

Gargoyles: The Forgotten

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She was the one he couldn't afford to let get away. But for years Jean De La Rue tried his best to forget the woman whose memory imprinted itself on his very soul. It might be madness but his need was too great to deny forever. He had to have her back.

What happened in the past should remain in the past...or not. Emma Duncan tried not to think about the man she met fourteen years ago because it only ended in her wanting a repeat performance of the naughty things he'd done to her, preferably all night long. But her libido would have to take a backseat to the questions she needed answers to. Her son's life depended on it.

Prologue

“How long do you plan to hide in that sliver of nowhere?” Shana’s question came out in a bored huff, reminding the succubus again of the huge gap in their ages. To their kind Shana was really nothing more than a child on the cusp of womanhood. Too young to be a threat but just the right age to be molded for usefulness.

A frown marred the succubus’ brow at the younger female’s inquiry.

“I don’t hide, dear,” she informed her with veiled politeness.

“Hmm, so what would you call it then? You’ve been holed up there for two years and rarely leave, why?”

Petulance was a quality not appreciated by the succubus and Shana’s tone toed closely at the line of it. Would she be so flippant if they were speaking in person instead of having the conversation over the phone?

“It’s just a little...” the succubus trailed off as her mind searched for the right word. “Sabbatical. Some much needed R&R after decades of leading an overly active lifestyle.”

“Sabbatical?” Shana didn’t hide her sarcasm. “I thought those designations were reserved for professors or people of that ilk.”

“Hmm, I rather like the sound of that. I’m the instructor and you’re my little apprentice.”

There was a pregnant pause. “Hold on, I’m no one’s underling.” The haughty reply crackled over the phone line.

The succubus intended the comment to stop Shana's prodding and it worked. Succubi were such a prideful and vain lot, and Shana was proving to be no different in spite of the lack of succubus parenting in her life. It was a major design flaw of their species and a contributing factor to their low numbers. The all-female race could barely tolerate one another for very long which trickled down to their steadily declining population size. Procreation, as a result, was a bitch because it required two succubi and an elfin male to form a new life. Elves' high libido made the procurement of the male easy enough, but finding a willing succubus to play carrier for the two year gestation period was another matter. A succubus wouldn't want the inconvenience of being burdened so long nor sacrifice their coveted looks for such a happening only to have the offspring handed over to the partner succubus for raising. It was a thankless job to say the least and not one many were willing to take on.

Shana might just be the answer to her dilemma.

It was about time she had a daughter and the younger succubus was a likely candidate for providing one to her. If she played her cards right.

"Oh don't get your panties in a bunch. I consider your help to be invaluable." Although the succubus couldn't see Shana, she was sure her chest swelled at the half-hearted compliment. It wouldn't take much to smooth over any perceived wrong with her.

Shana was truly a find.

The dimwit had lived as a human for so long with her wiccan surrogates she was easy pickings. Manipulating her was effortless, like leading a thirsty horse to water. Shana had been orphaned by her sires and without someone to guide her in the ways of the succubi she was more instinct than practical knowledge and eager to learn all she could. Shana served as her eyes and ears to the outside world allowing the succubus to keep a low profile from the Protectors in constant pursuit of her.

The Protectors' ridiculous bounty made the succubus' life completely uncomfortable. And every otherworldly being seemed ready to collect on her unfortunate circumstance. There was truly no loyalty out there. Honestly, she didn't see what all the fuss was about. Lorn had his precious mate back *and* a child, besides only one human fatality resulted from the whole fiasco. All in all it had proved to be an uneventful waste of time, made more regrettable by her current exile. It was another reason why crossing paths with Shana was truly a fortunate happenstance.

In truth, the succubus believed it was a definite sign the fates were finally showing her some favor.

Luckily for the succubus, Shana's minimal contact with otherworldly creatures made her unaware of the danger her newfound friendship placed her in. However, she seemed to be smart enough to have finally discerned her mentor was keeping a purposefully low profile by sequestering herself in the little seaside community.

"You'll be proud to know I have a gremlin in my thrall," Shana announced boastfully.

What would possess her to think the news would be a joyous moment? Part of their bargain entailed Shana maintain her own separation from otherworldly creatures in exchange for succubi training, although Shana's detachment was more for ensuring the older succubus' anonymity.

White hot anger flashed then coiled its way through her system. She could truly wring Shana's stupid little neck for being so careless. The younger female was still getting her feet wet working her control on humans and while she'd shown impressive skill, to attempt an otherworldly thrall without aid was a foolish endeavor. Shana's eagerness to practice could expose their relationship but more importantly it left the succubus vulnerable to discovery.

The succubus had built a comfortable respite for herself in the little town, safe from Protector detection and surprisingly with a small enough population of otherworldly creatures she was able to dispose of them quickly and with little notice from the human population. The town itself wasn't much to speak of but the thriving human population's race for modernity was an added amenity to her. It was easy working her way through the community. With some key council members, the police chief and mayor in her thrall she had to admit things were starting to look up for her. And now the life she'd made was being threatened. She wouldn't stand for it.

