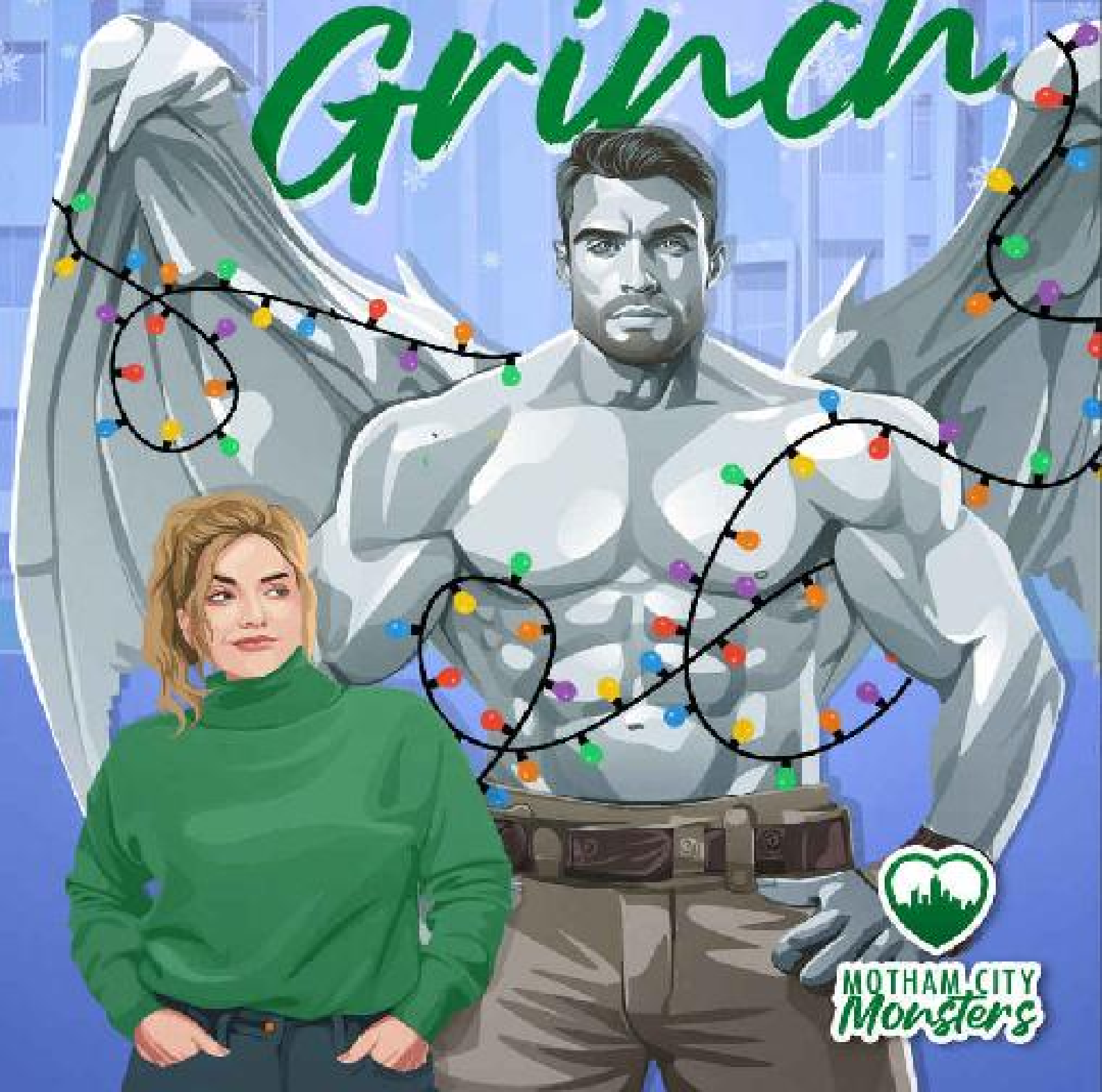


LILITH STONE

The
Gargoyle
Grinch



MOTHAM CITY
Monsters

THE GARGOYLE GRINCH

A COZY CHRISTMAS MONSTER ROMANCE

MOTHAM CITY MONSTERS

BOOK TWO



LILITH STONE

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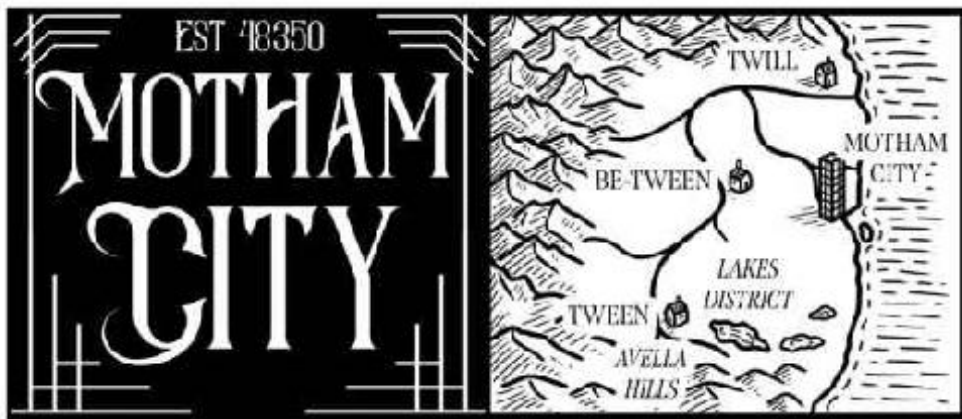
CONTENT WARNING

The Gargoyle Grinch is a low angst, sweet and cozy monster romance with a guaranteed Happy Ever After. It does however include mentions of parental death, and issues relating to post traumatic stress syndrome. There is a fight scene, and mention of blood, but it all resolves pretty quickly.

There is frequent cussing and explicit sex scenes.

If any of the above is likely to upset or offend, please look after your reading experience and go no further.

For all other monster lovers, I hope you enjoy your visit to Gotham City and Grayson and Maisie's journey into love!



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CHAPTER 1



S now had started to fall as Maisie hurried through the doors of Pixie Pie's Home Help services.

Inside, a number of consultants were on the phone organizing placements. One was talking to a goblin who was giving a loud run-down of their house-sitting experience.

Maisie took a seat and waited.

She really needed a well-paid Christmas job. She'd hoped to have more money saved towards her project by now. And working over Christmas didn't worry her because this time of year was full of sad memories and loneliness. She'd long ago stopped pretending that one of her many foster parents would invite her to stay for the holiday season. At least working helped her to forget that most people were spending Christmas with their loved ones.

After another five minutes the goblin left, grumbling about being offered a house-sit in Motham rather than one of the elite human towns, which the consultant said were reserved for elves and fae folks only.

"Discrimination," the goblin muttered as it walked past. "You'll be alright. Humans always are," it grunted in Maisie's direction.

Maisie could have pointed out that not all humans had it easy, and that, unlike the goblin, she was quite happy to take a job in Motham City. But instead, she just smiled and said, "Seasons greetings."

The goblin didn't answer.

With an attitude like that it was hardly surprising the goblin didn't get the placement they wanted, Maisie decided. A moment later the consultant looked up and beckoned to her. Maisie jumped up, letting her smile spread. Always look keen, professional, amenable. That's how she made sure she got employment.

"You've got a great work record," the consultant said after she'd perused Maisie's résumé. "What kind of placement are you looking for?"

"I'm happy to take anything."

"Any monsters you prefer not to work with?"

"All monsters are fine." Maisie had worked for quite a number of monster species over the years, and just like humans, she'd learned they were a mixed bag. "I'm happy to do whatever's required—housekeeping, cooking, caregiving. I'm not at all fussy."

"That's great."

"I'm saving for a special project," Maisie added brightly. It always helped to remember her end goal at times like this.

"Well, that's good. Christmas rates are much higher, of course."

Maisie nodded.

The consultant scrolled through the jobs on her screen. "Can you work Christmas Day?"

"Absolutely."

"New Year's too?"

"No problem."

The woman's brows pleated slightly as she cast Maisie a look. "No family commitments?"

Maisie was used to this question. "None."

"Okay." The woman nodded. "How long are you available for?"

"As long as required."

“Fantastic!” The consultant smiled brightly. “Well, I do have something that’s just come in. It could be perfect for you. Not many people on our books have the credentials for it. Great pay, too.”

Maisie sat up straight, her spirits soaring. “That’s fantastic.”

“It’s for a gargoyle.”

“No worries.” Gargoyles were one of the few species she’d never worked for, but there was a first time for everything. How difficult could it be?

“He’s quite an important figure in Motham,” the woman explained. “Not that you’d likely have heard of him, he keeps well below the radar—or, more precisely, above it.”

“Am I allowed to know who?” She hoped at least they didn’t do anything illegal. She had her standards.

“He runs the biggest security business in the city.”

“Oh, right.”

“His name’s Grayson Lightfoot. His company is called Tower Security. Not many people have heard of it because he works behind the scenes for the Motham authorities. I understand he’s a very good operator.”

“Why does he need a Christmas housekeeper?”

“According to the request, his usual housekeeper is heading home to family over the mountains, and he requires someone to cook meals, keep the place neat and tidy. Other than leaving out his food, on no account does he want to be disturbed. He’ll be working from home for the whole period.”

That suited Maisie just fine. Sharing Christmas bonhomie with her boss wasn’t necessary. “That’s not an issue for me,” she said briskly. “I’m looking for a job, not a Christmas party.”

“A perfect fit then.” The woman beamed. “I’ll let his housekeeper know straight away. We’ll call you as soon as I hear back. But I’d say you’ve almost definitely got the position.”

“Thank you,” Maisie said and left with a spring in her step.

Outside in the thickening snow, she wandered around the main trading area of Motham. Everywhere was bustling with Christmas shoppers. A large orc tucked a Christmas tree easily under his arm and strode along the street, holding the hand of his young son, who was kicking up the fresh snow. Lovers strolled hand in hand, staring in the shop windows. It was a vibrant scene. Every year there were more humans and monsters mixing in The Hole In The Wall district of the city. Maisie felt a sudden longing to buy a present for someone, but there was not a single person she could give a gift to. Her family were all dead.

Swallowing a lump of sadness, she decided to head home.

Within an hour, she got the call from Pixie Pie’s telling her she’d got the job.

She would start on Monday. Five days before Christmas.

And the pay was even better than she’d expected.

In her tiny apartment in an upgraded tenement building just outside Motham City’s walls, Maisie went over to her accounts book on the dining table. Carefully, she added in the sum she would be earning to her savings and smiled. After this job, she’d have almost enough to apply for a loan to start her drop-in center.

A warm glow filled her heart to think that after her own unhappy childhood, she would soon be able to set up a safe place for troubled kids in Motham. Human or monster, she wouldn’t discriminate.

Maisie just wanted them to have a better start in life than she’d had.

And if Grayson was a grumpy old gargoye who didn’t like to socialize, well, all the better.

Seemed like she’d have one thing in common with her new boss, at least: neither of them liked Christmas.

CHAPTER 2



“I’ll be off now sir, if that’s okay.”

Grayson swiveled his head to see Cedric, his housekeeper, standing shivering on the rooftop next to him.

He knew he should say something seasonal and cheery because Cedric was heading home to stay with his family, but he was feeling grumpier than usual today. There was a Christmas parade happening, and apart from the fact everyone was having fucking fun, it also meant there would be more petty crime to watch out for.

Even with his X-ray vision, the sheer number of people, the bright lights, and the decorations made it hard to catch irregularities that could be suspicious.

He managed a grunt to Cedric, who was clearly dying to get off the rooftop as he fidgeted from one hoof to the other, pulling his scarf tighter round his goatee beard.

“So—um, your fill-in housekeeper will be here in an hour.”

“Remind me of their name,” Grayson said, turning back to watch the crowded streets below.

“Maisie.”

“Sounds like a bloody cat. What are they, goblin? Elf?”

“Human, sir. “

Fuck. “I thought I said no humans.”

Let alone a *female* human, by the sound of that name.

He turned and fixed Cedric with a hard stare. The faun's ears flicked nervously. Snow was gathering on Cedric's thick pelt. With his brindled winter coat fully established, you'd think the guy would be able to cope, but no, he didn't like the cold. Always angling to turn on the heating.

Fauns just weren't as hardy as they used to be.

Come to think of it, monsters in general were going soft, Grayson reckoned. Which left more room for the feral gangs to cause problems.

As for the cold, frankly Grayson couldn't give a shit. He didn't feel it. Except when he made the mistake of coming inside and shifting back into his flesh form. Not that he did that often, because becoming flesh was simply too unpleasant. Which made heading up Tower Security the perfect job. Crouched up on the roof all year, he could be impervious to the weather, and even in summer the breeze here was cool. The fact he rarely had to meet people other than his staff was an extra bonus.

"Sir?" Cedric's reedy voice brought him back to the human housekeeper issue. Grayson's brows pulled down as he turned and glowered at the faun.

Cedric had his cringy look happening. "We did discuss it, sir."

"When?"

"When we got the one and only applicant for the job."

Grayson grunted. "I'd forgotten." Or rather, he'd *chosen* to forget. He wanted to forget Christmas. Period.

Cedric started bleating nervously. "She's got lots of experience and excellent references and she knows to keep out of your way. She'll just cook meals and keep the place neat and tidy. I did tell you, sir."

Grayson shrugged. Really, why did it matter what species they were? He'd be up here all hours anyway. Christmas, with its memories, was not a time when he chose to come inside the house. No way did he want to thaw out and risk feeling shitty as hell.

“She knows the deal, right? She’s not expecting me to pull freakin’ Christmas crackers and wear a fucking paper crown, is she?”

“Absolutely not sir.”

Grayson sighed heavily. “Okay then, off you go.”

“Thank you sir.” The faun bowed his horns and scuffed his hooves until he’d backed his way to the stairwell. “I’d, erm, say have a good Christmas, but I know—”

“Just go, Cedric, before I change my mind and make you stay.”

“Yes, sir.” Cedric turned on his hooves and disappeared, the metal door clanging behind him.

With a huff, Grayson resumed watching the scene below. The streams of people crowding through the Hole In The Wall district of Motham looked like tiny ants from up here. It was harder to keep this area policed since the hole had sprung up between the human world and Motham some ten years ago. Now that folks, both monster and human, could move around with ease, the threat from feral species who lived in the wastelands to the north of the city had increased significantly.

So far though, since the authorities had strengthened the force field, there hadn’t been too many incidents this Christmas.

Grayson stared down gloomily, his red eyes scanning the scene, and gradually time lost its meaning. Which was exactly how he liked it. Being engrossed in his work stopped him from feeling, thinking. As he watched, for some reason his gaze fixated on a figure hurrying away from the crowds. There was nothing untoward about them really, except they were moving up the hill toward his house. His vision homed in. A short human in a big duffle coat with a woolly hat on her head and a rucksack on her back. He scaled in closer. The human had blonde hair the color of corn sticking out from her rosy-cheeked face, and a red scarf with reindeers on it wound round her neck.

As she kept moving in the direction of Grayson's turreted home, he had to lean further out over the roof to keep her in his sights. She trotted briskly along his street, then stopped and looked up at the house.

Grayson watched her intently. Her eyes when he zeroed in were large, and the brightest blue, giving her an air of innocence. She pulled a piece of paper from her pocket, scanned it, and then, pushing back her shoulders, made her way up the steps.

Crap. It was Maisie whatever-her-fucking-name-was. Early.

The doorbell chimed.

Hadn't Cedric given her the entry code? Grayson cursed under his breath.

Letting her in meant taking the four flights of stairs through the interior of his home. Inside were temptations, including the temptation to light a fire and luxuriate in the big bed that he never allowed himself to sleep in these days.

Alternatively, he could just swoop down from the roof, show her the code, then fly back to his position, thus avoiding any contact with the interior.

When the doorbell sounded again, longer and more insistent, Grayson muttered a curse under his breath, spread his wings, and pitched off the roof. A moment later, he landed almost soundlessly on the pathway behind the human.

He was good at not making a disturbance, thanks to years of covert operations, but she must have sensed his shadow and turned quickly to face him.

A little squeal escaped her, and her eyes flew wide.

As if she'd never freakin' seen a gargoyle before.

"Didn't Cedric give you the code?" he growled, taking in her pink nose and bright blue eyes. Up close they were disconcerting for some reason, so he flicked his gaze up to the blonde hair sticking out from under the rim of her beanie.

“Oh—um, no he said to just ring the bell and that someone would let me in.” She cocked her head to one side now, looking like she’d got the measure of the situation. “Are you Grayson?”

After years of Cedric steadfastly calling him sir, it was a surprise to hear his name on this female’s lips. Her voice was soft, melodic. And his name sounded good on her lips. Human lips.

Grayson felt a tiny tingle in his chest and stiffened.

“Yes, I am, and I can’t hang around. I need to get back to my post,” he grumbled.

“Oh, where’s that?”

Like, durhhh, human. “On the roof.”

“Is that where you just appeared from?”

“Yes,” Grayson gritted out. Her questions and her wide blue eyes and her rather pretty mouth in her round face were irritating him to the core.

He took the steps up to her level. Flicked open a panel next to the front door. “Here—two, eight, three, zero. Never share it.”

“No, of course I won’t.”

Standing next to her, he was aware his presence was probably quite menacing, but unlike a lot of humans, she didn’t shift away from him in fear. He knew he was huge in stature, his muscles ripped to a point that looked almost impossible, that his features were unfriendly, hostile even. It did tend to put a lot of folks off. But her energy was calm, a little bundle of quiet confidence in her duffle coat.

He punched in the code and the double doors swung open.

She turned and looked up at him. “Aren’t you coming in?”

“No,” he muttered. “On duty.” He patted the walkie-talkie fixed to the wide belt of his cargo pants.

Her eyes panned over his naked chest, her expression impossible to read. “Don’t you need a coat?”

He huffed a harsh laugh at that. “I’m made of stone.”

She bit her lower lip, but there was a little hint of amusement playing in the cornflower blue of her eyes. “Of course, silly me.”

Grayson ruffled his wings impatiently. “Go inside. Your room’s on the first floor, Cedric will no doubt have left you instructions about every goddamn thing. I’m off.”

He unfurled his wings now to almost their full breadth and this time her mouth did fall open at the sight. As he crouched down, ready to make the sharp upward flight to the top of the building, she called out, “Just one more thing.”

Heck, this woman was going to annoy the shit out of him if she kept this up. “What?” he almost snarled.

“What time would you like dinner?”

CHAPTER 3



Maisie jumped as the big iron front door clanged shut behind her.

She'd been taken off guard seeing a huge gargoyle looming behind her, but she was used to getting over a shock quickly. You learned to hide your reactions when you grew up in foster homes.

In seconds, she'd taken in every detail—the sheen of his dark granite skin, the massive pecs and abs that looked like they'd been chiseled from... *yeah, Maisie, well, of course.* His wings were freakishly large and veined, almost like a bat's. And when she'd smiled in her usual I'm-your-new-employee-pleased-to-meet-you way, his features had remained hostile, his heavy brows drawn steeply down over eyes that glowed in their sockets.

Red freakin' eyes.

And monosyllabic answers to her polite questions.

There was only one thing Maisie could deduce from her new boss's demeanor.

Grayson Lightfoot was not overjoyed to see her.

Oh well, she guessed apart from taking him meals she wouldn't have to put up with his grumpy vibe.

Think of the paycheck, Maisie.

In the hallway now, she removed her rucksack, leaned it against the wall and looked around. There was a sweeping staircase and rather grand fittings and fixtures, but everything

was kind of... gray. The floor was dark, highly polished stone, the walls painted a lighter shade of gray. The rug on the floor was a thick dark gray wool with a lighter silver woven patterning. Everything looked expensive, but the whole place needed a lift.

Around the hallway were a half dozen closed doors. All painted gray.

On a hunch, she beelined for the third door to her left, and sure enough, it opened into a sparse modern kitchen. The room was decorated in shades of—not surprising—gray. On the large dark island bench she noticed a few pages of notes, stuck under a vase of flowers, their pastel mauve and yellow shades the only hint of color anywhere to be seen.

She guessed the notes were from Cedric. He'd told her he'd leave her all the details when she'd spoken to him on the phone. He'd seemed really nice, and concerned for her. He kept apologizing for his boss. "You'll find he's somewhat acerbic, but his heart's in the right place."

Acerbic was an understatement, Maisie thought now with a huff as she took off her duffle coat, unwound the scarf from her neck. Still shivering, she was glad to be wearing her thick woolly jumper and jeans. The house didn't feel like it was heated at all. Then she recalled Cedric saying, "Grayson doesn't like the house warm."

"Really, even in winter?"

"Yeah, being made of stone... well—obviously he doesn't feel the cold unless he shifts. Then he's more prone to heat and cold."

"Oh, he's a shifter?" Maisie had worked for a handful of shifters; they could be a bit temperamental.

"Of a sort." She'd sensed Cedric hadn't wanted to tell her more, but she figured she didn't need to know. She was just there to do her job, get paid, and leave.

Casting her eye over Cedric's neat handwriting, she counted thirty-seven points in total. There was also a layout of

the house, showing the plan of the other four floors. The whole floor below the roof seemed to be Grayson's apartment.

She decided to go find her room, unpack, and then come and digest her list of duties. She glanced at the clock on the wall. She had three hours. When she'd asked what time he'd like to eat, Grayson had replied curtly, "Seven pm. On the dot. Bring it to me on the roof." And then, with a flap of those huge wings, he'd disappeared.

Grabbing her rucksack from the hall now, Maisie made her way up the first flight of stairs. This was indeed a grand house, one of the older, more ornate ones close to Motham Palace itself. No doubt one of the few that had been built in the early days when Motham City formed and their leader, the gentle mothman Atholrose Motham, had helped the exiled monsters build this city.

Maisie knew the history, perhaps more than most humans. Because of her work, she'd chosen to learn about the many different species that lived in Motham. In her spare time, she'd go to Motham library, braving the bad-tempered lizard woman who ran the place. But there was no rule against humans visiting the library, so Maisie had diligently worked her way through anthropological texts on the many species that lived here. She'd only ever read sparingly on gargoyles—she'd found the number of different sub-species somewhat overwhelming.

Reaching the top of the staircase, she turned the handle onto her room and looked around. It was well-decorated, but impersonal. In fact, everything she'd seen so far was totally impersonal.

Like no one really lived here.

Unpacking, she put her few clothes in the wardrobe. She only had one reminder of Christmas that she'd brought with her, the little reindeer decoration she'd had since she was a kid. It was something to remember her gran by. She put it on the bedside table. Next, she placed her toiletries in the en suite bathroom, admiring the marble and silver taps. This was definitely upmarket accommodation for her. She didn't need

much; she wasn't one for luxury living. In fact, this was way more swish than what she was used to. In her last job, she'd worked with an old arachnid and had to squeeze herself into a small room in the attic full of his amassed books. The worst thing had been dealing with the cobwebs he trailed behind him. It took her ages to get the stuff off her clothes.

She walked back into the bedroom and looked longingly at the thick coverlet, wishing she could snuggle under it for a few minutes. It was so cold in here; she would have to layer up. Padding over to the window, she gazed down at the panorama of Motham below. It wasn't what you'd call a beautiful city—too many monsters all with their own ideas had turned it into a mishmash of architecture—but from here, with the Christmas lights strung up around The Hole In The Wall, it did look pretty.

Her meagre belongings now all put away, she went downstairs, grabbed the plan of the house from the pile of papers Cedric had left her and walked from room to room, starting on the ground floor. A formal living room greeted her first. There was a big fireplace, but no fire burning in the grate. And no Christmas decorations anywhere. Next to that was a dining hall, with a huge table and about twenty chairs. She looked at the pictures on the wall. They were all rather somber views of mountains she didn't recognize. But then, why would she? She'd never been past the mountain range herself.

Keeping it all dusted and the silverware polished would at least keep her busy.

Next, Maisie took the stairs.

On the first floor, the plan showed Cedric's room opposite hers. She peeped in. Neat as a new pin. Up she went again. More bedrooms. Empty. All with beautiful fittings but looking as if they'd never been occupied.

Maisie took the next flight of stairs.

There was only one door on the whole landing. When she opened it, she found herself in a suite. A vast bedroom with a gigantic bed in the center, much bigger than a king size. Apart from a rather ornate carved dresser, that was it for furnishings.

A huge bathroom led off the bedroom, decorated in dark granite with silver fittings. The spaces were vast; she'd never seen such a big shower alcove.

Next to the bathroom was a dressing room, as big as her own bedroom downstairs. It was filled mostly with identical pairs of cargo pants. She ran her hands along them. Below were several pairs of identical black boots, neatly lined up. A few other more formal clothes were wrapped in plastic, as if straight from the dry cleaners. Right at the back, she found a uniform. Starched, and also wrapped in plastic. An army uniform, by the look of it.

She walked back into the bedroom and moved to leave. There was nothing here that gave her a clue about her new boss.

Then she saw another door.

Maisie entered tentatively, feeling like she was somehow spying on Grayson's life. And yet, so far there had been nothing really to spy on.

This room was clearly an office. Books lined the walls. Old encyclopedias, some ordnance survey map books; very dry stuff, Maisie decided, skimming the titles. There were also some files: Employee forms, Tax, Wages.

The big wooden desk was devoid of anything except one photo in a gilt frame. Maisie looked closer.

It was a monochrome photo of Grayson in uniform, just his upper body, seated in front of a flag she didn't recognize. He was smiling—a proud, almost challenging smile. His huge shoulders were pinned back; wings folded close to his body. Maisie found her breath hitching strangely in her throat. He looked younger, by at least ten years, and very handsome, she had to admit. But still there was a tightness around his mouth, a hollowness, sadness even, in the depths of his eyes, despite his smile.

Maisie shook herself. She was probably imagining it.

She suddenly felt like she shouldn't be in here. She doubted the grumpy, aloof gargoyle up on the roof would want

her nosing around in his personal life.

With that thought, Maisie hurried out the door, closing it behind her.



The clock on nearby Motham Tower had just chimed seven when Grayson heard the door to the roof creak open. He detected—because his hearing was excellent—the pad of soft feet getting closer. The next thing he knew, he could smell shepherd’s pie, the scent of savory meat, gravy and mashed potato tantalizing his nostrils.

Had Cedric told her shepherd’s pie was his favorite?

A moment later, he sensed her standing next to him.

“I don’t suppose you have a picnic table or something similar?” Her voice was matter of fact, but again, that sweet intonation made his chest stir disconcertingly. It occurred to him that in another life, another time, he might have listened happily to her voice for hours.

Nowadays, he chose to tune out pleasant things.

Especially if that pleasantness emanated from a human female.

“I eat on my lap,” he muttered, shifting his eyes to the right without turning his head. He saw her in his peripheral vision holding a large tray.

“It’ll get cold if you don’t hurry up,” she observed.

He shrugged. He hated eating in front of people. The necessity to chew and digest meant he had to become less stone, more flesh. Which meant he shoveled food into his mouth and swallowed fast, closing off his bodily functions again as soon as he could.

He couldn’t survive without food.

So, he did what he needed to.

As for other things, well, yeah—he did what was needed on that front, too.

And then he berated himself for letting his mind go there. Was it the fact that a human female was so close? Even over the smell of the food, he could detect the warm, sweet scent of her skin.

Fuck.

He jumped as the tray suddenly landed slap bang in the middle of his lap.

Grayson recoiled, his wings unfurling slightly. “What did you do that for?”

“You said you eat on your lap. And you weren’t making a move to take it from me.”

“Cedric places the tray on the wall. I take it when he’s left,” he explained through gritted teeth. “And then I eat. Alone.” *Meaning, go.* Why couldn’t she take the hint?

“I don’t like preparing food and seeing it go cold,” she said calmly.

“I don’t like hot food,” Grayson growled.

“Right. Like you don’t like your house warm either,” she said casually. He found himself strangely speechless.

“Do you want a drink? I forgot to ask.”

His mouth watered and he felt the muscles of his stomach relax, soften. He was hungrier than he’d thought. And he needed her gone. So he said the first thing that came to mind. “There’s cola in the fridge, lots of ice.” He could sense her blue gaze on him. Grayson flicked a covert glance. Her eyebrows had elevated just enough to show she expected something more. “Please,” he grunted.

“No problem, I’ll go get it,” she replied sweetly.

As she walked away, he found himself turning and staring after her departing figure.

She was short and curvy, and her ass was satisfyingly round in those jeans, the denim tight around her thighs. She

was wearing Converse and a baggy dark green jumper, her hair tied into a loose ponytail, which bounced down her back in golden waves.

There was nothing about her appearance that shouted sexy, and yet...

Something stirred in his groin.

Gods, his stomach and his freakin' cock fleshing out in unison. Not good. Grayson tightened his muscles into hard stone, then looked down at his food in exasperation. Now he'd have to wait another five minutes for things to relax again before he could eat.

And as for the other *thing* going on below his waist... He shifted and the tray nearly tipped.

With a curse, Grayson righted it. Reminded himself of the last time he'd felt anything for a human woman.

A total disaster.

A sudden wave of guilt and self-disgust threatened to unravel his self-control.

His jaw ticking, he turned his attention back to the landscape below him. At least if he focused on watching for crime, he'd be okay.

The smell of the food she'd cooked wafted up to his nostrils and he felt his stomach gradually unknot. He was just about to take a bite when he realized she was back, holding out a glass of cola.

He took it from her, their fingers brushing. Hers were almost as cold as his.

Now Grayson did look, straight at her.

Her upturned nose was pink tipped, her teeth chattering, and her full mouth was blue tinged.

As if on cue, snowflakes started to fall, dusting her hair in white. He had the odd urge to wipe one off her cheek. "Go inside," he ordered brusquely. "And next time wear a coat."

"Sure. Will there be anything else?"

“No.”

“What time would you like breakfast?”

He shrugged. “I don’t eat breakfast. You can bring me a black coffee. Mid morning. I sleep from early light for a few hours.”

She cast a glance around, as if wondering where. Her teeth were chattering so loudly now he could hear them clunking together.

