

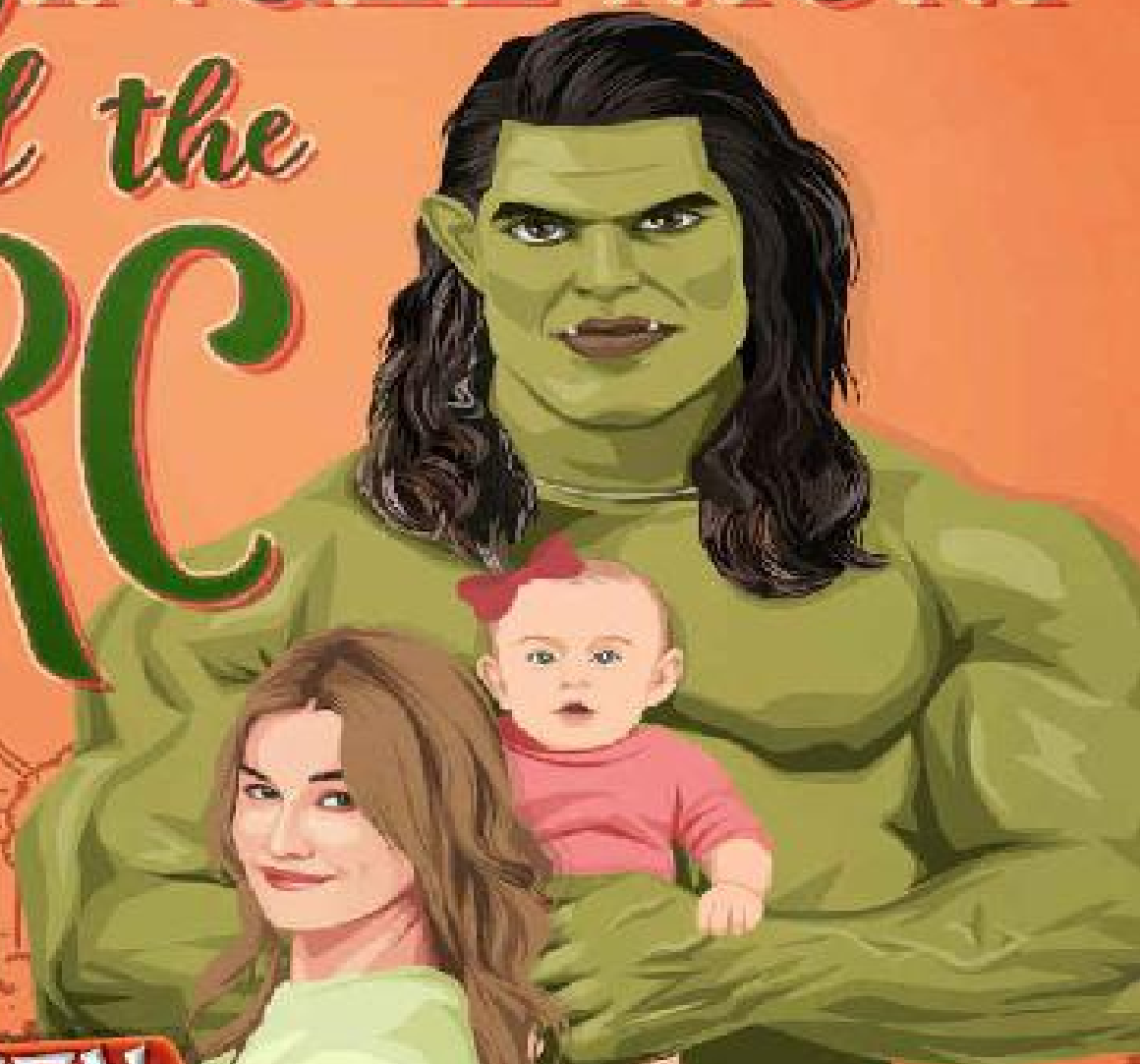
SWEET MONSTERS TREATS



The SINGLE MOM

and the

ORC



HONEY PHILLIPS

THE SINGLE MOM AND THE ORC

SWEET MONSTER TREATS

FAIRHAVEN FALLS



HONEY PHILLIPS

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CHAPTER 1



Pippa did her best not to cry when the waitress deposited a plate of golden brown pancakes swimming in butter and maple syrup in front of her.