"I thought we talked about keeping a wide berth from otherworldly kind," the succubus reminded Shana, holding her temper in check. It wouldn't do to let Shana see how affected she was by her actions.

"I know, but he was such a perfect candidate I couldn't just let him slip through my fingers."

"And are you really certain the thrall took? Did you remember to use the potion too?"

"Of course," Shana answered incredulously. "Are you doubting me when you're the one who said I

was ready for something stronger than the human mind?”

True, she'd applauded Shana's ability but it had only been another placating tactic on her part. She'd let her practice with a few people in the little town but she didn't want Shana out there experimenting on her own and certainly not with otherworldly beings whose thralls were usually very tricky even for the most skilled succubus.

“Not at all, but this is one of those journeys we should have taken together. It could've been very dangerous for you. Gremlins don't take too kindly to being controlled.” For good measure the succubus added a bit of concern to her voice.

“Well how was I going to get to use the spells you've taught me on someone else when you won't come out of your cubby hole to provide the training you promised? Frankly I'm bored sitting around waiting for my next lessons. I had to take matters in my own hands.”

Defiance and arrogance were traits the older female admired and would certainly cultivate in her daughter, but in Shana it was a nuisance.

The succubus sighed heavily. It was time to do some damage control and it meant knowing what Shana did about this gremlin. “Tell me about your thrall?”

“I thought you might be curious,” Shana replied excitedly. “Well he has substantial resources at his disposal and thankfully he prefers staying in a pleasing human form. Quite dashing in fact.”

The succubus held her gag reflexes in check, no matter how handsome the form they took Gremlins were still foul creatures with a stench strong enough to make most otherworldly beings keep their distance.

“And you picked him because?”

“He's someone who seems to have his ear to the ground, if you know what I mean?”

“Explain.” Any bit of information she could gather on Shana's victim would be helpful in ending his life when the time came. And poor dumb Shana would be none the wiser because accidents were the succubus' specialty.

“He calls himself a documenter.”

“And it means what exactly?”

“He likes to document and catalogue the various otherworldly species and human hybrids out there.”

Interesting. “For what purpose?”

“To chronicle the evolution of life on earth. It’s not like the old days when otherworldly beings were more discriminating, now there’s all this human crossbreeding. It’s creating hybrids with an assortment of abilities. At this rate there’ll be all kinds of abominations out there,” Shana spat indignantly. “You of all people should understand how important it is to know what we might be up against one day.”

Maybe the succubus had gone a little heavy on the whole purity of otherworldly species bit with Shana. But the woman wore her prejudice like a badge of honor and she’d needed a unifying point with her. The older female chose not to bring up just how infrequently unions with humans produced offspring. Not every human could breed with an otherworldly being. Nature regulated the result, therefore hybrids were actually very few indeed.

“So what does he plan to do with the information he’s gathering?” the succubus asked.

The long silence let her know Shana either had no idea or was keeping the information to herself. She surely hoped it was the former because she’d hate to think the younger woman was foolish enough to try to keep a secret from her. The twit was valuable to her for now, but still expendable.

“Right now the important thing is cataloging. He has a really in-depth process for following up on leads to confirm their identities as hybrids.”

Doubtful, the succubus thought but remained silent. So far she wasn’t impressed.

“It’s a shame how these abominations flaunt their abilities too, obviously their otherworldly parents haven’t taught them the importance of remaining under the radar. Their carelessness runs a risk of exposing us all.”

Shana would have reason to be paranoid if in fact hybrids existed in any substantial way. Humans outnumbered otherworldly creation and would forever be a threat in spite of otherworldly beings’ powers and gifts. It was anonymity and human skepticism of the supernatural which protected the

other beings identities. Those capable of mating with humans would not let their coveted offspring run around unchecked and put the entire community at risk.

“Your thrall claims to have proof these so-called hybrids are using their abilities publicly?”

“He’s working on it. They have been smart enough not to use preternatural gifts in the presence of humans but how long before one of them slips up in order to show off to some friends.”

“So no proof. You know these pairings are extremely unusual. It can’t just happen with any human,” she finally pointed out.

“Or so we’ve been led to believe. My thrall has tracked over one hundred human and otherworldly hybrid offspring. In fact there are two in the Oregon area he’s investigating now,” she said confidently.

“Really? Which pairings?”

“Well... he’s still working on the data, but one he believes is a female resulting from a human father and *futakuchi-onna* mother.”

“He thinks a two-mouther has settled down with a human male and reproduced?” She didn’t give Shana an opportunity to answer. “First off that species would rather feed on man, not mate and secondly the physiology and genetics of it just aren’t possible. They are asexual reproducers so if he’s really seen an offspring I’d caution him to keep his distance. They also have a taste for otherworldly beings and are very protective of their young.”

On second thought, maybe she should encourage Shana to have the fool snoop in the *futakuchi-onna*’s affairs. It would certainly prevent a trip for her.

What a joke.

“I-um, I should probably let him know.”

