,” he said.

Nothing? What did that mean? She took a step back.

He opened the door wider. "You'd better come in."

She tried to catch his gaze, hoping he'd respond, but he didn't look at her. His attention was directed to the hallway. Although she was wearing her white, woolen sweater and the sun was well and truly up, she shivered down to her bones.

"Come on," he said impatiently.

"Please God," she whispered as she took a hesitant step over the threshold. "Give me a break."

Alex swiveled left and right on the stool at the kitchen bench with a cup of black coffee cradled in her cold hands. Dad and Ginny were talking, and only a few words floated up the hallway, but those few words let her know God hadn't been listening.

"Well, she can't." Ginny's voice was uncompromising.

Her Dad murmured something she couldn't catch.

"When?" said Ginny.

"As soon as..." A door banged, and Alex couldn't hear any more. She spun on the stool to check out the family room, trying to distract herself. Dad hadn't gone backward since he'd left. Other than some art on the wall she recognized, everything was expensive and white and new. She slammed her mug on the counter. He'd taken the paintings, but not her.

She heard a door open, and her father appeared seconds later. He was scowling and headed for the percolator to pour himself a mug of coffee. His hand was shaking as he lifted it to his lips and a couple of drops splashed onto the counter.

"Hey," she said, smiling at him.

He turned his back and stared out of the window above the kitchen sink. "Hey," he said.

She didn't want to ask, but she had to. "Dad, it's all right for me to be here, isn't it?"

"Of course, Princess."

The huge weight that had lain in her gut since she'd boarded the train last night shifted, and she let out a deep breath. He'd called her Princess. His pet name for her. "I haven't heard from you for so long, and I knew Mom had something to do with it, but ..."

"Your mother has problems."

"You have no idea. She's made me go into therapy, her boyfriend's an ass-wipe, and he keeps..."

"Your mother sent you?"

"No, I've run away. She probably doesn't even know I've gone yet. I snuck out after she went to bed."

"I'm off, Rhaegar."

Alex caught a brief glimpse of a fine-boned, tall blonde, dressed in a skimpy leotard, ponytail swishing as she rushed past them.

"Ginny, don't worry," he called, wincing as the front door slammed and a key turned in the lock. He turned to face Alex. "So, your mother didn't send you?"

"Of course not. Mom's always making excuses to keep us apart."

His fingers relaxed around the handle, and he took a small sip of coffee. "Like I said, your mother has problems. Turn on the TV. I have a few calls to make in the study. They shouldn't take long, then we'll sort something out."

"I'm so glad to see you." Alex climbed off the stool to give him a hug.

He hugged her back and ruffled her hair. "Go on." He pointed to the lounge.

Alex almost floated across the smooth wooden floors and the shaggy white rugs to sink into the folds of the white, leather lounge. Yeah, she could get used to this house and this white furniture, and maybe even the girlfriend.

Alex didn't know what made her do it, well if she was honest, she did. She was nervous, and although Dad had called her Princess and ruffled her hair, something was going on with Ginny. The hands-free set on the coffee table was blinking red, which meant he was talking now. Lowering the volume on the TV, she swapped the remote for the receiver and listened. It wasn't Ginny's voice, it was Mom's.

"We had a deal, Claire."

"Hey, it's not my fault. I didn't even know she was gone until you called."

A deal. What deal? Alex pulled at the neck of her jumper.

"You'd better come and get her now. Otherwise, all bets are off."

"Please, take her for a couple of weeks. She's had a lot of problems, and they all began when you left. If you spent ..."

"No."

It was so loud Alex pulled the receiver away from her ear, but not far enough that she didn't hear the rest of his sentence. "Keep her away from me."

"She's your daughter."

"No, she's not. We both know that."

And Alex forgot to breathe. What was Dad saying?

"When we got married you agreed, Rhaegar."

"We're not married now. She's not mine."

"Please Rhaegar, you..."

"Do you want the maintenance?"

Her mother was silent for a long moment. "I need it to raise her."

"If you want it, stick to the deal. I'll donate to the bastard, but if you don't keep her out of my life, everything stops."

"Why don't you tell her you don't want anything to do with her?"



“Everybody needs a charity.”

Alex swallowed vomit as she replaced the handset and stood on shaky legs. She needed to get out of here. Quick as she could, she made for the front door, her ears straining for him. Locked. Okay, had to be a backdoor somewhere. She ran past the study as Rhaegar stepped out.

“Hey Princess, where are you going?” He grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her to face him. There was a big grin on his face. “All sorted with your mother, we’re going to ....”

“Take your hands off me,” she spat.

“Huh?” he said tightening his grip.

“Let me go.” She tried to break away.

“No. You sit and wait for your mother.” He pushed her into the lounge chair and stood over her, legs spread, arms crossed, the grin he’d been wearing now almost a snarl.

Alex ran her hand down to the leather sheath strapped to her ankle. Snug inside was a ten-centimeter double-edged blade with a wicked point. She knew several grips, but now she used her favorite – the saber grip. She plunged it into his thigh and watched horrified and just the tiniest bit elated as he collapsed, and blood-spattered his white rug and white lounge.

“I’m not going back,” she hissed and took off.

Rhaegar tried to get up, screamed, and fell back to the rug, taking shuddering breaths as he pressed the heel of his hand into the wound. His cell let out a high-pitched beep, and he slid it from his pocket, sweat beading his forehead as he keyed in the password to open the encrypted message.

Candidate to be extracted

And the breath caught in his throat.