

# STONE-COLD HEART

A MYTHOS LEGACY NOVEL

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BLUE  
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# Chapter One



**H**EAT ROILED UP FROM THE SIDEWALK, AND RAQUEL LIFTED her head skyward to avoid the worst of the eye-searing wave. Apparently, autumn hadn't received the calendar's memo that warm fronts were banned for the rest of the year. Her gaze landed on the fifth floor windows of the apartment building that was to be her new home.

*Dump sweet dump.*

The cabbie tossed her duffel bags—less than gently—onto the pavement beside her. Luckily, she didn't own much, and most of it wasn't breakable.

Her now-former roommate didn't accept his treatment as quietly. "Hey, hey! That's her whole life in those things. A little respect."

Raquel ignored the ensuing argument and sidestepped Brianna's exuberant gesturing to give the guy his fare. The taxicab was a block away by the time Brianna wrapped up the last of her insults. Raquel righted the one bag with wheels and yanked up the handle.

Brianna eyed her. "Are you sure you're going to be okay on your own, Kell? What are you going to do when you don't have me around to defend you?"

Defend her? *Seriously?* Which of them had been in combat?

She didn't bother with a reply. Brianna simply was who she was. They might share a Puerto Rican heritage, but Brianna's boisterous take on the world was far closer to the fiery Latina stereotype than Raquel's style would ever be.

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She'd much rather stay dispassionate. Emotions were distractions—interfering with her situational awareness of dangers around her.

"I'll be fine. It's better this way. Trust me."

Brianna grabbed the suitcase, leaving the non-rolling duffel bags for Raquel. "I don't blame you, you know."

That was the trouble. Brianna treated her like an innocent bystander instead of the lethal killer she really was. PTSD wasn't a *Get Out of Jail Free* card for every unacceptable behavior, the way Brianna seemed to think it was.

"Paula was already sick of my nightmare-screaming every night, so the sleepwalking thing was the final nail."

In truth, sleepwalking was *her* final sign that she needed to live on her own before she hurt someone. What if she'd forgotten to take the magazine out of her weapon before tucking it under her pillow? An icy shiver shot up her spine. She refused to be responsible for more deaths just because she needed a metallic security blanket to sleep.

"Yeah..." Brianna slipped her oversized sunglasses off the top of her head and untangled its arms from her long, highlighted hair. "Maybe I wish Paula was the one moving out and not you." She put on her sunglasses and finally checked out the building in front of them. "This is the place, huh?"

Brianna's voice lifted on the last word, probably in an attempt to disguise her disappointed-teacher tone. Granted, the old mid-rise didn't look like much anymore. Back in the day, though, it must have been something.

Like many of the older buildings in the Upper West Side of New York City, carvings of leaves, flowers, and scrolls decorated the stone façade, but the years had not been kind. In addition to the usual fire escapes and air conditioning units cluttering the front, patches of mismatched bricks filled in damaged sections every few feet.

"Oh, a grotesque!"

Raquel leaned, scanning past the tree branches for what Brianna was focused on near the roof. "What's gross?"

"Not gross. A grotesque, a carved stone figure. There, where the center of the building steps back from the front, making that

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section one floor shorter than the rest. You can see its head just peeking over the wall on that lower section of the roof.”

“Oh, you mean the gargoyle? Yeah, that’s my new apartment to the right of it.”

Raquel hefted a duffel bag strap over each shoulder and climbed the steps to the entry door. Brianna followed with the suitcase, her voice in teacher mode.

“Technically, it’s a gargoyle only if it acts as a water spout.”

“Huh.” Raquel didn’t bother faking enthusiasm for the subject and instead squared her shoulders, bracing for Brianna’s reaction to the interior. A century ago, the building had been a swanky hotel, and the place still sported peeling vintage wallpaper and a tarnished chandelier, which hung precariously in the high-ceilinged lobby.

The squeak of suitcase wheels behind Brianna stopped. “This has *got* to be the biggest dump in all of the Upper West Side. And here I thought you were moving up in the world by leaving Bushwick. How did you find this place?”

“A search for the cheapest place I could find within walking distance of work.”

Everyone had their priorities, and for Raquel, that meant avoiding the crowds of public transportation. Yet the cab fare for the alternative made the old neighborhood in Brooklyn a no-go for her current Upper West Side job. This central location would also be better if she ever got her act together and returned to college.

Someday she might not be as broken, right? A girl could dream anyway.

She steered them toward the stairs. Brianna side-eyed the ornate, open-cage elevator. “Let me guess, the elevator doesn’t work?”

“Uh, no.” Raquel held in a laugh. Even if the elevator *was* working, she wouldn’t trust such an enclosed space. The open scrollwork of the elevator cage made it a fancy-looking trap, but a trap nonetheless. “But the apartment includes all utilities, even internet, and comes furnished.”

“Yeah, with bedbugs.”

Compared to her deployment at one of the most remote forward operating bases in Afghanistan, *any* bed was a luxury, so Raquel wasn’t going to complain about the possibility of a less-

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than-pristine mattress. “I’ll deal.”

By the third floor, Brianna was huffing and moaning at each step. “You go ahead. I’ll catch up after I find my lungs.”

Raquel didn’t wait to see if Brianna would change her mind. She took the remaining stairs two at a time, relishing the ability of the scarred skin on her left leg to make the full stretch, and opened the door to her new apartment. Bright sunlight greeted her from the multiple windows of the studio unit, and she dropped her duffel bags, enjoying the silence.

Her own apartment. She felt almost hopeful for the first time in months. Years? This was a moment to be savored.

Financially, the no-roommate thing wouldn’t help her all-too-empty wallet build up savings, but it would be nice to relax and not have to worry about what she might do to others during the night. The nightmares didn’t need any assistance impeding her sleep.

After the moment passed, she went back to rescue Brianna from responsibility for the suitcase, and her former roommate followed her up the stairs. “Thanks, Kell. Not all of us can be über-tough Sarah Connor *Terminator* chicks.”