Or not. “What about this other so-called hybrid?” She prepared herself for another ridiculous pairing. Perhaps a human with one of the ghostly *Ankou*.

“Um, the child is male and the result of a human female, the species of the father is still unknown but he’s working on uncovering that bit of information.”

She chuckled. “And what makes your friend so sure *this* is a hybrid?”

“Well, the mother has exhibited some supernatural enhancements but my thrall is certain she is human. The boy, on the other hand, is obviously developing into something more.”

The succubus checked the clock mounted on her library wall. She’d really need to hurry this along. Her plans for the local theatre had been on her calendar for a month and she didn’t want to be late.

“And the proof? Has the boy exhibited any physical or otherworldly abilities?”

“Um, I don’t think so.”

“So another waste of time. Perhaps your thrall is hiding behind his self-appointed title as documenter to pursue voyeuristic interests. He could be suffering from a bit of human envy. It happens.”

“As if. He is certain there is something otherworldly about this kid. In fact he’s on assignment now to substantiate reported observations.”

“Sounds like good old-fashioned stalking to me.”

“It’s far more than that,” Shana rushed defensively to reply.

“Do tell? A fatherless child and mother with so-called ‘enhancements’ is not exactly evidence of anything.”

“The boy is thirteen, a critical age for his gifts to begin manifesting, so we expect to see a lot more in the coming months but for starters he’s garnered media attention with his overnight prowess on the football field. His speed alone borderlines on preternatural. I don’t presume to know a lot about the sport but my thrall says the way he manipulates the field is unprecedented for a human. Not only that but he is massive even for larger human males. He’s already over six feet with muscles which could put a professional athlete to shame.”

The succubus’ interest was piqued if only because of the level of appeal etched in Shana’s voice. She certainly didn’t sound as if she considered him to be an abomination. Maybe this young human would be worth looking into further.

“What of his physical appearance.”

Shana huffed. “I just told you-”

“Not his build, what does the boy look like?”

There was the briefest hesitation. “Dusky hair, long with massive curls, sun kissed complexion and hazel eyes that seem more green than brown. He will certainly grow into a very comely male.”

The description was enticing. “And what of the mother? You said she appeared to have supernatural abilities.” Would the woman pose a physical threat if the succubus decided to pursue an interest in the boy? Not that she was really worried about a simple human female but she’d lived long enough to know not to underestimate a potential foe.

“My thrall has observed her. She’s demonstrated above average skills in the performance of her work.

Did Shana think she was interested in the woman’s resume? A dedicated work ethic was admirable to humans but not proof of anything.

She’s faster than the average human and seems to have an uncanny aptitude for ferreting out danger,” Shana continued quickly as if sensing the other succubus disinterest.

Still not proof of anything but a thought formed in her mind. “And has he explored the possibility they could be werekin. Those little shapeshifters are quite adept at appearing to be regular humans.”

“He’s assured me he ruled out that possibility. Werekin cannot avoid the call to shift for extended periods of time and he’s been trailing them long enough to determine neither has done so. Nor do they have any affiliation with any packs, herds, clans or other groupings.”

A farfetched notion came to mind, one she might not have considered if not for the advertisements which had social media buzzing. The gargoyles seemed in a frenzy over the possible existence of more fledglings. Humans might not understand the underlying meaning of the ads but the otherworldly community was well aware and watchful. Lorn’s mate renewed a hope in all of the Protectors and the succubus had heard about the discovery of another female. One could be dismissed as a coincidence but two definitely gave credence to the prospect of more out there. Was there a third?

“Does she have any markings on her body?”

“I haven’t observed her myself but my thrall hasn’t made reference to any, why? Should he be

looking for one?"

"Just a curiosity."

"So you *do* think there might be some legitimacy to his interests?" An excited edge laced Shana's question.

"It could warrant further investigation. I might even pop in for a look-see."

Silence stretched on for long moments making the succubus wish she hadn't voiced her intentions.

"I can setup a meeting with you and my thrall-"

"Not necessary. All I need is a name."

"For what purpose?"

"I'd like to perform an independent investigation. One can never be too sure in these matters. But your thrall need not know of my curiosity."

"Why? He would be honored you're looking into the matter too."

"I'm sure he would, but as I've said before I prefer to limit my contact with others. If I should need anything I'd much prefer to deal with you directly. Am I making myself clear?"

"Crystal. I won't make him aware of your involvement. So what pairing do you think it might be?" Shana's curiosity was palpable.

"I wouldn't even begin to speculate at this point and without a name I can't personally look into it further." The succubus willed her response to sound casual having revealed too much of her curiosity already.

Her theory, even unfounded, would remain her secret. An otherworldly creature with knowledge of the whereabouts of a fledgling would certainly want to use the information to get in good with the Protectors. Then again only a mated Protector could produce a child with a fledgling which called into question, if this woman were a fledgling where was her mate? The absurdity that a gargoyle would allow his woman and child to live alone should have been reason enough for her to rule out the pairing. But admittedly all things fledgling and gargoyle would forever be her Achilles heel and might very well be her ultimate downfall.

