



Stone Cold Touch (The Dark Elements Book 2)

By Jennifer L. Armentrout

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#1 New York Times bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout draws readers into the extraordinary, irresistible world of Wardens and demons in the second book of The Dark Elements series.

Every touch has its price

Layla Shaw is trying to pick up the pieces of her shattered life—no easy task for a seventeen-year-old who's pretty sure things can't get worse. Her impossibly gorgeous best friend, Zayne, is forever off-limits thanks to the mysterious powers of her soul-stealing kiss. The Warden clan that has always protected her is suddenly keeping dangerous secrets. And she can barely think about Roth, the wickedly hot demon prince who understood her in ways no one else could.

But sometimes rock bottom is only the beginning. Because suddenly Layla's powers begin to evolve, and she's offered a tantalizing taste of what has always been forbidden. Then, when she least expects it, Roth returns, bringing news that could change her world forever. She's finally getting what she always wanted, but with hell literally breaking loose and the body count adding up, the price may be higher than Layla is willing to pay....

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Editorial Review

Review

"The second in the Dark Elements series is an absolutely phenomenal, edge-of-your-seat thrill ride." ---RT Book Reviews

About the Author

Jennifer L. Armentrout is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of the Covenant series and the Lux series. She writes young adult paranormal, science fiction, fantasy, and contemporary romance, and she also publishes adult romantic fiction, including the Gamble Brothers series, under the pseudonym J. Lynn.

Saskia Maarleveld is an experienced audiobook narrator and voice-over actress based in New York City. Raised in New Zealand and France, she is highly skilled with accents and dialects, and many of her books have been narrated entirely in accents other than her own.

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Ten seconds after Mrs. Cleo moseyed on into biology class, flipped on the projector and turned off the lights, Bambi decided she was no longer comfortable where she was currently curled around my waist.

Sliding along my stomach, the very active demonic snake tattoo was not a fan of sitting still for any length of time, especially not during a boring lecture on the food chain. I stiffened, resisting the urge to giggle like a hyena as she cruised up between my breasts and rested her diamond-shaped head on my shoulder.

Five more seconds passed while Stacey stared at me, her brows raised. I forced a tight smile, knowing Bambi wasn't done yet. Nope. Her tongue flicked out, tickling the side of my neck.

I clamped my hand over my mouth, stifling a giggle as I squirmed in my seat.

"Are you on drugs?" Stacey asked in a low voice as she brushed thick bangs out of her dark eyes. "Or is my left boob hanging out and saying hello to the world? Because as my best friend, you're obligated to tell me."

Even though I knew her boob was in her shirt, or at least I hoped so since her V-neck sweater was pretty low cut, my gaze dipped as I lowered my hand. "Your boob is fine. I'm just...antsy."

She wrinkled her nose at me before returning her attention to the front of the classroom. Drawing in a deep breath, I prayed that Bambi would remain where she was for the rest of the class. With her on my skin, it was like having a mad case of the tics. Twitching every five seconds wasn't going to help my popularity, or lack thereof. Luckily, with the much cooler weather and Thanksgiving fast approaching, I could get away with wearing turtlenecks and long sleeves, which hid Bambi from sight.

Well, as long as she didn't decide to crawl up on my face. Something she liked to do whenever Zayne was around. He was an absolutely gorgeous Warden—a member of the race of creatures who could look human at will, but whose true form was what humans called gargoyles. Wardens were tasked with protecting mankind, hunting what went bump in the night...and during the day. I'd grown up with Zayne and had nursed one heck of a puppy-dog crush on him for years.

Bambi shifted, her tail tickling the side of my stomach.

I had no idea how Roth had dealt with Bambi crawling all over him.

My breath caught as a deep, unforgiving pang hit me in the chest. Without thinking, I reached for the ring with the cracked stone—the ring that had once held the blood of my mother, *the Lilith*—dangling from my necklace. Feeling the cool metal between my fingers was calming. Not because of the familial bond, since I really didn't claim a relationship with my mother, but because, along with Bambi, it was my last and only link to Astaroth, the Crown Prince of Hell, who had done the most undemonic thing.

I lost myself the moment I found you.

Roth had sacrificed himself by being the one to hold Paimon, the bastard responsible for wanting to unleash an especially nasty race of demons, in a devil's trap meant to send its captive to Hell. Zayne had been doing the honors of keeping Paimon from escaping, but Roth...he'd taken Zayne's place.

And now he was in the fiery pits.

Leaning forward, I propped my elbows on the cool table, completely unaware of what Mrs. Cleo was droning on about. Tears burned the back of my throat as I stared at the empty chair in front of me that used to belong to Roth. I closed my eyes.