Just the ones who had to be that way to live. Exercising to the point of exhaustion—pushing herself to be stronger, faster, better—was a healthier distraction from the memories than drowning herself in drugs or alcohol. Even that idiot of a counselor she used to see had said as much.

Brianna entered the apartment and whistled. “I think my dorm room was bigger than this.”

A wall to the left of the door separated the small bathroom and closet from the main space and beyond that lay the alcove for the bed. Bedbugs or not, the queen-size mattress would be downright luxurious come bedtime. A mini-kitchenette filled the corner on their right, and a dresser sat along the back wall.

But the windows—the windows were what made the location great. As Brianna had noted, the center of the building inset at the fifth floor, so this unit was like a corner apartment, with two tall windows opening to the fire escape above the street and two more overlooking the roof of the lobby and common rooms. Despite its small size, it *felt* bright and airy, and that trait was virtually impossible to find at this price range.

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“No kitchen? God, you’re going to be eating those pre-packaged crap meals all the time now, aren’t you?”

“Fridge, microwave, toaster oven. What more do you need?”

Brianna checked the view from each of the windows. “Well, you can’t see the river from here, but you have this bonus square footage of the roof area.” She opened the window facing the central roof and climbed out.

Raquel lunged to the window. “Wait, do you think that’s safe? What if you fall through?”

“Kell, even though I weigh twice as much as you, that grotesque”—she pointed to the larger-than-human-sized stone sculpture in the middle of the roof—“weighs a *ton* more than I do. Trust me, if the roof can hold up his weight, you and I are fine.”

Under her breath, Raquel grumbled, “You better not get me evicted before I even move in.”

She followed Brianna out the window. The roof’s surface was solid under her feet, and piles of cigarette butts in the inner corner where the inset met the rest of the building proved others had come out here and survived. It *would* be nice to have a place to stretch out and do her exercises without fear of smacking a wall or being stared at in a public gym.

A quick check of the surroundings reinforced her gut instinct. The building across the road was one story shorter, a sidewalk tree and a wall along the roof’s edge mostly hid the location from street level, and the only other apartment overlooking the roof was the corner unit at the opposite end, but that resident had covered the windows with furniture.

For being in the middle of the city, the rooftop was surprisingly private and secure. The light color of the roofing surface reflected sunlight, and the elevation of several stories even caught a breeze, keeping the heat at bay.

“Wow, this thing is huge!” Brianna stood at the foot of the sculpture.

The gargoyle was taller than her former roomie, despite the fact that the creature was crouching. Horns protruded from the top of its head, and wings spread from its back, stretching about eight feet tall. Hopefully the beastly shape wouldn’t star in her nightmares later. That was the last thing she needed.

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The statue perched several feet back from the edge of the roof. She approached the monster and circled. Long, clawed toes gripped the edge of its low pedestal, and matching fingers curved around a shield held in front by its extended arms. Its face was frozen in a permanent snarl, displaying long canines, top and bottom. Yet other aspects of the creature were human looking, like its broad shoulders and six-pack abs.

Brianna peered over the shield, her head angled down toward the creature's abdomen. A person could fit in the space between the sculpture's arms, legs, torso, and shield.

Raquel snorted. "Are you checking if it's anatomically correct?"

"Ha. No." Brianna sat on a low section of the roof's street-side wall, which stepped up and down like battlements on a medieval castle's parapet walls, and touched the stone shield in the creature's hands. "I was checking for other marks because there's writing on the front of his shield." The social-studies-teacher aspect of her personality took over, and Brianna tilted back her sunglasses over her head and tugged out her cell phone. "I have to look this up. All I know is that it's not English."

"Okay, you do that. I'll go unpack."

Brianna didn't respond, and Raquel didn't expect her to. Good thing she hadn't planned on Brianna's help for her move. Technically, she hadn't even asked the woman to be here.

Back inside, she analyzed the space for the necessary reorganization. The bed was in a good protected location, not in a direct line from the door, but tucked into the alcove behind the bathroom and closet. The dresser was another story.

The window-mounted air-conditioning unit impeded one exit to the fire escape, and the dresser sat in front of the other. Not good. The more escape paths, the better for her sense of security.

She shoved the dresser over the threadbare carpet, rotating it into the corner and leaving the window Brianna had opened unobstructed. Three escape paths—the main door, the fire escape, and the roof. That would work.

Next step, securing her Beretta M9. New York City's strict handgun regulations meant she couldn't get anything more than a premises-only license, but having a weapon she'd trained with available in her apartment was better than nothing. Sleep was

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already impossible *before* the thought of facing a night without her security blanket under her pillow—unloaded though it was.

She opened her suitcase and unburied the separate cases for her handgun and ammunition. After unlocking the cases, she popped the loaded magazine into the M9's handle. Now, where to keep it during the day?

Enemies would check the drawers of the dresser or kitchenette cabinets and around the bed. She scanned the room, forcing her usual hyper-vigilant eye for threats to focus instead on concealment options. The curved opening in the bottom fascia board of the dresser? She knelt down and tested the space.

Her small hand fit easily, even with the pistol in her grasp, but most wouldn't be able to get their hand into the opening, which meant they wouldn't think to check that location. Perfect. She slid her Beretta behind where the dresser's wood fascia curved down to create a foot. Hidden and yet easily accessible, just what her paranoia required.

The priorities taken care of, she made quick work of unpacking her clothes and personal items. If it weren't for the dress clothes she needed for her job, her whole life really *could* fit into one duffel bag. Army habits stuck hard.

The walls were already a pincushion for nails remaining from previous tenants, so hanging her pictures was easy too. The Guerrero family picture taken at her brother's graduation from basic combat training was assigned to a hook by the door so she wouldn't have to constantly see her father's proud, beaming grin—the grin he hadn't bestowed upon her. The picture of her brother and her, both in uniform, taken a month before he'd died, earned the place of honor by her bed.

She pressed her fingertips to her lips and then to Eduardo's face. "Help me be worthy."

Her brother's faith in her—that she *was* good enough—had helped her survive childhood. Too bad his faith had been misplaced.

Finally, the picture of her special operations combat team claimed the spot between the front windows. Her guys would be able to keep an eye on the whole apartment from there.