“Emma and Will Duncan of Portland, Oregon,” Shana muttered reluctantly.

The succubus silent debate was sealed with Shana’s revelation. The lure was too tempting to resist.

Chapter One

Emma trudged her way into the two bedroom flat she shared with her thirteen-year-old son. The living area sat quietly empty but Will's presence was evidenced by the cumbersome backpack sitting at an odd angle in the middle of the floor where it had been dropped and dismissed. It was the first breadcrumb in a long line of items trailing to his room; jacket, shoes, and cleats completed the path. Emma shook her head at the mess but was too tired to muster up a healthy rant. Instead she banged on his door en route to her own sanctuary. A shower was definitely in order before scrounging up something for dinner. She didn't bank on having leftovers from last night's meal. Normally, Will was ravenous but he was downright gluttonous on practice days.

"What?" Will called out in response to the pounding but the unspoken question echoing in his petulant teen tone said *'why are you bothering me, old person?'*

She stopped in her doorway. "Don't 'what me' William Oliver Duncan. Come out here get up your mess and I'd better see your door open with your nose in a book by the time I'm out of the shower."

"All right," came the mumbled reply.

Emma knew he'd be slow to act but ultimately would get the task done or suffer the wrath of mom. He was a good kid and she considered herself lucky to have him. In her line of work she'd seen all types of teens. Unfortunately, it was usually because they were being treated for injuries suffered as a result of their own folly or a victim of circumstances created by their environment. Statistically speaking, as a product of a 'broken' home her son could just as easily be getting into, or causing trouble in the streets, instead of being an honor roll athlete with a penchant for computers. It was a good thing she didn't put much stock in statistics choosing instead to be the master of her own fate and instill the

same principles in Will.

Her job as an Emergency Medical Technician paid the bills, kept food in their bellies and afforded her the ability to work enough overtime as needed to keep her son active after school and on weekends. She could also afford to indulge him in his computer addiction. It wasn't uncommon for her to find a processor chip left on a table or a motherboard on the kitchen counter. She worked long days but could be home, most evenings, to help Will with his homework. It might not seem like much but she liked being able to provide an occasional home cooked meal. She was better at the cooking than the homework thing because quite frankly schoolwork seemed a lot tougher nowadays than it had been when she was in Junior High School.

Emma pulled her ponytail holder loose and freed the massive abundance of curls around her head. She fingered the tangled tresses and quietly debated the merits of individual twists over her current grooming practices. It sounded good in theory, but coming off the day she'd just had hair care would have to wait until another night. Her fingers were manipulating the first button of her work shirt when Will came bursting into her room.

"Stop, before you scar me for life," he said in a rush.

"Number one, my door was closed and number two you should have knocked."

"Yeah, yeah," he dismissed her scolding. "I need to show you something."

Emma groaned certain whatever it was would mean a sizeable dent in her wallet. She'd worked enough overtime the last few weeks to get money together for the summer football camp her son wanted to attend, so the thought of additional OT to fund his latest request made her want to groan. She really needed to start telling him no. True he was an athletic kid and played everything from football to baseball. She loved to encourage his interests but enough was enough. He'd have to pick one sport and stick with it or she'd go broke.

"Will we talked about this soccer thing already and I-."

"It's not about soccer, at least not right now. I need to show you something else."

"Something that can't wait until I'm done with my shower?"

He shrugged and the light in his caramel complexioned face dimmed. She hated being the cause of

it.

“Two minutes, buddy, I had a rough day.”

He nodded and added somberly, “You lose somebody?”

He knew her so well, but then again why wouldn't he when they were all each other had? Emma didn't consider herself a recluse but she could count the number of people who were in her inner circle on one hand. All females and all with lives and families of their own to keep them pretty well occupied. By default her son had evolved into the role of her best friend but there were still plenty of things she didn't want to share with him.

“Yup, but it's nothing for us to discuss. Work is left at the door, remember?”

“Yeah, I just thought talking about things might make you feel better, you know like you do with me.”

He really was a sweet kid.

She mussed his already frazzled dark brown hair which seemed to grow darker every month. At the rate it was changing he'd be a true brunette in no time. His curly ringlets were an indiscernible mixture of waves and tangles.

“Met a comb today, kid?”

He eyed her mass of curls. “You really want to talk about hair?”

“Smart ass, I hope you know this is all being calculated in your two minutes.”

“No fair,” he grabbed her wrist with a hand that was already the size of a full grown adult male and tugged. She stumbled behind him marveling at his sheer build. To her he was still her little baby, but it was times like this when she was reminded of what others saw. Every day his body was becoming more man than boy at a far more alarming rate than his peers too. It was quite the norm for her to be asked for additional proof of birth whenever he signed up for a new sports activity and even then people seemed to scrutinize the evidence as if it might be a fake.

“Hey, I need that arm.”

“Sorry,” came his sheepish reply as he released his hold.