“Just go, woman,” he muttered. “The last thing I need is you catching a chill.”

“Thank you. G-g-goodnight then, G-Grayson.” Hugging her arms around herself, she turned and left.

This time Grayson didn’t look. He registered she’d gone by the clang of the stairwell door.

No fucking way was he going to risk looking at her ass again.

CHAPTER 4



When Maisie woke up, she poked her face out from under the covers and watched her breath snake toward the ceiling.

She'd slept with her fluffy dressing gown over her pajamas. Last night she'd optimistically tried to have a shower to warm up, but the water had been icy—which shouldn't have been a surprise, of course. Cedric's copious notes had given her not a single clue on how to turn on the hot water. No way was she going to risk asking Grayson and cop more of his grumpiness, so instead, she'd wrapped up in her dressing gown and put on two pairs of socks before hopping into bed.

It had taken ages to fall asleep. For some reason, all she could think of was that black and white photo of young Grayson Lightfoot, with his confident smile. The neatly pressed uniform that hung in the back of his dressing room.

She'd learned a few bare facts about him from Pixie Pie's Home Help Services. He was ex military, apparently, but left of his own volition and started Tower Security seven years ago. It had fast become the most successful private security company in Motham. Was that how he'd amassed his wealth, she wondered? Because this house was worth serious money.

Shame he couldn't afford heating. Maisie frowned, suspecting there was another reason, one she didn't yet know.

It's none of your business.

With that thought, she steeled herself. She was here to earn money, she reminded herself. Good money too, which would

bring her significantly closer to making her dream a reality. And right now, she needed to get her sorry ass out of bed and start the day.

But she really, *really* needed a shower.

And the only guy around here who would know how to heat the water was Grayson.

Reluctantly, Maisie threw off the covers and padded over to the window. Ice had formed on the inside, but she scraped it away and looked out. The sky was radiant blue, and a thick blanket of snow lay on the ground, turning Motham into a fairyland.

Even the factory chimneys to the east side of town looked hauntingly beautiful, as if for a moment in time their pollution had been stilled by a big snowy hand.

She turned and looked at the clock on her bedside table. Grayson said he slept until late morning, and it was only 7 am, but she was desperate for warm water on her skin, a good wash, maybe some heating on in the house. She looked longingly at the overhead ceiling vents; they should be spilling out warm air right now. She even went and stood on tiptoe and put her hand up to check. Nope. Nothing.

She guessed there was no harm in going up on the roof and seeing if Grayson was awake. Perhaps she could bribe him with a coffee in return for a hot shower.

A sudden image of that huge, ripped body taking a shower shot unbidden into her head, her mind imagining how the water would glisten off his dark skin, the ripple of those huge pecs and abs. Maisie's breath momentarily hitched.

She scrubbed the image from her mind real fast, shoved on her slippers over her socks, and made her way out of her room and up the stairs to the rooftop.

Pushing open the heavy door, the sun reflecting off the snowy roof blinded her momentarily, its warmth on her face a pleasant feeling. Maybe if she stayed up here, she'd thaw out properly; but then, that would mean spending the day with Grayson.

Neither of them would relish that.

So where was he?

Not at his sentry post—at least, she guessed that's what the stone column he'd been crouching on last night was.

She took a stealthy little circuit of the rooftop, wishing she'd put on sturdy shoes as she felt the snow melting through the soles of her slippers. Still no sign of Grayson. It wasn't until she'd done a full circle and got to the other side of the stairwell that she saw it, a kind of rough shelter made out of corrugated iron. She tiptoed up to it and peered into the dim interior.

Even though she was half expecting to see him, the sight of Grayson fast asleep made her heart accelerate.

She stepped back, nearly lost her balance in the powdery snow and silenced a squeak. When the gargoyle didn't stir, she crept closer.

He was lying on his side, one wing tented over his body so that only his head and part of his bulky shoulders were visible.

Asleep, he looked less hostile. She guessed it was because those red eyes were closed. Maisie took another tiny step forward, marveling at his long eyelashes. Were they made of stone too?

The darkness of his skin had this amazing sheen to it, almost glimmering as it stretched over his wide cheekbones and strong jaw. His bone structure really was incredible, and the mouth that had been a thin hard line yesterday had softened and filled out in sleep. She realized one of his hands was tucked under his cheek, the claw tips showing. An odd juxtaposition of human fingers and gargoyle claws. It was strangely vulnerable, endearing almost.

You could see the remnants of that smiling young cadet in his face.

As she watched, fascinated, his brow furrowed, then he grimaced as if dreaming, and his claws suddenly unfurled, his big body twitching.

This wasn't a dream, it was a nightmare.

"No, fuck, no..." The words sounded like they were wrung from him, his outer wing flapping wildly as his huge body arched. The face that had been so peaceful earlier was now contorted.

Maisie let out an involuntary little scream and jumped back, this time toppling and landing on her butt in a thick pile of snow.

The next thing she knew, her dressing gown was bunched in a huge, clawed fist, and a very angry face jutted close to hers.

"What the fuck were you doing?"

"I—I—" Maisie stuttered, realizing her feet were completely off the ground now and her body was skimming a very hard torso. The rage-filled red eyes blinked, then as if he'd suddenly come to his senses, Grayson released her.

Maisie dropped what felt like a couple of feet to the snow.

"Don't creep up on me again." He passed a hand over his eyes, and when he blinked at her again, the rage had gone. His lips slid into a hard, tight line.

For a moment there he'd looked almost remorseful, but then grumpy Grayson was back. She guessed an apology was out of the question.

"What are you doing here?" He glanced around, sweeping a big, clawed hand across his ebony hair as he glanced at the sky. "It's only six minutes past seven."

He could tell the exact time just by looking at the sun. Impressive.

"I thought you might like breakfast—or a coffee, or something."

He scowled at her. "I told you—" His eyes travelled to her fluffy blue dressing gown, and he frowned.

Maisie steeled herself. "Truth is—" she gulped, "the water is freezing cold, I couldn't take a shower last night, and Cedric

didn't leave any instructions on how to turn on the water heater. I thought you might know... and maybe how to work the heating in the house, too."

His scowl got heavier. "We only heat the house if it's freezing cold."

That made Maisie laugh, somewhat hysterically. "How much colder would you like it to be?" she said, casting an obvious glance around the snow-covered roof.

He chewed on his lower lip, still frowning. "Okay. I'll show you," he muttered. "Follow me."

With that, he stomped off toward the stairwell. Maisie followed, watching him squeeze his wings tight to his big body to fit himself through the door. He took the stairs remarkably quickly; she almost had to run to keep up with him. In the kitchen, he opened a wall cabinet to show a panel full of switches.

A big claw flicked one on impatiently.

"Hot water." He flicked another. "Central heating. Two hours max in the morning, two at night. That's it. The rest of the day, put on more clothing."

He gave her another once-over, his lips twitching slightly. "You're pretty well padded."

"Well, *thanks*," Maisie bit back. Okay, so her curves were verging on what some people would describe as plump, but mostly she was okay with that. She had better things to think about than her appearance.

But still, she did sometimes get sensitive. Like now.

His glance, she realized, had slid down her body again. Did she imagine it or had his eyes lingered on her breasts?

When his red gaze snapped back to her eyes, his face seemed darker. "I meant well-covered in clothing. I don't make insulting comments to women."

"Right, you just think them." Goddess above, had she actually said that out loud?

“No.” He slammed shut the cabinet. “I would never think that of you.” Something in his words, some deeper, huskier edge made something swirl low in Maisie’s belly.

She tugged her dressing gown around herself. “Thank you for doing this. How long will the water take to warm up?”

“Five minutes. The system’s state of the art,” he said coldly. Yes, she’d definitely imagined the huskiness in his voice, the glance at her tits. “That’s great, thank you. I really appreciate it.”

Grayson huffed and made his way to the door, his wings barely fitting through.

Just before he disappeared, he said without turning round, “When you’ve showered, bring me a black coffee. One sugar.”

CHAPTER 5



Grayson spent the morning even grumpier than usual. He kept telling himself it was because he'd been woken up early by the annoying little human.

Or was it because she woke him in the middle of that recurring fucking nightmare?

Or the fact that that she'd demanded—okay, *asked*—if she could have some heat?

He guessed it wasn't her fault she had no idea what warming up did to him.

Then again, it could have been her breasts that annoyed the hell out of him. Because even wrapped up in that thick fluffy dressing gown, they'd looked tantalizingly soft and inviting.

Gods in heaven. Lack of sleep was tripping his switches.

That and his PTSD.

He'd read enough about post-traumatic stress disorder to know that poor sleep worsened the symptoms. But what did you do when your dreams were littered with dark memories—and then you woke, and grabbed your new employee human practically by the throat? Only to see that little round face with its chipmunk cute cheeks and wide blue eyes staring at you, terrified.

But it wasn't just fear, was it? Something else had stirred him up. Something about her soft curves against his cold stone chest.

Admit it, you wanted to bury your head in those tits.

Grayson groaned.

He'd had a coffee about an hour ago. Maisie had brought it up, handed it to him wordlessly, and he'd wanted to apologize. Which he didn't, of course. She shouldn't have been there, creeping up on him.

But now he really wanted another.

Finally, he messaged her from his cell. "Coffee. Same as before, one sugar." He hesitated, added, "Thanks."

When she arrived some five minutes later, he nodded his head toward the low parapet wall. "Put it over there." He didn't want to risk her touching him again. Even her fingertips as she handed him the cup would be too much for him this morning.

He fidgeted, adjusted his cargo pants. Cleared his throat. "Sorry about earlier." So much for not apologizing.

"Which bit?"

He cast her a sidelong glance. She was smiling that benign smile that told him nothing. But behind it there was a quiet confidence, and yeah, he kind of liked that about her.

Ruefully, his lips hitched. "Manhandling you. When I woke up. You surprised me, that's all."

"That's okay." His peripheral vision picked up her shrug. "I guess you're probably always a bit on guard, with your work and all. Even when you're asleep."

He hesitated. A sudden urge to tell her something—not a lot, just some small facts about his past—took him by surprise.

No fucking way, man.

He thinned his lips, nodded. "Yeah, you could say."

He sensed her perusing him, turned his head, and eyed her briefly. Her soft mouth was parted, her head on one side, and he noticed she was wearing that stupid red reindeer scarf.

"You can't still be cold."

"Like you told me to, I've turned the heating off."

“Oh. Right. Good,” Grayson muttered.

“Your house looks amazing. But it’s a bit like a mausoleum in there.” She hesitated. “Do you ever... spend time inside?”

He grabbed his coffee off the wall, clasping it tightly with his claws. “I used to.”

“What changed?”

He stared down over Motham, as if somewhere in the crowded streets there lay an answer. In truth though, he knew the answer lay much further back, in a different place and time. “Work got too busy,” he said gruffly. “Business took off and I’m a workaholic. So, yeah. Make of that what you will.”

“Do you police the whole of Motham?”

“Not me personally. Me and my team. The Motham police force had a lot of corruption problems, too many shady deals going on with ferals, so they decided to sub-contract some of the work to a neutral third party while they focused on clearing things up internally. I had a good track record, so...”

“From the army?”

His head snapped to look at her. “How do you know that?”

“Oh, just... I was given some basic info about you before I took the job.”

His shoulders relaxed. It would only be the usual promo stuff he put out. “I did my time. Chose not to renew my contract.” He paused, resisted the strange urge to explain why. “So anyway, when this option came up, I decided to run my own show, and that’s how Tower Security started.”

“Do you have many people working for you?”

“About twenty now. Mainly gargoyles. A few foot patrol, orcs mostly.” He stood up to his full height and she didn’t back away, which he found oddly pleasing. Her short curvy body had a solidity to it. Like she wouldn’t move away if he... He put all thoughts of those spectacular tits and her cute round ass cheeks firmly out of his mind. “Talking of which, I should

have told you earlier, but I've got the team leaders coming for a planning meeting in a couple of hours."

"Would you like me to bring up lunch?"

A smile shaped his lips; it was good not needing to ask. It was like having Cedric here, only she was more attractive. "Yeah, actually."

"What would you like?"

"Rolls with salami, cheese, pickles, you know, soft drinks. Energy food."

"A few bags of snacks?"

"Sure. Why not? Monsta-bites, maybe." He felt like an idiot asking for the cheesy flavored baked snacks, shaped like monsters. Kids junk food. But they were his weakness.

"I like those too." Her smile widened, making those cute cheeks bunch up toward her twinkling eyes. She wasn't beautiful, but hell, he'd had enough of beautiful humans and their empty promises.

He kind of liked her energy. That was all it was. And apart from the guys he employed—and, grudgingly, sometimes Cedric when he wasn't being a nervous little asshole—he didn't like many creatures in this sad, fucked up world.

"How many should I cater for?"

"Four gargoyles, an orc and me."

"So six in total then. No problem, count it as done. I'll go shopping now and be back well in time."

As the metal roof door clanged behind her, Grayson picked up his coffee and sipped it.

He realized he was feeling a little more okay with the world. Well, why not? The sun was shining, and if he ignored the twinkling lights on Motham Palace and the huge Christmas tree, he could pretend it was just another winter day.

Quite a pleasant one, actually.



The supermarket was full of Christmas shoppers. Maisie got her cart and navigated around the busy aisles. A moth person was helping their aging mother, two griffin's were bickering over which mince pies to choose, and a vampire was loading their trolley with steaks.

She got some nice cold cuts and cheeses, a couple of bumper packs of Monsta-bites, bought freshly baked rolls from the bakery counter, and filled her trolley with soft drinks. She guessed gargoyles would eat and drink quite a lot, so she doubled up on what she thought they might want. After all, the huge freezer would accommodate the extra.

While she was here, she decided to check out some of the things Cedric had suggested.

Absolutely nothing resembling a Christmas dinner, he'd told her firmly. No turkey. A roast chicken would be okay, but not on Christmas day itself. Keep away from hams of any sort. Lamb with rosemary would probably be safe. Or a nice roast beef. Oh dear. She rubbed her tight forehead. This was not going to be easy.

She looked longingly at the Christmas puddings and brandy butter; she did have a bit of a thing for that combination. One set of her—slightly nicer—foster parents had owned a restaurant, and for the three years she'd lived with them, they'd always laid out a beautiful spread. Those Christmases had been okay. Until they'd given her away because their work got too busy, As Lena, her foster mom, had said, "Sorry sweetheart, but business must come first."

Maisie had gotten used to being put last.

Until finally, she'd learned to put herself first.

Looking at her stacked trolley, Maisie guessed she had enough for now. Cedric had left her a credit card to use, so she got it ready and waited in a long line to pay.

The woman behind her, a rather bedraggled looking she-wolf with long straggly hair, started to cough, a nasty hacking sound that Maisie hoped was a smoker's cough. Then she sneezed. Maisie could almost see the spittle particles in the air. She edged away. Why didn't the wolf wear a mask? They came in all shapes and sizes these days.

The last thing Maisie needed was to catch something. Especially while living in that giant ice box of a house.

She paid for her groceries and hurried out as the she-wolf continued to snuffle and cough behind her.

Back home, she made light work of arranging the lunch platter. She was getting used to the kitchen now, and despite looking sparse it was a delight to work in. Plenty of bench space, and utensils neatly laid out in the copious cupboards and drawers. Maisie liked cooking; most of her early jobs had been helping out in café kitchens. They weren't well paid, but she'd learned a lot about food prep.

And at least after she'd started working, there had been no more awful foster parents to deal with. Through her youth support worker, she'd found her own little cheap apartment. Tiny and rough as guts, but she'd made it hers. She could sew, so she'd made her own curtains and cushions out of scraps, found second-hand furniture at flea markets. All on a shoestring budget so she could save for her long-term goal of helping troubled kids.

She'd lost both her parents in a tragic air crash when she was a baby, then her beloved grandma had died when she was just five years old. Maybe if that hadn't happened, her whole life would have looked very different. Maybe she would have trained in a profession—still not an easy thing for a human woman to do. The Counsel of Towns decreed women should be the backbone of families, raise the children, and human towns like Tween certainly conformed to that. But Maisie's family came from Twill, where things weren't so strict, and women often traveled over the mountains to study.

Her grandparents had made sure her mother had that opportunity in a city thousands of miles away. Her mom had

met her dad there when they were both training to be doctors.

Maisie huffed a sigh.

If her parents hadn't been so caring of others... maybe they wouldn't have died.

A tightness restricted her chest suddenly, and she abruptly put a stop to her thoughts. No use wishing things were different. She had to look to the future, not get lost in what might have been.

The platters now ready, she glanced out the window to see a big shadow fly past. Then another. And another.

Running over, she saw a whole group of gargoyles launching off from the garden path—up to the roof, she guessed.

The next moment, the doorbell chimed.

When Maisie opened the front door an orc stood there, big and attractive, her dark green hair tied up in a bun and her tusks neat and small on either side of her mouth. She was wearing khaki pants like Grayson's, and a big fur-lined parka.

“Hi there, I'm Katrina.” She clasped Maisie's hand in a firm shake, her eyes already moving toward the stairs as she strode in. “I'm here for the meeting. Can I make my way up?”

“You know where to go?”

“Yeah, I've been here before.” Katrina hitched her gun belt on her pants and took the stairs two at a time. “Nice to meet you,” she called back over her shoulder.

“Nice to meet you too—” But the orc had already disappeared.

Masie went back to the kitchen, put everything on a tray and waited for Grayson to message her.

CHAPTER 6



Grayson found he was almost smiling as he farewelled Matt, one of his senior team of gargoyles.

“Guess I won’t say happy Christmas.” Matt knew Grayson hated Christmas, though he didn’t know the details as to why.

“Guess I’ll allow those words this once,” he muttered.

Katrina looked at him with eyebrows raised. “What’s got into you, boss?”

To be honest, Grayson didn’t know. He just felt a little more... positive toward the world in general. Nothing to do with the presence of Maisie, of course.

He grinned, feeling sheepish, and changed the subject. “Doing anything special with Lucia?” he asked.

Lucia was a vampire. She’d un-fanged especially for Katrina, which was a huge commitment. They were engaged now, which was nice. “Well, since you’re asking, we’re going over to see her parents.”

“And where do they live?”

“In Venushka. Know it?”

Grayson stiffened. “Yeah, kind of.” He’d done service there. Cracking down on skirmishes before they threatened to spill over the mountain range. Not so far from where... he slammed his mouth shut, his good mood dissipating.

Katrina looked at him out of astute eyes. “You served near there, didn’t you?”

Grayson shook himself, smiled tightly. “A long time ago.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to recall there used to be troubles in that part of the world. It’s a nice town now.”

He nodded. “Well, enjoy—”

“—the season?”

“Yeah, the season,” he muttered.

Katrina made for the stairwell. “Nice human you’ve got helping out. How long’s Cedric away for?”

“Nearly four weeks.” A peculiar thrill passed through him. To think that for the next few weeks, Maisie would be moving around the house below, that he’d hear her soft step and look round to see her smile and her bright blue eyes, at least three times a day. More, if he kept asking for coffees. Maybe they’d share a drink together, a glass of wine...

Finally alone, he shook off the strange warmth oozing into his chest and took his post, channeling his energy through his eyes, his ears, anything but into his body. He got out his small screen and set it to the four regions of Motham to get info from his team members.

As his laser vision panned back to the cityscape, he caught sight of unusual movement. He zeroed in. *Fuck*. That didn’t look good.

Something was happening in the Hole In The Wall district. A gang of ferals had just attacked a mixed group of fae and moth kids by the looks of it.

There was no time to waste. Grayson swooped off the roof and was soon in the midst of them. One feral, a cat shifter with a scar over its eye, wielded a knife and was smashing it around with aggressive karate moves. The kids scattered, but the cat shifter grabbed one of them and held the knife to his throat. “Okay, pretty boy. Give us your cash,” the cat whined, its face scarred from previous fights, ears ragged from bites.

The fae looked terrified. As Grayson landed, a reed-thin moth boy grabbed his arm, crying and screaming. “That

thing's got a knife! Oh, don't let them kill him—please stop them.”

Grayson gently pushed the moth boy off of him. Pumping up his muscles, he jumped forward and with one twist of his fist, knocked the knife clean out of the cat shifter's paw. It yowled, jumped onto a wall and hissed at him. Grayson followed it, swiping its rump with his extended claws. The cat shifter screamed this time, flicking into human form as it scaled up the rooftops, trailing blood behind it. Grayson decided not to follow; that wound would put it out of action for a while. He picked up the knife. He'd get it claw printed by the police and hopefully they'd follow up on the gang.

Meanwhile, the moth boy and fae were clinging to each other. The moth boy sobbed hysterically, while the fae stroked his antennae and tried to reassure him.

“Thank you so much,” the fae said. The kid was wealthy, Grayson deduced from his expensive leather jacket and diamond-studded boots. It was probably what had prompted the attack. The fae looked pale and shaken, but otherwise okay.

“Do you want to go to hospital to get checked out?” Grayson asked.

“I'll be fine.” The fae directed a rueful smile at his moth boy partner, whose head was still buried in his neck, his gossamer wings trembling. “I think he needs treatment more than me.”

Grayson nodded. “No problem. Do you need me to call you a cab?”

“Don't worry. My dad's chauffeur will pick us up. And thank you so much.” The kid gave him a charming smile.

As he spoke, another fight started up outside The Right Bite café. This one wasn't so serious—a succubus squabbling with her friend after too many Christmas drinks by the look of things.

Grayson rolled his eyes. It was going to be a long afternoon.



It was getting dark as he flew home. He'd asked Matt to keep an eye on his patch while he was on the ground and now, he radioed in. "All good, I'm nearly home. You can knock off."

"Thanks." Matt sounded relieved. "I've got the in-laws coming for an early Christmas celebration. The kids are getting some presents, so you know, lots of excitement. Tina keeps calling me."

Wife, kids, family. Grayson tried not to feel bitter. "I can see most of district as I fly. Off you go mate."

"Thanks, Grayson." Matt hesitated. "And thanks for being a great boss."

Grayson huffed. He didn't like praise. He did what he did because protecting the folks of Gotham was the way he assuaged his guilt. And his team—well, they were as close as he'd get to a family of his own.

"Enjoy the-in-laws," he said gruffly.

"I wish." The other gargoyle laughed. "Moms-in-law, you know what it's like."

Grayson didn't, but he chuffed out a laugh as he ended the call and veered toward home. Home. Not really. It was a vast majestic house that he'd bought when he was nineteen with the large inheritance left from his family. He'd had ambitions then, dreams even. Dreams of having a large family, to make up for the fact that he'd lost his own. But before that, he was going for retribution, an eye for an eye, to avenge the scum who'd killed his parents, his brother and sister.

He'd been strong and determined. Bitter, but not eaten up by it. He'd still considered love a possibility; there'd been a seed of hope in his heart that one day he'd have what Matt had now. Hence the huge bedroom, and the extra rooms—for kids, of course. And a wife to worship.

Suddenly he caught sight of a lit-up window on the first floor.

Maisie's room. A zing of electricity passed down his spine. No, he wouldn't look. He wouldn't...

So it made no sense that he landed on the roof of the building opposite and zoomed his laser vision in.

Closer, closer, until could see every detail of the room.

Suddenly, Maisie walked into view... wearing nothing but a towel. She'd obviously just showered. The towel was wrapped tightly around her, and her breasts formed an incredible cleavage over the top.

Grayson's breath stuttered. His belly softened, and a delicious heat pervaded his whole body.

And then she had to go and drop that freakin' towel.

Heat zapped below his belt.

His cock bucked wildly in his pants.

Because Maisie naked was something to behold.

Her belly and thighs were full and rounded, and as white as alabaster. Her tits bobbed high on her ribs, adorned with big pink areole like the most beautiful blossoms. A little patch of blonde hair rode between her legs and his tongue practically melted in his mouth as he imagined putting his head between those beautiful thighs, nudging his face deep into her sweet pussy.

His hand was already palming the hard ridge in his cargo pants.

Grayson stared unblinking as she shook out her thick blonde hair around her shoulders and walked over to the mirror. Her ass was now fully in his view as she leaned over and smoothed lotion on her face and neck. A neck he'd love to nuzzle as his hand slid between her legs. He reckoned he could almost smell her sweet scent.

And now... oh glory... she was running her fingers over those bouncy tits, stopping to stroke her nipples for a moment, her back arching slightly as if with pleasure.

She paused... then her hand snuck lower, reaching between her legs.

Grayson's cock was now a hard bar, cutting into his fly.

Barely thinking, he ripped open the zipper of his cargo pants, freed his cock and started to jerk off, imagining his cock was nudging between those beautiful white butt cheeks, going where her lucky hand was right now.

Pre-cum soaked into his fingers, warming them. *Hot* precum. That meant he was turning into flesh, even though his cock felt like granite.

Shite.

With a muffled curse, he stopped himself. Shoved his swollen length back into his pants. Zipped himself up and tried to ignore the throb pounding his balls and his seed wanting to spurt out through the head of his cock.

He couldn't do this.

He wasn't a voyeur. Gods in the heaven. He was behaving no better than the low-lives he dealt with daily.

With another fierce curse, he flung himself off the rooftop, up toward his own spot on his own roof.

For a moment, the constriction around his heart drowned out the ache in his cock and balls.

But as he breathed and focused, gradually he could feel the welcome cold sweeping over him.

The relief of turning back to stone.

And with that, his emotions cooled. Stilled. Froze.

His hard-on dissipated.

After another five minutes, he told himself he'd imagined the whole thing.

But somehow, he doubted it.

CHAPTER 7



The shower was fantastic; she'd stayed in it way longer than she should have. And once she dried herself, Maisie let herself luxuriate in the warmth of the room. Letting her towel fall onto the thick carpet, she felt more at ease in her body than she had in... forever, probably. And not just at ease. The way her thighs rubbed gently together, the full ripe feel of her breasts, wow—she felt... sexy. *Really* sexy.

Padding over to the mirror, she gazed at her reflection.

Not so bad, Maisie Brown.

She'd never hated her body like some women did, never been one to overanalyze supposed imperfections. Sure, she had a fleshy belly and hips, cellulite on her thighs. But so what. Her body had always been this functional thing that got her around. As for sex, well, she'd only had one relationship, with a human called Steve, which had been pretty lame.

You could hardly call her love life a success.

Not that she didn't fantasize. Maisie dreamed of having a partner someday, human or monster—it was immaterial, as long as they were kind. And sex, oh yeah, she'd like more of that too. She'd bought herself a vibrator and got herself off when she needed to, but even that was perfunctory, functional.

When you grew up being neglected, it was hard to know how to care for your own needs, she guessed.

But since arriving here, meeting Grayson had set off a spark inside her.

Even though he hadn't exactly been friendly toward her...

Something about that huge dark chest and massive shoulders, the line of his jaw and the ridge of muscles on his neck, the way his cargo pants sat low on his hips, exposing the v of muscles that led down to his...

The way he looked at her so intensely.

A moan escaped her.

She bit her lip, moved her hands over her full breasts, skimming her nipples, which puckered at her touch into hard little peaks.

Weird. Why did she have a sense that she was being watched? The idea was quite a turn-on. Imagining a shadowy voyeur with big wings watching her through the window made her pussy clench and the bud of her clit throb with sudden need. She trailed her hands down her body, shifted two fingers along her cleft and felt the slippery wetness of her own arousal.

The desire to lie down on the bed, spread her legs and bring herself off was so powerful and instantaneous it nearly took Maisie's breath away.

She shook it off. This was no time to rummage around for her vibrator. She needed to think about getting a meal on the table for Grayson when he returned.

Which wouldn't be long. He'd texted and said he was just cleaning up a fight downtown. She'd asked, maybe a little anxiously, if he was okay and he'd reassured her he was.

It felt kind of nice to have someone to worry about.

She glanced at her watch. Yep, he'd probably be landing on the roof any moment.

With a sigh, Maisie went and gathered her clothes.

Pleasuring herself would have to wait.



“Sounds like you had a torrid afternoon,” Maisie said cheerily as she put the tray on the wall next to Grayson.

He didn’t look at her, and her heart sank a little. He’d gone back to being grumpy as hell.

She couldn’t blame him really, his job must take its toll. Just because she’d had a little fantasy earlier that involved him didn’t mean he’d pick up on that. Or be the slightest bit interested in her.

Which, Maisie Brown, you should be very thankful of.

She peeked at his stony profile. “That bad, huh?”

He grunted, shifted his butt. That stone pillar he chose to crouch on must be uncomfortable. Maisie tried again. “I’ve made you a really nice minestrone soup.” This was her idea of winter comfort food, full of goodness. Then she made the mistake of saying, “It will warm your bones.”

“I don’t want them warmed.” Seriously, if she couldn’t see his stony profile, she’d be certain he was putting on a sooky pout.

“Well, okay, then. Whatever.” Suddenly, the smell of the soup she’d so lovingly prepared for him gave her no pleasure. Maisie decided to leave.

But just as she pivoted on her heels, his hand shot out, hard fingers gripping her wrist. “Stay.”

They both looked at his hand, and slowly Grayson unfurled his fingers, one at a time. “Please.” She thought she heard him sigh. “I could do with the company.”

Her pulse racing for some reason, Maisie pulled up one of the chairs that Grayson used for staff meetings and sat next to him.

Now they both stared out at the lights of Motham.

“You’re warm enough?” Grayson asked after a moment.

She nodded. She’d put on her scarf and her thick green jumper with her jeans. Maybe, secretly, she’d hoped he’d ask

her to stay for a bit. But now that she was here, she was kind of lost for words.

“At least eat your food,” she managed finally.

“Gods, you’re like a nagging partner.”

“Doesn’t Cedric tell you to eat?”

“Not the way you do.”

She smirked into the darkness. “I don’t want you to waste away.”

When he spoke, she could hear warmth in his voice, even though she knew he was trying for sarcasm. “I’m deeply touched.”

“Yeah, right.” She laughed. “What happened this afternoon in Motham? You were gone for hours.”

“You noticed. Now I’m doubly touched.” Maisie’s cheeks heated, and she was glad it was dark.