Some uppity-ups would sniff that they weren't technically *her* guys or *her* team—just the special ops team she'd been attached to



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in her Cultural Support role—but they hadn't been there, serving side-by-side, taking enemy fire together. Heck, most of those *in* the U.S. Army didn't know her program had ever existed. To hell with official labels, she'd promised she'd never forget her guys, and she was going to keep that promise no matter what.

"Hey, Kell!" Brianna's call wafted through the open window.

Raquel climbed onto the roof again and joined Brianna at the gargoyle, prepared for another lecture. "What's up?"

"See these odd letters? The one that looks like a lower-case *B* with the tail of a *P*, and this *A* that's stuck to this *E*? That was the key I needed to translate these words. This shield says *Duty, Valor, Loyalty*."

"Sounds like a military motto."

"It does, doesn't it?" Brianna examined the pedestal at the creature's feet. "I don't think he's original to this structure. Most grotesques I've seen are right at the edge or on the side of a building, but he's set back from this wall. Weird, right?"

"If you say so."

"I wonder if he was taken from a military installation, like an old fort or training academy, but the people installing him for decoration here were limited in where the roof was strong enough to support him."

From a military installation? Raquel gave the statue another once over. Maybe its snarl could be seen as a challenge, daring its enemies to show themselves. She could relate. Enemies who showed themselves were much easier to fight than those that hid in the shadows or pretended to be allies.

She gave the stone sculpture a fist bump on its speckled gray knuckles at its shield. "You tell 'em, Gross-whatever-dude."

"So..." A glint of smugness lit up Brianna's eyes. "You're glad I looked that up?"

"Yeah." Her apartment already felt perfect before, but this tie to the military right outside her window made it seem like this was where she was meant to be. A fraction of tension released its hold on her chest. "I am. Thanks."

And if she slept better tonight with the knowledge that a military warrior figuratively stood watch outside her apartment, maybe the creature wasn't such a monster after all.

## Chapter Two



**R**AQUEL TOSSED ON THE BED IN HER NEW APARTMENT, BUT THE security-blanket lump of her Beretta M9 under her pillow settled her back toward sleep. The blackness behind her eyelids turned into images she couldn't leave behind, and the scattered traffic noise through the open roof-side window merged with her memories of the hustle and bustle foreshadowing a battle.

Some part of her dreaming mind recognized the nightmares had started, but as always, she couldn't stop them, change them, control them. Only suffer through...

Rips of Velcro sounded as the gathered special ops soldiers adjusted their clothing and body armor in preparation for her guys' night-raid mission. Crockett, the team's squad leader, caught Raquel's eye.

"Rocky, you're in charge of the women and children. There shouldn't be any out this late, but if you see them on the streets, check if they have intel for us and get them into their homes or the mosque, away from the target location. If the targets decide to run rather than come out peacefully, be prepared to take fire and protect your translator and any locals. Otherwise, remain in the secured areas."

She nodded and triple-checked the M4 rifle strapped over her shoulder and the M9 pistol at her thigh. So far, only a few dozen women had completed the U.S. Army's highly selective Special

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Operations Cultural Support Team training to attach female soldiers to special operations combat forces. The fact that she'd not only been selected for the program after a grueling week-plus assessment of physical, mental, and psychological testing but had also excelled throughout the later months of tactical and cultural training was her greatest pride.

Crockett's forehead tightened in a pattern she recognized as matching his deliberations, and given that he was still focused on her, she had a good guess of his internal debate.

She tucked her combat helmet with night-vision goggles under her arm and gave him a level stare. "You know how I feel about the risks to the team if you're undermanned because someone's babysitting me." She cleared her throat and added, "Sir." She'd fought hard to earn the respect of her guys, but it was his ass on the line with command if anything happened to her without a security detail assigned. "I promise I'll be careful."

Deep in the front lines of battle, CSTs were the only female soldiers qualified to serve alongside the army's special operations forces, and in that high-threat environment, the military's rule against women in combat was irrelevant. She relished the constant pressure—and opportunity—to prove herself. When she did her job well, her guys' missions were more secure.

Crockett's lips twitched so subtly only someone looking for a sign of his approval would see the fraction of a smile. Then he moved on to his next orders, letting that action speak as his decision.

"Ramirez, Lewis, take your men and make a path to the target. Cruz, you and I will lead the strike force. Let's have a nice, clean capture of these insurgents and then get the hell out." He gave her one last nod. "Stay safe, Rocky."

She kept her face serious despite an urge to do a fist pump in celebration. "I intend to, sir."

His confidence in her, despite his concern, filled her with hope that her father might have been wrong. Maybe she wasn't worthless.

Hell, if she wasn't as toxic to others as her father claimed, maybe someday she *could* try a relationship. Crockett, for example. His respect felt damn good, soaking deep into the fractures of her soul,

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and eventually it might be nice to see if he was interested in more.

As the group broke apart, Raquel grabbed Anosha, her translator, from the sidelines and explained the mission. Thank God Anosha had showed. This was the woman's first nighttime assignment, and a couple weeks' worth of intelligence gathering and gaining the locals' trust weren't enough for Raquel to overcome the language barrier.

Her minimal familiarity with Dari and Pashto was adequate for letting locals know she was a woman and not a threat—but not much more than that. Most CSTs worked in rotating two-person teams, but this remote long-term assignment left her on her own, other than her translator. She could do a lot of good out here with her ability to interact with the fifty percent of the population her guys weren't allowed to approach, especially if Anosha was at her side.

Her helmet's night-vision goggles illuminated the path ahead, a route she'd committed to memory during her dozen-plus daylight patrols. She took the back way through the village, closer to the compounds where the women and children spent their time.

Sixty feet ahead, a shadow peeked from a darkened doorway at the corner of the village's main intersection. Adrenaline electrified Raquel's limbs. An insurgent? Before she could aim her weapon as a precaution, the shadow stepped from the alcove, revealing a woman in a headscarf.

The initial rush of energy in Raquel's chest faded, and in its place, a sense of foreboding unfurled in her gut. Why would a woman be out—by herself—at night? Was she trying to deliver intel?