Emma did her best to ignore the mounds of objects in different piles around his room. He called it organized clutter while she, in her motherly wisdom, recognized the junk for exactly what it was. A pure mess.

“Sit down and look.” He pointed to his desktop monitor.

She focused on the computer screen while sinking into the chair he indicated. *Ebony Beauties Wanted*, the first line read which is where she should have stopped but like watching a train wreck in the making she couldn't look away, at least not until she could take no more of the obvious gag.

Emma laughed. “This is a joke?”

“No, it's real. Apparently this same ad has been everywhere for a while and it's still all anyone is talking about at school. You would know this if you turned on the T.V. or looked at a computer from time to time,” Will paused. “Mom, you have a birthmark like that one on the back of your shoulder.”

Emma swiveled in the chair to stare up at her son, something she would have had to do even if she weren't sitting down.

“And how do you know that?” She cut her gaze at him.

“It's not like those gym tops you wear really hide it. You have to admit they are a little flimsy.”

“They are completely appropriate for the times and places I wear them, thank you very much.”

His traditionally smug look slid into place. “Hey, I'm just saying at your age you shouldn't be wearing certain things.”

“I'll have you know I look good for someone *my age* and I'm fitter than most of the girls in your school.”

Although Emma said it jokingly it was the truth. Even at thirty-six she was the poster girl for health and fitness. She could bench press more than some of the beefiest guys at the gym who seemed to spend every free minute there. The funny thing was she accomplished this without looking bulky or steroid induced. Her muscles were sinewy and well-defined but definitely feminine.

“Really, Mom, you're going to compare yourself to Junior High School girls?”

“Whatever. What exactly is your point in showing me this?”

“I think you should call the phone number.”

“For what?”

Will shrugged looking sheepish now. “You know, maybe you and one of the guys might like each other.”

“Will, have you lost your little teenaged mind? What makes you think I’m so hard up I need to answer some prank ad in the paper for a man?”

“I just thought—“

She bounded to her feet. “Well that isn’t something you should be thinking about at all, and guess what? Your two minutes are up, buddy. Now how about you get this room in some semblance of order and hit your homework.”

“My bad for wanting to see my mom get a man before I go to college,” he muttered under his breath after Emma exited his room.

She’d heard the utterance as clearly as if he’d been standing right in front of her. It was a gift and a curse. In fact very little anyone said escaped her hearing. Emma tossed off his words knowing her son’s intentions were pure. In his adolescent mind he couldn’t grasp why she seemed to have zero desire for companionship. Quite frankly she couldn’t figure it out either, but it wasn’t important enough for her to give it more than a passing thought. Was she being selfish by not entertaining the idea of finding a companion? Maybe she should be considering his feelings in the matter. He’d ventured down the road a time or two. At ten he’d even broached the subject of her possibly being lesbian by innocently mentioning he would be okay with having two mommies. She’d assured him her interests didn’t extend to the same sex but she appreciated his openness on the notion. Maybe it wasn’t simply Will seeking a companion for her but for them as a unit. It was normal for him to want a father in his life even in a world where single moms were so prevalent. She’d tried to be it all to her son but at the end of the day Emma recognized there were just some things he needed a male figure for.

Truth be told she’d shied away from men altogether after her brief encounter with Will’s father those many years ago. She personally preferred not to even think about him because any time her thoughts drifted in that direction her heart ached. Literally. And if that wasn’t bad enough she’d start to seriously Jones for the man. It was inexplicable. She’d met him one time, had one wild night and

never heard from him again. He'd said his name was Jean but she never knew if it were true. It could have all been a ruse just like his light Parisian accent and the dogged attention he'd shown her until she finally let him talk her into a drink. In the end she couldn't place blame on him. She had been lonely and decided he would be the perfect distraction for her.

Emma stripped out of the remainder of her clothes suddenly feeling in extra need of a shower. She swore under her breath for letting her mind wander to that forbidden zone. Jean was a topic of the past and held no place in her or Will's future. They'd lived fine without him. Still it didn't stop her body from responding to the thought of him. It happened every time she let her mind stray to that night fourteen years ago. He was her forever curse. Time had yet to remove his imprint from her.

For good measure she dredged up the image of an accident victim she'd worked on at the beginning of her shift. It was a woman who'd been banged up pretty bad in her car and things seemed sketchy on the way to the hospital but thankfully the woman was able to be stabilized and the handoff to the ER staff went smoothly. The memory helped to take the edge off her erratic hormones somewhat.

Emma breathed a sigh of relief for the dodge. It didn't do well for her to dwell on the past. Her body's reaction was just an added reminder of why she needed to stay firmly rooted in the present. Both her son and work were her anchor. Fortune had smiled on her by giving her Will. Sure she'd been scared when she first discovered her pregnancy. She was twenty-two, no family and up until that point had no thought of having children. But Emma couldn't have asked for a better gift than Will. She'd poured all her energy into him at home, and on the job she was ranked top EMT in their county, something her partners seemed to begrudge her. Already she was on her third one in under a year. She wondered if she'd beat last year's record of four. There were still a few months left in the year so anything was possible. Although the outlook on the current pairing seemed to work well since her partner was perfectly content with letting her take the lead. Once, with a previous partner, her boss suggested she scale back her enthusiasm in the field and she contemplated his suggestion briefly, but the risk was too great. She wouldn't jeopardize the life of a person just to save the ego of someone on the job. This of course didn't make her too popular with other EMTs, police officers or fire fighters who all dubbed her *Emma the Jumpy* because she sprang into action as soon as she hit the scene.