“I’m afraid you’ve made a mistake. I didn’t order—”

But the waitress was already gone, disappearing into the crowd of Others who packed the riverside café. Pippa hastily averted her eyes as a large furry male in a trucker’s cap flashed huge fangs as he grinned at her. She’d always known that the Others, creatures of myth and legend, existed, but she’d never been around so many of them before.

Daisy whimpered in her sleep, and Pippa adjusted her grip, rocking her daughter slightly as she cradled her against her shoulder. The pancakes looked so soft and delicious—she’d only need a fork in her free hand to cut off a bite of fluffy golden perfection and lift it to her mouth.

No. She couldn’t afford to waste the tiny amount of money she had left on the pancakes. The waitress would realize soon enough that she’d made a mistake and take them away.

“There you are. I was beginning to think you were never going to get here. You’re late!”

A tiny old lady in a pink tracksuit wagged her finger at her as she slipped into the bench seat on the other side of the booth. With her short white curls and dark sparkling eyes, she could have been any other little old lady—except for

her green skin and slightly too sharp teeth.

“I’m sorry, I think you’ve—”

“And is that your daughter? What a little angel. Not literally, of course.”

Pippa had a dazed feeling that she’d stepped into someone else’s life. Did she have a double somewhere in this odd little town?

“I’m sorry,” she began again. “I think you must have me confused with someone else. I’m not late—I didn’t even know I was going to end up here.”

She’d been driving into the mountains, hoping to find some dirt cheap motel where she could hole up for a few days and come up with a plan when she’d stumbled on Fairhaven Falls. She’d heard of it, of course. In her old life, she’d even seen one of the posters advertising their winter festival. Liam had laughed when she shuddered at the snowboarding yeti.

But the town had looked so pretty and peaceful—and far too nice for the kind of motel she had in mind—that she’d been unable to resist driving down the main street, trying not to stare at the variety of Others strolling along the sidewalks. When a parking space opened up in front of the River Café, it seemed like fate, and she’d decided to splurge on a single cup of coffee.

But now she not only had a cup of coffee, but a plate of those delicious-looking pancakes and a strange old lady acting as if she knew her...

“Look, I think I’d better go.”

She reached for the wallet tucked in the diaper bag, but her hands were shaking and she knocked everything off the seat. Diapers and wipes and a spare outfit tumbled across the floor, and when she tried to collect them, Daisy woke up and started wailing. She desperately wanted to give in and join her, but she couldn’t. She had to keep moving.

“Don’t worry, dear. Everything is going to be all right.” The old lady smiled at her and put a firm hand on her arm. “Let’s get you out of this noisy place so you can take care of that sweet baby of yours.”

“But my diaper bag—”

“Rona will get it for you.”

The old lady guided her gently but inexorably through the crowd and out onto a waterfront deck. The fall sunshine highlighted the colorful pansies growing in the lush planters that separated the umbrella covered tables.

“I’m Flora, by the way. Now you just sit down and take a deep breath, and we’ll work everything out.”

“I’m Pippa,” she said automatically as she collapsed into a big Adirondack chair in the corner of the deck.

Daisy was still wailing so she quickly lifted her T-shirt and unfastened her bra, sighing with relief when her daughter latched on and the crying stopped. She smiled down at her daughter, a wave of fierce, protective love washing over her. She would do anything to keep her safe.

When she looked up, she realized belatedly that she hadn’t even thought about her surroundings. Fortunately, the chair was in a surprisingly private location, separated from the rest of the deck by a planter filled with tall grasses.

“Now why don’t we try this again?” Flora asked.

The old lady had perched on the chair next to her, looking so fluffy and innocent that her alarm seemed foolish.

“You really must have me confused with someone else.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. But never mind all that.” Flora waved a dismissive hand. “Are you planning on staying in Fairhaven Falls?”