“A feral cat-shifter gang attacked a group of kids. Tried to steal a fae kid’s money. Then two succubi got in a squabble, both wasted after Christmas drinks.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Do you ever get hurt?”

“Not physically.” His quiet answer took her by surprise. For some reason she thought of the photo on his desk, the smile that she’d sensed rarely happened anymore. There had to be a story behind it all. Suddenly she yearned to know more about her grumpy boss.

To have him tell her his story with that deep, sexy voice of his.

Hell, what’s wrong with you, girl?

“Thanks for the soup,” he said as he reached out and took the bowl off the parapet wall. A minute later she heard a loud slurp. Then another.

Maisie burst out laughing.

The slurping abruptly stopped.

She looked sideways to see him with the spoon hovering around his mouth. “Is that why you choose to eat alone? Because of your terrible manners?” She giggled.

For a moment she thought she’d offended him, but then he said quite seriously, “When I eat, I have to relax my whole digestive tract and sometimes my lips are... inflexible when I start.”

“How do you mean?”

He huffed. “You want a gargoyle anatomy lesson?”

“I guess.” Now she wished she’d read up more on gargoyles when she went to the library.

“Okay, so much of the time I’m made of stone, obviously. But there are times when I have to shift out of that into a more... flesh-like state, I guess. Eating is one of them.”

Maisie held her breath, not daring to ask what the other things might be. Then something dawned on her, something Cedric had said. “So you shift into human form?”

“My form stays the same; I retain my wings, and my musculature, thank the gods. I don’t turn into a wimpish creature like a human.”

“Wow, thanks.”

She sensed him side-eyeing her. “Should have prefaced that with *present company excepted*.”

“If that’s your attempt at an apology, I’ll take it.” Maisie felt her cheeks bunching as she grinned.

Another slurp. “This is good. Damn it woman, you can cook. At this rate I won’t let Cedric return.”

The rush of warmth around her heart didn’t mean anything. “Well, I’m afraid you’ll have to. I’ve got other plans.”

“What kind of plans?”

She shrugged. “Just plans.”

“What? To travel, to set up a restaurant? You could.” The praise made her head spin. So did his big body so close to hers.

“I want to help troubled kids.”

“Human kids or monsters?”

“Both. I’ll help any species.”

“Help them in what way?”

Maisie didn’t know why, but his questions, asked with genuine interest, made her want to open up. “I’ve been saving money for years to open a drop-in center, like a safe place for kids who are living on the streets, or in bad care situations.”

“Why?”

“I lost my parents when I was a baby. My gran looked after me until I was five, but then she died, so I lived in foster homes until I was sixteen and could legally live alone. I know how hard it can be having nowhere to go, no one to turn to. No place where you feel safe.”

He put the bowl down on the wall in front of him, swiveled to face her on the pillar. And his scrutiny now, the deep glow of his eyes in his dark face, made her uncomfortable. But in a way that wasn’t entirely unwelcome.

“You’re saving money you earn from jobs like this to do that?”

“Yes. I’ve nearly enough to apply for a loan and I’ve got an idea of where I want it to be, in the east part of Motham.” She warmed to the topic. “There will be art and games, you know, a pool table and relaxation rooms. I’m planning to have a space for a little garden as well, because growing stuff is good for mental health. Staff-wise, there will be me and I hope a couple of counsellors. I want it to be somewhere these kids can just be, talk if they need to or simply hang out. Whatever they want.”

“That’s really something, Maisie.”

The emotion in his voice made her pulse quicken.

“What happened to your parents?” he asked.

Maisie sighed. “They were both doctors. They’d often go on voluntary medical trips into the mountain regions to help monsters who couldn’t get basic treatment. One day their plane crashed in the highlands in bad weather conditions.” She felt a lump form in her throat. “My gran brought me up after that, but then she died of cancer, so...”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well, thanks. It was a long time ago. I can barely remember my mom and dad, to be honest. Gran, I do. I miss her so much still.”

They sat in silence for long moments, Maisie cradling her hands in her lap, wishing he’d reach out and touch her while knowing that was a crazy thing to want.

Finally, Grayson said in a low voice, “I also lost my parents when I was young. And a sister and brother.”

Maisie cast his profile a surprised glance. He was leaning his chin on his tucked-up knees, staring out across the snow-covered rooftops.

“Can I ask what happened?”

She felt his energy coiling tight, his muscles bunched, and his wings stuttered as though he wanted to wind them around his body.

“They were killed in a massacre.”

Maisie’s eyes grew wide. “But... that’s impossible. There haven’t been any massacres of monsters since The Great War, and that was two hundred years ago.”

“You valley humans don’t get news from past the mountain range, do you?” There was sudden harshness in his voice.

“I—I—”

“Your politicians hide it from you. They don’t want their perfect little human world threatened.”

Maisie rubbed her forehead, confused. “But, I mean—how long ago? Where?”

“Thirty years ago,” Grayson said. “In my home town of Kefalli, over the range. My parents were the wealthiest gargoyles family on that side of the mountains. My dad owned a masonry business, building mansions for wealthy humans.”

Maisie frowned. This was like having to rewrite history. This was *recent*. “Did the humans kill them?”

He barked a harsh laugh. “No, not directly. It was ogres.”

“O-ogres? I thought they were extinct.”

“Think again, sweetheart.”

“But—I mean, I’ve never heard about them on this side of the mountain range.”

“Guess who keeps them at bay?” His voice was edged with bitterness. “Monster armies, like the one I joined. Nothing better than mercenaries really.”

“You were a mercenary?” she stuttered.

“Oh, we pretended we were honorable, but really, we were just paid troops for the humans. Cannon fodder. Only nowadays of course, it’s machine guns and grenades.” His laugh was hollow.

“Did you choose to join, or were you conscripted?”

“I was one of the fools who chose to join up. I never needed the money, I had plenty. Let’s say I had a *minor* grudge against ogres.”

“So you did it to avenge your parents’ death?”

“You got it.” He made a gun motion with two fingers at the sky, the bitterness behind the movement unmistakable.

“I’m so sorry,” she said softly.

He turned and looked at her now, his lips twisting. “Seems you and I have a few things in common.” His eyes were hollow. “Both carrying our old wounds, huh.” He got up

suddenly, unfurling his wings in a stretch. “Invisible ones, but they’re still raw, right? Now, I think it’s time you went inside.”

Maisie stood up too, quashing a sense of disappointment. He was right, she was freezing. “Have you finished your soup?”

“Nah, I’ll eat it when you’re gone.”

“But—”

“Don’t you dare say it will go cold.”

She gave a little smirk. “I could microwave it.”

“Sometimes heat has its drawbacks.” Again, there was a hollowness in his tone. “Sometimes heat can burn you, Maisie.”

She didn’t know what he meant, not really, but she sensed there was more trauma he wasn’t prepared to talk about.

She shivered again, the cold biting into her now, as if she’d never be warm again.

Nodding silently, she turned on her heels and left him alone to the darkness.

And to his thoughts.

CHAPTER 8



Where the hell was she?

Grayson stomped up and down on his rooftop.

He'd messaged her three times to bring him up a coffee. Admittedly, it was earlier in the day than usual.

After last night, he hadn't slept well, his body feeling the cold, aware that he kept morphing into skin and flesh and blood and—damn it—*feelings*.

Talking to Maisie, that was the problem. He shouldn't have opened up about his past.

He'd never told anyone—other than Cedric—this much about his life. From now on he'd keep to himself.

He punched another message into his cell. He was not going down into that house. Not in his present vulnerable state.

He waited... and waited. No reply. And no Maisie.

To hell and damnation with it. He pushed back his thick dark hair, accidentally scratching his head with a sharp claw, and winced. Normally he wouldn't feel it.

Squinting up at the steel gray sky, he could tell it was around 9 am, even though there was no sun. He'd studied the shadows cast by buildings long enough to tell the time in any circumstances.

And damn it, Christmas was only two days away.

He groaned out loud.

It was all closing in on him. And it didn't help that he couldn't seem to dislodge Maisie from his mind. He remembered her soft body shivering next to him last night, how he'd wanted to put a big wing round her to warm her up. But that would have warmed him up, too. And then... shame racked his body as he remembered his peeping tom activity the previous afternoon. The lust that had overtaken him. Even now, he felt a shift in his pants.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Grayson forced his mind away from his dick and back to his phone.

The screen remained dark. Had she left? Without telling him? Fear gripped him. Had he frightened her away? No, she hadn't seemed at all fazed by their conversation. In fact, he'd felt the sympathy emanating out of her.

And besides, she needed to earn money. For her project.

Despite himself, his lips softened into a smile as he thought about Maisie's grand plan, her determination, her desire to help others. Gods, he could have done with a place like that himself growing up. He'd been so lonely and confused, trying to get himself through life with the perfunctory care of a great aunt who was gradually dementing, and a parade of paid staff who didn't really care.

How he would have loved somewhere cozy to go to, to have been around Maisie's warm energy, played games, done some art even...

Man, you are turning soft in the head.

He glared at the blank phone screen. Why was there no Maisie with her soft step behind him, cup of steaming coffee in hand, and that lovely smile that almost made his stone toes curl with delight?

There was nothing for it. He'd have to damn well go and find her.

With a huff, Grayson jumped off his pillar and strode to the door. A waft of warm air from below met him as he opened it.

He made his way downstairs and strode into the kitchen. No Maisie. It didn't even look like she'd been in here today, everything was neat and tidy and untouched. Grayson's brows drew down. Something wasn't right, his well-honed intuition sensed it. He went from room to room now, calling her name.

He knew exactly where her bedroom was, and having found no sign of her anywhere else, this was his last place to look. He rapped on the door. No answer. Placing his ear to the door, he knocked harder. No sound of movement. Finally, he pushed the door open and poked his head in to see no sign of Maisie, the bed empty. Grayson's breath stuttered briefly at the sight of the mirror, remembering the sight of her standing in front of it, naked. His cock twitched.

For fuck's sake, man, not now.

Then he heard running water and he breathed a little easier. She must be taking a shower. He hesitated, his brow tightening as the water kept on running and the minutes passed. Finally, alarm bells ringing, Grayson strode through the bedroom and knocked on the bathroom door. No answer. After one more sharp rap, he shouldered open the door. Steam hit him in the face. At first, he couldn't see much, just shadowy shapes, then... a body on the ground.

Maisie!

She was naked, sprawled on the bathmat, damp golden hair tumbling around her shoulders. Oh, holy goddess, no.

He sprang over to her, sheathed his claws and sank down on his knees.

She moaned. He let his eyes pan down her soft body, checking for injuries. There were no cuts, no bruises he could see.

"Maisie, Maisie," he said urgently, close to her ear. "It's me, Grayson."

Another little moan and her eyelashes fluttered. His nostrils detected her warm sweet scent, and he had to shut down his awareness abruptly.

Focusing instead on making her safe, he looked around for something to cover her with. There was a fluffy towel on the nearby rail. He grabbed it, and as he draped it around her, his fingers touched her hot, damp skin, so hot it nearly burned him up. Had she got a fever, or was this from the heat in the steamy room? He had to discipline every cell in his body not to register how soft and inviting her curves were as he wrapped the towel awkwardly around her.

She stirred and moaned, and then her eyes opened blearily. “W-where am I?”

Suddenly she registered it was him and her eyes flew wide. “Oh—G-Grayson—what—?” She tried to sit up, and the towel shifted, showing a slice of cleavage. “Ow.” She put her hand to her head and lay back down. “I’ve got the worst headache.”

Grayson kept his gaze resolutely on her face “You’ve taken a tumble. You’re in your bathroom.”

“What are you doing here?”

Good question.

He grinned ruefully. “You didn’t respond when I called you. Repeatedly. So, I came to find you.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Do you need a coff—” She tried again to sit up, then moaned.

“Stop, Maisie.” He did touch her now, gently, on her upper arm. “I think you have a fever.”

“I do feel really terrible,” she admitted.

“Do you remember what happened?”

“I woke up with a really bad headache. I thought taking a shower would help. I remember going into the bathroom, getting in the shower... and then feeling weird and thinking I have to get out... and then... you...”

“You fainted, I think. I found you lying here on the bathmat. Tell me where’s it hurting.”

“Everywhere. My whole body aches.”

“Can you move, Maisie? I just want to check you didn’t hurt yourself when you fell.”

She sat up now and leaned against the bathroom cabinet, and as she did, the towel shifted even lower, exposing her nipples. She didn’t seem to notice. But he did. Grayson’s scalp prickled as he tried to keep his thoughts firmly above his waist.

“My head is pounding, but it’s the same headache I had before I passed out.”

“Here, let me look at your head.” He examined her skull, claws furled. There was no bump on her head, which was miraculous; she must have fallen onto the fluffy bathmat and somehow not done herself damage.

But she was definitely sick.

Because while she was hot, she was also shivering violently. Her cheeks were bright red and her blue eyes too bright.

“If you can dry yourself, I’ll find your clothes.” *Please, woman, cover your gorgeous tits.*

Thank the gods she now pulled the towel over herself and waved toward the door. “My dressing gown’s on the hook.”

Grayson got up and grabbed it, while she dried herself with the towel, not doing a great job. As her breasts bobbed in his peripheral vision yet again, Grayson growled, “I’ll come back in a minute.”

When she didn’t come out after two, he stuck his head around the door to find her supporting herself on the basin, the dressing gown haphazardly wrapped around her. She gave him a wan smile.

“Oh Grayson, I’m so, so sorry. I’ll be up in a minute to make your coffee.”

“No, you won’t, you are going back to bed and I’m calling the doctor.”

She shook her head, took a step forward then stumbled back against the vanity. “Ouch, this headache is something

else.”

Biting back his reservations, Grayson strode over, unfurled a wing and circled her. “Here, I’ll help you into bed.”

She nodded, biting her lip a little, but leaned into him. He registered the warmth of her body against him, tried to ignore how much he liked the feel of her nestled under his wing as they walked slowly across the room.

He eased her up onto the bed using his wing as a sling, then removed it and she fell back on the pillows with a weak laugh. “I feel as feeble as a newborn kitten.” Then she shook her head. “Grayson, I can’t just lie here. I’ve got to get shopping, cook meals.” She made to stand up, but he stopped her, and her hand flew to her head with a moan.

“I’m getting you painkillers and calling the doctor.”

“Don’t be silly, I’ll be fine shortly.”

Grayson gave her a stern look. “Stay put,” he ordered.

Maisie didn’t argue, which Grayson conceded must mean she was sick indeed. Instead, she sank back on the pillows, her blonde waves framing her flushed little face. She didn’t even seem to have the strength or inclination to pull the covers over herself, so he gently pulled them around her, patting them down. She mouthed *thank you* before closing her eyes.

As he went to find his phone to call the doctor, he refused to let himself dwell on how adorable she looked.

CHAPTER 9



“It’s definitely a virus. Lots of fluids and plenty of rest.”

Maisie felt too ill to argue as the small doctor, a species she couldn’t identify, with pointed furry ears and blue skin, wrote out a script. “This will help you get some rest and bring down the fever,” he said. “Otherwise, it’s bed rest for you until the fever has gone, young lady.”

Behind him, she could see Grayson nodding.

“But I—I can’t, I’m here to look after Grayson,” she said, trying to struggle up to a sitting position, then giving up as her head pounded.

“You need to look after yourself,” the doctor said. “I’m sure Mr Lightfoot will cope.”

Over the doctor’s head, Grayson gazed at her, his eyes no longer red, she realized with surprise, but a shade of gray, like clouds just before it rained. She tried not to stare at him, because altogether he seemed *softer*, though that might just be her blurry vision. He was still buffed; his skin was still that deep granite color, but his energy seemed different. “You heard the doctor, Maisie,” he said now, and even his voice had lost its hard edge. Maisie decided she must be hallucinating, because his tone almost felt like a caress, and when his lips tipped into a smile, she felt... safe. Cared for.

By Grayson Lightfoot.

Yep, definitely hallucinating.

To offset the strangeness of this turn of events, she tried to protest. “But... your meals, coffees...?”

“I’m not completely helpless. I’ll be able to fend for myself—and look after you.”

Maisie tried to argue, but it came out like a whimper of assent.

It seemed the tables were turning, and she felt too sick to do anything about it. She had to admit, the thought of Grayson looking after her made her feel even more hot and limp. For very different reasons.

Maisie pulled the covers up to her chin and closed her eyes.

A moment later she heard Grayson and the doctor leave the room, talking in low voices. “It should pass in a day or two. Chicken and vegetable broth will help.”

As she drifted off, Maisie did manage to wonder whether Grayson would have a clue how to make chicken and vegetable broth...

She must have slept, because some time later, she was startled by the feel of a cool hand on her brow.

“Mmmmm.” Her eyelids fluttered, too heavy to open.

“I’ve brought you a drink. Well, actually, a choice of drinks.”

The mattress indented heavily, almost tipping her sideways. And when she opened her sore eyes, there was Grayson, sitting on the bed next to her. The color of his eyes still reminded her of soft clouds on a rainy day, making him so much more handsome. Not a good thing to contemplate when he was sitting so close, even in her current state.

His lips quirked as he pointed to three drinks on a small tray next to the bed.

“Plain water, lemonade, or herbal tea. Take your pick.”

Maisie realized she was thirsty enough to drink all three of them. “Oh, the lemonade first.”

“Madam’s wish is my command.” He handed her the glass and she guzzled it thirstily.

“Why are your eyes a different color?” she asked weakly when she’d finished.

He looked almost put-out. “They are?”

“Yes, they’ve turned gray.” She sank back on the pillows. “Why is that?”

He shrugged. “Happens sometimes when I shift.”

“Oh, suits you...” Somehow she sensed he wasn’t telling her the full story but it was too hard to keep talking. Maisie’s eyelids drooped and she dozed off.

For the rest of the morning she was aware of Grayson’s big shadow coming and going, checking on her, fluffing up her pillows, bringing her drinks, and asking if she needed food. She wasn’t at all hungry, she just needed to sleep, but it felt good somehow, knowing he was around.

At one stage, when he put a cool palm on her forehead, she found herself wishing he’d stroke that big hand all over her body. Goddess! The things fever did to your brain.

She must have mumbled something because he said, “Just checking in. I’ll leave you to sleep some more. I’ll be back later.”

She roused herself to ask drowsily, “Are you going to work?”

“Nope. I’m going to make chicken and vegetable broth. Like the good doc told me to.”

That made her eyes fly open. He winked, smirking back at her.

She managed a lip quirk in return before turning over and closing her eyes.

Grayson doing what he was told? That was weird. And kind of... cute.



At first Grayson had stood in the pristine modern kitchen feeling completely overwhelmed.

He couldn't remember when he'd last prepared a meal. Cedric had been with him since he'd left the army, gotten him through the dark days, and then been a steady presence while Grayson got Tower Security up and running.

But with Cedric commandeering the kitchen from the get-go, Grayson had barely set foot in here for years. He didn't have a clue where anything was. But the doctor had said Maisie needed broth, and he was damn well going to make it.

In the cupboards he found pans and utensils. To his delight, he found a chicken in the fridge ready to cook. And there were plenty of vegetables in the crisper drawer.

Maisie was organized, he'd give her that.

First things first, he needed to get someone to cover for him. Looking after Maisie was going to take up the next few days, he was sure. He wasn't going to risk finding her collapsed in the bathroom again.

He called Matt. He knew his second in command would be able to manage the situation without making a fuss of the fact he was nursing a small human back to health. When he explained, Matt said, "I'll get Tom to cover your zones, with two of the new young guys as backup. They'll welcome the extra cash."

Grayson knew his old-timer Tom wouldn't mind. He didn't like Christmas either. "I'll leave it with you to organize then, okay?" he said gruffly.

"Yeah, sure boss, consider it sorted."

Grayson grinned. He liked Matt's constant positivity. It made up for his own grouchiness.

When he ended the call, he started to chop and dice and throw the chicken pieces into the pan with onions and herbs

and a splash of oil. Then he added the rest of the vegetables.

Soon his nostrils were working at the savory smell of the soup bubbling away on the stove.

His mouth watered and his stomach growled.

Grayson frowned, remembering how Maisie had looked surprised, admiring even, when she told him his eyes had turned gray.

It had come as a shock. His eyes shifting colour so dramatically hadn't happened for a long time. Not since...

Yeah, he knew why, even if part of him didn't want to admit it. It meant he was feeling a deep attraction towards another being. His body too was losing its hard edges, his movements were more fluid, his limbs felt looser. The blood was pulsing warm through his veins...

Right now, he felt pretty much everything in his body, when normally he barely felt a damn thing. An old scar from a shrapnel wound early on in his army career tugged insistently on his left calf. He sighed; he did *not* want to be reminded of anything to do with those days.

So instead, his brain brought up an image of Maisie. Gloriously naked.

That was not a freakin' good idea either.

Because the memory of her pink nipples and full breasts just took him back to watching her hands stroke down her body through the window yesterday.

Grayson groaned as his cock sprang to life.

Yeah, right. Fucking ironic.

For years he'd been a stone effigy, his dick behaving impeccably, and suddenly when his body decided to soften into blood and nerves and skin, he had a massive hard-on pounding between his thighs.

But even so, he couldn't help a smirk. To his surprise, he started to hum to himself as he stirred the soup, reminding him

of the way he'd been before everything turned to shit: a gargoyle who enjoyed shifting from stone to flesh at will.

While the soup cooked, he went over to the window and gazed out at the garden, blanketed in white. Snow was falling again, like soft cotton wool fluff. The next-door neighbor's Christmas tree twinkling in their window caught his eye, and he watched his neighbor, a rather svelte elfin woman, placing presents underneath it.

His heart ached suddenly with a yearning he hadn't allowed himself in years.

For a mate. Someone to share it all with.

Grayson huffed a sigh and turned abruptly away from the window.

He stared glumly around his perfect, sterile kitchen and out toward the hallway where everything was muted shades of white and gray and stone and marble. Just like him.

His heart turned heavy in his chest, a heaviness he barely let himself acknowledge anymore. And then he thought about Maisie yet again, her desire to help kids in need, the fact she didn't draw a line between monster and human. Gods, what an angel!

Heat swirled in his chest. He wanted... *needed* to make something good happen. For her. Here. *This* Christmas.

Grayson's breath hitched, and he had to swallow down the surge of emotion.

Why not? Just this once. Next year, he reasoned, there would be no Maisie and he'd go back to being his usual lonesome self. Just him and his faithful old faun, Cedric.

But this year... to help her to feel better, to feel cared for... he had to do *something*.

He didn't want to leave the house to go shopping. Didn't want to leave Maisie alone.

Then an idea struck him. He picked up his cell and dialed Matt's number again.

“Hey there, boss, was just going to call you. Christmas cover is all sorted, Tom’s happy to work as long as you need him to.”

“No worries. Thanks.” Grayson’s gaze snagged on the decorated tree next door, its lights winking at him through the neighbor’s windows. “What are you doing at the moment?” he asked gruffly.

“Just off to grab some last-minute shopping. Tina’s got her hands full with the younglings at home. Then I’m off to my post.”

“Will you be going to the central mall, by any chance?”

“Yeah, most definitely.”

Grayson paused, scratching his skull with a claw. “Would you mind buying me something?”

“Sure, you name it, boss.”

Grayson hauled in a breath. “A Christmas tree,” he gritted out. “And fairy lights.”

CHAPTER 10



Maisie's nostrils twitched. Something smelled delicious. She realized she felt a little more normal. Hungry, even.

Cracking open an eyelid, she saw Grayson, seated on a chair next to the bed, smiling down at her.

His eyes were still that deep shade of gray, and that smile was like the very best medicine.

She struggled up on the pillows.

"Did I fall asleep again? What's the time?"

"Six pm."

"Oh my!"

"Yep, I've come in and checked on you a couple of times. Good girl. You've drunk all the water."

She had vague memories of waking, drinking, getting up to pee and then falling back to sleep. Memories too of a big gargoyle gently holding a glass to her lips, then tucking her in. Did he touch her hair, smooth it away from her cheeks, or had she imagined that? A telltale warmth swirled low in her belly.

Luckily, before she could give it her attention, a tray landed on her lap. A bowl of delicious, creamy looking chicken and vegetable broth.

A napkin. Neatly folded. And a sprig of holly!

Holly!

Maisie's eyes flew to Grayson's. His lips quirked sideways.

"Is this a nod to the season, Grayson?" she asked.

He shrugged, his forehead wrinkling. "You being sick and all, I thought it would be nice..." He trailed off, looking kind of... bashful.

"You didn't need to. I know you hate Christmas, and it doesn't mean much to me either," she said, trying to hide her pleased smile.

He nodded. "Yeah, it's a sad time for some people. Kind of accentuates that you're alone." He sat back down. Was that chair where he'd sat and watched over her today, she wondered? "Now eat," he said gruffly. "It took me ages to cook."

"It smells delicious."

She sampled a spoonful. Yes, it sure was, and her stomach received it gratefully. "It's really good."

"Don't sound so surprised," he grumbled. "I used to cook a fair bit, actually."

"Really, when?"

"In the army, when we were on reconnaissance. We'd be out in the freezing mountains sometimes for days, and I'd try and dream up things to spice up our rations. I figured a decent shared meal helped keep my team cohesive and strong."

"Your team?"

"Yeah, I was in charge of covert operations. I had a small group of elite soldiers with me. Twelve guys in total."

Maisie took a couple more spoonfuls of soup. "A bit like how you are now with Tower Security."

"Yeah. Suits me to boss people around." She saw his jaw tighten, a shadow pass over his features.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly.

"What for?"

“Touching a raw nerve.”

He scoffed. “Nah, I barely think about those times anymore.”

She sensed he was lying, but even if she’d felt well enough, she wouldn’t have pursued it. Grayson had erected these walls around himself for a reason.

She kept eating in silence, sensing him watching her. “When you’ve finished, I’ll leave you to rest again.”

When Maisie finally scraped the bowl clean, he grinned slyly and asked, “Marks out of ten?”

“Not bad at all. Very creamy, vegetables well cooked, the flavors merged well. A seven maybe,” she said airily.

Grayson shook his head in disbelief. “Shite, woman, here I am slaving over a hot stove for you, and I get a seven.”

“Used to getting a ten, are you?”

“Consistently in the past. But I’ll concede I’m a bit out of practice.”

Something flared between them, some other meaning behind the words. Her internal muscles clenched suddenly. Maisie couldn’t believe it. Here she was feeling horny, even when she was sick. Maybe being sick had opened her up to things she rarely let herself feel.

She hoped he’d go before her eyes gave her away, but he didn’t seem to want to move. “I really think I’d like to get up and try taking a shower.”

“If you want, I’ll stay in the room, just to make sure you don’t keel over again.”

“Okay, thank you, I’d appreciate that.”

He moved over to the window as she got out of bed, gathered a towel and some clean PJs. She realized he was being polite, not looking at her, and she appreciated him being such a gentleman. Then again, why would he want to gawk at her? Even at her best she was no head turner, and right now, she was probably looking far from her best.

She felt a little dizzy, but the shower helped. She washed her face, cleaned her teeth and got herself ready to go to sleep again. Her face in the mirror still looked feverish, her eyes bright, but maybe some of that was to do with Grayson, how kind and considerate he'd been all day... and how *handsome* he looked, gazing at her out of those soft eyes, his elbows hunkered onto his knees, his face intent as he watched her eat the food he'd prepared.

Like you mean something to him.

Don't be ridiculous, Maisie.

As she came out of the bathroom she moved a bit too briskly, just out of habit, and her head suddenly spun, the floor coming up to meet her. She leaned against the door frame with a little groan.

Grayson was at her side in seconds.

Once again, a big wing enveloped her, lifting her like a baby in a sling, and this time his arms were under her thighs she realized, as he carried her back to the bed in big easy strides.

It struck her that he felt... warm. Sure, he was all ripped rock-hard muscle—that was a given—but she felt the heat of his skin filtering through her garment. And he smelled good too, a slightly musky sweet, male scent. Even in her current state, Maisie felt the telltale throb of arousal between her legs. Unable to stop herself, her hand sneaked out and she placed her flattened palm against his chest.

Yep. Warm.

She heard him inhale sharply, felt the rise and fall of his chest, the beat of his heart, steady and strong.

Masie let out little moan.

Grayson looked down at her, his lips slightly parted, more sensual than she'd ever seen them.

“You okay?” he asked huskily. Her only answer was for her hands to sneak of their own volition around the thick

column of his neck. Her nipples peaked shamefully, rubbing against the hardness of his pecs even through her pajama top.

Grayson seemed to be holding his breath as his eyes bore into hers. His mouth was so close, she could see the stubble around his lip and jaw. If she just strained her neck a little, her mouth would be a whisper from his.

I want to kiss you so bad.

Oh, gods no, she wasn't okay. But not for the reason he thought.

"I think maybe you should put me down," she gasped in a strangled voice.



Grayson cursed himself as he left the room, carrying the empty tray with him.

As he'd held her against him, and she'd placed her little hand on his chest and gazed up at him out of those bright blue eyes, he'd felt like he was falling... His senses spinning, the energy electric between them.

He'd wanted to bend his head, claim her lips, kiss her slow and dirty, let his tongue forge into her mouth and explore every sweet nook and cranny. And immediately, his cock stood to attention, tightening the inside of his cargo pants.

Thank the heavens she'd told him to put her down or he'd have done things he'd deeply regret.

Inappropriate things.

She was sick, for the gods' sakes. What was he? Some kind of pervert that liked to take advantage of a sick woman and have his way with her?

Except... he'd felt her nipples harden against his bare chest. Seen the way her lips had parted, and her eyes hazed over. That wasn't just a fucking fever, was it?

Back in the kitchen now, Grayson slammed the bowl into the sink and raked his hands through his hair, then flexed and unflexed his claws.

He had to get back on that freakin' roof, cool down.

He took the flights in great strides, gasping as he slammed through the door and looked up to see a large gargoyle in the evening sky, heading toward him.

Carrying a fucking Christmas tree.

A second later, Matt glided onto the parapet wall.

“What’s bitten you, boss? You look like a whole heap of ferals are after you.”