She ignored the behind-the-hand whispers whenever she arrived, although she'd heard each and every one. It was a weird quirk she'd developed years ago after recovering from an illness which had

left her hospitalized for days. While she'd been good at her job before it, she turned into a dynamo after she was cleared to go back on duty. Her sudden rehabilitation found her in better than perfect health along with a few other enhancements. Emma noted an extended range of hearing, enhanced sight, strength unlike anything she'd possessed in the past and a sixth sense for trouble. The latter had saved both her and her partners' tail when they found themselves in less than favorable situations. At first she thought she was losing her mind but later embraced the abilities and other physical improvements bestowed on her. She, of course, kept them as her own personal secret.

"What do you say we order a movie on satellite and have Chinese delivered?" Emma suggested, dressed and feeling refreshed from her shower. A quick inspection showed Will had followed her instructions, at least in true teenage fashion. His mess had been gotten up out of the living room, but his bedroom, although neater than what she'd first seen it still left a lot to be desired. Emma decided it was a battle she wouldn't escalate while he was finishing up his homework.

"This is the second time we ordered out this week, I thought we were on a budget?" Will queried.

"You let me worry about the budget, besides I'm really not much in the mood for cooking tonight." It was the truth. The shower had helped but Emma needed some more distraction in the form of bantering with her son and a little boob tube viewing. Cooking would lend too much of an opportunity for her thoughts to drift and right now securing them in the present was proving to be a difficult task.

"Can I pick the movie?" he queried.

"So long as it's not gross or a completely idiotic comedy."

"You do want me to watch it with you, right?" His voice dripped with youthful sarcasm.

"Oh come on, see if there's a good action film out yet."

"All right, action I can do, just no sappy girl movie."

"Nope, none of that tonight. You want me to order up the usual?"

"Yeah... but uh could you get extra fried rice and chicken this time, I'm starved."

This gave her pause. "Did you eat at school?"

“Yup, even had seconds, which reminds me my lunch account is getting really low again.” There was a twinge of embarrassment in his voice which made him seem more like a little boy. Still Emma tried not to wince at the revelation. She’d added enough funds on his account to get him through the entire semester and it was almost gone, again. They hadn’t even hit winter break.

“I’ll send you with money tomorrow. What about when you got home did you have a snack?”

There was a pause in Will’s answer this time. “Yeah, I ate a little something.”

“By little you mean?” She tried to keep her tone neutral. No need to go into freak-out mode. He was a growing boy, that much was obvious, and plenty of parents went through the teenage blues with their children and food consumption. To his credit his metabolism seemed to be on fire. Still Emma worried about the large amount of food he consumed which seemed to do little in quenching his hunger.

“There was that left over chicken, chips and I polished off the last of that fruity stuff you had in there... oh yeah and the salad you made.”

The leftovers were enough for a whole other meal for two, in anyone else’s household but not in the Duncan home. Actually Emma had expected him to finish off the food and relaxed a little at his catalogue.

“Oh and you might want to add ice cream, bread, milk and cereal to the grocery list.”

“Will, I just went shopping two days ago and stocked up on those exact things.”

“I’ve had cravings and the munchies.”

Yeah, it was time for another visit to Dr. Che. He’d shown concern over Will’s growth rate at their last visit and had wanted her to keep a chart on his eating habits as well as document his size progression. Their last visit was just four months ago and already he’d pushed past two shoe sizes and had grown out of his men sized jeans.

“I swear if you’re pregnant I’m putting you on every T.V. show I can find to make back my money,” she joked forcing the concern out of her voice although it rattled around in her head.

“You’re not even funny, Mom,” he shot back en route to the living room.

“I’m just saying.”

Emma stared after her son trying to keep her worries at bay. At their last visit it was obvious Dr. Che hadn’t wanted to scare her but she knew he was concerned about Will’s growth. Emma personally worried it might be a glandular problem. She trusted Dr. Che’s opinion, having been Will’s physician since birth, and didn’t doubt he’d order up testing to get a concrete prognosis to put any worries to rest. Will was just a normal, healthy happy young man going through a mega growth spurt. It would stand to reason he would shoot up and out. She was tall as had been her own father and brother. The kid was definitely getting it from both sides. His father was well over six foot five inches and was very solid in stature. Emma didn’t doubt her memory on that point, in fact she remembered everything about Jean. He’d stood head and shoulders above the rest of the men in the crowded bar she’d wondered into. He was tall enough for her to have to stare up at him which was a nice change of pace from looking down at guys who hadn’t quite hit her six foot marker. The memory sprang forward so quickly she didn’t have a chance to counter the recall.