Wouldn’t that be wonderful? She looked across the broad, peaceful river to the wooded slope rising from the other bank, already sprinkled with autumn colors. The town seemed so pretty, so safe, despite the strange inhabitants. But it wasn’t the kind of safety she could afford.

“I doubt it. Unless... Is there a cheap motel nearby? Maybe on the outskirts or further up in the mountains?”

“As a matter of fact, I own the Fairhaven Inn.” Flora beamed at her, then wrinkled her brow. “But I’m not sure that would work.”

“I’m pretty sure that any kind of inn is more than I can afford.”

Flora waved her hand again, still looking thoughtful.

“It’s not the money. It’s the proximity.”

“I’m sorry?”

The other female ignored her, then suddenly grinned.

“I have the perfect answer.”

“Answer to what?”

She couldn’t help sighing as she switched Daisy over to her other breast. Talking to Flora was like talking to someone over a line that kept dropping. She had the uneasy feeling that she was missing half the conversation.

“To your problem, of course.” Flora blinked wide, innocent blue eyes at her. “I have a little cottage that I was intending to fix up. It needs a lot of work, but the roof is in good shape. More or less.”

Her heart started to pound. Liam would never think to look for her here. If she could just stop running for a while...

“A cottage? How much is the rent?”

“Oh, I couldn’t charge you rent, dear. It really is in terrible shape.”

“I can’t take—”

“I have a better idea.” Flora overrode her reluctant protest. “You could do some work on it in exchange for rent. It would give you a place to stay, and it would be a huge help to me.”

“I could do that,” she said eagerly. “That is, what kind of work?”

“Stripping wallpaper, painting, polishing floors, that kind of thing.”

She nodded. Everything sounded perfectly doable, except...

“I have to be careful with paint around the baby.”

“Of course, my dear. In fact, I know the perfect person to help you with that. Do we have a deal?”

After a brief hesitation, she reached over and took Flora's outstretched hand. It really did seem like the perfect solution to her problems. But as the small, strong fingers closed around hers, she suddenly felt distinctly like the innocent fly who had just walked into a spider's web.

CHAPTER 2



“*M*aybe I should have looked this gift horse in the mouth,” Pippa muttered as she stepped into her new home.

When Flora said it needed work, she hadn’t been exaggerating. A musty orange shag carpet covered the floors, clashing yellow floral wallpaper was peeling from the walls, and heavy brown drapes blocked out most of the light.

Daisy gurgled happily, unconcerned with the horrible decor, and she sighed. At least they had a roof over their heads. The sort of cheap motel she’d been looking for probably wouldn’t have been much better, and at least here she could make some improvements. The room itself wasn’t that bad, with high ceilings and a brick fireplace—currently painted a sickly green—in the corner.

Behind the living room was a small dining room with a built-in bench beneath a dust-covered window. Next to the dining room was a kitchen with floral contact paper stuck to the cabinets, a harvest gold stove, and an avocado green refrigerator. She very cautiously opened the refrigerator, but it was cold and surprisingly clean—and empty. Groceries would have to come next.

She fought down a wave of panic at the thought. It had been a few years since she’d had to worry about it, but she’d grown up poor. She knew how to stretch a dollar until it squeaked. Without the worry of rent, she could make the small stash of cash in her wallet last quite a while.

The kitchen door led out onto a small back porch with a view of the weed patch that might once have been a nice yard. A big tree shaded most of the area, and a soft breeze ruffled the leaves that had not yet begun to turn. A bird chirped in the overgrown bushes that surrounded the yard, and the smell of new cut grass drifted past her. It was so peaceful that she felt like crying again.

No. She'd already made a fool of herself once today. Daisy had finished eating just after she and Flora had reached their agreement. While she was burping her, the blue-skinned waitress appeared carrying another plate of steaming hot pancakes, along with a large glass of milk.

"You forgot your breakfast, sweetie. And I brought milk this time. You need to keep up your strength while you're feeding the little one."

She bit her lip, then shook her head.

"I'm sorry, but I can't afford the food. That's why I didn't order anything."

"I know, sweetie," the waitress said quietly. "But you need a good meal."

"I... I can't."

"Nonsense," Flora said briskly. "You hand me the baby and enjoy your pancakes. Rona's chef makes the best food in three states. Three southern states at that."