“Feels like it,” Grayson muttered. He cast an eye over the Christmas tree, suddenly wishing he hadn’t asked Matt to buy it.

But already Matt had placed it against the wall and was bringing out a string of fairy lights from his pack, along with tinsel and a freakin’ toy fairy.

“Didn’t ask for tinsel,” Grayson growled bad-temperedly. “Or the fairy. How much do I owe you?”

Matt reeled off a figure. “Just add it to my Christmas bonus, boss.” He grinned.

Grayson nodded, sticking his hands into his pants pockets. At least there was space, now that his erection had subsided. “Sure thing, how was it down there?”

“Busy. Cheerful. Everyone having a good time. How’s Maisie?” Matt asked casually, sitting down on the pillar next to his.

Grayson stiffened. “Hot.” No, not hot. Hell, why had he said that? “I mean, feverish hot.”

He could sense Matt giving him the side-eye. “What’s she got, a virus?”

“Yeah, I think so. Said she was standing next to some she-wolf with a bug at the supermarket. Maybe she caught it off her, I don’t know...”

“Or allergic to you maybe, boss.”

“Yeah, well.” He shrugged. They sat in silence for a minute after that, staring at the horizon.

“Boss?”

“Yes?”

“Katrina’s having a New Year’s Eve party. She doesn’t dare ask you, so I said I would. Why don’t you come? Bring Maisie if she’s better.”

“Oh—n—” Grayson started to refuse, then something stopped him. He’d been a miserable Christmas grinch, spending it alone on this fucking rooftop for seven years. Eating alone, sleeping alone. He needed to give himself a break.

His staff looked out for him and all he did was push away their warmth, their friendliness. Maybe just this year... Just once. And besides, it was New Year’s Eve. Not Christmas.

New starts and all that.

“Oh, well, yeah. Okay.” He huffed a laugh. “That might be nice. If Maisie wants to.” It almost sounded like they were a couple. He tried to tense his pecs, his abs, to harden himself, but truth was, right this moment, he didn’t want to shut down this feeling. Despite the cold, his chest felt warm and full, and he liked it. Way too much. “Is Tom happy to keep covering?” he asked casually.

“Yeah, sure.”

“And the two young guys helping him out?”

“Absolutely. They’re money hungry.”

“Cool.” Grayson looked over at the Christmas tree now propped up on the wall. “I’ll go inside then...” He went and tucked the tree under his wing and tried to stroll nonchalantly toward the stairwell. “See you later.”

Somehow, he sensed Matt was grinning as he flew off into the night sky.

CHAPTER 11



When Maisie woke up the next morning she felt a lot better. Not quite her usual self, but getting there. Her fever must have broken in the night.

A couple of times, she'd sensed Grayson's big body close by, checking on her, pulling the covers around her, urging her to take a sip of water.

She wasn't sure where he'd slept.

The idea that he might have been in the room with her, might have slept on the floor even, brought that rush of heat again, low in her belly.

She'd hoped this minor crush she had on him was just a result of her fever, but putting her hand to her brow, she realized it was quite cool.

Even if between her legs was definitely *not*.

She sat up gingerly. No dizziness. Whatever it was she'd caught, it was definitely not the flu. She had no cough, no sore throat.

She was thankful she felt so much better. Now Grayson could get back to work, and she'd get back to bringing him his meals, and everything would be normal again...

Yeah, right, Maisie.

With an exasperated sigh, she got out of bed and took a shower.

Once dressed, she made her way downstairs.

When she pushed open the kitchen door, her eyes widened at the sight of Grayson, a tea towel over his shoulder, cooking eggs and bacon. The smell was divine.

Her nostrils quivered and she realized she was starving.

And his back view, huge wings tightly furled and his muscular back v-ing sharply down to the belt of his cargo pants, was even more delicious. There was something about a gargoyle in the kitchen that was hot as hell.

She managed to squeak, “Hi.”

Grayson swung round, his eyebrows raised. “You’re up. Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah, I am. Remarkably so. Must have been a twenty-four-hour thing.” Okay, amend that, her legs did feel like Jell-O right now, but she had a hunch that was nothing to do with being ill.

“I’ve made some breakfast—you want some?”

“Yeah, maybe a little.” She sat gingerly down at the table and watched as he moved around with consummate ease, juggling the pan, grabbing plates, cutlery, as if he did this every day of his life.

“So you found where everything was, clearly,” she said, slightly miffed. At this rate she’d be out of a job. “And all the food in the pantry?”

“Yeah, you’d stocked it well.”

“I wanted to get it done before Christmas Eve, which turned out to be wise, seeing I got sick.” She huffed a little laugh. “I reckon you don’t need me anymore.”

He swung round from the stove sharply, brows drawn, with such an intense look on his face that she found herself coloring up. She stared down at the plate of food he put in front of her as he said, “I need you.”

His voice was husky, as if carrying another meaning—either that or her illness had made her brain imagine things. She tucked quickly into the food, and he sat down opposite her. They ate in silence for a few minutes.

“So why aren’t you back on the roof right now?” she asked finally.

He shrugged. “Wanted to check you were fully back on your feet. I’ve got one of my older staff keeping an eye on the city.”

“Did I meet him the other day?”

“No, he’s not a team leader. His name’s Tom. Grisly old guy. Good operator, but he’s got arthritis in his wings now, so I’ve got him some backup with a couple of my new younger guys.” He gestured toward one of his wings. “It’s a bugger when it gets into your wings.”

“What’s it like?” she asked. He cocked an eyebrow at her. “I mean, having wings. Flying.”

Another shrug. “It just is. Like walking, I guess. Do you think twice about that?”

“Yes, I do actually.” She raised her chin challengingly. “I’m grateful that I have very sturdy legs.”

“You have nice legs.” The silence sang loudly between them. Grayson cleared his throat. “That came out a bit pervy. Sorry.”

She found herself blushing, realizing he would have seen a lot more than just her legs when she’d been splayed unconscious on the bathroom floor. “It’s fine,” she mumbled. She’d never had a guy compliment her on her body before. She didn’t have a clue how to respond. “Anyway, *I* like them,” she said jauntily. “But then, they’re the only ones I’ve ever had, so, you know, like the saying goes, love yourself, because everyone else is taken.”

“Good advice,” he returned gruffly.

“Getting back to flying,” Maisie blurted, eager to steer the subject away from her, “soaring high above the land, seeing the world from a different angle. That must be *amazing*.”

“Yeah, and it has special meaning when...”

“When...?”

“Oh, nothing.”

She looked over to see the color on his cheeks darkening almost to ebony. Was Grayson blushing now?

He cut carefully into his bacon, not looking at her.

“Tell me,” she laughed.

Silence.

“Tell me!” she insisted.

He cleared his throat. “When a gargoyle.... makes love while flying—apparently.”

“Oh.” She nearly inhaled a piece of bacon. “Have you, erm, done that often?”

“No. It’s reserved for a gargoyle’s one true mate. To seal their lifelong commitment.”

Okayyyy. “*Right*, well—I guess, hmm, that would be quite something,” she heard herself squeak. Visions of being held in his wings, cradled against his huge chest, those full dark lips kissing her deep and long and tender, and that other part of him... Sweet goddess, now she had to squeeze her thighs together hard to stop her clit from humming out loud.

“So, what are you going to do today?” she asked, changing the subject quick smart.

“I’ll go check on the guys briefly.”

“Right, and I need to get some final shopping.”

His eyebrows winged down. “You will not do that. I will. You are not doing anything strenuous today.” He got up and began gathering their plates. “You’re staying here and resting.”

“Boring.”

He looked at her again, an eyebrow quirking. “You’re sure you’re feeling better?”

“Absolutely. You go and see your team, I’ll clean up.” She started to fuss around, moving to the sink, needing him gone. His presence was too disturbing—too arousing.

But to her surprise, he brought the plates over to her. Then—even more surprising—he gave her a little nudge. A tiny movement, but she could feel the sheer strength of him through it. “Go and sit down, woman.”

Maisie’s lips quirked. “No.” She pushed back, and in a moment, they were jostling at the sink, laughing, each trying to gain the upper hand—though of course, she knew Grayson was using only an infinitesimal amount of his muscle power. But at least all the earlier awkwardness was gone. And yeah, it was fun to have this laughing, handsome gargoyle teasing her.

Gone was the grumpy guy who’d glowered at her out of red eyes those first few days. He’d been replaced by *playful* Grayson, *kind* Grayson. *Sexy as hell* Grayson.

Maisie almost jumped away from him.

He looked at her sharply. “What’s up?” Why did he have to be so sensitive to her mood changes?

“Oh, nothing, I’m just forgetting my place.”

“What is your place exactly?” he asked softly.

“You know—I work for you. I should be more professional.”

“Phhtt. Professional schmeshinal. Cedric and I joke around.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, well, he’s pretty serious most of the time, but when he’s not letting his OCD get the better of him, he can relax and enjoy himself.”

“I didn’t think you had a sense of humor when I first met you.” Oops, she hadn’t meant to be so honest.

“Thanks. Was I really that grumpy?”

“A bit.”

“I’m not at my best around Christmas.”

“Neither am I. But at least I’m not rude to people.”

“Sorry.” He huffed a sigh. “To be honest, it’s been good for me take care of someone else for a change.”

“But you look after people all the time,” Maisie said, moving back to the table and gathering dishes, just to get some space.

“Who?” He looked genuinely perplexed as he leaned his hips against the kitchen cabinets, watching her.

“The residents of Motham, of course.”

He shrugged. “It’s my job. This felt more... real. With you.” He said it softly, then smirked, his cheeks flushing dark again. “And you do seem a lot better, thanks to my incredible soup-making skills.”

“Thanks. And yes, at the risk of your head expanding, it was delicious. Ten out of ten.” Feeling suddenly warm all over, she occupied herself stacking the dishwasher, but when she glanced around again, she saw his gaze quickly divert from her butt.

Maisie’s clit pulsed again between her thighs.

Oh heck. *Awkward.*

Grayson strode quickly to the door. “I better go get ready,” he said brusquely. Turning, he said casually, “I’ve got to fly over to check Tom’s all set up to cover me.” He hesitated, then added, “Why don’t you come with me?”



When Maisie’s mouth fell open and her cheeks flushed pink, Grayson winced internally.

Gods, that was a mistake. Now he’d put her in an awkward spot, especially after their conversation about sex while flying.

He hadn’t intended to mention gargoyles’ intimate mating ritual. But his guard was down right now.

He fisted his forehead. “There’s no hidden agenda or anything. I’m not—” Fuck, he was tying himself in knots here.

“I’m not cracking onto you if that’s what you think.”

Now her cheeks went even redder. “I didn’t think for one minute...” She eyed him, a little smile hovering around her lips. “So how would it work? I mean, is it like a tandem parachute jump?”

Grayson laughed, relief flooding through him. “Well, yes I guess so. I have a special harness for when I do rescues—you know, airlifting people out of car crashes and the like. So I’ll strap you on my front and... away we go.”

“Right.” She licked her lips, her brows furrowing a little.

Grayson’s heart sank again. “Don’t like the idea? Sorry. I shouldn’t have suggested it.”

“No, really, I’d like to. Very much.”

“Tom works only two blocks away, so it’s a very short flight. How’s that sound?”

She straightened, flashed him the smile that made her cheeks bunch in such a cute way, blue eyes sparkling. It made his heart beat harder, his scalp prickle.

He was feeling happy again, he realized. Yeah, the idea of taking Maisie flying made him happy.

And gods, he hadn’t felt that for a long, long time.

“Okay,” he said, “I’ll go get the harness.”

“What should I wear?”

As little as possible.

Shut that thought down, man.

“What you’re wearing is fine—scarf, hat, gloves, and your coat. Gets chilly up there.”

“What about you? What do you wear when flying?”

“Just this.” He saw her eyes scan his naked torso, then her little pink tongue edged around her lips. His cock twitched, and he looked away. That must *not* happen on their flight together. Even though she’d be strapped higher than his groin, the distraction of a hard-on might make his wings jerk.

Nope. He'd make sure he remained one hundred percent stone cold gargoyle throughout.

“Meet me on the roof in five minutes,” he said.

Maisie's smile widened. “Done deal.”

CHAPTER 12



Maisie stared at the harness Grayson was holding out to her, and then peered over the wall.

Motham City lay below them, the streets a map of threads and veins, almost like the body of a living creature.

Why had she agreed to this? She wasn't great with heights. But she had always said that one day she would do a parachute jump, just to test herself. This was kind of the same thing... almost.

But it was more than fear making her blood pump faster than the speed of light, wasn't it?

The idea of being strapped to Grayson's big chest, his big *bare* chest, was making things light up in all kinds of places. Heck, forget Christmas lights. There was one hell of a celebration about to kick off between her legs right now.

When he showed her how he'd carry her, with her back to him, strapped onto his chest—and, luckily, above his waistline—she was quite relieved. Because the idea of any part of her getting within cooee of his crotch was enough to make her feel light-headed.

“Come on then.” He beckoned, holding out the harness, his legs planted wide. “What? Feeling chicken?”

Maisie gulped. “No—okay, yes, a little.”

“You'll be safe. I promise. Go hop on the pillar and you'll be about the right height for me to strap you on.”

She did so and her mouth dried up as he prowled over with the harness. She held her breath as those huge capable hands placed the harness around her.

“Turn around,” he ordered. Maisie did so, and gulped as she felt his bulk shift against her back.

Even through her clothing, she sensed the coolness of his stone body. Cool, but not cold. She held her breath as the straps came around her middle, criss-crossed over her shoulders and Grayson clicked them into place.

“Jump up,” he said, and as she did, he hauled her against his chest. Now she could feel his chin resting on the crown of her head where it nestled against the striated muscles of his neck. One of his arms came around her. Quite casually, but firmly, anchoring her even more closely to his chest. It occurred to her she’d probably feel quite safe even without the harness, just with those strong arms holding her.

Suddenly she found herself wondering how he’d make love to her flying.

Would he enter her like this, from behind, bending her over his huge forearm? Or would they face each other, kissing as he lowered her onto his...

Heat pooled in her belly, and she must have squirmed a little because his deep voice rumbled near her ear. “Comfortable?”

Oh, goddess above, if only he knew what she’d been imagining.

“Yes, thank you.” She looked down at his hand, the claw tips just showing as silver glints, otherwise very much like human hands, but dark grey.

What would it be like to be touched by those hands?

Would his claw tips add another sensory dimension...

She must have let out an audible little mewl. His words rumbled close to her ear, “Don’t be scared. I’ve got you.”

Now Grayson jumped lithely onto the wall. She heard the soft rustle of his wings unfurling,

“Okay. I’ll count to three and then we’ll be airborne.”

Knowing there was nothing else to do, Maisie let herself melt against the hard wall of his chest and abs, feet dangling over the edge of the building.

“One... two... three...”

And they were away.

She caught her breath. In fact, she probably wasn’t breathing at all as awe replaced apprehension. Here she was, soaring above the streets of Motham, the shadow of two large wings behind her, Grayson’s rock-solid body at her back, warding off the wind. She was enveloped in this amazing, almost silent space, like she was dream flying.

Weightless, effortless, joyful.

All the things she’d carried all her life, the sadness, the loneliness, the fear of being sent to another new place to live with strangers, all melted away.

Motham City lay below her, sparkling and full of life as everyone finished off their last-minute Christmas shopping. The Christmas decorations and shop lights twinkled like hundreds of land-based stars.

Grayson’s hand tightened around her, making her feel so safe... so cared for.

As they circled, he pointed out the grounds of Motham Palace. There was a huge Christmas tree in the quadrangle, the gardens ornately laid out with fountains and beautifully pruned shrubs, dusted now with snow. There was even a maze. It was totally breathtaking.

From there, they flew over the Hole In The Wall, the trams and buses and people looking like a toy town, and soon they were hovering over a rooftop. Grayson’s feet barely jolted as they landed on top of what appeared to be a multi-story parking lot.

Maisie swallowed her disappointment. He’d said it would be a short flight, but she found herself wishing it was longer.

What if this was the only time she'd ever fly like this, strapped to this beautiful beast?

The idea of doing this with Grayson again and again struck her as wonderful. Heavenly.

Stop it! Maisie chided herself fiercely. She was at serious risk of getting a crush on her boss. And that simply wasn't on.

She'd never even contemplated that with an employer before. But considering most of them were old and frail, that wasn't surprising. Grayson was anything but old and frail. He was probably ten or more years older than her, but he was in his prime, physically. No doubt about that. Maisie stifled a little sigh as he gently unbelted her harness. She stumbled a little, her feet trying to gain purchase on solid ground.

When she turned, he was smiling down at her.

"Verdict?" he asked, wagging his eyebrows.

"It was amazing. The best. How could you ever take flying for granted?"

"I don't."

"But you said it was just like walking—"

"And you said you never take your legs for granted."

"True."

"Well then. I *could* take my wings for granted. But the truth is, I don't. It pretty much puts my head in the right space whenever I'm up there in the slipstream." He looked at her intently. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Best Christmas present ever." She saw him stiffen slightly. "Oops, sorry."

He shook his head. "Don't be. I'm finding it easier this year, for some reason." He paused, looking like he was about to say something more, and again the intensity of his gaze made her feel hot inside. "C'mon, let me introduce you to Tom."

Grayson led the way toward a small cabin on top of the roof, like a control room, she guessed. Inside, on a battered old

office chair lounged a large, leathery gargoyle with a wrinkled face. He had a scar running across from one eye almost to his ear, puckering the skin. One of his stumpy horns, Maisie noticed, was bent out of shape.

He turned his red eyes toward them, and she tried not to recoil. He was pretty scary, and clearly a different gargoyle sub-species from Grayson. He grinned, showing sharp teeth (though some were missing) and waved a big, clawed hand in the air. “Well, look who just blew in. Fucking Grayson fucking Lightfoot.” He paused, seeing Maisie’s small figure lurking behind, and got to his feet. “Gods love me, if you haven’t got a human lady with you.” He stood up and pulled at his bent horn, tipping his head. “Sorry for my foul language. Didn’t realize.”

“This is Maisie,” Grayson said. “She’s never flown before.”

“Not many humans have.” The older gargoyle’s red eyes twinkled as he looked between them, and Maisie felt herself blushing. Oh gods, did he think they’d gone for a make-out session in the sky? How embarrassing.

Grayson clapped the older guy on the shoulders. “Curb your dirty mind, mate. Maisie is covering for Cedric, and since it’s Christmas I offered to give her a sky show.”

The gargoyle grinned at her. “How are you coping, lass? He’s a grinch, this one, eh?”

“You can talk.” Grayson laughed. “When did you last put up a Christmas decoration?”

The older gargoyle looked suddenly pensive.

They exchanged a look, and Grayson growled, “Don’t answer, mate, I get it. Any action out there?” He moved over to a display of screens.

“A few scuffles. One purse snatch, a bit of pickpocketing. Keeping the lads busy enough. Nothing major. Kind of worries me that it’s so quiet.”

Grayson sighed, hands on hips, eyeing the streets below. “You think the feral gangs are hatching something?”

“Dunno.” The older gargoyle shrugged.

Grayson huffed in agreement. “Hopefully the authorities have done a better job with the force field this Christmas.”

“Yeah, like they promise to every year,” Tom grumbled. “You and me, boss, we know better than to believe their rhetoric.” The older gargoyle shook out his leathery wings. “Egh, sorry lass,” he said to Maisie. “Me and this young whipper-snapper served together in the forces. When you’ve seen that kind of action it colors your view. Don’t listen to us. I’m sure it’s all going to be quiet this season. Now, you two go and have fun.”

Grayson growled. “Stop stirring the pot, your old bastard.”

Maisie tried not to blush even harder at their banter, tried not to wish... hope...

Later, as Grayson put her harness on, she thinned her lips, refusing to let herself relish the feel of his chest against her back, the intimacy of his head so close to hers, refused to imagine those lips placing a kiss next to the shell of her ear.

She held herself rigid all the way back, and as soon as they landed and he’d unclipped her harness, Maisie sprang away like an animal escaping a trap.

Because it would be, wouldn’t it? A trap. Letting herself fall for Grayson.

One that would cause her pain long after she’d escaped.



“Hey, wait.” Grayson couldn’t just let her run away like that.

He should. But he couldn’t.

It was Christmas Eve; he’d put up that damn tree downstairs and hung little bits of tinsel on it and countless glass baubles. He’d strung the fairy lights up and checked that they worked. Spent ages positioning the little fairy on top.

It had taken him hours to get it to his satisfaction.

And he'd done it for Maisie. To make her feel better.

And now that he'd gone to the fucking trouble, he needed someone to sit there with him and pretend to admire his handiwork.

Her muffled thanks and then speeding toward the stairwell didn't cut it.

"Wait!" he shouted, louder this time.

Maisie stopped, shoulders hunched. When she turned, her eyes bright, her lips and cheeks pink from their flight, it hit him just how naturally lovely she was, how her calmness had soothed him this past week, made him relax, uncoil. Right now, he needed her around him. To calm the jitters that always beset him this time of year.

And yeah, that was selfish, he knew. But just this once, with Tom happy to cover for a few more days he could... what? Relax, maybe. Enjoy the company of a fellow creature.

That was all.

"Do you need something, Grayson?" She huddled into her coat, looking small, tired suddenly. His chest constricted with worry. What if he'd made her sick again? "Are you okay?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"You don't feel ill? I didn't make you air-sick?"

"No, your flying was very smooth. It was beautiful, thank you," she said, her chin retracting into her scarf.

They both stood there awkwardly, Grayson's breathing erratic and... warm in his throat.

Oh gods, he might as well come clean. "I was wondering if, later today, you'd like to join me for a..." He gulped, unable to continue.

She cocked an eyebrow, her feet shuffling as if she wanted to get the hell out of there.

A surge of irritation—worse, *hurt*—struck him in the chest. Damn it, he paid her, she could at least have the grace to

spend another hour with him. He cleared his throat, tried again. “If you’d like to join me for a Christmas drink.”

Her eyes rounded. “Oh.”

“Just oh?”

“I mean,” she played nervously with the ends of her scarf, “yes. Sure. When?”

Grayson’s heart leaped. “Say, 6 pm?”

“Up here?”

“Nah, I’m not risking you catching a chill. Downstairs in the formal living room.”

“Okay then.” She wound her arms tightly around her body in a hug.

“I’ll—” Heck, he *would* do it. “I’ll light the fire if you’d like.” A fire would guarantee to turn him fully into flesh and blood. And that was perhaps dangerous, but hey, as she lifted her chin and suddenly smiled, that warm, vibrant smile, he didn’t care. “That would actually be nice,” she answered.

“Don’t get any ideas.” He kicked himself as her eyes turned into saucers.

“W-what?”

“Don’t get any ideas that a drink means I’ll celebrate Christmas tomorrow. Because I won’t,” he said gruffly, feeling stupid.

Her face relaxed. “I believe you.” A dimple appeared in one rosy round cheek, and he had the ridiculous urge to stride over and press his lips to the indent.

He didn’t, of course. Just turned away and hoisted his backside onto his pillar.

“Hey,” she called out, “I thought you weren’t working today?”

“Might as well keep an eye on things while I’m up here,” he threw over his shoulder.

Maisie laughed. “Once a workaholic, always a workaholic.”

As he heard the door clang shut behind her, Grayson hunkered down, his wings hugged close to his body.

And smiled.

Truth was, right now he’d be more than happy to ditch work for play with Maisie.

CHAPTER 13



Maisie huffed a sigh as she gazed at her meager selection of clothes. Two pairs of jeans, one pair of blue work slacks, three tees, two woolly jumpers and one pink blouse made of a silky clinging material, which was a bit more dressy. She'd bought it at an op shop and loved it, but the color was way more flamboyant than she usually wore.

But... it was the only sexy thing she had to wear to Christmas drinks with her boss.

Sexy!

Nothing's going to happen, girl.

Still, her heart rapped against her ribs and her breath quickened.

Even if he made a play for her—which he wouldn't—her professionalism came before any stirrings in her heart.

Heart!

Sweet goddess, Maisie, what has got into you?

Nope. It wasn't her heart, be honest, it was her pussy that was getting excited.

It had been a long time since she'd had sex, she reasoned. She'd put up with Steve, her ex, for too long. He'd gaslit her continually and made zero effort in bed. They'd met when she was sixteen and been together for six years. She'd stayed with him because, well, initially he gave her an outlet from her miserable foster homes, took her out places, and sometimes

they'd had fun, she supposed. And she'd always hoped one day he'd become more caring, that the sex would get better.

When he'd finally dumped her, saying her ass was getting too big and he had a better offer, she hadn't actually felt anything. She'd taught herself to go numb when it came to criticism or unkindness. Instead, she'd shrugged, and at least got one barb in by saying that she hoped whoever he was seeing could get off in thirty seconds, because that's all the time they'd have before he came.

He'd called her a bitch and left.

So that was that. Six years of her life wasted on a premature ejaculating tosser. She'd bought herself a couple of imaginative monster vibrators after that and allowed herself to fantasize, pretending that the hum of the batteries as she brought herself to climax was a dirty big beast whispering sweet, sexy words in her ears.

Other than those fantasies alone in her bed at night, she'd kept away from sexual liaisons. And she'd never, ever thought about a romantic attachment. Clearly romantic love was not for her. Instead, she'd poured her passion into her plans to help the kids of Motham. That had felt enough. Until now.

But she couldn't let her fantasies over Grayson take hold. She was a sensible girl, and that meant jeans and... Okay, damn it, she'd wear the pink blouse.

Maisie found herself smirking as she buttoned it up and realized that it showed off a hefty dose of cleavage.

Ten minutes later, her hair loose around her shoulders, a lick of lip gloss and mascara applied, she took the stairs down to the formal lounge, trying not to notice how fast her pulse was racing.

When she opened the door, Grayson was already seated on the leather sofa, elbows hunkered over his knees, a glass of whisky in his hand, staring into the fire.

And then she saw it, and her eyes nearly fell out of her head.

In the window alcove stood a giant Christmas tree, its branches stretching up nearly to the ceiling. It was covered in tinsel and twinkling fairy lights. There was even a cute little fairy right on the top.

Maisie covered her mouth, tears of delight pricking her eyelids. “Oh!” She looked to Grayson then back at the tree and blinked. “Did you... do this?”

He jumped up, smirking.

“Oh, Grayson.” She frowned suddenly. “But you hate Christmas.”

“Yeah, but this year I decided to make an effort.”

Maisie blinked away the water in her eyes “Why?”

“Just because...”

His gaze met hers. Something in the depths of his eyes made a delicious warmth pool inside her. Was he implying he was doing it for her?

No, of course he wasn't.

Even so, Maisie couldn't help her gaze eating him up. He was bare-chested as usual, the sheen on his granitic skin even more enticing in the firelight. He'd shaved, too, his jaw strong and clean cut, accentuating the firm sensual lines of his mouth, the soft gray of his eyes.

She noticed he was wearing formal black pants, cinched with a black leather belt with a silver buckle.

In return, his eyes panned her body, lingering on her breasts, and his cheeks darkened. His big wings jerked away from his shoulders as his eyes snapped back to her face. “Can I get you a drink?”

“What have you got?” Maisie said, grateful to break the intense energy between them.

“Wine, spirits, soft drinks. I mix a mean cocktail, too.” He grinned suddenly and his features relaxed, making his face even more startlingly handsome.

Maisie stifled a sigh of pleasure. “A glass of wine would be nice. White, if you’ve got it.”

He nodded, strode over to the drinks cabinet. She tried to ignore how gorgeous his tight butt looked in those pants. He turned, presenting her with a bottle. “The finest chardonnay from the Avella Hills?”

“Thank you. I’ve heard Avella Hills wines are the best. Have you ever been to the hills?”

“Sure, I’ve flown over them.”

“Not stopped off?”

“It’s human territory, so not officially. I touched down a couple of times, but it was not sanctioned.” He shrugged. “At least now you can buy their wines here in Motham.”

As he handed her the glass, she saw his gaze fall to her breasts, then lift swiftly, his cheeks darkening again. “You look nice.”

Now it was her turn to flush. “Thanks. Well, it is Christmas—oh, can I say that word now you’ve put up a Christmas tree?”

He smiled, and Maisie realized she loved getting to see more of this smile, the way it softened the harsh planes of his face. She moved quickly over to the Christmas tree and gazed at the cute decorations. There were small reindeers and pixies, pretty candy canes, tinsel, brightly colored baubles. It must have taken Grayson ages to do this. “You went to so much trouble,” she murmured. He came and stood next to her, easily reaching up to rearrange the little fairy on top. “And all these pretty twinkling lights.” She glanced up at him. “This isn’t the effort of a guy who doesn’t like Christmas.”

She saw his jaw tighten. Oh dear, she’d said the wrong thing.

Then he huffed a sigh and said softly, “I used to love Christmas when I was a kid.”

She hesitated. “How old were you when you lost your family?”

“Seven. Old enough to remember it.” His face went gaunt.

“Who brought you up after that?”

“A great aunt. And a bevy of paid staff. Me and her were the only ones left alive. She hid with me in an outbuilding when the ogres...” He swallowed hard. “Anyway, she was a sweet old thing, but she was losing her memory even then, so in the end as a teenager I kind of looked after her.”

“Is that when you learned to cook?”

“Yeah, needs must. We both had to eat, and I didn’t trust our staff to provide her with good enough nutrition.” She heard the rustle of his wings next to her, recognized it by now as a sign of his emotional discomfort. “But hey, let’s lighten up, shall we? It’s Christmas Eve. How about some music?”

“You like music?”

“Don’t sound so shocked. I like a lot of things I don’t admit to.” As his eyes rested on her again, Maisie tried to stop the waves of heat invading her body. She failed miserably.

He put on some mellow music, a fae with a lilting, beautiful voice, who came from way over the mountain range. Her music had reached Motham, Grayson told Maisie. “In fact, she might even be doing a gig here sometime, after Christmas,” he added.

For a second, her stupid mind imagined him asking her to go with him, but of course he didn’t.