The woman spotted Raquel and Anosha and waved them closer. Whatever information she might have, they needed to get her off the street and into a protected location. Her guys would be making their way down the main streets any minute.

She whispered her thoughts to Anosha and spun, walking backward toward the woman, checking for hostile witnesses and other threats behind them. The block held no sign of others, but she couldn't shake the ominous feeling permeating the darkness. She turned forward again, but Anosha was no longer beside her.

Damn it. Anosha had jogged ahead, closer to the woman. Not a

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time to break regulations.

Anosha quietly called out a greeting in Pashto and Dari. The woman spread her arms, opening her long coat.

*Oh fuck! A suicide vest.*

Raquel yelled a warning, but it was too late. Light and sound invaded her brain, and a blast of heat seared her face. The explosion lifted her up and threw her backward. Blackness crushed her from all sides.

Had she been knocked unconscious? She tried to lift her head, but singeing pain exploded along her arm and leg. Fire. She was on fire.

She tucked toward her shoulder to smother the flames, but a strap across her other arm pinned her in place. Each second, the fire burned deeper. She yanked her arm free and rolled in the street. Dirt and building debris ground into raw skin.

The pain shredded her nerve endings, overwhelming every other thought in her mind. In the tornado of agony, a single command worked its way through the chaos. *Move.*

Her guys...

She collapsed onto her chest, and another eruption of pain ripped through her. Her guys would come running. *Warn them.* Suicide bomber. There could be another one.

Her left arm and leg screamed, refusing to cooperate. Pain. So much goddamn pain.

Anosha? Was Raquel calling for her? Her head was ringing too much to hear herself.

*Focus.* Warn her guys, and then check on Anosha.

She scanned the wreckage around her. M4 rifle? Buried. Radio? There.

She seized her equipment and broke radio silence. Although for all she knew, they'd been calling for her. She didn't bother with the usual radio protocols, as she couldn't hear a damn thing.

*Enemy combatant. Improvised explosive device. Do not approach. Repeat. Enemy combatant. Improvised explosive device. Do not approach.* At least, that's what she thought she said.

At their remote location, air support or an evacuation would be at least an hour away—if it came at all. Crockett could make that call, but either way, there was no point in reporting her

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coordinates for an evac yet. Not when she still had work to do.

She crawled, one-armed, along the back street. Rubble from the now-flattened wall beside her littered the street, and she dragged herself over the sharp chunks. If she was shredding her body with more injuries, she couldn't tell. Every sensation from her nerve endings insisted her left arm and leg were still on fire, despite what her eyes told her. Agony beyond that searing torture was irrelevant.

*Focus. Ignore the pain. Just focus.*

Anosha's body lay at the corner, thirty feet ahead. Even from here, Raquel could tell Anosha hadn't been so lucky—a ripped-open chest as evidence—but Raquel couldn't stop.

No... Not Anosha. Not Anosha.

Either the explosive force or rolling to put out the fire had knocked away Raquel's helmet and night-vision goggles. Without them, the blood and guts of Anosha's body spilled out in various shades of gray, illuminated only by moonlight.

*I'm so sorry, Anosha.* She should have been more aware and stopped her from approaching the woman. Too many of the locals in these remote villages were more than they pretended to be. She should have known.

A flash and concussive vibration caught her attention. Another explosion on the main street.

No! Damn it. She'd told them not to come.

She'd lost her radio again. She crawled around the corner, yelling at what she thought was the top of her voice. *Do not approach. Do not approach.*

Screw the protocols regulating that she was supposed to take cover and wait for support. It might never come. She needed to go to them. Show them she was safe.

But another flash lit. And another and another in a chain reaction of hidden enemy bombs. The village was a trap.

The explosions continued until she lost count. She never stopped yelling. Never stopped telling her guys to stay away. Stay safe.

Her body protested that she moved at all, much less how hard she pushed herself to go faster. Pain be damned. She *would* be strong.

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Weakness wouldn't help her guys. They depended on her. She'd worked her ass off to earn their respect, to prove that her father was wrong. She *was* good enough, and she wouldn't let them down. She wouldn't fail them.

Failure would betray their trust. Failure would betray Crockett—betray them all.

She crawled as fast as she could, over obstacles and down hiding places. The terrain didn't match her memories anymore, but she continued crawling.

Her limbs grew cold. She was going into shock. Keep moving. Ignore the pain. Ignore the cold. Just move. Move. Move.

Her functional right hand encountered a large curved rock unlike anything in the village. A flash of speckled gray stone came to mind. Her instincts told her this was a place of safety, where she could wait until her guys found her. She crawled up and found an area protected by stone on all sides. This would be safe.

Pain from her limbs nudged her closer toward unconsciousness, and she curled into a ball in her protected place. It was okay if she blacked out. She could let that happen now.

She could sleep.

She was safe.

## Chapter Three



WARMTH CREPT THROUGH GARRETT'S CHEST AND SPREAD into his limbs. Tingles followed, racing along his nerves, stirring sensations in his body.

For the first time in countless years, he awoke from stone-death. The human female curled between his limbs explained why. She must have focused enough trust toward him to help him regain full consciousness.

About blasted time. Although these circumstances weren't the situation he wanted to encounter when he awoke.

Of all the things he'd seen during his stone-death, he *hadn't* seen the one thing he'd expected. None of his regiment had brought a human female he could use to awaken—or had even come by to check on him.

All those years in his vulnerable form, where his prison of stone could have shattered—ending his life. Years without word, without reports from the field, without conversations with his regiment. Years left alone. Abandoned.

A wave of chills followed the effects of the woman's warmth. No matter his inadequacies, loyalty should have taken precedence. The betrayal—if it was one—of his regiment was unforgivable.

His muscles and skin softened, the tugging sensation on his face indicating that his features were taking on their humanoid shape, and his neck loosened enough that he could twist his head



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and scan his surroundings. He caught sight of an open window on his left. Ah, the human female must live in that room.