The kindness on both females' faces and the relief of being able to stop running broke down her defenses and she burst into tears. Flora tutted, then handed Daisy to Rona while she rubbed Pippa's back soothingly until the sobs finally subsided.

"You'll be all right, dear. You're safe now."

The choice of words struck her as odd, but she was too exhausted to wonder about them for long. Rona was cooing over Daisy as the baby's arms waved happily, so when Flora ordered her to eat she obeyed. The pancakes were every bit as delicious as they looked, light and fluffy with a crisp buttery edge, and the cold milk was the perfect accompaniment. Everything disappeared in an embarrassingly short time, but she had to admit she felt much better afterwards.

“Thank you,” she told Rona sincerely.

“I know what it’s like to be hungry,” the waitress said, a shadow crossing her face, then kissed Daisy and handed her back. “You’re welcome any time.”

As soon as Rona left, Flora turned into a miniature whirlwind of activity, herding Pippa back through the café as she collected her diaper bag. As soon as Daisy was safely in her car seat, she followed Flora through the pretty town and up a long winding road. The houses were fewer here, sturdy older buildings with big yards. When Flora turned into the driveway of a large two story house with a charming front porch, she almost panicked, but the other female continued past the big house and around the curve to a much smaller cottage.

Peeling paint covered what looked like an old farmhouse. The porch sagged and the decrepit air made her hesitate, but then she looked over at Daisy, asleep after the car ride. It might not look like much but it had to be a better option for her daughter than the endless hours of driving. Maybe it was better inside.

As soon as she climbed out of the car, Flora handed her the keys.

“Here you go, dear. Make yourself at home. I have some errands to run, but I’ll be back to check on you later.”

“But—”

Flora was already halfway back to her car.

“The power and water are on. If you need anything, just tell my grandson.”

“Grandson?”

But it was too late. Flora was already disappearing in a cloud of dust. And now here she was, confronting the reality of her bargain.

Leaving the back door open to let in some fresh air, she stepped back into the house and continued her explorations. A small hall led out of the dining area, and she discovered two identical bedrooms along with a miniscule bathroom tiled in pink and black tile. More of the horrendous shag carpeting covered the bedroom floors—muddy green in the front and sickly brown in the back

—along with more of the heavy brown curtains blocking out most of the light.

“Did a vampire live here?” she muttered to Daisy as she wrestled with one of the bedroom curtains, then shuddered.

Flora and Rona seemed nice enough, but they weren’t exactly monsters. She only hoped she didn’t run into any of the real monsters that lived in the town.

She yanked harder at the curtain, and the hooks gave way. The heavy material dropped to the ground, letting in a flood of sunlight and a shower of dust. Daisy sneezed as she quickly covered her face and hurried out of the room.

“Sorry, baby. Let’s go back out into the fresh air.”

She walked Daisy around the yard until the dust settled, then wrestled the portable playpen out of the car and set it up on the back porch. She put Daisy in it and placed her favorite toy giraffe by her hand, then went to make a list of what needed to be done.

The list grew by leaps and bounds, but there were some positive developments as well. The minimal furniture was old and dusty, but at least there was some. The kitchen cabinets still contained dishes and pots and pans as well as some old spices. The mattresses were past saving, but there was a linen cabinet full of dusty but intact sheets and towels.

Cleaning supplies would have to come first, she decided, although she’d have to ask someone how to get to the nearest grocery store. And the sooner she removed all of the heavy dust-catching curtains and carpets, the better.

She was heading back through the dining room when someone knocked at the door. Her heart immediately started to race. *It’s not him. It can’t be him.*

It was probably just Flora, she decided. The old lady had said she’d come back later. She forced a smile to her face and opened the door.

A very large, very green orc stared down at her.

CHAPTER 3



Trogar bent over his drawing board, concentrating on the fine shading to one side of the tree—and the doorbell rang. He swore as his hand faltered, then quickly adjusted his grip. Whoever was out there could go to hell. There wasn't anyone he had any interest in seeing.

The doorbell rang again. And again. And again.

Fuck. He climbed to his feet and stomped towards his front door. His unwelcome visitor had better be prepared to be face to face with a very annoyed orc. He snatched the door open.