But even so, he was in a more relaxed mood than she’d seen him before. Before long, they were talking and laughing, sharing light-hearted anecdotes. Grayson chuckled at her story of working for the book-hoarding old arachnid with his serious cobweb problem, and in turn he told her about a few funny incidents he’d had to sort out in Motham. Maisie let herself revel in how handsome he looked, sprawled on the sofa across from her, one big hand cradling his whisky glass, the tip of his claws glinting in the light. He had the best arms, the muscles beautifully defined, chiseled.

Maisie’s internal muscles clenched. Oh god. She’d always had a weakness for arm porn.

She reminded herself of how he'd got such great arms.

As a soldier, Maisie. This guy isn't soft. He's hard as rock, both exterior and interior.

The thought sent a little shiver up her spine. He'd seen bad things, done bad things probably. Killed people—well, ogres, that was pretty much a given.

She shouldn't fool herself that Grayson would be good for her.

Maisie sipped her wine and tried to pull herself together. To take herself back to being sensible, professional Maisie. But somehow tonight it was almost impossible to remember that old, sensible Maisie.

And now Grayson's big foot was tapping, one hand beating fingers on his thigh to the rhythm of the music. He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Wanna dance?"

"W-what? Me?"

"There's no one else in the room."

Maisie shook her head furiously. "Oh no."

"Why not?"

"I'm a useless dancer."

"Who says?"

"I say." Steve used to tell her she looked like a clumsy baby elephant on the dance floor. He'd totally destroyed her confidence.

"C'mon. I'll lead," he wheedled.

"But—" She blurted out the first excuse she could think of. "You're so much bigger than me."

"I'll hold you." He got up and held out a wing. It was so wide and... so inviting.

"Stand on the sofa and I'll pick you up."

"That's ridiculous," she huffed, but he waggled his eyebrows again, and his expression was so cheeky that she shrugged and put her drink down. "Okay, you win."

She hopped onto the sofa and stood there, bouncing on her toes and feeling—silly. Well, she certainly had a daft ninny grin on her face.

He came and faced her. Standing on the sofa, she was almost level with his face. She could see everything—the lines around his eyes, the deep grooves around his mouth that made him look sterner than he really was. How soft and dark his lips looked. The smoothness of his skin, even the little follicles where he'd shaved, and the way his hair grew thick and swept away from his broad forehead. She could even see two long grooves in his skull under his hair. Gargoyle grooves, she realized, remembering the different species she'd seen in pictures. Not all of them had full-blown horns.

She drank it all in. Because like this, he was, frankly, beautiful.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Ready?”

She nodded, her mouth suddenly dry.

Then she heard the soft rustle of his wing, felt it supporting her back. His arm went lightly around her waist as well, and then she was whisked off the sofa so fast she let out a surprised little squeal.

“I’ve got you,” his voice rumbled against her ear.

And suddenly it didn’t matter that her feet didn’t touch the floor, she was dancing and swaying, tucked inside the wing of this gorgeous guy. They were laughing together, the music sweet in her ears and the lights from the Christmas tree twinkling past as Grayson twirled her around the room time and again.

Finally, as the song ended, he placed her down, breathless and giggling on the sofa, her arms still locked around his neck.

“How was that?” He didn’t seem keen to drop his wing. She could feel its energy pulsing against her spine.

“Amazing. Who needs legs when you can dance inside a wing?” She laughed, hearing the tremble in her voice.

She felt the warmth recede as his wing folded away from her, but still his arm was steady and strong around her waist, his hand hot on the small of her back. Her breath hitched, her eyes fell to his chest, heaving a little—from exertion, or maybe something else. And still, her hands stayed clasped around the strong column of his neck.

When she glanced up from under her lashes, his eyes were focused lower. Following his gaze, she saw that somehow the buttons of her pink blouse had loosened, exposing her lacy white bra, the two full moons of her breasts spilling over the top.

His expression darkened further, and the muscle in his jaw twitched. His throat bobbed as he swallowed.

And when he looked into her face again, his eyes were raw.

“Maisie.” He said her name with such need, such longing that Maisie simply couldn’t move. Couldn’t remove her hands from around his neck, even though she knew she should. Her whole body pulsed with fire, with need. She let out a little mewl, and moved into him, until her breasts were brushing against his pecs, her nipples hard and pushing through the flimsy material.

“Fuck I want to kiss you,” Grayson growled harshly.

In answer, she raised her face and pressed her lips to his and marveled at how soft his mouth was. His lips trembled against hers.

But only for a moment. With a groan, he suddenly dragged her to him, and the kiss became urgent, demanding, his tongue rimming her mouth, demanding entry.

Maisie let out an answering moan, her lips parting, her tongue tangling wildly with his. Her legs turned boneless at the stroke of that big tongue inside her mouth. With another harsh sound, Grayson’s arm tightened, his wing coming around her again as she clung to him.

Heat pooled in her belly, her arousal already saturating her jeans.

“Maisie. Fuck—” he panted against her mouth, “I’ve wanted to do this since I first met you.”

Those words were such a turn-on! Maisie’s hands roamed feverishly over his chest, and her body pressed against his hardness. She sensed another hardness she couldn’t deny, the rod of iron pressing into her lower belly.

He pulled back momentarily from kissing her, staring hungrily at her breasts. Wantonly, she ripped open more buttons on her blouse. “Gods, I want to suck those beauties. May I, Maisie?”

She nodded, unable to speak as she pulled her bra down further, letting her boobs bounce free.

With a groan, Grayson buried his face between them.

Maisie’s head kicked back as he found one nipple and sucked ravenously. It wasn’t sweet or soft, it was demanding, possessive, as one big hand cupped her breast, the sharp scratch of his claws only adding to the pleasure.

Her clit spasmed in unison with his mouth drawing in her nipples. He slurped at her breasts with such abandon, like he was starving and had suddenly found a feast laid out in front of him.

Oh dear goddess, if this went on, she’d be ripping off her jeans and begging him take her right here on the sofa.

But wait... He was her boss!

She was making out with *her boss!*

The unprofessionalism of it somehow managed to infiltrate her lust-crazed brain.

With a little cry, Maisie put her palms on Grayson’s huge chest and pushed him away.

CHAPTER 14



Immediately, Grayson let go of her. Retracting his wing, he stumbled back.

“Oh, gods, Maisie—fuck. I’m so sorry.”

He watched her panting on the sofa, her blouse ripped open and her beautiful big breasts bouncing, the nipples rosy and swollen from the onslaught of his mouth. But even so, guilt was doing nothing to stop the ache in his balls, the painful throb of his cock against his fly.

He wanted her. He was hungry for everything about her.

Consumed.

“I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No, I guess neither of us should.” She hung her head, trembling fingers hooking up her bra straps and he wanted to bawl like a fucking baby, seeing her hide those beautiful tits from his view.

“I didn’t mean to. I guess this whole Christmas thing and —” He wanted to tell her so much more, how he’d felt the pull, the attraction to her from the get-go, but the words were backed up in his throat.

Her lip curled sadly. “Yeah, I get it, Grayson, we’re both alone in the world.” She was doing up those buttons one by one, and it slugged him in the gut. The space between them felt cold, and he wanted, *needed* her warmth. The soft pillowy feel of her flesh against his. Touching her, holding her, kissing

her warmed his cold heart, made the blood pulse in his veins. Made him feel *alive*.

But he should never have taken advantage of her...

“I mean—I’m working for you, Grayson,” she said in a strangled voice.

He raked a hand through his hair. “Yeah. Terrible power imbalance. I abused that—”

“No. No. You didn’t—” She pushed back tendrils of hair from around her face, smiled ruefully. “I met you more than halfway.”

A little flame relit in his chest. At least she felt something. That eased the hideous knot of guilt in his stomach.

He started pacing, his wings twitching, one of them catching the Christmas tree and almost sending it flying. Grayson swore under his breath.

This was crazy.

She’d hopped off the sofa now and was standing awkwardly, still playing with the buttons of her blouse. He wanted to put his hand over hers, beg her to undo them again.

Oh shit. She was unhinging him. His whole body was a mass of tingling and throbbing flesh and blood and desire for her.

“I’ll just take these dishes to the kitchen,” she mumbled.

“Yeah.” He pointed upwards. “I’ll go back to the roof.”

“You’re not staying inside tonight?”

His lips shaped a rueful smile. “You think I could stay in the house with you Maisie, and not want to fuck you?”

Her mouth went slack “Oh.”

“I can’t let that happen, for either of our sakes.”

“No.” She hung her head. “That would be terrible.”

He couldn’t help another tug of his lips. “Do you hate the idea so much?”

Her chin dipped, but he thought she was smirking. “Did I seem to hate the idea when you...”

“Not entirely.” He huffed a laugh. Yeah, she’d kissed him back alright, ripped her breasts out for him to suck.

His cock bucked hard. He was still burning for her.

That was the problem, though, wasn’t it? Letting this go any further would burn them both.

“You’d better go, Maisie.”

“No, I really must clean up first.”

He gritted his teeth. “Just go.”

She stood her ground, her breasts heaving. “I need to do get back to doing my job, Grayson. That way... the boundaries will be easier, you know? We’ll both know where we stand.”

“Right. Yep. Got it.” He dug his hands into his pockets to give his swollen cock some space. Hell, why wouldn’t it subside? He guessed it was a hard ask, with her standing in front of him, so curvy and delicious.

So totally *edible*.

If she was intent on clearing up, he’d better scarper.

“I’ll be off then.” But still his feet didn’t move.

She was gathering the glasses and the plate of half-eaten snacks. As she bent over, he stared longingly at her round butt cheeks. All he wanted was to wriggle those jeans off her and bury his head into her sweet cunt, eat her out, until she cried out his name, and those lush thighs jerked around his ears.

His cock bucked again.

Shite! If he stood here one moment longer, she’d turn round and see his cock sitting up like a tent pole in the soft linen of his black pants. What had induced him to wear something that would show off a hard-on?

Grinding his molars, he took off toward the door in big strides, ripped it open.

As he turned, she was looking at him, her big blue eyes sad, her little white teeth nibbling her soft lower lip, still swollen from their kisses.

He groaned inwardly, his heart splicing in two.

“Happy Christmas, Maisie,” he gritted out, then pretty much slammed the door behind him.

Happy, be damned.

He’d had some bad Christmases, but this was up there with the worst.



Maisie pulled her dragon’s breath dildo out from under the covers and threw it at the wall.

She didn’t want a purple rubber thing that puffed hot air on her clit between pulses, she wanted that big grey giant with his rock-hard cock and a tongue that could practically make her come just by rolling it around her nipples.

She huffed crossly. Her pussy was throbbing, her head ached, it was three in the morning on Christmas Day, and all she’d done since she’d run away from Grayson was lie here in a state of unrequited lust.

She’d tossed and turned in her little bed, thinking of his hot mouth on hers, that thick tongue tangling with her own, the feel of his hand steady on her back, his mouth suckling her nipples while she looked down at his head on her breasts, wanting to frame it with her small hands and shamelessly push it between her legs.

What if...

He’d be out on the roof now. And probably not even thinking about her.

Except he’d seemed so desperate. So tortured.

Of course he’s thinking about you.

Stop selling yourself short.

He'd paid her compliments, and she could tell by his expression he meant them.

She knew she wasn't beautiful. She was passable. But with him, she felt like the most desirable woman in the whole universe.

Why deny herself that? Even if it only lasted a night.

A wicked little smile shaped Maisie's lips.

What if she gave them both a Christmas present?

Whatever happened tonight, she was only here for a couple more weeks.

If he wanted to be her boss with benefits for three weeks, she could add that to her list of duties, couldn't she? At no extra charge.

Maisie Brown, you shameless hussy.

She smirked, kind of liking this new side to her personality.

And if he rejected her? She glanced over at the purple dragon dildo still happily humping the wall. "You'll just be on duty again I guess," she informed it.

With that, she jumped out of bed. Her pajama bottoms had been kicked off in her attempt to come, so she decided to leave them off, unbuttoned her top and flung that off too. Then she pulled on her dressing gown and slippers.

And took the stairs up to the roof.

The cold blasted her as she opened the door, the night sky clear and dotted with thousands of stars. Rarely did Motham have such clear skies, but here on the hill the air was less polluted as the factories slowed their output over Christmas. A big moon hung low, and she almost expected to see Santa's sled and reindeer riding past.

And then her breath hitched because there, silhouetted against the sky, big shoulders hunched and his wings wrapped close around him, was her gargoyle.

He's not yours.

Just for Christmas, another part of her begged.

She tiptoed lightly over, but before she could reach him, he rumbled, low and gravelly, “What are you doing here?”

“Oh—I, I couldn’t sleep.”

He grunted, still facing straight ahead. Maisie’s heart sank. Not a good start. Garnering her courage, she drew up a seat and plonked herself next to him, and despite the cold, she let her dressing gown part as she sank her butt onto the seat. Her legs glowed white in the ambient light, a draft of air blowing straight to her pussy and making her shiver. But if he looked, it would be worth it.

After a moment she sensed him side-eyeing her. His wings jerked on his shoulder blades.

“Fuck, Maisie, what are you doing to me?” he growled harshly.

That was invitation enough.

Holding her breath now, she stood up and moved around to face him. Placed her small hands on his huge shoulders and felt his indrawn breath.

He was cold, but not *that* cold.

She could thaw him out, she was sure now. Letting her dressing gown fall open, her breasts tight with the cold, her nipples forming hard little peaks, she held herself just inches from his chest.

His gaze was literally snapping now, sparking between red and grey. His eyes riveted to her breasts, but still he gritted out, “Maisie. Go back to bed.”

“Is that what you really want?”

“It’s for the best.”

“But is it what you *want*?” Her heart was in her mouth saying it.

He was silent, his jaw working.

His eyes snapped away, staring past her shoulder.

Still he didn't answer.

She ran her fingers across the taut skin of his cheekbones, his strong jaw, down the line of his neck, feathering them across his pecs and lower...

She was risking so much. But she kept remembering the hunger in his eyes when he told her how he'd longed to kiss her.

She had to believe in that. In whatever this was between them.

"What if I want to give you a Christmas present?" She bent and placed her lips on his forehead.

He groaned. She felt his chest expand, grow warmer, and she pressed into him, giving him her human warmth, her softness. "Come back inside," she murmured.

"If I do, then I'll become flesh, and you know what that means. I won't be able to resist fucking you, Maisie. Up here, I can control it."

Her pussy spasmed at the harshness of his tone, knowing it held all his pent-up desire for her.

She could feel his whole body straining, as if against restraints, and she wanted to snap them one by one.

"What if I don't want you to be controlled?" She dared to go lower, planting her lips on the cool skin of his neck now. Felt his throat bob as he swallowed hard.

"You really want this? This isn't to please me because I'm your boss?"

"I want this, Grayson, and if you sack me for inappropriate conduct, right now, I don't care."

"I'd never do that." She heard the breath catch in his throat. "Oh—Maisie."

The next moment, he'd picked her up and was striding with her in his arms toward the stairwell.

He stopped as the warm air hit.

“Last chance to say no.”

“I say yes, yes, and yes,” she murmured, gazing up into his beautiful face. “Now take me to bed.”

CHAPTER 15



At the top of the stairs, Grayson hesitated. Should he take her to his part of the house?

His bed was big, inviting. Comfortable and cozy—that's why he never slept in it anymore.

But there were also those other rooms in his wing, his study with its photos and its memories. Memories of the life he'd fucked up so spectacularly.

But it was Christmas and hell, he wasn't going to think beyond today. And there was no need to open his study door. A bed was all that was needed right now.

She'd offered to be his Christmas gift.

And hell, right now he wanted more than anything to be hers.

To love her, slow and long and sweet. To make her come in every conceivable way, with his tongue, his fingers, his cock.

Barely able to stop himself from running, Grayson booted open the bedroom door, strode to the bed, and practically threw her on it. She giggled and squirmed, her dressing gown now completely open, little goosebumps still littering her skin from the cold.

He felt himself getting warmer. His cock throbbed with the sudden rush of blood.

He had to fuck her soon or he'd come all over himself.

How long had it been without the touch of a woman's hands on him, the feel of a woman.

The danger of a woman.

Grayson shook the thought off. He must not think about that.

Focusing just on the delight in front of him, he moved down her body. Suckling her breast, over her stomach, swirling his tongue in her belly button and relishing her giggled, "Grayson, that tickles."

And then she wound her fingers in his hair and if he wasn't much mistaken, she seemed to be pushing his head lower.

Grayson obliged.

He could smell her warm heady arousal, her hips bucking up to meet him. He kissed the soft blonde hair at the apex of her thighs, planting tiny kisses over her mound until she was begging for more. "Patience, sweetheart, I'm getting there."

Drawing back, he gloriied at the gleam of her wet seam, the hooded bud of her clit enticing him. Slowly lowering his head, he flicked his tongue over it and relished the sound of her moaning his name, then stroked his tongue into the honey of her channel, in and out, until her sweet wet entrance was shuddering around him.

"Oh, Gray-son." Her hips were bucking faster, desperate for release, and he was being cruel to tease her, drawing out her orgasm for both their pleasure.

Time to relent.

Throwing her thighs over each of his big shoulders, he pleased her in earnest now.

With a grunt of pleasure he plastered his flattened tongue onto her hard little clit. Vibrated it. Fast then slow, gentle then firm, until she was writhing, holding his head in place with both hands as if her sweet pussy would swallow the whole of him, wings and all.

He worked her harder, adding a finger until she clenched around him, moaning and bucking, and he felt the waves of

her orgasm beating around him.

“Grayson, oh god, oh god, I’m—you’re going to make me—oh goooooodddd.” Her thighs scissored around his head as her climax broke and a sweet fluid spurted onto his tongue.

Having Maisie fall apart like that, riding his tongue and fingers, filled Grayson with awe.

He wanted it to go on forever. And at the same time, he was so fucking hard he was going to die if he didn’t get inside her.

But he stayed put, until the last flutters of her orgasm passed and finally she was just crooning delightful nonsense and playing with his hair. Then, and only then, did he kiss his way back up her body, careful to stay on his elbows so his big bulk didn’t crush her.

Somehow, he contained himself enough to kiss her trembling lips, her eyelids, the tip of her cute, upturned nose. Her cheeks were flushed rosy and her blue eyes bright as she gazed back at him.

And then her little hand crept down between them and folded around his cock.

Oh fuck!

He was leaking pre-cum all over her, and she was smoothing it over the head of his cock in long, expert strokes, the slick intensifying every nerve ending. “No, fuck, Maisie I’ll—” He pulled back, his abdomen twitching in readiness, his balls pulling tight. “No, Maisie... I—”

A sudden horrible realisation hit him.

Shit. He hadn’t got condoms.

Hadn’t owned any for years.

“Maisie, I don’t have any condoms. Do you?” He eyed her out of feverish eyes, hoping.

Maisie giggled. “I came here to *work*, Grayson. So, um, no... strangely not.”

He groaned, palming his forehead with his free hand.

“I’ve got another idea.” She grinned wickedly. As he pulled reluctantly away, she propped herself up on her elbows and he salivated at the way her breasts hung heavy, like two delicious ripe fruit, tempting him.

“Shift up here, big guy.”

“W-what are you suggesting?” But as he eyed her beautiful tits, he had a fairly good idea what she was getting at. And then she leaned forward, bobbed her head down and licked the tip of his swollen cock. The sight of her sweet human lips swirling around the head was almost too much.

“Oh gods, Maisie,” he groaned. “Stop or I’ll spill right now.”

Reluctantly, she pulled back. “Your cock is so beautiful,” she gasped.

He looked down. His cock was black, apart from the head, which was tinged with a deep burgundy red, showing how close he was to shooting his seed, the slit oozing his pre-cum. Just for her.

She found his cock beautiful. And that filled his chest with pride.

She sighed softly, palming him.

Grayson gritted his teeth as the pleasure built to breaking point. “I’m sorry... I’m very close... It’s been a long time...”

“It’s been a long time for me too.” Why did those words fill him with satisfaction? Almost like she’d been saving those beautiful tits just for him. “So let’s not make it any longer.”

As she sat back against the headboard, he feasted on the sight of her, the roundness of her lovely belly, her legs spread wide to accommodate his body. With another groan, he shuffled up the mattress and knelt between her thighs.

She wasn’t quite high enough so, laughing together, they shoved more pillows under her butt.

Neither of them spoke, but they both knew exactly where this was heading.

Even so, he managed to delay his pleasure enough to bend his head and take each nipple in his mouth, cup the heaviness of each luscious breast in his big palm.

Her eyelids fluttered. “Uh-uh, it’s your turn now.” She laughed huskily.

She cupped her tits and waggled her eyebrows again, her mouth shaping a wickedly sweet smile.

He needed no more encouragement to fist his cock and sandwich it between those beautiful creamy white tits and watch, his breath coming in fast, sharp pants, as she squeezed her boobs around his shaft.

“Can I move?” he gasped out, his hands squeezing the base of his cock to stop himself coming.

“Yes, do it Grayson.” Her voice was needy, her eyes bright, her sweet round cheeks flushed. He realized she was finding this as arousing as he was, and that was such a huge fucking turn-on.

He thrust, slow and deep at first, relishing the sight of his cock drowning in the pillowy softness of her flesh, glorying in the way his foreskin tugged back with each thrust between them.

But the sight of his black cock riding her beautiful white tits was soon too much for his beleaguered senses.

He had to fucking come.

Grayson’s hips pistoned, faster, his breath catching harsh in his throat as she egged him on with sexy words of how she couldn’t get enough of watching his cock like this, and then she squeezed those tits around him that little bit tighter and he was done for. Pumping his cock fiercely, once, twice more, Grayson’s wings arced out behind him as strings of his hot pearly come spurted all over Maisie’s amazing breasts.



Maisie nuzzled against Grayson's chest. They'd giggled after he'd come so spectacularly all over her, his face flushed and almost sheepish now as he'd dragged a box of tissues out of the bedside drawer and cleaned her up. It was adorable. And sure, gargoyles sure made a lot of cum, but it was sweet smelling and sticky and an almost iridescent silver.

Maisie found herself wondering whether a human could become pregnant to a gargoyle.

Her womb spasmed with a sudden yearning, one she'd never felt before.

She just had to remember this was a Christmas present, not a lifelong commitment.

At that thought, her heart dropped a little. As if picking up on the shift in her emotion, Grayson murmured hazily against her hair, "What's up, Pumpkin?"

She told a half truth. More than half, come to think of it. "I guess you doing that turned me on, so—"

He pulled back and looked at her, lips quirking. "You wanna go again?" She bit her lip. Truthfully, she could.

"I wish we had condoms." She sighed.

"Hmmm. Christmas Day—four in the morning. Not the best time to find them."

She raised her lips, and he kissed them lingeringly before husking, "I think the lady needs Santa to give her a little gift all the same." His hand crept between her legs. She felt two fingers suddenly scissoring her clit, softly see-sawing on either side of it. It was incredible. Next, he put the pad of one big digit on her, while another explored her entrance. She felt something delicious, the tiniest little scrape of his claw at her entrance. Just enough to tickle the sensitized flesh. His other finger pad kept rhythmically massaging her clit, then he scissored the little bud all over again between two fingers. Oh god, this was heaven, like nothing she'd ever experienced before in her life.

Round and round went those fingers on her clit, massaging every angle of her swollen bud until Maisie's eyes rolled back

in her head and her pussy spasmed.

As she came, he pushed two fingers inside her, the claw retracted now, just those meaty digits massaging her G-spot, intensifying her orgasm, milking every last drop out of her. Maisie arched, keening out his name as she came hard around his fingers.

“Better?” Grayson murmured against her hair as she floated back to earth.

She nodded, almost purring now. As she drifted off to sleep, she felt his wings enveloping her, as if she was the most precious thing in the world.



Dawn light was creeping through the curtains when she woke up and realized Grayson was gone.

Maisie sat up, rubbing her eyes, not sure now if the whole thing had been a dream. Then she looked around and saw a note and a sprig of... what was that? Mistletoe, on the bedside table. She grinned like a ninny as she read the note.

Gone to get supplies. Back soon.

She shook her head. She doubted he'd find anywhere open.

Besides, the fridge was stacked with food. What could they possibly need?

Other than each other. Her body heated at the thought.

She got up, padded into the bathroom and decided to take a shower in the huge cubicle. Wide enough, she realized, for a gargoyle to spread his wings. It was such a beautiful suite, the bedroom, bathroom. And then of course, there was Grayson's study...

As she dried herself, she resisted the temptation to look in his study again. She sensed somehow that he wasn't ready for her to know more about his past. There was something dark and painful in his heart, and she shouldn't dig around.

And then, dressing gown around her, she did what she'd just told herself not to.

She tiptoed over to his study door, opened it and slipped inside.

Nothing had been touched since she was last here. She peered at the photo, her heart clenching with a new knowledge of Grayson. She knew every detail of that face intimately now.

Holding her breath, she gingerly opened the drawer of his desk.

Inside was a book. Her breath hitched as she read the title: *Surviving Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*. The copy was dog-eared and there were sticky notes in places, and some papers jammed inside.

And while her fingers itched to open it, to read those notes inside, her conscience got the better of her. It wasn't her place to be here. Having sex with Grayson didn't give her the right to rummage around in his personal life.

Quickly, she shut the drawer and sped out of the room.

When she heard his footsteps on the stairs she was already back in bed.

She gloated at the sight of him as he entered. Wearing tracksuit pants low on his hips, his hair all ruffled, he looked softer, younger, sexier—if that was even possible. When his eyes fell on her, his face lit up like he'd seen sunshine.

Her body flooded with... love.

Love.

Don't be daft, Maisie.

She pushed the thought away. Tried to keep her smile wickedly lascivious. It was stupid to think of falling for this gorgeous, troubled guy.

Just enjoy the moment, Maisie.

And truly, she'd never felt as sexy as she did this past night with Grayson. "Where were you?" She gave a little pout.

“I needed to buy something.”

“You found a shop?”

“There’s an emergency pharmacy that’s open 360 days a year. But it’s downtown. Bit of a flight.”

“Are you okay?” Alarmed, she wondered if she’d given him her virus. “You’re not sick?”

“Yeah, I’m sick,” he said softly as he approached, his eyes never leaving her face. “Sick with wanting you.”

It was literally the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to her. He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a packet of condoms.

Maisie felt her cheeks bunching with pure glee.

She reached for him as he ripped off his pants, already hard for her.

“Oh,” she said her eyes bulging and her mouth salivating.

“I’ve had a hard-on the whole flight there and back,” he grumbled. “Had to wait outside the bloody pharmacy to cool down before I could go inside.”

She giggled. “Maybe they thought you were just guarding the entrance for free.”

He growled, “Silly woman,” but there was nothing silly about the way his eyes swept over her naked body. Suddenly he dived and scooped a huge wing under her butt, pulling her close. Her legs fell open either side of his hips. As Maisie’s clit rubbed against him, she marveled at how that wing seemed to be able to position her just where he wanted her. Now the other wing swept around her and oh, joy! His hands were still free to play with her tits.

Maisie threw back her head on a gurgle of delight.

Being made love to by a gargoyle was fulfilling her every fantasy.

As his cock nudged her belly he growled, “I’m going to loosen my grip, but don’t worry, I won’t drop you.” She found herself being tipped backwards, enveloped in those soft veined

wings as he ripped open the pack with his teeth and rolled a condom down his length.

He was *huge*, but she'd never been wet like this in her life. Her juices were literally dampening her thighs now.

“Let me play with your clit until you're ready to take me,” he murmured as his wings brought her up flush with his body. With one hand, he maneuvered his cock at her entrance, while the other stroked around and around her clit, sending zings of pleasure to her core.

She was ready for more.

“Get inside me Grayson, please,” she whined.

“You sure?”

“I'm sure.”

As his cock head circled her, she could tell he was trying to hold himself back, but Maisie's clit was pulsing under his expert strokes, her channel wide open and sopping wet. Her internal muscles sucked his cock deeper and deeper inside her, feeling the stretch and glide of him as he entered her, filling her up with each heavenly thrust.

Soon, everything was coalescing behind her eyes, the smell of him sweet and musky, the brush of his wings on her butt, the quickening of his fingers on her clit in perfect sync with the thrust of his pounding cock. Filling her, enveloping her as he rocked her in the cocoon of his wings. And now his lips found hers and his tongue thrust to the same sweet rhythm of his cock until Maisie couldn't hold out any longer. Head thrown back, fingernails digging hard into his back, she tumbled into the most intense orgasm of her life.

And then Grayson was shouting her name, his dark beautiful body tensing above her as with one final thrust, he came deep inside of her.

CHAPTER 16



Grayson padded around the kitchen, humming to himself.

Humming?

It was Christmas morning, and he was... Fucking full of joy and merriment.

Christmas Day and happiness did not go hand in hand for him. Hadn't for years. Bad things happened at Christmas, things you couldn't control.

He gripped the teacup so hard he nearly snapped the handle off. Took a deep breath. Surely he was allowed to be happy?

Yes. Today he fucking was. And be damned to the memories that haunted him.

Upstairs, there was a beautiful, luscious woman in his bed, and frankly, if he hadn't been such a gentleman as he'd pulled back the covers earlier and gazed at her, he'd have turned her over, buried his face in her beautiful pussy and licked her awake.

But he was a stickler for consent. So he'd covered her back up with a sigh and gone to make her a cup of tea.

He snorted as he poured the tea. He hadn't had sex with a human in years. He'd had a few little forays into the non-human world that had not been satisfactory for him. However, he didn't want to admit it was human women that did it for him, because... because... there was too much anguish around that.

Keep away had been his mantra.

Until Maisie came along and blew him away. As the kettle boiled, he walked into the lounge and turned on the Christmas tree lights, lit a fire. He wanted her to come down and be welcomed by the ambience.

A sadness swept over him as he realized there were no presents under the tree. He wanted to go and buy her gifts, shower her with them, but no shops would be open. He smirked. At least he'd managed to get condoms.

Guess he'd have to be her Christmas present. At the thought, his cock obligingly thickened.

He grinned down at it. "Never seen so much action in years, mate."

He could have sworn his cock winked at him.