Strange that females would live on their own in this era, but then again, he'd seen plenty of changes during his time of stone-death. He'd have to find a talkative boulder to catch up on all the news he'd missed and see where his regiment had spent their intervening years. Whether they wanted him back or not, he *was* their commander.

His limbs shortened to human proportions, and the shield in his hands reformed. The stone split in half and flowed like water up his arms, creating a shirt, trousers, and boots. His wings flapped and settled over his shoulders in the guise of a cloak. He stood from his pedestal and stretched. He'd been condemned to stone-death for far too long.

*Oh, to be awake again.* Despite the granite-like heaviness of his worries, he felt like roaring.

Just as quickly, the surging excitement in his chest faded. His wakefulness would last only until the next setting of the full moon unless he could convince this woman to share her soul with him—and unless he used trickery, that didn't seem likely.

While in his half-conscious state of stone-death, he'd seen her approach and touch him, but that potential interest was outweighed by her earlier odd words. He needed to earn her trust, yet her behavior hadn't given him the impression that she cared about anything, much less a stranger.

Although... She *had* crawled out to be with him. Why? That seemed unusual behavior for any human, much less this one.

The woman stirred at his feet. He should probably return her to that room before she awakened. He had too much to do, too many answers to find, and too much to learn to spend time with a human's questions right now. Discovering more about how to persuade her could wait.

His knees stiffly protested at returning to his crouch, and he scooped the female into his arms. Her body was light and compact, yet almost as firm as his. He'd never known a female to work herself into a state of readiness for battle as he did. That didn't bode well for her mind being malleable and compliant.

She moaned and snuggled against his chest. A soft warmth of

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sensation coalesced in his core, and he held his breath.

Maybe she wouldn't be so difficult to convince after all.

He ducked into her room and spotted the bed in the corner. The squishy covering over the floor muffled the sound of his boots. The bed and the rest of the room were empty, the woman's companion nowhere to be seen.

Pity *that* woman hadn't been the one to wake him. She'd seemed easier to manipulate. But that opportunity was lost now. He had one chance to avoid returning to stone-death, and this woman in his arms was the key.

He laid the female on the bed and covered her with the sheet. She twitched, as though dreaming, and her hand slid under her pillow.

He rested his fingers on her forehead and ordered, "Sleep."

Even though he whispered, his deep, rumbling voice filled the small room. The human female settled, obedient.

The encouraging response calmed his worries. Even if he needed to resort to trickery, this one might not be too difficult at all.

He slipped out the window and breathed deep of the night air. The scent of nature drew him to the east. He took two quick strides and leaped off the low wall at the edge of the roof.

His form changed instantly, his cloak spreading into wings, his body and limbs growing into his natural state. But despite the mottled gray appearance of his skin in this form, his flesh and muscles remained supple, like stone that wasn't stone.

He extended his wings, grasping the air around him. After being imprisoned for so long, the rush of wind—the ability to stretch, to fly, to soar—was glorious.

Several more flaps lifted him higher over the buildings. By the Maker, how *huge* was this city? Unfathomably tall buildings appeared in every direction, and lights shone everywhere, crawling, moving, like ants in a hole. Honking and squealing noises resonated from every corner, and the unnatural odor of human technology fouled the air.

He sought to fly higher than the tallest buildings, searching for nature amidst the endless city. But the lights stretched as far as he could see, even spanning the nearby river to invade the other side.

Where was this blasted nature he'd smelled? He gave up on

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using his eyes and followed his nose.

The scents led him to a dimly lit, less-developed area in the middle of the city. His senses searched for ancient boulders among the grass and trees. He finally detected a giant glacial artifact perched on a hill and landed beside the stone.

Along with his humanoid form, his clothes reappeared, and his cloak fluttered around his shoulders. He bowed to the venerable witness. “I am Garrett, supreme commander of the Earthen plane regiment of the gargoyle army from the Mythos plane. I have not walked these lands in many moons, and I beg your indulgence. May I join with you to learn what I have missed?”

*STONE BROTHER UNKNOWN. NOW KNOWN. GREETINGS, GARRETT.*

The boulder’s acknowledgment grated on his mind. He’d forgotten about the abrasiveness of their communication style.

Ignoring the false sensation of pain from the mental conversation, he bowed again. “Thank you.”

He placed his palms against the cool stone face and joined with the boulder’s memories, playing back the centuries of change it had witnessed. His shoulders relaxed, and he drew a deep breath, even this limited contact soothing his loneliness. It had been too long since he’d last connected with any of his kind.

Yet as history passed, his hands curled into fists, and his knuckles scraped across the jagged surface. While the boulder had seen much, the information didn’t answer his questions. Nowhere in its memories was an explanation for his regiment’s abandonment.

The ancient witness spoke into his mind again. *MISSING?*

He’d never known stone to have a sense of inquisitiveness, but perhaps the fact that it had never met one of Garrett’s kind before was reason enough.

“I need to know what happened to my regiment—why they did not come for me.”

*EARTH WITNESSES ALL. QUERY EARTH. PATIENCE.*

Was it possible for this boulder to tap into the collective memory of the Earth itself? His muscles loosened, tension flowing out of him, and warmth filled the emptiness left behind. He wasn’t alone in his quest. He *would* find and reconnect with his regiment.

“I thank you. I would be much obliged for whatever information you can gather.”

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A chorus of impressions abraded his senses, invading his mind with coarse testimony. He lurched back and shook his head. Blast! His hands instinctively went to his ears, as though blood dripped from them, despite the fact that stone didn't communicate through sound at all.

If he wanted answers, he'd have to endure the rasping sensation in his skull. He placed one fingertip on the cool surface of the stone and let the narrow contact drill into his mind. During his absence, the very foundation of the Earth had compared notes with mountains, cliffs, and beaches worldwide, and now the boulder was eager to share the report.

*STONE BROTHERS NO LONGER WALK EARTH.*

Shock resonated through his thoughts. *No longer walk?* Cold much deeper than the chill of the rock's face sank into his awareness. His regiment hadn't come for him because they'd ceased to exist on the Earthen plane.

He was alone.

All alone.

He staggered and fell onto his backside. His chest constricted so hard it nearly felt like stone again.