“What the hell do you—”

“Hello, dear,” his grandmother said cheerfully as she waltzed by him and into his house. “I hope I didn't interrupt anything.”

“As a matter of fact—”

“Good. I just need one tiny little favor.”

She turned and smiled up at him, looking as innocent as a fluffy little kitten, but he knew better.

“The last time you needed a ‘tiny’ favor, I spent three days in the hot sun replacing floorboards with those two annoying bastards.”

“Is that any way to speak about your brother and your cousin?”

Gran frowned at him, but he refused to let her make him feel guilty. Perhaps

Grondar hadn't been that bad—other than his ridiculous obsession with his human mate—but his brother Holdar was a surly bastard, even by Trogar's standards.

“You should be grateful they were able to help you out,” she added.

“They wouldn't have needed to help me out if you hadn't shanghai'd me into working on what you described as a ‘small’ project.”

She giggled, and he ground his teeth.

“It's good for you to get out of the house. And to spend time with your kin,” she added sternly. “But you won't need them this time.”

“This time?”

“Yes. I rented out the old cottage.”

“You did what—”

“In exchange for the tenant cleaning up the place. But I quite forgot that there aren't any cleaning supplies. I must be getting forgetful in my old age.”

He snorted. His grandmother had the sharpest, most devious mind in town. Probably in the entire state. But he was more concerned with this new tenant.

“I don't want anyone living—”

“So if you could just run some cleaning supplies over there. Oh, and give her some advice on non-toxic paint.”

Dread rushed over him in a tidal wave.

“Her?”

His grandmother blinked up at him innocently.

“Why, yes, dear. Didn't I mention that?”

“You did not,” he said grimly. “I don't want a tenant, and I especially do not want a female tenant.”

“You know you really need to get over this fear of females, Trogar.”

He reared back.

“I am not afraid. I simply—”

“Good. Then you won’t have any problem taking her those supplies and letting her know about the paint. Thank you, dear.”

She wiggled her finger at him, and he automatically bent down. She kissed his cheek, patted his face, and disappeared.

“Hurricane Flora strikes again,” he muttered as he stomped back to his drawing board. He had absolutely no intention of succumbing to whatever twisted scheme she had in mind this time. But not only had his concentration been destroyed, his conscience started to bother him. Whoever his grandmother had rented the old cottage to must be pretty down on their luck to want to live there.

It’s probably just some older lady Gran took a shine to, he told himself. No one knew better than he did that his grandmother had a kind heart, despite her schemes. And a nice, quiet older lady might not be too bad, as long as she stayed away from him. He decided to go ahead and take the supplies. At the same time, he’d make it clear that he wasn’t to be disturbed.

Feeling decidedly more in control, he retrieved all of the necessities from his cleaning closet and walked down the path and through the gap in the bushes. As always, the sight of the decrepit cottage disturbed him. He’d offered multiple times to put it back in order, but his grandmother had always refused. He avoided it as much as he could, but the knowledge that it was there nagged at him.

Perhaps that was another bright spot in the situation. Knowing the house was once more neat and tidy would soothe his desire for order. He strode across the porch, ignoring the way it creaked, and knocked briskly at the front door. It wasn’t until the door opened that he realized the extent of his grandmother’s evil.

A very pretty, very young, very human female stood staring up at him. Tendrils of damp light brown hair curled around her flushed face, and big green eyes grew even bigger at the sight of him. Her old T-shirt was stained and ripped, but it did nothing to disguise the lush swell of her breasts, and

faded denim shorts revealed deliciously long, curvy legs.

“Fuck,” he growled, and she took a step back, her fingers trembling on the edge of the door.

“I think you’ve made a mistake.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper, and he caught the sweet scent of her fear.

Fuck. This time he managed not to say it aloud.

“I’m Trogar. Flora’s grandson.”

Her pretty mouth formed a surprised *oh* as her eyes widened again, and he could all too clearly picture her looking up at him in exactly the same way as he fed his cock between those sweet little lips. The resulting rush of arousal annoyed him even more, and he hurried to explain.