When he made it back to the bedroom, Maisie was sitting up, her hair tumbling around her face, her wide blue eyes even wider as she saw him walk in. As a joke, he'd put on one of Cedric's striped aprons and tied it round his waist. And now he presented her cup of tea with a sprig of mistletoe on the tray.

Yes, he was hoping for a kiss—and more.

Her smile widened and her cute chipmunk cheeks scrunched up. "Are you my Christmas present?"

Now Grayson had a shit-eating grin on his face. There was no other way to describe it.

He put the tray down and sat and nuzzled into her sweet-smelling hair. Just the scent of her had him wanting to do wicked, unmentionable things to her.

"Aren't you going to join me?" She kicked down the covers until her bouncy tits were exposed, the nipples rosy, and Grayson gulped. A cup of tea seemed tame compared to what he could devour right now.

But he contained himself and threw himself on the bed next to her, relishing putting an arm around her shoulder. He wanted to air-punch as she nestled her head against his chest.

Which led him to another thought.

What would it be like to have Maisie here every morning when he woke up?

To have breakfast in bed with her before he started work.

The idea of going back to his makeshift bed up on the roof made his heart drop into his belly. She was here for barely three more weeks; it couldn't last. Besides, he worked all night. How could he sleep down here and be flesh and blood when he had to be stone and on duty 24/7?

He must have stiffened, because she looked up at him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, why?" But he knew his smile was tight.

"It's like a cloud came over you." She shifted away slightly, frowning. "If... this wasn't what you wanted... I mean, I'm a sensible person, Grayson. I can enjoy it as a one-off and go back to the status quo."

His lip curled. "Yeah?"

He saw her face pinch, and he knew she was fibbing. He didn't want to explore what this meant, but he knew it wasn't a one-off. Not for him. The thought of never again tasting the nectar between her thighs, or thrusting into her sweet pussy, filled him with a bleakness akin to despair.

This is crazy shit, mate.

He forced himself to relax his facial muscles. "All I know is, last night was the best, and it's Christmas, so let's just enjoy what we have right now, huh? You good with that?"

For a second more, he sensed her wanting to withdraw from him, and then it was like she pulled herself together, nodded and sat up to pick up her teacup. "I'm good with that."

But Grayson wanted to kick himself, because those words were dismissive, not at all representative of how she affected him. He wanted to explain why, but he hadn't talked about what happened all those years ago—except with Cedric, and even then, he'd left out a lot of the details.

He tamped down the pain that threatened to engulf him, tried to say something that would show how much he wanted and desired her, but she'd sat back against the pillows and was quietly sipping her tea.

He turned his head, opened his mouth, and then something at the window caught his eye.

A big shadow flapped past. Then another. And another.

Fucking gargoyles.

What the hell were they doing here? He jumped off the bed and searched around for his pants.

Maisie looked at him out of wide, alarmed eyes. "What's the matter?"

"I think some of my team have just turned up."

"Why?"

"I have no freakin' idea. Never happened before on Christmas Day."

He went over and peered out the window.

Damn the gods. Yep, there they were on the snowy front lawn. And then along the street bobbed Katrina's unmistakable green head, wearing a stupid pixie hat.

No fucking way.

They should all be at home opening presents with their loved ones.

Maisie was already out of bed, and even in these circumstances he couldn't help a longing glance at her beautiful body as she shoved on her dressing gown.

"I'll go see what they want." Grayson took the stairs as the doorbell chimed.

When he opened it, three gargoyles and one orc started singing a very out of tune version of "Jingle Bells."

Grayson stood there feeling stupid.

When they'd finished, he put his hands on his hips and tried for his best Grayson Lightfoot scowl. "What the fuck are

you all doing here?”

Katrina pushed forward, followed by Matt, Tom and his youngest recruit, Harry. “We’re not here to see you, Grayson you old grinch. We’re here to make Maisie’s Christmas morning bearable.”

“W-what?”

“Where is she?” Katrina gave him the stink eye. “We’re the bringers of gifts.”

“Yeah, she’s Santa Claus and we’re the three reindeers.” Tom smirked as they pushed past him into the hallway. The lounge room door was open, and they all stood and gaped, wide-eyed.

“Oh, my!” Katrina breathed.

“Boss,” Tom said, “have you gone soft in the head? You decorated a Christmas tree?”

He wanted to lie, say he’d had nothing to do with it. But of course, Matt knew the truth, so he couldn’t. They’d rib him for this for weeks, months probably.

“Guilty as charged,” he growled.

“Oh, my goddess,” Katrina chuckled. “Wait until I tell Lucia about this.”

“You should be at home with Lucia right now,” Grayson complained.

“She’s waiting in the car up the road. Then we’re off to her parents’ place.”

Grayson turned to his second in command. “And you, Matt. What about the kids and Tina? Won’t they be missing you?”

Matt looked at him blearily. “The kids were up at 4 am opening presents. I’m going home to bed after this.”

Just then, Maisie came down the stairs. Dressed in jeans and her usual green jumper, her hair in a ponytail, she looked just as she always did. But Grayson’s heart flipped, and it felt like he had sugar syrup in his veins just looking at her.

Because now he knew what she looked like, felt like, smelled like *out* of those clothes, knew the divine little noises she made when she came for him. Quickly he turned away, his cock already twitching.

Katrina went bounding over to Maisie, holding out the basket of gifts. “Happy Christmas, Maisie. We’re here to make it a bit more bearable.”

Maisie flicked a glance at Grayson, and he saw her color up. “You are so sweet, guys. But why did you feel you had to —”

“What? Leave you alone with the grinch here, with no presents? Not likely.” Katrina laughed.

“But then we saw all this—” Tom jerked a thumb at the Christmas tree in the lounge, twinkling away, the fire roaring in the grate. “And we realized he’s made an effort after all.”

Grayson felt his own skin coloring up. His wings moved restlessly on his back. This was fucking embarrassing. “Seems like you’re turning the boss soft in his old age.”

Hard. More like it.

The thought made Grayson nearly choke on his own saliva. He turned it into a cough.

“Sorry you were sick. Are you feeling better?” Katrina asked Maisie.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine.” Masie cast a look at Grayson.

“Did he look after you well?”

Now Maisie was the color of a holly berry and Grayson felt his own skin hot as the fire in the grate. He sensed they could all guess something was afoot, but he wasn’t going to enlighten them, and clearly Maisie wasn’t either. Let them keep guessing. It would be over by their next staff meeting anyhow.

And that thought made his heart drop like the stone that it was.

Meanwhile, Maisie gushed, “You are too kind, guys; I don’t know what to say.”

“Open them, you might not like what we chose,” Katrina urged.

The gargoyles all shuffled their wings expectantly as they moved into the formal lounge.

Maisie put the box on the coffee table, and everyone gathered around as she unwrapped the presents.

A Christmas cake came first. “Lucia and I made it,” Katrina said proudly. “Lots of brandy.”

Then a Christmas candle. Grayson watched Maisie sniff it. “Christmas spice for a seasonal ambience,” Katrina explained.

A box of cookies. “My wife made them,” Matt explained.

And finally, a cute little gargoyle chiseled out of wood. “Carved it myself,” Tom said proudly. “When there’s no action, I make things out of wood. Gotta do something with these gnarly old hands.”

Grayson could see how touched Maisie was. Her eyes shone, and her lips quivered.

“Thank you, guys, this is... I mean, no one has ever gone to so much trouble for me before.”

Katrina jumped in. “We wanted to do it, not just because he’s the grinch but because—well, you’re nice. We all liked you as soon as we met you. So, you know, it’s kind of a shame you won’t be around for longer.”

Grayson felt the air between him and Maisie tighten like a bow string.

Because the truth was, it *was* a shame that she wouldn’t be in his life for longer.

A huge shame.

He swallowed hard, clapped his hands. “Right, that’s it. You’ve all got homes and families to get back to.” He remembered Tom. “Apart from you, Tom, and you’re getting paid triple to make up for it.”

The gargoyles and orc made grumbling noises as they headed for the door.

“We respected that you didn’t want a gift, boss. We’re used to that, but...” Katrina hesitated as she stood on the doorstep. “I know Matt mentioned my New Year’s Eve party to you. We really want you to come. We figure that isn’t really Christmas anymore. And Maisie deserves some fun.”

Grayson felt his eyes smarting. Here were his team, wanting to include him in the festivities, and every year he was a miserable recluse. Refusing to put on a party for his team, not even a Kris Kringle. Tom had been right the other day, calling him the grinch.

But this year, damn it, he was going to allow himself to thaw. To enjoy himself. He owed it to them. And to Maisie.

He dug his hands in his pockets and tried not to grin. He swiveled and looked at Maisie, raising an eyebrow at her. “You want to go to these reprobates’ New Year’s Eve party?”

She nodded, biting her lip, smiling right up to her ears.

How beautiful she looked. How happy she made him right now.

“Yeah, we’ll come,” he growled hoarsely. “But don’t think I’m making a habit of this.”

CHAPTER 17



When Grayson entered the living room after seeing off his team, Maisie stood, awkwardly pulling at the sleeves on her green jumper, feeling so self-conscious she hardly knew where to look.

She fixed her eyes on the gifts on the coffee table.

“That was sooo sweet of them.” Why was she cooing in that sickly sweet voice?

She heard Grayson grunt, and her heart sank. But when she glanced at him, his eyes were soft with yearning. And something else.

Lust.

Her pussy obligingly clenched.

“Yeah, it was, very sweet.” He moved slowly over to her, panther-like in his grace, his wings pinned back, his chest muscles rippling. And a definite large pouch in his pants.

She gulped.

“But nowhere near as sweet,” he got closer, “as someone else I know.”

She hugged herself now and he stopped, frowned. “Maisie?”

“It’s just... I don’t want you to think...” Her words trailed off.

“Think what?”

“That I, you know, want this to be more than a fling. I’m good with that, Grayson, I know this could get awkward, and there’s this you-boss-me-employer thing, but I am totally cool with it. Just for the record.”

He nodded, his lips tightening.

Had she said something to displease him? Gods, she’d thought that was what he’d been getting at before his team had arrived bearing gifts.

Now she was confused.

Suddenly, he smiled brightly. “Yeah, sure. I agree.”

“Good, then.”

“You don’t think I’m abusing my role as your employer?”

“Um, if I remember rightly, I was the one who came and found you last night.” She gave a little smirk. “And I am being paid triple rates over Christmas, so...”

At that, Grayson threw back his head and roared with laughter. Maisie just gawked. She’d never heard him laugh like this. Chuckle, yes, but not this deep belly laugh. She loved the play of muscles at his neck as he laughed, the way his big shoulders shook.

“Oh Maisie, you really are freakin’ something else.” In two big strides he’d taken her in his arms and whisked her around.

And then he kissed her.

And the world stopped turning.

Because Grayson’s kisses were the best. Maisie kissed him back passionately, her hands around his neck, and daringly climbed his body and threw her thighs around his hips. At this angle she could feel the hard ridge growing by the second and pressing against her seam. A drenching sweet heat flooded her.

With a growl, Grayson dipped her down onto the sofa, and she lay there, panting, as he kneeled between her legs and pushed up her jumper.

“This off,” he growled, as he worked the zipper of her jeans. Maisie needed no encouragement to pull it over her head and throw it aside. Lying there in her bra, he worked her jeans down her legs, grumbling huskily, “I don’t know where I want to put my mouth first, on your gorgeous tits or your sweet little cunt.”

“Can’t you do both?”

Again he laughed, deep and vibrant, and so unlike the grump she’d first met that it took her breath away—or it would have, if his ministrations hadn’t done the job already. Her jeans off, he buried his head in her tits as his other hand ran a path along her soaking cleft.

Maisie’s head kicked back on the sofa and her body slid lower, legs flung wide. As he suckled her nipples and stroked his fingers through her seam, sparks ran from her nipples to her clit and back like lightning, and she grabbed him by his big shoulders and dug her nails into his flesh as she squirmed and mewled.

Grayson lowered his head and started to kiss down her body until his mouth took over from his fingers between her legs.

“Oh—OH!” Maisie arched as his tongue found her, all the sensations streaming together like the fairy lights on the Christmas tree now, blurring in front of her eyes. That tongue was big enough to encompass her clit and her entrance, curling around the hard bud and licking it like it was some delicious lollipop, only to thrust inside her moments later.

Maisie felt her orgasm teetering, then... No—he moved his mouth away, leaving her bereft. “Not yet,” he growled. “I want to make you come so hard you don’t know your own name.”

Oh god, he was edging her, she realized as his tongue licked around her thighs and then back just at the beginning of her seam, his lips planting little kisses everywhere but where she was burning up. Slowly, slowly he made his way back to her clit as she bucked and squeezed his shoulders and begged.

He tended to it with deep grunts of pleasure.

And then he did it all over again, until she was mewling like a kitten and trying to chase his tongue with her bucking hips.

And then, suddenly, he was taking no prisoners.

He went down on her in earnest.

She felt his tongue encompass her whole vulva, making her feel so incredible that she could no longer tell where the pleasure was centered. Then he zeroed in, suckling her clit into his mouth, his tongue tip flicking her hood, adding to that delicious sensation. The almost obscene sound of him lapping up her juices told her she was practically drowning him, his growls of pleasure increasing as if he, too, was almost on the brink of coming.

Oh, goddess, that tongue was vibrating on her sex like no freakin' dragon dildo ever could.

Maisie's orgasm exploded. There was no other way to explain the pleasure that rushed through her, lighting up all her nerve endings. She jerked wildly, fingernails clawing into his shoulders, her back arching, her head banging the back of the sofa as she literally howled, "Yes, yes, oh Grayson, yessssssss...."

As she shuddered in the aftermath, Grayson kept his tongue rolling around her seam, gentling her back to earth until the final spasms of her release were past.

Lying there like a rag doll, she felt him move up her body, leaning over her but not crushing her.

"What just happened?" she panted.

"Welcome to the land of beasts." He laughed, low and soft. "Because the sound you made, baby, when you came was definitely not quite human."

Maisie smirked, her cheeks flushed, her bones feeling like they were made of noodles.

And then she saw the huge rod tenting his pants and her inner muscles spasmed once more.

This! This was what she needed—the icing on the Christmas cake.

“I want... And you need...” She sat up and started to unzip him.

Grayson laughed huskily, his eyes eating up her body. “Yeah, Pumpkin, I won’t pretend otherwise.”

As she freed him, the head of his ebony cock was copiously oozing pre-cum. If possible, it looked even bigger than the first time. He took it in his fist, looking at her with both lust and... *love*.

No, Maisie, don’t go there.

She needed to stay clear on what this was between them. And right now, *this* was him inside her, fucking her until they both saw stars. But then another thought made her face fall. “Oh, do we have condoms here?”

He put his hand in his pocket and brandished them with a grin. “Thought we might need them at the ready.”

Oh. She giggled as he ripped off his pants and stood naked and resplendent in front of her.

“How do you want me?” she asked.

“I don’t know, babe, everything about you turns me so hard, I can’t think straight.”

“Well, then.” She gave a naughty little pout. “I’ll decide.”

“Yeah, instruct me. I like being bossed around.”

“You’re kidding right?”

He dropped a kiss on her lips, then nibbled her ear. “Only if the bossing is coming from someone called Maisie.”

When she flipped over onto her belly, he gave a delighted laugh. “But you did read my mind, Pumpkin—”

Maisie clung onto the back of the sofa and wiggled her ass cheeks in his face. She’d never felt so free, so deliciously sexual in her whole life. She heard him gasp, felt the wet hot

tip of his cock gently tracing a path around her butt cheeks, leaving a trail of delicious sticky pre-cum.

“I want to mark you as mine,” he growled, low and commanding. Maisie didn’t know if he was joking, but the words were hot as hell.

She heard the rustle of foil as he ripped open the condom, then his grunts as he sheathed himself.

Then his cock was parting her, moving along her ass crack. Stopping at her tight little hole to tease her gently, before smoothing the swollen head along her wet seam. Grayson rubbed his cock over her clit until Maisie was nearly ready to come all over again, she was so sensitized.

She needed him to thrust into her.

“Go inside me,” she begged.

On a deep groan, he pushed, and she surrendered, her pussy opening to take him, to suck him in deeper.

With another groan he pushed deeper, the root of his cock on her clit just adding to the pleasure.

She rotated her hips.

“Oh gods, Maisie, you have the most beautiful ass in the world.” His big hands landed on her ass cheeks, his claws lightly scratching the surface of her skin, intensifying her pleasure.

“I want to bury myself in you up to my balls.”

“Yes, Grayson, go deep in me.”

“I won’t be able hold out long Pumpkin, not watching your cute ass wiggle like this.”

She felt him leaning over her, his weight a little heavy, pressing her into the sofa as he fucked her harder and his two hands came around and cupped her breasts, kneading them.

She was so close, but she needed a tiny bit more on her clit to close the deal.

Was he one of those brutish guys who thought only he should make her come? No, she was sure he wasn't.

As if guessing her thoughts, he rumbled in her ear, "Bring yourself off with me, it will make me come harder for you, babe."

Her hand snuck between her legs, and as she applied the right pressure to her clit, rubbing it firm and fast, his body seemed to know exactly how to match her rhythm. He thrust harder, faster, deeper, their bodies slapping together with delightful lewd noises, their gasps and pants in exact unison.

"Oh god," Maisie whined, teetering on the edge. "I'm coming, Grayson—"

"I can feel it. Oh fuck, Maisie, you're gonna milk every last drop of me."

With his hands splayed on her hips, she felt his body tense behind her and his cock swell, filling her completely as he came.

CHAPTER 18



“You take this plate in, I’ll bring the others.” Grayson handed the roast potatoes to Maisie. Okay, so it wasn’t a traditional Christmas dinner—it was a lamb roast, stuffed with garlic and rubbed with spices—but they’d done all sorts of trimmings. Honeyed carrots and broccoli with almonds and even some little devils on horseback.

And they had the Christmas cake that Katrina had brought, which was taking things further than he had in years.

It was *their* Christmas, his and Maisie’s, and that’s what mattered.

Prepping the meal with her in the kitchen had been wonderful. They’d touched in passing, he’d dropped a kiss on her shoulder, she’d pinched his ass cheeks. They’d laughed a lot.

Then they’d made love again, upstairs in the shower, him holding her up in the water with his wings, Maisie giggling when he gently flapped them, sprinkling her from all angles with droplets.

Yeah, it had been the best Christmas morning ever.

As they tucked into their meal he got her to tell him more about her plans for the drop-in center, loving the way her face lit up as she chatted.

“There’s so many kids out there who need support, I wish I could open several centers.” She sighed.

“I know. Feral kids, most of them. Few of them have proper homes; their parents are too drunk or stoned to care and they just run amok. They’re our biggest problem in Motham. The youth gangs.”

She nodded. “I’ve been reading up about it.”

“You’re amazing, Maisie.”

She cocked her head. “Why do you say that?”

“Most humans don’t care. They just pretend the problem doesn’t exist. I think they hope Motham City will implode.”

“Well, here’s a human who *does* care,” Maisie responded stoutly. “And I want to help— even the feral kids.”

Grayson sighed. “It’s not really the younglings’ fault. The poor kids have nowhere to go, so they roam the streets. Most of them are just lost, lonely, and bored. Only a few are really troublesome. But boy do they make trouble. The monkey and cat shifters are the worst. Real bad news.”

“Maybe their behaviour is a cry for help. Maybe all they want is to feel loved,” she said softly.

What was it about her that got under his cold skin, melted his stone heart?

Was it their difficult childhoods, their shared loneliness? The sense they’d both been on the outer? Their need to help others?

He wasn’t going to analyze it. He knew it would come to an end, but today at least, he wanted to relish it.

You thought a human was amazing before.

And look what happened.

He slammed down the thought. Unclouded his head.

Told himself to just enjoy the moment. No expectations. No ties.

Masie was rational, sensible.

She knew the score...

Except she didn’t. She didn’t know any of it.

And he couldn't—wouldn't tell her.

Grayson shook off the cloud that hovered over his head, threatening to spoil his day. If he let that happen, he'd spoil hers too, and he didn't want to hurt her. She'd had pain and sadness too, and *this*, whatever *this* was, however brief, was healing for them both.

As lunch progressed he shared stories about his staff, telling Maisie how they'd come to work for him. "Matt had been a gym instructor and got bored of it, and I took on Tom because of his experience with me in the army." He paused, then quickly moved on. "Katrina had been working security for an upmarket store, but was sacked after a human high breed complained that she'd been rude to them. It wasn't true. They had the footage to prove it, but this woman was from Tween." He huffed. "So, she won of course. Friends in high places."

Maisie shook her head. "I hate Tween. It's so snobby. I only had one person who was prepared to foster me from there. She was mean and horrible and made me eat alone in a tiny dark room."

"Oh, shit. Maisie."

She smiled at his horrified face. "Don't worry. In the end I learned how to work the system. Be good, be nice and make yourself useful, and that way you'd get the better placements."

"And you still do that, right?"

"I still try to do the right thing, but I stick up for myself now. I don't take shit. Once I'd got away from foster homes and ditched my gaslighting boyfriend..." She stopped. Grayson felt his skin prickle with rage at the thought that anyone would treat her that way.

He tried to sound casual. "When was that?"

"We split two years ago."

"Human?"

"Yeah."

“Ever had a—a monster in your bed before?” Heck, why did it matter?

She shook her head.

Grayson stared at his plate.

“How about you?” she asked quietly.

He froze, his wings tightening. “What about me?” But he knew what she was asking.

“You know, relationship stuff.”

He shrugged. “Flings here and there. I had a fae partner for a short while, but we didn’t really fit, the chemistry wasn’t there between us. Otherwise, short-term flings, where the deal was clear on both sides.”

“No humans?”

He gulped hard, stared harder at his plate. “One. Very briefly. A long time ago.”

The silence drew out between them.

“You don’t want to talk about it, do you?” she said finally. When he dared to glance at her, her eyes were a little sad, a little hurt even. He wanted to tell her it wasn’t what she thought, not really, but he’d never talked to anyone about it, other than a fleeting mention to Cedric once, after one too many whiskies. It was his shame; he’d take it to the grave.

He shrugged. “To be honest, I barely remember it, it’s so long ago now.”

Her look made it clear she didn’t believe him. She got up and started to clear the plates and he felt the magic dropping away.

No, please gods, not yet.

He wanted this to last—just a little longer.

He stood too, caught her arm in his hand, suddenly realizing his claws were out and that they’d snagged in her jumper.

“Let’s not talk about the past. Let’s just make the most of this now,” he pleaded.

She nodded, her mouth tight. Grayson retracted his claws, sighed heavily. “Maisie, I don’t know what this is, but being with you has been the best Christmas present. More than I deserve.”

For a moment more, her lips compressed, her eyes cloudy. Then he felt her arm relax and she moved toward him. “You deserve to be happy, Grayson. You’re a good guy.” Her face softened as he kissed her, smoothed the hair away from her forehead.

Did she see it? His inner turmoil, his pain? He sensed she did. Maybe that was one of the reasons he felt so drawn to her, because she saw through all his bluff and bad temper.

Those blue eyes cut through all his crap and went straight to his soul.

He didn’t understand the intensity of this feeling. But the truth was, he just wanted to be around her, to be enveloped by her warmth, her kindness. Her beautiful soul.

And body.

“I’ve got something I want to give you,” he husked out.

“What is that?”

“Can’t you guess?”

She gave a little smirk. “I’m guessing your bed is very empty up there.”

Thank the gods, she wasn’t upset or angry. He should have known. She was such a down-to-earth person. She may be young in years, but she’d learned the hard way that life wasn’t a fairy tale. She wasn’t expecting more from him than he could give.

But, hey, the holiday season wasn’t over yet. They were going to a party together on New Year’s Eve.

And until then, he was going to enjoy every freakin’ minute he had left with her.

Before she could protest, he growled, “The dishes can wait.” And lifting her into his arms, he strode out the door and up the stairs with her.

“I may not have bought you a present,” he growled in her ear, “but I can give you something else”

“And that,” Maisie giggled, snuggling against him, “will be the best Christmas gift of all.”



Maisie stretched luxuriously. She'd fallen asleep with Grayson spooned behind her, sated by yet more amazing sex. She was a little sore, to be honest. Their lovemaking was hectic and acrobatic, and as well as the obvious part of her anatomy, her arms and legs hurt like they'd had a strenuous gym workout.

Though she'd choose making love with Grayson over a gym session a zillion times over.

Making love.

She couldn't call it just sex, could she? It was rough and dirty and tender and beautiful.

And the time had flown past, which Maisie guessed happened when you were this happy.

It was New Year's Eve already.

These past six days had been so much fun, and not only in bed. They'd cooked and shopped together. No one around these parts stared at the big gargoyle and the small human; it wasn't abnormal now to have mixed pairings like this. He'd taken her flying again, a bit further this time, soaring over Motham and even going past the city gates toward the hills. She wondered where they'd go next...

Stop daydreaming

It's not like you two have a future. Be sensible.

With a sigh, she cracked open an eyelid and realized he wasn't in the bed. She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

It was quite late in the morning, judging by the angle of the sun peeking through the curtains.

Maybe Grayson had decided he needed to work.

Her eyes alighted on a note next to the bed. A sprig of mistletoe on top of it.

I kissed you before I left. Didn't want to wake you Gxx

This had to be more than just sex.

Don't go there, Maisie.

Think about something else.

And then she did, and she didn't like that thought much better. Tonight was the party at Katrina's and she had nothing to wear.

Oh dear.

She guessed she'd just have to put on jeans and her pink silky blouse. But it made her sad that she didn't have something really pretty to wear. Growing up, she'd never had anything but the brown slip dresses the agency provided to show that she was a foster kid.

Only one family had given her some other clothes to wear. They'd made her feel like a princess, even though they were hand-me-downs from an older daughter who was bigger and taller than her, so she still looked like an orphan. Just a better dressed one.

Maisie huffed softly.

No use remembering that. She looked nice in her pink blouse. Grayson had, after all, practically ripped it off her. At least he hadn't torn it.

She got out of bed and padded to the bathroom. Showered and washed her hair, then went downstairs and made herself some breakfast. Then she tidied up the plates from their dinner last night, which they'd left because he'd insisted he wanted to bury himself between her legs.

She gave a snorty giggle. God, how attuned they were to each other. They came simultaneously, nearly every time.

Her body heated and she wished he was here. They probably wouldn't even get to the bed.

As if on cue, she glanced out the window and saw a shadowy shape flying toward the house, unmistakably Grayson—with a fist full of shopping bags.

She smirked at that. Such a huge guy looking so incongruously domesticated.

A couple of minutes later, she heard his heavy footsteps coming down the stairs from the roof.

He breezed in with a big grin on his face.

“We didn't need any more food, Grayson. We've got heaps.”

“Not food.” He pushed one bag toward her, then another.

Maisie's brows pleated. “What's this?”

“Don't ask questions, just open them,” he growled.

Gingerly, she opened the first bag. Her hand met something sparkly and soft inside. Maisie frowned some more.

“For the goddess's sake woman, just take it out.”

She held it up—a shimmery dress in green satin covered in sequins that would hug her curves for sure.

“Oh, is this for me?”

He rolled his eyes now. “No, it's for the fairy on top of the Christmas tree. What do you think?” He was beginning to pace now, looking slightly like his old grumpy self. “Open the other one.”

She pulled out another dress, in a beautiful shimmering shade of blue.

“To match your eyes,” Grayson muttered, staring at his boots.

“Oh... and this?” She removed a box.

“Sandals.”

“How do you know my size?”

“I checked in your wardrobe.”

“Oh Grayson.” Her breath hitched. He hadn’t gone to work at all; he’d gone shopping for her instead. She pulled out the gorgeous strappy silver sandals. There was one more little bag.

“And this?”

“That’s for me.”

“Oh good, I’m glad you bought yourself something.”

He was smirking fit to burst when she pulled out a beautiful bra and tiny g-string made of black silk and ivory lace.

Maisie burst out laughing. “Grayson, they won’t fit you.”

“For me, so I know you’re wearing them all night and then I can rip them off you when we get home.”

She pouted, but already her inner walls quivered at the thought. “That would be a terrible waste of something so... beautiful. Did you check my bra size too?”

“I guessed that from—” he held up one cupped hand, “—having got intimately acquainted with them lately.”

With a squeal, Maisie ran and jumped into his arms.

He kissed her, his tongue forging into her mouth. After a long moment, she pulled back and put her hands on either side of his cheeks. She stared into his eyes, so clear and gray and somehow vulnerable as he gazed back at her.

“Grayson. No one has ever done something so lovely, so thoughtful and kind. Thank you.” She tried to hold back the sob in her voice, the great big lump in her throat, but a tear ran down her cheek. After all the years she’d been Cinderella, now here she was going to the ball.

With her prince.

“They should have showered you in gifts, Maisie. They should have...” He stopped himself, then brought a big finger up and wiped the tear from her lashes. They both laughed as he guessed her thoughts. “You, Pumpkin are going to the ball tonight.”

“Promise I won’t turn into a pumpkin at the end of it?”

“Only into *my* pumpkin,” he said, and kissed the tip of her nose.

As she hugged him tight, she tried not to give in to the niggling little worry that this was too good to be true.

Stop it.

Tonight, she was going to live the fairy tale, without fear or doubts getting in the way.

“Let’s go upstairs so you can try these on and work out which you like best. And if you don’t like either of them, we’ll go shopping again.”

“That won’t be necessary. I love them both already.” Maisie sighed.

“I hope so.” He smirked wickedly. “Because I’ve got something much more fun than shopping in mind for the next couple of hours.”

CHAPTER 19



Even before they reached the party, Grayson could hear the music pounding from way up in the sky. Typical Katrina, she loved a good party. The house looked like a Christmas decoration from above, all lit up, and soon he was hovering over the roof, checking for the best spot to pitch down without landing on the folks who were up there dancing and chatting.

There were two barbecues running with sumptuous meat cuts, and a fire in a firepit where folks gathered, laughing and having fun.

Grayson's face cracked a huge smile.

He had a beautiful woman strapped onto his front, wrapped in the fur that had belonged to his grandmother, and that meant a lot to him.