Alone? That was impossible.

His head dropped between his knees, and he struggled to draw breath. Ringing dug into his brain, although whether that was an aftereffect of the communication style or from barely constrained panic, he couldn't be sure. He sucked in air and tried to make sense of the impossible.

Gargoyles were immortal. Indestructible under normal circumstances here on Earth. They *couldn't* cease to exist.

Right. That *was* impossible. He drew a deep, calming breath, loosening the bands around his chest. His time in stone-death must have impaired his ability to keep his emotions clear. Perhaps it was a good thing his regiment *hadn't* witnessed that loss of his composure. He didn't need to encourage their doubts in his ability to lead.

Of course there was an answer. He simply didn't know what it was yet.

His regiment must have rejoined the rest of the legion in their homeland on the Mythos plane—without him. That was the only

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explanation that made sense.

But why would they do that? What about their mission, their duty?

The dozen-plus members of his regiment were responsible for protecting the portal to their homeland. They alone were all that stood to prevent extinction for the hundreds of gargoyles serving the faeries back home. Just because he didn't want to take on the risk of finding a mate or creating progeny on Earth didn't mean others felt the same. He served the *legion's* needs.

And what about his regiment's supposed *loyalty* to him? Yes, he lacked the abilities of a true supreme commander, but was that failure bad enough to earn him banishment and death? Each answer created more questions.

He scrambled to his feet and made a hasty bow. "Thank you for the information. I fear the news was not good, however. I must return to my homeland and discover the meaning of these mysteries."

*STONE PATH NO LONGER FLOWS.*

The screeching observation from the boulder froze him to the spot. No, no, no...

He bent over, lightheaded again, and his vision narrowed. His hands clutched his thighs, bracing himself—for even as he reached out with his senses, the horrible truth behind the boulder's statement sank deeper into his mind.

The portal to his homeland on the Mythos plane didn't press upon his awareness. The pathway between planes didn't exist. The portal had closed.

He collapsed to his knees, one realization after another crashing into his awareness. Without the flow of magic through the portal, his escape from stone-death wouldn't even last until the full moon.

A temporary trust-bond could keep him awake for this moon cycle, but the human female would first need to be *conscious* of her trust for that to take hold—and as the woman had come out to him in her sleep, she hadn't been conscious of anything. At the first rays of morning's light, he would once again be caught in an eternal prison of stone.

His eyes pinched closed, and he wrenched his hands through his hair. His breaths came hard and fast, his mind whirling to think

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of an escape.

But the bounds of his magic were clear. Gargoyles were invincible, indestructible—except for the ways they were vulnerable.

Without access to the soul of the human who woke him, his life of wakefulness on the Earthen plane was temporary—and he was doomed.

Blast! Whether the human female was easily commanded as he hoped or the hard-hearted fighter she appeared to be, a few hours weren't enough to persuade any human to share their soul with one who was soulless. No human would trust a strange being in their bedroom either, so he couldn't convince her to consciously make even the temporary trust-bond. Especially as she struck him as too much like himself to allow any vulnerability.

He wouldn't give up though. He couldn't.

After granting his thanks to the boulder, he leaped into the air and flew over the city again. Maybe the portal wasn't closed. Maybe he simply couldn't sense it when he was surrounded by all this human interference.

His chest loosened a fraction. Yes, that explanation made far more sense than sealing off the portal. That act wouldn't doom just him but would condemn all gargoyles at home to extinction as well. His regiment would never allow such a fate to befall his kind.

He rose higher and headed southeast, toward the largest darkened area he could see. Mist from the surrounding clouds coated his skin.

The salty tang on the wind revealed the darkened area as the ocean. Water wouldn't connect him to the magic of the Mythos plane as well as land, but the waves below were certainly better than the chaos of humanity.

He stretched his wings, drifting, and opened his senses to the world. The anchoring sensation of the portal still eluded him. His way home was truly gone.

His heartbeat grew almost as sluggish as when encased by stone-death, and the weight in his chest joined forces with gravity. How was he to survive? Was he doomed to spend eternity watching the world pass him by? Or should he let the sunlight overtake him right here, where he'd sink and spend his life in a watery grave? Maybe after eternity, the ground would reclaim him, and

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he'd finally be released from his rocky prison into death itself.

A cold splash touched his toes, his wings no longer keeping him aloft. The chill snapped him from his depression.

If he sank here, the chances of a human female ever finding him on the bottom of the ocean were non-existent. At least in the city, he'd have a chance.

He sped back to the roof he'd called home for far too long. The woman had come out to him once—maybe she would again. Next time, he'd have a plan.

The lightening sky chased his rushing wing-beats. The eastern horizon glowed orange by the time he landed on the rooftop. He crossed to her window so quickly his body had barely changed back to human form before he crawled through the opening.

She still lay in the same position as when he'd left her. His best chance now was to encourage her to wake him again. Consciously next time, so the trust-bond would be fully established to keep him awake—even during daylight hours—until the next moon cycle.

He placed his palm on her forehead. "My name is Garrett. Come to me. Trust me."

His joints stiffened. It was almost time. He needed to leave before dawn or else the surprise of finding him in her room would ruin any chance of convincing her to trust him. He'd done what he could to create the opportunity for another meeting between them.

He exited the window and stood on the pedestal. The human-made platform was irrelevant to any of his forms, but that location was where she'd expect to find him.

Pink rays streaked across the sky. His body instantly hardened into his stone-death form—his wings spreading, his legs crouching, his arms holding the motto of his regiment, his mouth screaming a battle cry.

All he could do now was hope.

## Chapter Four



A SIREN ECHOED THROUGH THE CANYON OF MID-RISE structures and screamed directly below. Raquel startled awake and sat up in bed, weapon in hand, muzzle pointed toward the open window and the source of the noise.

Before adrenaline even hit her system, she lowered the empty pistol. Others wouldn't understand how an unloaded gun could act as her security blanket, but she didn't trust anything else with a trigger-happy soldier suffering from PTSD sleepwalking and nightmares—otherwise known as *her*—during the night.