Two weeks. Three hundred and thirty-six hours, give or take a few, had passed since that night in the old gymnasium and not a second had gotten easier. It hurt as if it had happened an hour ago and I wasn't sure if a month or even a year from now would be any different.

One of the hardest parts was all the lies. Stacey and Sam had asked a hundred questions when Roth hadn't returned after the night we had located the *Lesser Key of Solomon* (the ancient book that had the answers to everything we'd needed to know about my mother) and had been caught by Abbot (the leader of the Warden clan in D.C. who had adopted me as a young girl). They'd stopped eventually, but it was still another secret I was keeping from them, two of my closest friends.

Despite our friendship, neither of them knew what I was—half Warden, half demon. And neither of them realized that Roth hadn't just been out with mono or changed schools. But sometimes it was easier to think of him that way—to tell myself he was just at another school instead of where he was.

The burn moved into my chest, much like the low simmer in my veins that was always present. The need to take a soul, the curse my mother had passed on to me, hadn't diminished one bit over the past two weeks. If anything, it had seemed to increase. The ability to draw the soul out of any creature that had one was why I hadn't ever gotten close to a boy before. Not until Roth had come along.

Given that he was a demon, the pesky soul problem was a moot point. He didn't have one. And unlike Abbot and almost all of the Warden clan, even Zayne, Roth hadn't cared that I was a mixed breed. He had...he'd accepted me as I was.

Scrubbing my palms over my eyes, I bit the inside of my cheek. When I'd found my repaired and cleaned-up necklace—the one Petr, a Warden who turned out to be my half brother, had broken during his attack on me—at Roth's apartment, I'd clung to the hope that Roth wasn't in the pits after all. That he'd somehow escaped, but with each passing day, that hope flickered out like a candle in the middle of a hurricane.

I believed more than anything in this world that if Roth could've come back to me, he would have by now, and that meant.

When my chest squeezed painfully, I opened my eyes and slowly let out the breath I'd been holding. The room was a little blurry through the haze of unshed tears. I blinked a couple of times as I slumped back in my seat. Whatever was on the slide projector made no sense to me. Something to do with the circle of life? No, that was *The Lion King*. I was so going to fail this class. Figuring I should at least attempt to take notes, I picked up my pen and—

At the front of the class, the metal legs from a chair scraped across the floor, screeching loudly. A boy exploded out of his chair as if someone had lit a fire under his butt. A faint yellow glow surrounded him—his aura. I was the only one who could see it, but it sputtered erratically, blinking in and out. Seeing people's auras—a reflection of their souls—was nothing new for me. They were all kinds of colors, sometimes a mixture of more than two, but I'd never seen one waver like that before. I glanced around the room and the mixture of auras glimmered faintly.

What the Hell?

Mrs. Cleo's hand was frozen above the projector as she frowned. "Dean McDaniel, what in the world are you—"

Dean spun on his heel, facing the two guys sitting behind him. They were leaning back in their seats, their arms crossed and lips curved up in identical smirks. Dean's mouth was pressed into a thin line and his face was flushed. My mouth dropped open as he planted one hand on the white tabletop and slammed his other fist into the jaw of the kid behind him. The fleshy smack echoed through the classroom, followed by several surprised gasps.

Holy granola bar!

I sat up straight as Stacey slapped her hands on our table. "Holy shit balls for Sunday dinner," she whispered, gaping as the boy Dean had punched slumped to the left and hit the floor like a bag of potatoes.

I didn't know Dean very well. Hell, I wasn't sure if I'd spoken more than a handful of words to him during my four years in high school, but he was quiet and average, tall and slender, much like Sam.

Totally not the kind of kid who'd be voted most likely to knock another guy—a much bigger guy—into next week.

"Dean!" shouted Mrs. Cleo, her ample chest rising as she rushed to the wall, flipping the overhead lights on. "What are—?"

The other guy shot up like an arrow, hands clenching into meaty fists at his sides. "What the Hell is wrong with you?" He rounded the table, shrugging out of his zipped hoodie. "You want some of this?"

Stuff always got real when the clothes started to come off.

Dean snickered as he stalked to the aisle. Chairs screeched as students moved out of the way. "Oh, I'm about to get me some of that."

"Boy fight!" Stacey exclaimed as she dug around in her bag, pulling out her cell phone. Several other students were doing the same thing. "I so have to get this on camera."

"Boys! Stop it right now." Mrs. Cleo smacked her hand against the wall, hitting the intercom wired directly to the front office. A beep sounded and she turned to it frantically. "I need the security guard in room two-oh-four immediately!"