He glanced down at her. He'd strapped her facing him because of the cold and she was snuggling into him, the fur hood keeping her hair neat.

She'd looked so beautiful in her dress, so freakin' sexy as she twirled for him before they left. She'd chosen the green one, and in fact it brought out the color of her cornflower eyes even more than the blue.

He gently hovered and landed, then unstrapped her carefully. Was he going to let everyone see they were an item?

A knot formed in his stomach.

Were they an item? Gods, how was he going to tell her that when Cedric came back, he hoped they could keep seeing each

other?

“How’s my hair?” Her eyes twinkled up at him. He smoothed it down with his hands, kissed the tip of her cold nose.

“You look beautiful,” he murmured softly. “Now let’s go.”

“There you are!” Katrina bounded toward them with two glasses of champagne. “We were worried you’d chicken out.”

Matt sauntered over with his wife. Most of the other guys from work were there, except Tom of course, who was probably sitting at home with his bad leg up on a stool, happily drinking beer by himself. Grayson had popped in to see him earlier, to make sure there were backup staff in place for an emergency.

Yep, he felt pretty confident everything was covered. He could relax now.

“How are you, Maisie? Wow, what a dress! Where did you get that from?” Katrina cooed.

Maisie cast him a shy look under her lashes.

Grayson cleared his throat. “I think it was a gift from Father Christmas.”

Katrina’s eyes pierced him, her lips curled up in a smirk, but she didn’t say anything more.

Introductions were made to Katrina’s other friends; some Grayson knew, some he didn’t.

He loved the way Maisie just fitted in, smiled and looked so at home with everyone. His wing fluttered, wanting to curl around her, but to a gargoyle, a wing around a woman meant more than an arm. It meant: this is my mate.

An arm, well, that could still be casual enough. So he put his hand lightly on the small of her back.

“It’s cold out here, wanna go inside?”

“No, but if it’s okay I’ll keep your gran’s fur coat on.”

“Sure, I’d be honored if you did.”

So they stayed outside and then the party really hit its stride. The music got louder, and soon gargoyles were spreading their wings and hopping into the sky with the boppy jive.

“This is hilarious,” Maisie gasped as Grayson twirled her up into the air and then brought her down and twirled her under his arm. “I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“It’s a gargoyle party trick. Gets the girl every time.”

As they finally left the dance floor, a minotaur holding the hand of a pretty petite human stepped out of the crowd. “Hey there Grayson, didn’t expect to see you here.” The minotaur grinned at Maisie. “Care to introduce us to your lady friend?”

“Hello there.” Grayson, his arms still around Maisie, smiled at his two friends. “Maisie, meet Bryn and Ivy. How are the babies?”

Ivy laughed. “We got a much-needed reprieve tonight, thanks to mom-in-law baby-sitting. Can you believe they’ve just had their first birthday? Lovely to meet you, Maisie.” She beamed.

“Hi Maisie,” Bryn held out a big hand. “You managed to get this guy dancing. Impressive.” Maisie laughed as she shook hands with them both. They immediately fell into conversation, getting on instantly. After a while, Maisie asked Ivy where the restrooms were, and Ivy offered to show her. Grayson watched them depart, chatting away and laughing together, and then Bryn moved closer. “So are you guys...?” His dark eyes twinkled.

“Maisie’s my housekeeper while Cedric’s having Christmas with his family.”

“Good one.” Bryn’s eyebrows waggled suggestively, and Grayson felt himself blushing.

“She’s doing a great job by the looks of things.”

“Yep, keeps things under control.”

“Good bed maker too?”

“Trust a bloody minotaur to say that,” Grayson spluttered.

Bryn's deep laugh rumbled. "I get the picture." He patted Grayson on the back. "You've got a good one there, mate, she's special. And you're smitten."

Grayson could only growl. "I'm off to get a drink."

His minotaur friend laughed. "I can vouch for the married life."

Grayson didn't even try to hide his shit-eating grin as he strode toward the drinks table.

And when Maisie joined him, he couldn't stop himself—out came his wing and wrapped around her.

The evening passed so swiftly after that, it was midnight before he knew it. And suddenly everyone was in a big circle, their arms clasped around each other, singing "Auld Lang Syne."

Grayson's chest was soft and warm, his body malleable, like he could stay this way forever. Flesh and blood and emotion all dancing inside of him. Joy filling his heart. He wanted Maisie in his life, he realized as fireworks went off around the city, sending out great blooms of color and light. And when he grabbed her and kissed her lips, and she clung to him, already he was hard for her.

"Let's get out of here," he murmured against her hair. "I want you too much to wait a second longer. It's driving me insane."

"Isn't it a bit too soon to leave?"

"We've seen the new year in." And suddenly he had the thought, that maybe this year... with Maisie, maybe it could work out... "I want to spend all of New Year's Day with you."

"Me too."

As they said their farewells, Grayson was sure there were some smirks hidden behind hands, but he didn't honestly care. His belly warmed by a few beers, his heart equally warm, he strapped Maisie against his chest, loving the way her breasts pressed against him, and as he took off over the city, he felt

like he could soar like an eagle in the slipstream forever— just him and the woman he loved.

Loved. Oh god, was he falling in love with Maisie?

Grayson tightened his grip on her, felt her soft breasts against his chest even through her coat and fur coat, her legs clasped around his hips, and a surge of desire swept through him, so strong that if he didn't have enough logic, he would have taken her in the age-old tradition of gargoyles mating with their loved ones high in the sky.

He pulled his emotions into line.

In sky mating, there was never contraception. That was the whole point. You were bonded for life.

And it certainly didn't happen early on in a courtship.

But were they courting? Yep, they most certainly were, he was sure of it now.

When they got back, they snuggled together on the roof for long moments, his wings around her, his hard-on pressing into her.

She giggled up at him, her blue eyes dancing. “Did flying turn you on?”

“You turn me on.” He kissed her, but how could he tell her what had just happened?

It was too profound.

Was it possible that this thing with Maisie could progress to full mateship? Something that would result in children, in a life together, forever?

Right now, after this amazing New Year's Eve, a new year, a new life ahead, he let himself consider that possibility.

He was just about to say something, to open his mouth and blurt his feelings, when his phone trilled the alarm tone. Buzzers went off from the screen near his pedestal, and from the loudspeakers positioned around the rooftop. Alarms seemed to be everywhere.

Grayson jumped back, hyper alert suddenly, his body hardening into fight or flight mode.

These alerts only came in when there was a major incident.

“Sorry, I have to check this,” he said as Maisie reeled away from him, her eyes wide with surprise.

Striding over to the screen next to his pillar, he pulled up a view of the city zones, zeroed in on a messy situation over in the East Quarter. Looked like gang warfare.

Tom was on the line, and confirmed his worst fears. “I’m flying over there now, boss. I’ve called for reinforcements. Katrina’s been alerted and she’s organizing the ground team. Nothing for you to worry about.”

“No way mate,” Grayson growled. “I’m flying in.”

“Leave it to us, boss.” Tom’s growl was firm. “It’ll just be a skirmish. We’ll have it under control in no time. You enjoy the rest of the night.”

Grayson hesitated, torn. He longed to be with Maisie, but...

“Okay,” he agreed grudgingly. “Call me if you need me.”

“Trust me, boss.”

“I do, Tom.”

Grayson turned back to Maisie, his longing to take her in his arms, tell her how he felt suddenly crowded out by a cloud of worry he couldn’t shake. These gangs were dangerous. Everyone had been in party mode, relaxed. Sure, there’d been a team on the ground, but new guys, not his usual experienced ones.

Shit, was he dropping the ball here?

Memories ricocheted into his head, of another time when his heart had got the better of his head.

And catastrophe had struck.

Because he hadn’t been with his team.

Grayson's fists balled, muscles bunching, the emotion draining out of him as cold, hard reality hit like an ice pick.

He sensed Maisie watching him, shivering despite the thick fur coat.

He didn't step closer, or meet her gaze, because he knew if he smelled her or looked into her beautiful eyes, he would melt. He couldn't do that now. He needed to help his team.

He opened his mouth, snapped it shut, his jaw working.

She walked toward him and he stepped back sharply.

She stopped, her face hurt, but quickly she masked it, and he was glad. He couldn't bear to see her sad.

He looked over her head, knew that his eyes were changing color by the sharpening of his vision.

His mouth clamped shut, his muscles and bones hardening into action readiness, his heart a piece of rock in his chest.

"I need to go," he said stiffly,

She nodded. "I know."

And just that, the fact that she understood, was almost enough to crack his hardening heart wide open again.

With a curt nod, Grayson turned, crouched low, spread his wings, and took off toward the East Quarter.

CHAPTER 20



For long moments, Maisie stood staring after Grayson's departing silhouette, his beating wings highlighted against the moon as he flew higher.

He'd been going to say something. Something wonderful. She sensed it...

And then...

That call... His face had changed in seconds, his expression hardening, his eyes suddenly flaring red.

And just like that, her soft, loving guy had disappeared.

And when she'd stepped forward and he'd stepped back, staring stonily over her head, she'd realized he wasn't here with her anymore.

A cold little needle of dread pierced her heart.

She was overreacting, surely? It was just a temporary thing, him switching into work mode to deal with a crisis.

Maisie pushed back her shoulders and kicked off her shoes. She carried them down the stairs, meaning to go to her room, but outside his suite, she paused.

Wouldn't she feel better lying in his bed?

As she curled up on it and pulled the covers around her face, his unmistakable sweet musky aroma overtook her, bringing a sense of loss she couldn't explain. Sudden hot tears spilled from her eyes. She tried to tell herself not to be silly, but in the end she just let them come, soaking the pillow.

Lying there under the covers, her dress all crumpled, she really did feel like Cinderella after the ball.

Her Prince was gone.

It was as if she'd been shown this magical world, been given a peek of what it would be like to feel cherished, *special*... desired... *loved* even...

It had felt like that, hadn't it? The way he'd introduced everyone to her, saying her name in such a loving voice, his arm lightly resting on her back. It had said so much more than, "Here, meet my housekeeper."

She moaned, sat up, wiped her eyes fiercely with the back of her hand.

You're overreacting, Maisie.

It would be much better to go to her room where she wouldn't have to smell his delicious scent, remember the things they'd done in this bed.

Resolutely, she got up and left.

But as she passed his study door, she hesitated, the contents of his desk an almost visceral pull. She had to understand what was going on for Grayson, to understand why he'd suddenly shut off from her.

Turning the door handle, she walked inside and headed straight for his desk.

She opened the top drawer and took out the book on post-traumatic stress disorder.

Holding her breath, she opened it. A whole heap of newspaper clippings and printouts from the internet fluttered onto the desk.

She picked them up one by one, they were from a paper called The Mountain Herald.

Commander Grayson Lightfoot was away from his troops when tragedy struck.

She read on, her eyes quickly scanning the date: eight years ago.

Commander of the elite Special Monster Forces (SMF) Grayson Lightfoot was on leave when his team were blown up by a car bomb in Kachhi. The group were leaving a Christmas celebration when the bomb went off. The attack has been claimed by the guerrilla group OGRIS as revenge for the killing of their leader, Yorg Bargaen.

Only sergeant Tom Berrigan survived the bomb blast. Seriously wounded, he is said to be in a critical condition in hospital.

Lightfoot is reported to be devastated by the loss of his team members.

There were pictures also, of Grayson as a pall bearer at the funeral, his face drawn and gaunt.

She put the papers back inside the book, and with shaking fingers shut the drawer, feeling like she'd witnessed something she shouldn't have seen. He hadn't told her. Clearly, it wasn't something he was ready to share.

And yet... She didn't regret it either. Because it explained so much—the terrible scar on Tom's face. The way he and Grayson had shared knowing looks over their shared dislike of Christmas.

Of course.

Tom was the only survivor of Grayson's special forces team.

The only survivor of that terrible night in Kacchi.

Suddenly everything fell into place. The nightmare she'd woken Grayson from that first night, the hollow expression she'd caught on his face at times, the heaviness she sensed in his heart the few times he'd mentioned the past.

She knew now why he'd had to leave, why he'd sped into the night sky.

Because if history repeated, Grayson would never forgive himself.



As Grayson drew close to the East Quarter, he could see the fighting and it looked serious. The cops were here now, attempting to form roadblocks to stop the swarming packs of ferals. The sight didn't fill him with great confidence—the Motham cops were pretty useless. Then, with a sigh of relief, he spotted his own jeeps with the Tower Security initials on the top.

As he swooped down, he caught sight of Katrina with a Simian feral gang member in a headlock.

Tom was jostling a cat-shifter into the back of a police wagon.

Just as Grayson was about to touch down nearby, he saw another figure—a wolf-shifter from the Shezar pack with drug-addled eyes, running at Tom from the side.

Grayson saw the knife blade flicker in the flames from a burning car.

He swooped, but already the wolf had plunged the blade deep into Tom's shoulder.

With a howl of rage, Grayson's claws came out and he grabbed the wolf by the back of its leather jacket and flew with it, howling and kicking, before dropping the abominable piece of shit into a fray of police. He didn't even look back to see what they'd done with it, he was already on his way back to Tom, who he found lying in a pool of blood.

“Oh dear gods, Tom.” Grayson's voice cracked as he landed on his knees and desperately tried to stem the blood. Tom, being older, didn't have the same ability to remain stone as younger gargoyles. They must have got him in a weak spot.

Tom's eyes were hazy with pain as he stared up at Grayson. Finally, he recognized him, tried to smile, then grimaced. “Hey, boss...” he wheezed. “Think one of 'em got me.”

“It’s just a scratch,” Grayson lied, placing the heel of his hand on the wound to stem the flow. By the expression in Tom’s eyes, he knew his old timer didn’t believe him.

“You’re going to be okay, mate. Help’s coming.” He tried to keep the edge of desperation out of his own voice, but it was impossible to reach for his radio with both hands needed to slow the blood gushing from Tom’s wound.

“Here, use this boss.” Katrina was at his side, handing him a wad of thick bandage. “What happened?”

As Grayson removed his hand, blood gushed out of the wound. “Fucking wolf came in from left field.” He pushed the pad of gauze into it. “Can you call for an ambulance? I can’t reach my radio.”

“On it, boss.” Already her cell was at her ear. He heard her calm, steady voice speaking to the operator. When she hung up, she said, “I’ve gotta get back there, there’s a steady stream of shifter gangs and they’re on something that’s turned them completely nuts. I’ll get reinforcements to guard you two until the ambulance arrives.” Katrina was already radioing for more help. Within seconds, a group of young gargoyles were swooping in, forming a circle around Tom and Grayson, huge wings spread out to form a barrier.

“You’re going to be okay, Tom, we’ve got your back,” Katrina said before disappearing into the fray.

Feeling safer with a ring of gargoyles surrounding them, Grayson focused back on Tom. “The ambulance is on its way. And I’m right here with you Tom, you hear me?”

“Thanks, boss,” Tom said weakly.

“That night back in Kachhi,” Grayson’s voice cracked. “I’m sorry...”

“Give up on the guilt-shit, will you, boss?” the old gargoyle managed to growl.

Even through all this, Grayson had to smirk. Here was his badly injured old timer, still giving him a hard time.

“You be happy. Just be happy, okay? Me, I’ve done my time.” Tom’s breath was a thin rasp. “But you... You’re still young...” His voice trailed off. “That little human... she’s good for you...”

“Save your breath, Tom,” Grayson said gently.

The old gargoyle sighed, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Grayson pressed grimly on the wound. Had the knife hit something internal—an artery? He didn’t dare look. It felt like he’d been crouched there forever, stemming the blood, trying to stop Tom from losing consciousness, but finally the ambulance arrived, and two strong orcs ran over with a stretcher and oxygen. Grayson stepped back as they took over.

There wasn’t room for him to climb into the ambulance with Tom. Two gargoyles with the first-aid team as well would be too many.

“I’ll see you at the hospital,” Grayson called before the doors closed. “Don’t you go and die on me you old bugger, okay?”

Tom, now hooked up to all sorts of machines, managed a smirk. “Nah, I’m like a cat. Nine lives.”

“Gargoyles have twelve.” Grayson swallowed down the lump in his throat. “See you at the hospital, mate.”

“Stay here boss, help the young-uns.”

“I’ll be there soon,” Grayson responded firmly.

But first he needed to check on his team.

He found Katrina wiping a blood streak off her cheek. Grayson looked at her, alarmed. “Not mine, boss, don’t worry. But hell, I don’t know what this crowd are on, but it sure is evil. Their strength is way beyond anything I’ve seen before.”

“How come we didn’t get wind of this?”

“Dunno. East team didn’t hear a whisper. Apparently, some acid party thing got out of hand, a rival feral gang crashed it. And whatever they were taking was contaminated shit. So—boom! Light a match and watch it go up...”

Grayson sighed, put a shaking hand to his brow. “I have to get to the hospital to be with Tom. Are you and Matt okay to cover the mopping up?”

Katrina gave him the thumbs up as she strode off down the street.

Grayson checked his phone. No news; he hoped that was good news.

He cursed fiercely under his breath. He shouldn't have trusted that Tom could deal with something like this. He didn't have the shifting powers of younger gargoyles. He should have fucking known that, not left him to handle this.

The truth was unpalatable: he'd let his time with Maisie soften his heart, his head.

Supposing he got to the hospital and Tom was dead?

How would he ever forgive himself?

Bunched hard against the wind, not feeling the cold, his wings powered by the need to check on his dear old comrade, Grayson sped toward the hospital.

This could not happen.

Not. Ever. Again.

CHAPTER 21



Maisie had sat at her window watching the sky for hours now. It would be light soon. She could see dawn creeping over Motham like a stealthy grey blanket, and still there was no sign of Grayson.

Was he okay?

Was he hurt?

Fear plucked at Maisie's heart. But also, over and over in her head she could see every word on those news cuttings. The haunted look on Grayson's face in the photo of him at the funeral.

The pressed flowers. The readings from the funeral.

He'd kept them all.

He'd been elsewhere when his team were ambushed and killed, and she knew without a shadow of a doubt that he would never forgive himself for that.

And now...

She sighed. There was something else niggling at her.

The memory of his clipped reply when she'd asked him about that other human woman.

The way he'd said, "Just once." The way his face had shut down.

Shut her out.

She couldn't help wondering if this other woman was somehow tied up in this. A human woman, just like her.

Maisie's heart cinched painfully in her chest.

Glancing up then, she saw it, the large silhouette in the sky. The way his head was bowed with exhaustion, the slow beat of those huge wings, as if it was almost too hard to push through the sky.

She watched Grayson getting closer, until he was so close she thought she could detect the veins in his wings before he disappeared from sight. She could almost hear him landing on the roof, her senses were so alert.

Maisie started pacing the room.

What should she do?

Go to him?

Leave him be?

She chewed on her cuticle until she drew blood, waiting for him to come inside, to come to *her*.

But there was no sound. He was staying up there, wasn't he? On his rooftop, watching over Motham.

Back to being stone cold Grayson.

Cold, hard, heartless Grayson

And that just about broke *her* heart.

Eventually, she roused herself. This was ridiculous. She had to find out what had happened. She took the stairs quietly. Up on the roof, the snow had started to fall, sitting white on Grayson's grey shoulders in the thin early morning light.

She went over and touched his bicep.

It was cold. So cold.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yes."

"What happened?"

“Fight between rival feral gangs. Drugs involved. Got real nasty.” He hesitated. “Tom was stabbed.”

Maisie heard her own breath drag sharply into her lungs. “Is he okay?”

“I hope so. He bled out badly, but he’s in surgery now.”

“I—I’m so sorry Grayson. You weren’t hurt?”

“No.”

“What about Katrina? Matt? The others...”

“Thankfully, no one else was injured, which was a miracle.”

Maisie remembered those news cuttings. Tom had been badly injured twice now, but how could she mention that? She knew it had been wrong of her to look. Grayson would judge her for prying, and she wouldn’t blame him.

She said softly, “Tom, I mean, he’s strong, he’ll pull through. He’s—” she stopped abruptly.

He looked at her now, his features drawn, eyes a dull red. “How would you know?”

She bit her lip. His harsh tone hurt like whiplash.

Grayson passed a hand over his eyes. “He was too old to be there. He can’t shift from flesh to stone fast enough. They got him in a weak spot, just missed his heart.”

She nodded, not daring to say anything more in case he bit her head off. Finally she managed, “Can I get you anything—food, a drink?”

“No.” Silence. “Thanks.”

Tentatively, she squeezed his arm, but her fingers didn’t even leave an indent. He didn’t acknowledge her touch, didn’t turn and look at her again, just stared out at the city.

“Are you coming inside later?” she asked in a small voice.

Now he flinched. Shook himself. Maisie removed her hand like it had been burned. By ice. “No, I’m on duty. The others have to rest.”

“Okay. Then I guess I’ll go.”

“Yes, go,” he said. “Just leave me be, Maisie.”

A silent anguish pierced her heart.

She bit her lip, took a few steps toward the stairwell, then hesitated, wanting to run back and wind her arms around his neck, comfort him.

But he didn’t want her to.

Those harsh words told her he didn’t want her here at all.

It was like a wall of rock had come up between them.

A wall of his past.

A wall, she realized, she had no means of climbing over.

Without another word, Maisie turned and went inside.



It had been three whole days now, and Grayson had only left the roof to go visit Tom in hospital twice a day. She’d brought him food and drinks, even though he hadn’t asked for them. He’d grunted thanks of a sort, but without so much as turning and glancing at her.

Each time, tears would well in her eyes, but she fought them back.

He needs time, she kept telling herself. Be patient.

But on day three, when she woke feeling like she had a giant lump of lead in her chest, she knew she had to face the truth.

It was over between them.

What had happened in the past and what happened this New Year’s Eve were inextricably linked, and she could do nothing to change that.

Besides, she reminded herself as she washed the dishes from last night’s barely touched dinner, she’d known it wasn’t a forever thing. She’d known it couldn’t last.

It was just... she'd dared to hope... to dream.

She sniffed, wiped the hot tears angrily from her eyes with her sleeve.

Stupid, stupid Maisie.

And then she pulled herself upright. No more feeling sorry for herself, blaming herself.

Enough.

Even though right now it felt like her heart had been torn from her chest, she'd get over him. But to do that, she needed to get away from his brooding presence and put it all behind her.

So on Friday morning she made the heart-wrenching decision to leave.

She was supposed to be here for another week, but she could get the agency to replace her.

She packed her bags, barely able to look at her silky pink blouse. She left the new dresses Grayson had bought her hanging in the wardrobe. He could do with them what he liked.

She cleared out the bathroom., ripped the sheets off her bed and put them in the wash. Then she went shopping and stocked the fridge with food (not that Grayson would eat it), and neatened the kitchen.

Finally, with heavy feet, she took the stairs to the rooftop.

Grayson wasn't there.

Oh. Probably at the hospital again. Now what? Leave a note? She stood hugging her middle, her teeth chattering in the cold air. It seemed unfair somehow that she didn't get the satisfaction of telling him in person that she was leaving.

Or of entertaining the faint possibility that he would beg her to stay.

Don't be a fool, Maisie.

She waited five minutes, maybe ten, before the bitterly cold early morning air drove her back inside. She dragged her rucksack down the stairs, barely able to remember how she'd felt that day when she'd first arrived here. It was barely a fortnight ago. It felt like a lifetime.

She'd been a different Maisie back then.

Her magical time here with Grayson had changed her, made her feel like she was worthy of love... And now it had been snatched away, and the sad, lonely place in her heart was emptier because of it.

Would she ever recover?

She thinned her lips, tipped her chin. She had to. She had a mission, and no way was she going to give up on that. Sure, she was sacrificing some income by leaving before the contract was up, but there would be other placements. She'd catch up.

With that, she put on her duffle coat, hoisted her rucksack onto her shoulder, and left her short note on the kitchen table.

Grayson.

I have left.

To avoid any more awkwardness between us I feel that is the best decision.

I will get the agency to replace me.

Thank you for making my Christmas special.

Maisie xx

She'd struggled to add the last line, and the kisses after her name. But the truth was, he *had* made her Christmas special—*so* special. She couldn't deny that. And she wasn't a churlish person. Even though he'd ghosted her while she was still in his home, she wouldn't hold a grudge.

Not against Grayson.

Because somewhere inside her, she knew she had fallen in love with him. It was that simple. And that painful.

Closing the door behind her with a pang of regret, she hurried off down the street, bag hoisted over her shoulder, her beanie pulled tight and her scarf around her mouth. She didn't see the shadow immediately blocking out the light. Until it was real close. And then there was Grayson, hovering a few feet above her head, a huge scowl on his face.

Masie yelped with surprise.

He landed with a thud in front of her, hands on hips, red eyes flaring.

"Where are you going?" he growled.

For a moment she could only stand there with her mouth opening and shutting.

God he was scary like this. And beautiful.

And not hers.

Maisie took a deep breath. "I'm leaving, Grayson."

"Why?"

She gave him a withering look. Goddess, guys were dumb sometimes.

"I thought that would be obvious."

They stood in silence for a long moment, Grayson blocking her path forward with his dark gray bulk.

"I see."

Masie hauled in another breath. "You and me, w-we overstepped the professional boundary between employee and employer. And it was clearly a mistake, so I thought it best to—go."

He said nothing. "I'll ask the agency to send a replacement until Cedric gets back," she said finally.

He was still scowling when she glanced up. "Mistake, huh?" he snarled. "Is that how you view it?"

She shrugged. “How else would you like me to see it? I mean, you haven’t spoken to me since New Year’s Eve. Can you imagine how that makes me feel?”

He was silent.

“Can you, Grayson?”

He sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, Maisie. I couldn’t... there’s history... I—” He pulled his shoulders back, stared stonily past her. “You’re right. It’s best you leave.” And then briefly, his eyes met hers. “But it wasn’t a mistake,” he said softly.

Maisie stared at him. His eyes were pure red, and his mouth was a hard line again. He clearly wasn’t going to elucidate. But at least it was something.

When she said nothing, he asked harshly, “Was it for you?”

“No. It wasn’t a mistake.” She smiled too brightly. “But good things always come to an end, don’t they? And I think—well, it’s clear we’ve reached the end, so... it’s better I go.” She felt tears welling in her eyes, swallowed hard. “How is Tom?”

“Getting there. Slowly. Though whether he’ll be able—or want—to work again, is uncertain.”

“Will he make a full recovery?”

“Do you ever make a full recovery?” Was he referring to them, to his past life? She didn’t know.

“I’m so glad to hear he’s improving. Goodbye, Grayson.”

He opened his mouth. “I’ll make sure you are paid the full amount.”

“Just pay me for the time I was here.”

“No. The full amount.”

She frowned. “That sounds like for extra services...”

“No! Fuck no, Maisie.” The words were said with such feeling that it startled her, and she felt a sudden rush of hope. But when she looked at him, his eyes darted away.

She sighed. “I’ll let you work it out, Grayson.”

And with that, she walked away. Wishing he'd follow her, wishing he'd say *stop, wait, I can't live without you, I love you.*

But he said nothing.

And then, in her peripheral vision, she saw his shadow flying up toward the roof.

Away from her. Forever.

CHAPTER 22



Grayson stared at the coffee cups piled in the kitchen sink. Dirty dishes everywhere. The trash can full to overflowing.

He guessed he should clear up, but it was bad enough bringing his dishes in off the roof. Walking inside, knowing Maisie wasn't here. The house felt like a great big tomb. Empty, cold and hard. Like him.

As if to taunt him, the house was freezing. His breath curled out in plumes, showing he was flesh enough for his breath to be warm. Well, he would endure. He refused to heat the place now that there was no little human here that had to be kept warm.

Because if he thawed any more than he was now, the pain would be unbearable.

For a moment, an image of them snuggled into bed, the warmth of her head on his shoulder, the scent of her, the way she'd wind those beautiful ample thighs around him as he thrust into her... it nearly killed him.

No fucking way. He gritted his teeth until they were at risk of grinding to dust.

She'd been gone three days. It felt like a century.

He had well over another week of this before Cedric came back. Time he could have shared with Maisie in his bed, in his arms.

And then what?

Face it, it was never going anywhere long term. He was never going to risk melting into something like love.

You're not worthy of love.

That thought made the breath rasp in his throat and pain grip his heart like a vice.

Was that true? Is that what he really believed? That he was unworthy of someone truly loving him?

Gods be damned, he didn't know what he believed anymore. His head was a mess, and that wasn't good when you were in charge of the security of Motham City.

He just needed to regain his enthusiasm for his work. His commitment.

Right now, he was dragging himself to work every day, and that wasn't like him at all.

Grayson made himself a coffee with the last clean mug and headed for the stairs. As he walked past the formal lounge, his eyes snagged on the Christmas tree through the gap in the door.

The sight did nothing for his mood. He glowered at it. The silly little fairy perched jauntily on top looked like she was winking at him. As if she knew everything about his weak, traitorous heart.

It was time to tear that damn thing down.

He strode into the room, slammed his coffee cup on the table and feverishly started pulling off the lights, the decorations, the tinsel. He thrust everything haphazardly into the box next to the tree. He'd throw it all in the trash.

He'd never celebrate Christmas ever again.

As he grabbed the fairy with his claws, about to crush the stupid little thing, he looked at it and those wide china-blue eyes stared back at him, the blonde hair mussed around her shoulders, and it reminded him so much of—

Fuck. She was even wearing a green dress, like the one Maisie had worn on...

A guttural groan ripped from his lips as he curled his fingers around that damned fairy and hugged it to his chest. His heart stuttered and his vision blurred as he stroked its hair.

Then he put it almost reverently in his pocket.

What a fucking idiot he'd been to let Maisie walk away.

To let her slip out of his life like she meant nothing to him.

Because however hard he tried, he couldn't crush the memory of his few days of happiness.

Just. Could. Not.

The stripped naked Christmas tree too hard to look at now, he strode out of the room, headed back to the roof. His foot was on the first step when he heard the front door clicking open. Grayson swiveled and almost ran across the hallway, his feet skidding on the marble floor.