Sunlight slanted over the roof outside. She'd slept. She'd actually slept.

This apartment might be just what she needed.

She loaded the magazine into her M9's handle and slipped the weapon into its daytime hiding spot. Habit prompted her to create an agenda for the day.

Sunday—a whole day of nothing planned. A whole day of not having roommates distracting her from the demons haunting her memories. That change would *not* be so good.

Time to keep her mind occupied. She started with breakfast, which turned into a difficult proposition, as she had no food in her apartment other than a smashed granola bar at the bottom of her backpack. Brianna had taken her out for falafel at a place on the corner for dinner the previous night, but Raquel had neglected to



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stop at a market afterward.

*Good.* Grocery shopping, something she could put on her to-do list.

Before her usual efficient shower and moisturizing session for her scars, she decided to see how long she could stretch out her exercise routine. She smoothed her hair back into the tidy bun she'd perfected during her time in uniform and changed into a sports bra and yoga shorts. The outfit would never be one she wore in public, so it was a good thing she had no plans to go out where others would see her.

Scars scrolled over her left arm and leg, her skin uneven and discolored a light pink. But if the rooftop was as private as she hoped, no one would be around to stare.

Pity was the hardest reaction to deal with from others. She didn't deserve pity. She'd made it home when so many other soldiers hadn't.

She climbed out the window, scanned her surroundings for any new threats, and strode toward the statue. Maybe her night of good sleep was due to its presence acting as an additional security blanket for her mental state, and maybe it wasn't. Regardless, the urge to thank the creature sat on her tongue, and she poked at its elbow, waiting for the silly impulse to pass.

The rough stone under her fingertip reminded her of something, but she couldn't remember what. She squeezed the creature's arm, as though she could shove the odd thoughts away, and then stood in front of the statue. Only carved orbs marked where its eyes would be, but she gazed at them anyway.

The silly impulse hadn't passed.

"Okay, I'm only going to say this once. I got real sleep last night for the first time since I can remember, and if you had anything to do with that..." Her speech sounded more ridiculous by the minute. "Well, thank you, Garrett."

She spun and walked two steps before she realized what had come out of her mouth. Garrett? Where had *that* come from? She'd meant to call him Grotesque-dude or Beast or something like that, not an actual name.

The creature still looked as snarling as before, but her impression had definitely changed since Brianna had told her about its

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shield. Had it changed enough that her subconscious wanted to name the thing—like a giant pet rock?

The idea almost prompted a giggle. At least a pet rock was one friend she couldn't hurt. Hopefully naming the statue wasn't a bad sign for her mental state.

For the next three hours, she propelled herself through her usual exercises and added several new ones appropriate to the location. The rooftop area between her apartment and the opposite unit was long enough to run sprints. A metal support bar that ran diagonally across the rooftop's inside corner and connected the structure of her apartment to the rest of the building was perfect for chin-ups and pull-ups. And if she stood on her tiptoes on the creature's pedestal and wrapped her hands around its arm, she could do calf raises off the platform.

Pushing herself felt good, as though the memories were being flushed out through her pores. Even though she was exhausted, she didn't want to stop. What else could she do?

Her back muscles? Maybe she could figure out a way to do back extensions, stretching her body up from her hips.

The arms of the statue could work, one to elevate her hips and one to hold down her legs. Its arms seemed solid enough, each one bigger around than her waist, so her weight shouldn't be damaging. Disrespectful maybe, if she was supposed to treat the sculpture as art. But not damaging. Especially not if she took off her shoes.

Either because the gargoyle was right outside *her* window or because of the pet rock thing, she'd already started to think of it as hers.

She climbed inside the open space between its limbs and shield and wriggled her hips, facedown, onto one of its arms. From that position, she hooked the backs of her ankles under its other arm and successfully did hyperextensions, using her back muscles to lift her whole torso.

She added a twist to some of the lifts to engage her side abdominal muscles as well. On one twist, her peripheral vision landed on the statue, and she saw what this position would look like from an outside perspective—her ass right in front of the creature's face.

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Good thing she didn't care about being ladylike, because a most indelicate snort erupted from her. "You enjoying the view there, Garrett? I'd say sorry for using you this way, but I'm really not sorry."

Forget a face-to-face meeting. Given that they'd now met as-to-face, he deserved a real name, and Garrett seemed as appropriate as any other name that might pop into her head.

*Boom!* An explosion reverberated from the street.

Raquel dropped to a crouch in the center of the sculpture. Her chin scraped the creature's arm on the way down, and her heart thudded wildly in her chest. Damn it, she didn't have a weapon.

From her safe position, her eyes saw her location—the rooftop, the gargoyle, the city—not a remote Afghanistan village. And her brain belatedly recognized the sound of a semi-truck's rear door slamming closed. But her emotions didn't want to accept those facts.

Instead, overwhelming dread surrounded her, suffocating her, drowning her. Her limbs shook, and chills crawled up her arms, despite the late morning's rising temperature. She closed her eyes and curled into a ball. Acid rose up her throat, burning, and she clenched her jaw.

She wouldn't lose it. She wouldn't.

Images flashed in her mind of Anosha's gruesome death. Her torso ripped open, her body torn in half. Raquel shoved the thoughts away before other faces could become superimposed on the memory.

*Focus. One. Two. Three...*

She counted up to one hundred, and then started over again at one. She concentrated on the rough texture of the stone base under her bare feet. She noted the tickle on her chin from blood collecting at the scratch. She felt her nose flare with each determined inhalation.

By the time she got to her fifth set of hundred-counts, her breathing settled, and she opened her eyes. A drop of blood quivered off her chin and landed by her toes. She'd ridden out the flashback.

All the emotions she'd held in earlier burst out in a nervous laugh. "You didn't see that, okay, Garrett? And I'm sorry I bled on

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you.”

Shadows moved, and the splash of blood on the pedestal glistened in the sunlight. What the—?

Her head snapped up, and then her jaw dropped open. Instead of a monstrous beast at her side, a very human-looking man stood in its place. A very *manly* man at that.