“She’s not really my grandmother. She’s actually my great aunt, but my grandmother died when I was young and we always just called her Gran.”

Her eyes traveled down over him, and he fought not to react as they seemed to linger on the growing bulge between his legs. Then she shook her head.

“I don’t think that’s possible. I have to get back to—”

“Cleaning?” he interrupted. “That’s what Gran said. I brought you some supplies. Just the basic necessities.”

“Basic?” She finally looked away from him to the wagon he’d brought. “Three brooms, two mops, two buckets, and a box full of cleaning products?”

“Two brooms and a leaf broom,” he corrected. “One of the brooms is for the porches, and one is for inside the house. Just like one of the mops is for the kitchen and bathroom and the other is for the other floors. They’re color-coded.”

She looked at him, then at the wagon, then back at him.

“You’re an orc, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am.” Didn’t his size and his color and his tusks give him away?

“And you brought me color-coded mops?”

“It’s the best way to tell them apart.”

All of a sudden she laughed, and if he’d thought her pretty before, the laugh made her radiant. He was still staring when she stepped back, pulling the door open wider.

“Then I suppose you’d better come in.”

He opened his mouth to refuse... and found himself crossing the threshold.

CHAPTER 4



I hope this isn't a mistake, Pippa thought as Trogar came through the door. He loomed even larger in the dim room and her pulse jumped nervously. She'd been terrified when she first opened the door—he was just so big and so different with that green skin and those gleaming tusks. The impressive muscles beneath the tight white T-shirt and the suspiciously large bulge beneath the faded jeans hadn't helped.

Oddly enough, it was the neatly organized cleaning equipment that soothed her fears. How terrified could she be of a male who color-coded his mops? Now that they were inside in the enforced intimacy of the dark room, a shiver skated down her spine—although she wasn't entirely sure it was from fear. Even at this distance she could feel the heat radiating off of him and catch his faint musky spice. It had been almost a year since she'd been this close to a man she actually wanted to be around.

He's Flora's grandson, she reminded herself, although it still didn't seem possible.

“Are you adopted?” she blurted out, then blushed.

He only sighed.

“There's a fairy somewhere back in our family tree, and her genes showed up in Flora.” He shook his head. “What she lacks in size, she makes up for in... personality.”

“She's very determined.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” he muttered as he looked around, frowning. “Why didn’t you open the curtains?”

“Because they fall down if you pull on them. I decided to concentrate on the bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom first.”

“Hmm.”

Before she could stop him, he strode over to the windows and yanked on the heavy curtain.

As soon as he did, not only did the curtain come down, but the entire curtain rod collapsed onto the floor in a cloud of dirt, dust, and cobwebs. Trogar gave an outraged roar, looking so utterly horrified that a laugh threatened to escape. She tried to prevent it and ended up inhaling her own lungful of dusty air, her breath exploding in a confused mixture of snort, laugh, and sneeze.

His gaze shifted over to her. “Are you laughing at me?”

Before she could pull herself together enough to answer him, there was a wail from the back porch and she sighed.

“Dammit. You woke the baby.”

“Baby?”

He sounded as appalled as I’d said venomous snake, she thought crossly as she hurried out to get Daisy. Her small face was pink and scrunched up, her lower lip trembling.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. Did that mean old orc scare you with that loud roar?”

She tucked Daisy against her, and the baby snuggled against her neck for a few moments. Then her head popped up as she looked around with her normal wide-eyed gaze, and she sighed again. She didn’t think Daisy was going back to sleep anytime soon, which meant she wasn’t going to be doing any more work for a while. She’d better go and apologize to her grumpy neighbor, and ask him to leave the cleaning things for her to use later.

She walked into the kitchen and came to a halt. He hadn’t left. He was standing in front of her kitchen sink with his head under the faucet. He’d

stripped off his shirt to reveal acres of bulging green muscles, and her mouth went dry. She'd never been particularly attracted to muscular men. Even when he was playing football in high school, her husband had been more compact than muscular. But there was something about such a primal display of power and strength that some part of her responded to instinctively.