She'd come back to him. He waited, arms open, ready to hug her, hold her, apologize, tell her everything he felt inside, the truth...

The door opened.

And in walked Cedric.

A bulky scarf round his neck, two horns sticking out of neat holes in his beanie, and his goatee longer and more unkempt than normal.

Grayson blinked. Pulled back sharply. No way was he going to wrap his arms passionately around Cedric. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you too, sir." Cedric stalked in, his hooves clacking on the marble floor, not looking at all overjoyed to see him either.

"You're not due back yet."

"I got a call. Rather an urgent one."

"Yeah?" The air punched out of Grayson's lungs. He looked at the faun suspiciously. "Who from?"

“Maisie Brown, sir. Said she’d had to leave due to an emergency. She reckoned you wouldn’t take someone from the agency and asked if I could possibly recommend someone.” He sniffed. “I couldn’t. So I came back instead.”

The faun hung his coat neatly in the hall cupboard and proceeded briskly to the kitchen.

A moment later, Grayson winced as he heard his housekeeper wail, “Oh, ye gods in heaven.”

Grayson followed and leaned sheepishly on the door frame. “I was going to clear up at any moment,” he lied, as Cedric stared horrified at the mess. “Where am I supposed to even start? My apron, I need my apron.”

“Sorry about this,” Grayson mumbled.

By now Cedric was feverishly grabbing rubber gloves and cleaning products and putting them in a bucket. Grayson knew that the kitchen would be pristine in a matter of minutes.

The status quo would return. Him and Cedric in this big joyless house, probably growing old together. He guessed he should try and be pleasant at least. “How was your Christmas?” he asked, nearly choking on the C word.

“Fine.” Cedric’s lips were tight. Then he looked at Grayson and, as if relenting, said, “To be honest, too many silly old fauns all hanging out together gets a bit tedious.”

Grayson had to smirk.

“And how was yours?” Cedric asked as he piled dishes in the sink.

Grayson couldn’t answer for a moment. “Did Maisie mention anything—about what happened?”

“Yeah, we had a chat over coffee.”

Grayson stiffened, his eyes widening. “You met! Where?”

“At the Right Bite, briefly before I came here. She told me about the attack, Tom getting hurt. How’s he going?” Cedric asked, his eyes concerned.

“He’s okay. He’ll pull through, tough old bugger that he is.” Grayson hesitated. “How was Maisie? No, don’t answer that.” He let out a huff. “Did she... mention anything else?”

The faun’s eyes narrowed. “No, but I sensed there was more.”

Grayson rubbed his forehead. He needed to talk to someone. And Cedric had been there from the beginning. Knew most of the story. It was Cedric who had helped him through the dark days after he left the army, and who’d then stayed on to work for him as he set up Tower Security.

Cedric was the only one who would understand.

He ambled over to the table, sat down and gripped his fingers together tightly, not even realizing his claws were flexing into his skin. “Cedric. What would you say if I told you I’d been seeing Maisie? As in, *you know...*”

Cedric didn’t look surprised. “What would you like me to say, sir?”

“I don’t know—I think I just need to de-brief,” Grayson said, frowning so hard his forehead hurt. “It was mutual. She was fully consensual in the whole thing. We... kissed and then, you know, one thing led to another.” Grayson felt himself blushing, totally unable to meet Cedric’s eyes. “And then we... we went to a party together.”

“Party! You?!”

“Yes, Katrina held one on New Year’s Eve.”

“Good goddess. I don’t believe it.” Cedric’s eyes were round in his long bony face.

“We were really good together, Cedric. I was... happy for the first time in forever. We had a great time at that party. And then the attack happened. And I blew it.” Grayson sighed. “I pushed her away.”

The faun was silent.

“I’m pretty sure she reciprocates my feelings. Not that we said anything... I—I’m so confused. It was... special. I even put up a Christmas tree for her.”

Cedric reeled backward. “You are kidding! A party *and* a Christmas tree.”

“Yeah. I even put this on top.” Grayson pulled the fairy out of his pocket and placed it on the table. “And all it does is remind me of her.”

The faun frowned. “So, she left because?”

“I went stone cold on her. After the incident. Berating myself that I’d been out partying, enjoying myself with Maisie when Tom got hurt. I went back into all the old stuff. It was like history repeating itself; all the memories flooded back, engulfed me.” Grayson shook his head, chewing on his lip. “The fact that I was with a human woman that night in Kachhi...”

The faun tssked impatiently. “How much longer are you going to carry this?”

“Carry what?”

“Your survivor guilt,” Cedric said, sitting down opposite Grayson with a sigh and pulling off his rubber gloves. “You’d taken legitimate Christmas leave that night in Kacchi. Enjoying yourself during the holiday period—that’s not a crime, sir.”

“But I was with a *human*,” Grayson said in a hoarse whisper.

“So? Does that mean you can never date another human for the rest of your days?”

Grayson ground his back teeth together. “That woman, she used me, let me down.”

Cedric shrugged. “Yeah, well, you know what? I’ve met a few gargoyles that weren’t the best either. You’re not that dumb sir, surely? What—one bad human experience and you assume they’re all the same?” He spoke more gently now. “I like Maisie. A lot. I had a good feeling about her even before she started the job, and when we met I liked her even more. I got a sense she really cared about you.”

“What did she say?” Grayson fished hopefully.

“That you were alone... and hurting.”

Grayson stiffened, then let his shoulders slump. It was true, why fight it. Hurting from the past, hurting from missing Maisie. So bad.

The faun fisted the center of his chest, “I really sensed she is a beautiful person, right in here.”

Grayson cleared his throat, tried to swallow that damn lump. “She is. And now I’ve fucked it up big time.”

“Then un-fuck it,” said Cedric matter-of-factly.

Grayson’s gaze shot up, hopeful. “You think I could?”

“Yes. Absolutely I do. Maisie clearly isn’t someone who would take sleeping with her boss lightly.” The faun coughed into his fist. “I presume that’s what happened?” Grayson gave a grunt and his housekeeper continued, “When she phoned and asked me to come back early, and she was so worried about you, I guessed something then. The way she spoke about you, with such concern in her voice.”

Grayson’s heart expanded. He picked up the little fairy on the table, stroked her blonde hair with his fingertips.

“I don’t dare phone her. I doubt she’d pick up. Don’t suppose you have her address?”

“It’s on file.” Cedric had a little smirk on his face as he got up and trotted out, returning a minute later with Maisie’s file. “Here it is.”

He handed Grayson the sheet. Maisie’s face smiled up at him from the photo and Grayson’s heart lurched. He scanned her address. She lived just outside the Motham walls, in an area where they’d trialed humans and monsters living in the same building quite successfully some years back.

If he contacted Matt, got him to cover, then he could take a few hours out.

He had to go to her.

Had to explain everything. And if she still cared... then yes, he would open his heart, tell her everything.

“Thanks Cedric.” He grinned. “I might be gone for a few hours. I’ve got a beautiful woman to grovel to.”

“No problem, sir. Good luck.” Cedric smiled. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll get back to cleaning up this infernal mess.”

CHAPTER 23



Maisie was struck by a sense of déjà vu as she sat down in Pixie Pie's reception. Outside, the wind blew icy cold off Motham Bay, the sky was leaden, and there was slush everywhere.

Frankly, it was miserable.

She was miserable.

It was busy in here today with folks looking for new year placements, probably after spending too much on Christmas presents for their families.

Families.

She'd had one brief mad moment of happiness, believing she could have that for herself.

Be strong, Maisie.

Remember your goal.

She pushed back her shoulders. No more wallowing in her sadness, it was onward and upward from here. She'd done the right thing, met with Cedric and told him to take good care of Grayson. Now she needed to let go of the pain.

When it was her turn, the woman was decidedly grumpy. She looked about as happy as everyone else to be back at work in the flat post-Christmas period.

She flicked impatiently through Maisie's' file. "You finished your placement early." She frowned. "Why was that?"

“His housekeeper came back,” she said. It was kind of true.

“Well, they’ve already paid you. For the whole period, it seems.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and a hefty bonus, by the looks of it.”

Maisie’s head reeled.

This meant she wasn’t quite as desperate for work, but still... her cheeks heated.

Had he—was he... Paying her for *other* services?

She pressed her palms to her suddenly hot cheeks.

“I’ll deposit it into your account today,” the consultant said. “They must have liked you. Guess a reference will come in soon.”

Maisie wanted to die thinking of what Grayson might put on the reference. *Extras always willingly supplied.*

No, he would never do that.

When the woman went through the available jobs, none really appealed. Finally, Maisie put in an application for a position with a genteel elderly moth woman who claimed to be related to Atholrose Motham himself. Luckily, she lived nowhere near Motham Palace. That would be way too close to Grayson for comfort.

It was for a six-week period. By then she might have enough to find a venue for her drop-in centre. A little seed of hope settled inside her. She would direct all the love inside her to kids in need. Forget about that troubled, brooding gargoyle.

The placement finally set up, forms completed, Maisie headed home.

She’d just reached her apartment block when the wind really started howling. Icy sleet struck her face, making her wince.

Argggh, now it had turned into great blobs of hail.

She pulled her hat over her face and started to run.

Suddenly, the hail stopped hitting her. A shadow like a huge umbrella had formed over her head.

Looking up, Maisie realized the shadow was actually a set of wings, shielding her from the icy blasting sleet. Wings she knew intimately, all the veins on that velvet dark skin visible.

Maisie reeled back against the wall of a building as Grayson landed in front of her, one wing still hovering over her head to ward off the weather.

“What are you doing here, Grayson?” She hurled the question at him, hoping she sounded as icy as the weather.

“We need to talk, Maisie.”

She squinted at him. He looked... miserable. She hardened her heart. “There’s nothing left to say. You made your position clear.”

He winced. “Maisie, I need to apologize.”

“Well, apology accepted.” She gave a little nod for emphasis. “Thank you for the money, though you didn’t need to pay me extra.”

He glanced at the building behind them. “Can we maybe go inside your apartment and talk?”

Maisie looked at him uncertainly. Was he... shivering? “Are you cold?” Really, he shouldn’t be flying around bare-chested in this weather. He’d catch a chill.

“Yeah, freezing.” He raked a hand through his hair. “Goddess, Maisie. You don’t know how hard it is not to turn myself back into stone right now.”

Her heart melted a little at that. “Okay, come inside,” she said, and led him into her building.

It was luck really that the renovated tenement building was large enough to house beasts and humans. Even so, the lifts were too small for Grayson’s wingspan.

“We’ll take the stairs,” Maisie said and they did so in silence, Maisie all too aware of Grayson’s dark form behind

her.

At her front door, she fumbled with the keys, but finally they were inside.

It was a small apartment, but the ceilings were high, the doors wide enough to cater for monster and human alike. Grayson squeezed his wings close to his body and followed her into the kitchen.

“Nice place you’ve got here,” he said, leaning on the kitchen bench, arms crossed over his chest. The chest she’d lain on. Maisie tried to stop the slug of warmth hitting her between the legs. “It suits me,” she clipped out.

He gave an overly jocular laugh. “No wonder you kept my kitchen in such good order. Look at this, color-coordinated cups.”

She wished he’d get to the point. His being so close was reminding her how much she missed him. “Do you want a drink?”

He nodded.

“Coffee, your usual way?”

“Thanks.”

Maisie kept her coat on as she filled the kettle, afraid that if she took it off, he’d see the way her nipples peaked hard against her shirt, and realize he still affected her.

“How’s Tom?”

“Good. He’ll be out of hospital tomorrow. He wants to come back to work in a week. I told him no.” He sighed. “But that guy pretty much lives for his work.”

“Like you do.”

His gaze rested steadily on her face. “Yeah, well I’m hoping to change that.” Maisie busied herself with a teabag to hide her blush. “That’s good.”

She spooned coffee into a mug, filled it with water, added a spoonful of sugar and handed it to him.

When he took the mug, his wings ruffled. He looked more boyish than she'd ever seen him. And handsome, so damn handsome. "You've been in my thoughts," he said softly.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. All the time."

They sat down at the kitchen table and Maisie hid behind her cup of tea to hide the longing in her eyes.

He's just come to apologize for being rude when you left. Nothing more.

Grayson's fingers edged his coffee mug. She thought they were shaking a little—surely not. But when he took a sip and his claws flared open and then retracted, she knew he was nervous.

"You said you wanted to explain, so go on then. Shoot," she said with uncharacteristic brusqueness.

"Okay. Er..." He swiped a hand over his dark head. The same head she'd held as he lapped between her legs. Did she have to remember that now? Maisie groaned inwardly. She wanted to touch him so badly. A sweet, dragging heat thrummed between her thighs.

Why couldn't she just put him out of her life?

Because he was sitting opposite her, alive, and very much flesh and blood. And his eyes, now that she looked into them, were soft gray, the way they'd been whenever... *stop remembering that.*

Grayson fidgeted, his wings opening and nearly flicking over the chair beside him. He righted it and cleared his throat.

"The reason I stonewalled you..." He barked a laugh. "I'm sorry, bad choice of words. The reason I stayed away from you after... Tom was injured. It wasn't anything you'd done, Maisie. It was bad stuff—memories, surfacing from my past."

Now Maisie had reason to fidget. She should tell him that she'd opened that drawer and pried into his life. But first she needed to hear him out.

She nodded. “Go on.”

He huffed a big sigh. “Eight years ago, I was riding high, heading up a special forces team. My men and I had some real coups, it felt like we were invincible. I would have laid down my life for those guys— and they me.” He stopped abruptly. “And then I met someone. A woman. A human woman.”

Maisie’s heart constricted. Was he telling her he was still in love with someone else? She almost stopped breathing, not wanting to hear what came next.

“Other than a few light-hearted flings, I’d never been in a relationship with anyone before. I’d kept away from intimacy. I guess, not knowing what it was like to grow up with a loving family, I didn’t know what good love was... or bad love, for that matter. And this human, she pursued me, flattered me. I was young, impressionable, and I—I fell hard...”

Maisie compressed her lips. So he hadn’t got over this human. Well yippee-doo.

Grayson continued quietly, “It was infatuation, I realized later. She was a pure-breed human. I was a mere gargoyle. Her father was high up in the human army, a major. And she was a rebellious young thing. I was nothing more than a means to get back at her dad, who she loathed.” He huffed another deep sigh. “The night my guys had their Christmas celebration, I said I’d join them later, and then I went and met her. Stayed out with her longer than I meant. As the guys left the bar, that’s when the ogres hit, blowing up their car. I was with her... when I should have been with my men.”

His face was anguished now.

“That must have been terrible,” Maisie said softly. She wanted to comfort him, but she also needed to know the truth. “Are you still in love with her?”

His head jerked up and he stared at her, horrified. “No—no! Maisie, no way. She went running home to Tween so fast after that happened. I never saw her again. It’s not my feelings for her, they are long dead. It’s that I sacrificed my men for her, blinded by whatever it was—lust, infatuation, stupidity.”

“And being with me felt the same?”

“No! No way. But don’t you see? I was partying with you when my guys needed me on New Year’s Eve. The parallels were too much, and I just went cold. Closed myself off from you.”

“You think I’m some high-society human who will just duck and run? Or are you telling me I was just another bad choice?” Anger flared in her chest and she got up and went over to the window, staring blindly toward the Motham skyline. She’d never allowed herself to get angry before, but now it felt empowering.

She heard the scrape of his chair, sensed his approach. When he touched her arm, she pulled away, and they stared at each other, their chests heaving with emotion.

“Hear me out, Maisie, I beg of you.”

Silently she went with him and sat back down.

But she wouldn’t look at him, just clasped her hands tightly in her lap.

“Maisie. I made the stupid mistake of letting the past get mixed up with the present. I—I suffer with PTSD, bad dreams, flashbacks. And survivor guilt. I should have got professional help, but I self-treated instead, by reading about my symptoms and telling myself to get on with life. Cedric helped me at times. He’s talked me through some bad flashbacks. But I guess you probably never get over it completely.”

“I guess not. And I get it must be so hard, Grayson, I do. But how do I know you won’t do this again when you’re hurting? Freeze me out. Ignore me. I can’t go through that again. I vowed I wouldn’t ever let a guy do that to me again after Steve.”

He met her eyes steadily. “Nor should you. Ever. We need to keep talking, keep communicating, Maisie. I can’t promise I’ll never have another flashback, but I’ve opened my heart to how much you mean to me. And I will never go back on that. I know you’re not like her. You’re nothing like her. You’re beautiful and generous and kind, and that’s why I’ve...”

Grayson's throat bobbed as he swallowed hard. "—I've fallen in love with you."

The world stood still, Maisie's brain having trouble playing catch-up with those words.

"You've fallen in love with me?" she repeated finally, like a parrot.

"Yes, Maisie." He laughed, a little harshly, a little hopefully. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"I—I..." Was it? She'd hoped, hadn't she?

"Do you think I would have behaved the way I did over Christmas if I didn't have strong feelings for you? You think our lovemaking meant nothing to me? Do you think I'm that shallow?"

She stared at him, her eyes round, trying to compute what he was saying.

Grayson's mouth twisted. "Maisie, please just give me hope I can rectify this. Do you, in any way, return my feelings?" His features drawn, his eyes held hers, wide and vulnerable.

How could she lie? Masie let out a deep sigh. "Yes, Grayson, I do feel something for you."

"What, exactly? Friendship? Pity?"

She sat biting her lip, frowning, and finally he burst out, "Gods, Maisie, this is like trying to get blood from a stone."

"You're a fine one to talk."

At which they both sputtered and started laughing.

Tentatively, she reached across the table and with a growl deep in his throat, he covered her hand with his. It was warm, Maisie realized.

"When you left... I thought I'd crumble into pieces. Even trying to turn myself back to stone didn't work. I felt so lost without you, Maisie. I realized what a cold, hard being I had become. And I don't want that. I'm thirty-six years old. I need to love and be loved. I want to have a family of my own— in

my heart that has always been my dream. And when you walked into my life, you were the one I wanted that with, I knew it, almost as soon as my miserable sad eyes alighted on you. You... Maisie, you melted my heart. It's as simple as that."

Her little kitchen seemed to disappear. There was just her and Grayson, holding hands. Gazing across the table into each other's eyes.

Knowing the truth.

Finally, she was able to tell him the truth—*her* truth. "I knew what a good guy you were when you cared for me when I was sick, fed me, looked after me, Grayson. Since my gran died, no one has ever done that for me." A big tear fell from her eye. "I knew I was falling for you before that, but then... when you decorated the Christmas tree. I realized what an effort that was for you. I think that's when I knew I had fallen in love with you."

"My darling—" His voice cracked as he squeezed her hand.

"But Grayson, I have to tell you something too, something I'm not proud of."

He cocked his head.

"I looked in the drawer of your desk. I saw the book on PTSD and the photos of that terrible event. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have looked."

He laughed, relieved. "Is that all? I'm glad you did. At least some of my behavior might have made sense."

"It did help a little. But then when you stayed away from me, the way you shut me out for three days after, Grayson, without an explanation. That was not okay."

"I know, I've been hating myself ever since. And then I decided you despised me, and honestly, I had no idea how to dig my way out." He hung his head, bit his lip. "I'm not experienced in the ways of love, I was trained to fight, not to love. I am woefully inadequate in that regard. It was only when Cedric got back and knocked some sense into me that I

had the courage to come here. I'm so, so sorry." He leaned across the table toward her, and she did the same, until their foreheads touched and she saw a big silver tear leak from his eye.

Maisie lifted a finger and scooped up the tear. "Is this for me?"

"Yes. You have every inch of me. My warm tears, my soft heart. Maisie, I will never let you walk away again."

"I will never let you, my love." She smiled tremulously. "Promise me you'll talk it out next time."

"As the goddess is my witness, Maisie, I promise," he husked, his gaze rivetted to hers.

In one swift movement, she was off her chair and clasped in his arms.

And then they were kissing, and Maisie melted into his chest. She'd missed this so much, the touch of him, the strength of his arms around her, the feel of his wings cradling her, like a cocoon.

A cocoon of Grayson.

After they'd got their breath back, Grayson murmured in her ear, "Shall we get out of here?"

"Where did you have in mind?"

"My place. Cedric will have lit a fire, the house will be warm, and there's a big empty bed..."

"That does sound tempting."

His eyes lit up. "Is there a way to get to the roof here?"

"Yes, there's a staircase."

As they ran up the stairs and climbed out onto the roof, Maisie realized the sleet and hail had stopped.

The sky was clear blue, already darkening into twinkling stars as the winter evening closed in.

She shivered.

Grayson's arms came around her and then his wings surrounded her like a cape.

She looked up at him. "No harness?"

"Nope, no harness. Do you trust me?"

"Totally."

For long moments they stood and kissed.

His lips were soft and warm, his shaft rock hard against her, promising one very special thing in that big, big bed very soon.

"Are you ready, Pumpkin?"

"Ready." She threw her legs around his waist and he held her to him.

And then they took off into the night sky.

And Maisie knew she was exactly where she wanted to be.

Nestled against Grayson's big chest, his arms around her and those huge wings carrying her away, toward a new and wonderful life.

Together.

EPILOGUE



One year later... Christmas Eve

Grayson heard the front door slam from where he was doing paperwork in his study.

He looked down at the document on his desk and hoped Maisie wouldn't be mad at him.

He huffed a sigh. He guessed she probably would be. At first. She hated him keeping secrets from her. But he'd make it up to her.

As he heard her light footsteps on the stairs, he quickly shoved the document under a pile of other work papers.

"Grayson," she called out urgently.

"In my study," he called back.

A second later she burst through the door and hurled herself down in the chair opposite him.

"You won't believe what's happened. The worst thing ever." Her lower lip wobbled with emotion. "The place I was looking to rent for my drop-in center—it's been freakin' sold and they no longer want to rent it out. The realtor, Shona, said the new owner had plans for it already. And she was really unhelpful, which isn't like her at all."

He could hear the tears in her voice, and it nearly broke his heart as he soothed, "Oh, no. That's terrible, Pumpkin."

“I am so angry I don’t know whether to scream or cry. It’s going to ruin Christmas.”

Grayson shifted in his seat, glancing at the papers on his desk. *Tell her, man, don’t keep stringing this out.*

“All those months of negotiating, and them being so difficult, but it’s the perfect place! It has enough space and the garden area out the back. And it’s right in the East Quarter of Motham, where there are so many kids needing help. I just can’t get my head around it... I’m so, so sad.” A little sob escaped her, and Grayson couldn’t stand it a moment more.

Abruptly he stood up, grabbed the document off the desk and handed it to her.

She frowned up at him, her pretty mouth puckered and her eyes bright with frustrated tears. Soon, he’d kiss them away—if she didn’t punch him first.

“Grayson, are you even listening to me?”

Grayson cleared his dry throat. “Urm, this is for you.”

She eyed him warily out of her baby blues. “What is it?”

“A Christmas present, I guess.” He shrugged. “Just read it, Maisie.”

As she flicked over the pages, her eyes widened. And widened.

When she looked back at him, her mouth was a big O.

“You bought it? The building I wanted to rent?” He nodded. But instead of looking pleased, she scowled. “Grayson, w-what are you wanting it for?”

He smirked now. “It’s not for me. Look who’s named as the owner of the property.”

He watched her scan the document, and then her lips quivered again. “Maisie Brown. M-me.”

“I bought it for you, babe. Correction—for us.”

“I—I don’t understand.”

“Maisie, what is mine is yours. And I guess what’s yours is mine. Together, joined.” Grayson hauled in a breath. “I’m not putting this very romantically, but I want you—” Gods be damned, he was seriously messing this up. “I want to be with you for the rest of my life, Maisie.” He circumnavigated the desk, then hesitated, suddenly unsure what to do. He’d thought earlier of getting down on one knee, then ruled it out as too trite, but now he found he was on both knees in front of her, his big hands held out.

Maisie looked at him uncertainly. “Is this—a marriage proposal, Grayson?”

“I guess in my big clumsy way, yes. I mean, yes, wholeheartedly, it is.”

“Oh!” Maisie threw her arms around his neck. “Then I accept.”

They kissed long and passionately, and finally she broke away. “I can’t believe you managed all this behind my back. And even got Shona in on it. No wonder she was being weird!”

“But are you happy?”

“Yes, so happy.”

“I have another request. Along with marrying me and spending your life with me...”

“What’s that, my darling?” she whispered against his neck, raining delicious little kisses onto his skin.

“Will you do me the honor of flying with me...?” He felt himself flushing. “I mean, like, *really* flying with me?”

She looked at him, biting her lip. Sure, they’d taken flights before, but they’d never made love in the sky. That was to be saved for when a couple were truly committed for life. To seal their pledge.

Suddenly the gravitas of his request sunk in and her smile lit up her face. “You mean, as in fly... and... make love?” she finished on a whisper.

Grayson’s heart swelled. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

“Isn’t there a whole ceremony around that?”

“Yes, and I’ve kind of prepared, because I was hoping... you’d say yes.”

“Oh, yes, yes, Grayson.” Maisie sighed.

Grayson’s grin just about split his head in half. “Just wait here. I’ll be back in a minute.”



Maisie sat staring at the papers in her hand, stunned and elated in equal parts. Her beloved gargoyle had bought the whole freakin’ building, for her drop-in center. And now, he’d proposed to her, and they were about to *fly*. Make love in the sky.

It was something she’d longed for... hoped for someday.

Suddenly Grayson burst through the study door, and Maisie’s mouth fell open. He was wearing nothing but a bright blue loincloth, and carrying a beautiful embroidered purple cloak, lined with silk.

Grayson’s huge girth stood out against the very tiny scrap of material, and the bulge straining against it made it clear he was already aroused.

Maisie licked her lips as she stood up.

He came over to her and slowly, reverently removed her clothes, one by one, until she was standing naked in front of him.

“My gods, you are beautiful.” His eyes sparked with desire. And then he wrapped the cloak around her and lifted her into his arms.

“Up to the roof we go,” he growled. Maisie squealed with delight as he hoisted her into his arms.

On the roof, they kissed for several long moments before Maisie asked, “What is this garment? It’s stunningly beautiful, and it feels amazing against my skin.”

“This is the ceremonial robe that’s worn by a gargoyle’s beloved during flight-mating. It has been in my family for generations. Thankfully saved by my great aunt. To be honest, I never thought I would have the opportunity to find the love of my life. To have her wear it... but Maisie, now I’ve found you... this is my pledge to you.”

“I love you, Grayson,” she said. “Forever. That is my pledge to you.”

“I love you, Pumpkin,” he whispered in her ear.

Effortlessly, he picked her up and she flung her legs around his hips as he stepped onto the parapet wall.

“Are you ready?” he whispered.

“I think so, but Grayson, what if I fall?”

“I would never drop you. But even if I did—which I won’t—you couldn’t come to harm. This robe would form a parachute and you’d float gently to earth. You won’t feel the cold, either. Its magical thermal properties are the stuff of gargoyle legend.”

Maisie laughed, full of amazement, and clung on as Grayson prepared himself. Below them, the Christmas lights of Motham twinkled.

Grayson crouched down briefly before those powerful thighs pushed him skyward, then his huge wings took over as they soared up to meet the stars.

Soon he flipped them over, so he was coasting on his back with her on top of him, his wings barely moving, and they both laughed as she crawled up his body, rubbed herself against his hard cock.

“Your outfit is teeny-tiny,” she giggled.

“Designed for easy access.” Then his big hands were in her hair, pulling her into a deep kiss, his cock rubbing deliciously against her wet pussy.

One hand slid between them, massaging the little nub that trembled under his touch, her inner walls fluttering in the lead-

up to her orgasm as he stroked her and murmured words of love in her ear.

And when she so quickly shattered against him, her mouth on his, panting his name, she knew she was ready to take his cock in her. “Enter me, Grayson. Please.”

He needed no encouragement. He freed himself, his dark cock bobbing out between them, leaking pre-cum against her belly.

His kiss deepened, his mouth plundering hers, as his cock entered her with ease. She was so slick and hungry for him.

Their lips clung as he thrust into her, the gentle rocking motion of his wings holding them almost effortlessly in place among the sparkling early evening stars. Grayson’s shaft rubbed up and down on her clit, adding to the excitement as she gyrated her hips against him.

Making love high up in the sky was so amazing it seemed to turbo charge her pussy, and very soon Maisie was again teetering on the edge of release. “Oh gods, Grayson, I’m so close.”

“And when you come, lover, I’ll be right there with you.”

Her pussy gripped him harder, rippling around him as he thrust deeper. Panting in unison now, Maisie’s whole body jerked as her orgasm rode through her, and almost immediately Grayson followed. She felt him swell, and then the warmth of his come filling her, making her cry out as they rocked out the final throes of their orgasms.

When they’d both regained their breath, Grayson grinned down at her wickedly. “You want a joyride?”

“I thought we just had one.”

“Different kind.”

Maisie nodded, and with that Grayson spun them around, soared upward then looped the loop, Maisie whooping as she held onto his shoulders, before he dove down, almost to the roof of Motham Palace itself.

It was exhilarating,

Unbelievable.

To think that her Christmas grinch had turned into this fun-loving, joyful guy.

And that she had the rest of her life, and so many Christmases ahead, to share that joy with him.

“Want to do it again, Pumpkin?” Grayson grinned down at her, his eyes sparkling, like the stars.

“With you? Always,” laughed Maisie as they flew up once more to meet the heavens.

ALSO BY LILITH STONE

Thank you for reading The Gargoyle Grinch. If you enjoyed it, this author would be so happy if you left a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads; <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/199456962-the-gargoyle-grinch>

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The Billionaire Orc - out January 2024.

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Lilith spent her childhood checking for monsters under the bed. Now she writes sweet and steamy romances for grown-ups who'd rather have a monster in their bed than under it.

Lilith wrote and illustrated her first gothic novel at age 12 and hasn't really stopped since.

English by birth, she now lives in Australia and keeps out of the sea where there are way too many real life monsters.

Currently, she's too busy writing the next book to get her act together with a proper website but you can sign up for her newsletter for a **FREE short story, Rescued by the Orc (A prequel to Motham City Monsters)**, plus publishing updates and sneak peeks/free reads

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