It was the anniversary of the day that changed her life. She, her father and brother were venturing to the mountains for their annual pilgrimage for veneration at a favorite fishing hole and hunting spot. It had been a Duncan family tradition even before she was born and although Emma threatened to stop going on what she’d dubbed as a testosterone fest she could never bring herself to actually do it. She loved the bonding time with her favorite men. And in some ways it afforded her a connection with her own mother who’d died when she was just a baby. According to her dad her mother was a nature enthusiast and loved the time away from the city whenever possible.

Her father was at the helm on that fateful day. He’d wanted to take the first leg of the trip to allow his son and daughter the opportunity to indulge in some much needed rest. Emma’s brother had spent the better part of the week studying for the Bar and she was in her sophomore year of college and coming off the finals week from hell. When she’d signed up for her course load she’d ignored everyone’s warnings not to pack her schedule with biology, psychology and chemistry, eager to finish up her major early and have a lighter load come senior year. Needless to say both she and her brother were exhausted from multiple all-nighters. For the first hour they’d tried to keep conversation bouncing but Oliver had nodded off several times before slipping into oblivion. Apparently Emma

followed suit soon after lulled by the never ending greenery and the soothing hum of the car.

What she knew of the accident was only information she'd gathered from reports and the doctors at the hospital. Later, she'd read her father fell asleep behind the wheel on a downhill turn and their car went over an embankment with a more than hundred foot drop. Emma awoke from a coma two weeks later to learn of the accident and death of both her brother and father. It had devastated her. For the next two years she would travel to the site to pay her respects to her fallen loved ones, until the night she met Jean.

14 years earlier

Emma nursed the diet soda feeling more than a little foolish sitting in a bar but it was better than making the lonely trek back down the hill to sit in a quiet hotel room with only her thoughts to keep her company. She wondered if it weren't time to stop making the trip altogether.

It was always the same.

She pulled off the road onto the small emergency section of dirt and walked the distance to the unmarked spot where her father's vehicle had gone over the side of the cliff. To any outside observer Emma knew she must look like a complete lunatic taking her chances walking on the edge of the road, but it was something she felt she needed to do. A guard rail had been placed at the curve where they'd gone over. She stared at the shiny metallic frame and wondered what if it had been there the night of their accident? Would her father and brother be alive? Would they only have sustained a few injuries instead of dying? She looked around for any indication of the tragedy. Nothing remained of their accident. Foliage had long ago grown in to cover the damage caused by the incident. Maybe if she stood out there long enough it could make her disappear too.

A car whizzed by without the slightest decline in speed, easily maneuvering the curve and disappearing into the distance. She stood and listened to the fading hum of the engine. If only they'd waited a day until everyone was well rested. If only she'd taken a more balanced course load then she wouldn't have been too tired to help drive. If only... Tears welled up with the emotion bubbling inside her and flowed unchecked down her cheeks. She wanted to wail at the injustice of it all but what was the point? She was alone and there was no one there to quiet her cries. No one to soothe her fears or

tell her time would numb the pain, no one to assure her that her dad and brother would want her to go on living. No one but her. It was that reminder which allowed the subsequent depression to wreak havoc on her. It *was* time to stop doing this to herself. Could she do it, better still was it right for her to stop coming? Their bodies were put to rest at the family plot hundreds of miles away but Emma still felt a need to make the trip as if visiting the site where her father and brother lost their lives would bring her comfort. It never did.

This has got to be the last time. Her inner voice mirrored Emma's melancholy musings.

With her resolution firmly in place she pulled away from the site that had changed her life. Completely leaving the area forever was a little harder. She found herself turning into the packed parking lot of a tavern passed by every time the trip was made. She wasn't much of a drinker and really had no intention of starting at that moment, but the place had plenty of people and even pretend human companionship was better than nothing at all. At best she hoped to lose herself among the noise and chattering but quickly learned nothing was louder than her own thoughts.

"You plan on sitting here all night looking sad?" The slightly accented voice interrupting her musings was thick and resonant although he seemed to whisper to her.

It was the third attempt by a male in the bar to initiate conversation since she'd arrived and like the others she wasn't interested.

"That was the plan," Emma answered, refusing to give up her contemplation of the ice floating in her glass and the questions rattling in her head.

"Prolonged sorrow only burdens the heart more," he added.

"Maybe, but it's my heart to burden, so if you don't mind why don't you let me get back to it."

"Because I'd hate to think I didn't try to help you out of your obvious downward spiral."

He had her attention. Was she really so transparent?