He'd taken his hair out of the tight braid, combing his fingers through it under the faucet, and when he lifted his head, water dripped down the long dark strands, sliding across the ridges of his abdomen and down to the unbuttoned top of his jeans. Her mind could all too clearly envision the drops sliding down beneath the fabric, but her imagination failed when it came to what they would do when they reached the extremely large bulge behind the tight denim.

Oh my God. What am I thinking?

She snatched her gaze away from his groin and back to his face, only to find him looking at her, or more specifically Daisy, with an equally fascinated expression, as if she really were carrying a pet snake. Daisy was staring back, her eyes wide, and she bit her lip. She hadn't even considered that her daughter might be terrified of the stranger. But then Daisy gurgled happily, her toothless grin stretching her face as her arms waved towards Trogar.

"What is she doing? Is something wrong?"

He took a step back, looking almost panicked, and she had the sudden impulse to wave the baby at him like waving garlic at a vampire, then winced as she remembered that vampires were part of this town too.

"She's curious about you. Babies are curious about everything."

He frowned, which could have been terrifying, but his obvious bafflement was surprisingly adorable.

"Haven't you ever been around children before?" she asked.

"No," he said gruffly, and turned back to the sink. "Do you have any soap? Or dish detergent? Laundry detergent?"

"Not unless it's in your bucket of cleaning supplies. I was making a list of things to get at the store later. Once I figure out where the store is."

“The Piggly Wiggly is the closest. Your phone should give you directions.”

“I don’t have a phone. Could you draw me a map?”

His head came up at that, his dark eyes focused on her face.

“You don’t have a phone?”

“No. I don’t have a phone.”

More accurately, she did have one, but she had no intention of turning it on—she was pretty sure that Liam would trace her if she used it. She hadn’t had the resources to buy a new one.

“Don’t you need one? With the child?”

Yes. It was another item on her growing list of concerns. She glared at him.

“Yes, it would be better if I had a phone, but I can’t afford it, okay?”

He made a growling noise under his breath, then turned and stalked out of the room.

Great. No doubt he was disgusted by both her and her skills as a mother, as well as the disgraceful state of her home.

“I’m doing the best I can, sweetheart,” she whispered to Daisy, as the baby seemed to express her displeasure at Trogar’s absence. “We’re doing all right, aren’t we?”

As long as her daughter was healthy and happy, nothing else mattered. She rocked her for a moment, not entirely sure who was comforting whom, then went to get the sling so she could keep Daisy with her as she went back to work.

She turned toward the door and realized that Trogar had left his shirt. She was tempted to use it as a cleaning rag, but she supposed that wouldn’t be very neighborly. Despite his judgmental attitude, he had come to offer assistance so she should wash it and return it to him. Maybe he did have soap in that basket of his—if he’d actually left it. She headed for the dining room and almost collided with a huge green body. Trogar was still scowling as he thrust his hand towards her.

“Here.”

It took her a moment to realize what he was handing her—the phone looked so small in his giant hand.

“Umm, that’s nice of you, but I don’t need to make any calls right now. Although maybe I could look up the address of the grocery store.”

“Just use it to guide you there,” he said impatiently. “It’s yours.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You have a child. You need a phone.”

“But I can’t afford—”

“It’s paid up to the end of the year.” An unexpected flash of humor suddenly lit his expression. “Just don’t go making a bunch of calls to China or India.”

“I can’t possibly—”

Once again, he interrupted her.

“Yes, you can.”

He put the phone in her hand and closed her fingers around it, his own hand big and warm and gentle.

She burst into tears.

CHAPTER 5



Trogar stared at the crying woman, appalled. To make matters worse, tears welled up in the infant's eyes, and her lower lip trembled. His immediate instinct was to flee, but he couldn't abandon the distressed female. He very tentatively placed his other hand on her shoulder, wincing at how delicate it felt beneath his hand.

"There, there," he said awkwardly, even though he had no idea what that was supposed to mean. He'd just seen people say something like that on television.

To his surprise, she turned into him, burying her head against his chest as she cried. He instinctively slid his other arm around her in what was almost a hug, and then had no idea what to do. He just stood there in the silent house, holding her until her sobs finally began to subside, dying away into hiccups, much like the ones her daughter was making. She made no attempt to move away, and he found himself curiously reluctant to let her go. There was something oddly rewarding about providing comfort to her, to both of them, the three of them huddled together in the warmth of the house.