The elite-and-they-knew-it Spec Op soldiers she’d worked with couldn’t compete with the worthy-of-the-devil-himself cocky expression on this guy’s face. Dark eyebrows framed his light gray eyes. And as her jaw continued to hang open, those eyes glinted with a challenge.

Right on cue, a breeze teased his open shirt, reminding her of the covers of the romance novels Brianna loved. Especially when a wind gust played with his longer-than-army-regulation black hair.

This. Could. Not. Be. Happening.

She dropped her gaze and fought against a wave of dizziness. She’d lost it. She’d really lost it.

All this time of trying to keep herself together, to not let PTSD rule her life, yet she’d crumbled from a stupid slammed door. And here she’d thought she’d grounded herself so well during that flashback. But this hallucination was too real.

Her breaths came in short pants, and she twisted her knuckles into the stone platform at her feet. That pain was real. Hold onto that. She licked the abrasions on her hand. Sharp tang of blood, salty taste of sweat, gritty speckles of stone. That was real.

The shadow that now moved? The figure that stood beside her?

That was *not* real.

# Chapter Five



GARRETT SCRUTINIZED THE FEMALE CRINGING ON HIS ROOFTOP pedestal, but he couldn't make sense of her actions. Then again, he hadn't been able to make sense of a single thing she'd done all morning.

At first he'd thought he'd have an easy victory when she'd talked to him right away. But whatever level of trust her declaration signified hadn't been enough to wake him, especially not during daylight hours.

After that, she'd insisted on punishing her body for hours, acting the role of a warrior determined to survive a battle. Or rather, survive *another* battle, if the scars engulfing her arm and leg were any indication.

He'd never seen a warrior sustain such injuries—and whatever must have caused them—and lived to tell the tale. Despite being human, a warrior like her—determined, strong, dedicated—would be a match for many of the soldiers he'd trained. If he was honest, she could probably teach him a thing or two about focus as well.

And then she'd draped herself over his arms in a skimpy outfit he wouldn't even call clothing. He hadn't known whether to wish for his wakefulness that second or be grateful he couldn't jeopardize her trust with a rash action.

The practicality of gargoyles needing human females to share their souls for survival on the Earthen plane didn't mean he was

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blind to other possibilities. Especially when faced with such a temptation as *this* female. From her chestnut brown hair and light hazel eyes to her surprising curves and toned limbs, she was enticement personified.

But what to make of her terror at that explosive sound? She'd ducked and turned to him for protection, which was what he'd needed to awaken. He'd been ready to enact his plan to win her over. And now...

Now she was hurting herself and hyperventilating. Should he stop her? He bent closer, trying to make out her whispering.

"You're not real. You're not real. You're not real."

He grunted. Her denial was *not* going to help him maintain her trust. He'd dealt with many humans thinking him a demon over the centuries—but never utter denial to the point of self-harm.

When she started grinding her fist into the stone again, he seized her wrist. "Stop."

Her head jerked up, and she met his eyes. "I heard you." She attempted to twist her arm in his grasp. "I *feel* you."

She yanked against him, but he didn't let her go. Instead, he gripped her other wrist as well. "You feel me because I *am* real."

"Ha! Now I'm talking to myself *and* the voices in my head." Her lips dipped into a delectable pout. "But does the ability to question all of this mean I'm not crazy?" She tugged against his grasp again. "It doesn't matter. I'm stronger than this. I refuse to let my mind believe in this—this *insanity*."

Her skin, which normally had a slight brown tinge similar to his human-form, became clammy and pale, and if anything, her breaths came more rapidly. Maybe she hadn't been drinking enough water during her exercises.

He picked her up—ignoring her protests—and carried her through the window for the second time that day. A washbasin sat in the other room, but he didn't spot a water pitcher beside it. The room didn't contain any chairs either, so he plopped her onto the bed. "Get yourself something to drink."

She thrashed at his arms. "I do *not* take orders from the voices in my head."

"Would you rather faint?"

She shoved away from him and twisted a handle on the

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washbasin. Water flowed from the spout and filled a cup she'd grabbed off a shelf.

Ingenuous. Obviously humans had been up to far more than the inventions he'd seen from his perch since he was last awake.

After she drained the cup, she glared at him. "Even though you're not real, you're still not allowed to see me shower."

And with that, she slammed the door of the little room in his face. A moment later, splashing, like a downpour of rain, sounded from behind the door.

While she was occupied, he made a thorough survey of her room to learn everything he could about her. Other than the images of her with people he assumed to be family and friends, there wasn't much to provide clues. During his search around her bed, his boot knocked a dark, hinged rectangle that opened like a book.

One side of the interior glowed, and colorful letters appeared: GOOGLE. Beside those letters was a phrase: MILITARY MOTTO DUTY VALOR LOYALTY. A list displayed below, none of which were an exact match to the phrase.

Why was *his* regiment's motto on this glowing box? He picked up the rectangle and noted buttons with letters on the other interior side. He pushed the button for *G* to see what would happen if he spelled out his name.

The *G* appeared next to the motto above. An instant printing press?

He touched the fresh letter, but no ink stained his fingers. With one finger brushing along the *G* above, he pressed more buttons below. More letters appeared, and still no ink coated his hand.

He quickly poked each button in turn, watching for the results above. The *Backspace* and *Enter* buttons were most enlightening, as the instructions PRESS ENTER TO SEARCH displayed, and the list changed when he complied.

A method to search human knowledge? How was such a thing possible? In this little book-like object?

He rotated the machine but could not determine its secrets. If it truly was a way to search human knowledge, however, this might be his opportunity to investigate his predicament. After a moment of trial and error, he entered his own searches for information.

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Sometime later, he'd discovered that humans still didn't know anything about his kind. And that meant humans couldn't help him find where his regiment might have traveled or why they'd left.

Regardless, this seemed to be an important little device. Part of his mission, his duty, was to stay on top of human development so his kind would always know their best options and approaches for bonding to human females. Perhaps this machine could teach him what females expected in this era. He got as far as spelling out "how to get women" when the glowing rectangle offered suggestions ranging from "how to get women to chase you" to "how to get women in bed."

Yes, a very useful device indeed.

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