Emma withdrew her gaze from her drink to glance at the intruder. She cocked her head to the side but had to swivel a little on the barstool in order to look up at his face. Her gaze passed over a strong jawline, full lips, and high cheekbones. Her perusal stopped at his eyes. They were beautiful, from the emerald coloring to the friendly sparkle shining at her. Quite frankly he was gorgeous. In fact she'd

have to say he was the best looking man she'd ever seen. For a moment Emma worried the bartender had slipped a little something into her drink which had impaired her vision. Men like the stranger didn't just hang out in remote dive bars but then again she hadn't hung out in enough of them herself to know for certain. She'd seen the neon sign for the tavern several times over the years but never once had her father stopped. He'd called it a biker's haunt, a place full of "reprobates and people of ill ilk". Emma and her brother always liked their dad's colorful descriptions. They considered it a quirk from so many years on the judicial bench. Emma wondered what her dad would make of this guy with his clean cut appearance hanging around the place.

He had a face which could make any woman swoon regardless of her age or race, but Emma still kept coming back to his eyes. They seemed older and wiser than his youthful appearance. She assumed he was more mature than her own twenty-two years but she didn't think he'd quite hit the thirty marker yet. Still there was something else beyond their striking color. In actuality she felt some semblance of familiarity. Of course it was absurd. Emma would definitely remember having met him in the past but she couldn't find anything to support the feeling. Maybe he was a model or budding actor who she'd seen in a passing ad once or twice. Dredging her memory for the reasoning behind the recognition proved fruitless. Still, looks aside, Emma really didn't want to be bothered during her period of self-pity.

The dismissal was on the tip of her tongue when a throbbing flared to life and took hold. She paused at the sensation. What was it? Emma resisted the urge to touch the spot at the back of her shoulder. It wasn't exactly painful but was certainly something she'd never experienced before. She would have thought she was the victim of some strange insect attack except the palpitation was beneath the surface of her skin and felt as if were radiating outward. It expanded from the spot before reducing to a dull throb.

"Thanks for your concern but I don't need an amateur psychotherapist tonight," she finally managed.

He leaned into the bar. "What makes you think I'm not the real deal?"

"What?" She frowned in confusion at his comment.

"Why do you assume I'm an amateur? It feels a bit like you're prejudging me based on some

unknown variable and personally I'm offended."

"You're right. I should have recognized you as an amateur comedian from that bit. My apologies."

He winced and covered his heart in feigned injury. "You wound me madam. Usually a person waits until they've been in my presence a full hour before insulting me unless of course they're a member of my family."

"Well I'm a quick study." In spite of the unwanted attention she found herself smiling slightly.

"Wow!" His eyes danced with laughter and he beamed at her with a brilliant smile of his own.

She cut her gaze at him hedging at bit before speaking again. "Wh-what?"

"I knew you'd be prettier with a smile, even if it was just a half one. I can't wait to see what a full-fledged one will do."

Even in her current mood Emma recognized when someone was making a move on her.

"You realize you're barking up the wrong tree. I really didn't come here looking to hook up with anyone tonight."

She looked him up and down, making it perfectly clear she was scrutinizing the total package. It was meant to be a discouraging action but it also allowed for added perusal. Admittedly he made for a great physical specimen. He was twice muscled in all the right places and she couldn't think of any of her former friends who wouldn't give him play. There might have been a time when she would have been more receptive too, but those days seemed long gone.

"I didn't come here with the intention of picking up anyone either," he offered.

"Really? Well you look a little too jovial to be trying to drown your own sorrows so what else is there?"

"I know a few members of the band who are going to be on stage tonight." He nodded toward a small platform. As they spoke men milled around setting up equipment and instruments.

"I guess I stand corrected. Sorry to misjudge you. I hope you enjoy your friends' set." With that said Emma returned to her drink

Maybe it was time for her to get going. Stopping in the bar had obviously been a mistake. Still, she

didn't look forward to making the drive back alone. Quite frankly she was tired of her own company. If only there was someone to call. She would give anything just to hear the sound of a friendly voice. Unfortunately she drew a blank scouring her brain for the name of someone, anyone. Of course it was her own fault no one came to mind. The first year after the accident she'd slowly pushed friends out of her life unable to handle the pity directed over the loss. Soon after returning to school Emma made the decision to take some time off. Her hiatus transitioned into a permanent sojourn when she elected instead to become a certified paramedic. While studying to become an EMT she'd kept a low profile and didn't try to forge any attachments.

Friends or not the bar was definitely a bad idea and she didn't want to share her misery publicly any longer. She dug in her purse to pay for the overpriced soft drink.

"You don't think I'm going to let you bail out so easy do you?"

She cocked her head at him. "I didn't realize you had a vote on the subject. Apparently you know something I don't."

"I do." He placed his hand over hers to stop her search. It was a brief contact but his skin was warmer than hers, soothing even. When he moved it, she wanted to tell him to put it back so she could enjoy the contact a little bit longer. It was such an odd reaction for her.

"And what exactly do you think you know about me considering I'm a total stranger to you?"

He moved in closer, so close the heat from his body wrapped around her like an embrace. She caught herself almost giving in to the instinct to lean into him. It would have been so easy to do just that and lay her head on his broad shoulder.

"You need a friend even if just for a little while. Tell me I'm wrong?"

She couldn't. The words wouldn't even begin to manifest themselves. He was right and her heart wept.