Dean launched himself at his opponent, tackling him to the floor. Arms flew as they rolled into the legs of a nearby table. In the back of the classroom, we were safe, but Stacey and I stood up anyway. A shiver coursed over my skin as Bambi shifted without warning, flicking her tail across my stomach.

Stacey stretched up on the tips of her boots, apparently needing a better angle for her phone. "This is."

"Bizarre?" I supplied, flinching as the boy got a good hit in, knocking Dean's head back.

She arched a brow at me. "I was going to go with *awesome*."

"But they're—" I jumped as the classroom door swung open and banged into the wall.

Security officers swarmed the class, heading straight for the melee. One beefy guy wrapped his arms around Dean, dragging him off the other student as Mrs. Cleo buzzed around the room like a nervous hummingbird, clutching her tacky beaded necklace with both hands.

A middle-aged security guard knelt beside the boy Dean had punched. Only then did I realize the boy hadn't stirred once since hitting the floor. A trickle of unease, having nothing to do with the way Bambi was moving again, formed in my belly as the guard leaned over the prone boy, placing his head near his chest.

The guard jerked back, reaching for the microphone on his shoulder. His face was white as the paper in my notebook. "I need an EMT immediately dispatched. I have a teenage male, approximately seventeen or eighteen years of age. Visible bruising along the skull. He's not breathing."

"Oh my God," I whispered, clutching Stacey's arm.

A hush descended over the room, quelling the excited chatter. Mrs. Cleo stopped by her desk, her jowls jiggling silently. Stacey sucked in a breath as she lowered her phone.

The silence following the urgent call was broken when Dean threw back his head and laughed as the other security guard dragged him from the classroom.

Stacey tucked her shoulder-length black hair back behind her ears. She hadn't touched the slice of pizza on her plate or her can of soda. Neither had I. She was probably thinking along the same lines that I was. Principal Blunt and the guidance counselor I'd never really paid attention to had given all the students in the class the option to go home.

I didn't have a ride. Morris, the clan's chauffeur, handyman and all-around awesome guy, was still on the no-ride list with me since, the last time we'd been in a car together, a possessed cabdriver had tried to play chicken with our vehicles. And I didn't want to wake up Zayne or Nicolai—for the most part, full-blooded Wardens slept deeply during the day, entombed in their hard shells. And Stacey didn't want to be home with her baby brother. So here we were, in the cafeteria.

But neither of us had an appetite.

"I'm officially traumatized," she said, taking a deep breath. "Seriously."

"It's not like the guy is dead," Sam replied around a mouthful of pizza. His wire-frame glasses slipped to the tip of his nose. Curly brown hair flopped over his forehead. His soul, a faint mixture of yellow and blue, flickered just like everyone else's had since this morning, winking in and out as if it was playing peekaboo with me. "I heard he was revived in the ambulance."

"That still doesn't change the fact that we saw someone get punched in the face so hard that they *died* right in front of us," she insisted, eyes wide. "Or are you missing the point?"

Sam swallowed the bite of pizza. "How do you know he really died? Just because a wannabe police officer says that someone's not breathing doesn't mean that's true." He glanced over at my plate. "You gonna eat that?"

I shook my head at him, sort of dumbfounded. "It's all yours." A second later, he snatched the pizza with the little pepperoni cubes off my plate. His gaze flickered up to mine. "Are you okay?" I asked.

He nodded as he munched away. "Sorry. I know I don't sound very sympathetic."

"Ya think?" Stacey muttered drily.

A dull ache flared behind my eyes as I reached for my soda. I needed caffeine. I also needed to figure out what the Hell was up with everyone's auras doing the wonky thing. The colorful shading around a human represented what kind of soul they were rocking: white for an utterly pure soul, pastels were the most common and usually indicated a good soul, and the darker the colors got, the more questionable the status of one's soul became. And if a human didn't have that telltale halo around him, that meant he was on Team No Soul.

I.e., he was a demon.

I wasn't doing much tagging anymore—another nifty ability I had thanks to my mixed heritage. If I touched a demon, it was equivalent to sticking a neon sign on their body, which made it easier for Wardens to search them out.

Well, it didn't work on Upper Level demons. Not much did.

I didn't stop because of what had happened with Paimon and then being forbidden to tag. Abbot had ungrounded me for life after the night in the gymnasium, but it felt wrong to randomly tag demons, especially now that I knew many of them might be harmless. When I did tag, I went for the Posers, since they were dangerous and had a habit of biting people, and left the Fiends alone.

And truthfully, the change in my tagging routine was all thanks to Roth.

"It's just that those two idiots were probably messing with Dean," Sam continued as he finished off the pizza in a nanosecond. "People snap."

"People usually don't have fists that could be considered lethal weapons," Stacey retorted.

Users Review

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