Her lush breasts pressed enticingly against him, and his cock began to respond despite her obvious distress. He did his best to clear his mind of any inappropriate thoughts, but his body had other ideas.

He dropped his hands and took a hasty step back, then reached out to steady her as she swayed.

"I'm sorry," she said apologetically, giving him a watery smile. "I don't

usually cry all over someone I hardly know. It's just been a... difficult few months. And giving me the phone was just so nice of you."

Nice was not an adjective people usually used to describe him, and he shrugged uncomfortably.

"You needed it."

She bit her lip, then sighed. "I have to admit that it would be helpful to have it, so I'm going to accept, even though I shouldn't. I'm sorry I cried."

"I don't mind," he said abruptly, surprising himself, but oddly enough, it was true. He had liked comforting her. *But that doesn't mean it's going to happen again*, he told himself firmly. There was no reason for her to end up crying in his arms a second time.

"I'll just—"

He was distracted by the child before he could finish.

"What is the child doing?" he demanded. "She appears to be trying to eat her own hand. Hands," he added, as more fingers were covered in drool.

"The child's name is Daisy, and she sucks on her fingers for comfort, or because she's hungry."

"Which is it? How do you know what she wants when she can't speak?"

"You just have to try to figure it out. But you get better at it with time. In this case, I think she's ready for me to feed her again." She smiled at him. "At least that's one thing I can do. I'll just go out on the back porch."

"But you need bottles, formula..."

He waved his hand helplessly as he realized he had very little idea of what a baby required. Pink tinted her cheeks in an oddly enticing display as she shook her head.

"I'm nursing her, so I don't need any of those things."

He couldn't prevent his gaze from dropping to those luscious breasts, riveted by the idea. He knew it was a perfectly natural process, but that did nothing to prevent his still erect cock from flexing at the thought. He hastily turned

away, hoping she hadn't seen his reaction.

"I'll just get rid of these curtains while you... feed her."

"You don't have to do that. I promised Flora that I would clean out the house in exchange for rent."

"Since she sent me over here to help you, I seriously doubt she'll object," he said dryly.

She bit her lip, then nodded.

"All right. It would be a relief to have them out of here. All the dust in the air isn't good for the baby."

What?

"Outside. Now."

He put his arm back around her and marched her through the kitchen and outside, not stopping until they were halfway across the yard, barely preventing himself picking her up and carrying her.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded. "Is she all right? Should we take her to the doctor?"

She gave him a half-amused, half-exasperated look and shook her head.

"She's fine. The dust has settled and the windows are open. I just meant I wanted to clean everything that catches dust out of the house as soon as possible."

"Everything that catches dust?" he asked, shuddering as he looked back at the house and thought about the curtains, carpets, and the dust that covered almost every surface.

"I'll get rid of the curtains," he said firmly. "You two will remain outside."

She opened her mouth, and he was sure she was going to argue, but then the child hiccupped, and she sighed.

"All right. But can you please bring me the wooden rocking chair from the living room?"

“Are you going to remain outside with her?”

“I am.”

He quickly wiped down the chair and brought it outside, setting it in a patch of sunlight and making sure she was comfortable. He watched in fascination as she adjusted the child’s position and then reached for the hem of her shirt. But then she looked up at him, and he felt his ears burn. He muttered an apology and quickly turned away.

Tearing down the heavy curtains and hauling them outside proved to be a surprisingly satisfying task, although it didn’t entirely eliminate his unwanted arousal. It didn’t help that when he removed the curtains from the back bedroom, he had a direct view into the backyard. He looked outside just as she shifted the child to the other side, and he had a brief glimpse of a distended red nipple before he hastily dragged his gaze away. That brief glimpse stayed with him as he continued to work. Why was he so fascinated? Was it just because it had been a considerable time since he’d taken much interest in a female?

Not that I’m interested in her, he assured himself.

He was mopping the kitchen floor when she poked her head around the door frame, and he frowned at her.

“Are you sure the cleaning liquid is safe for children?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Since I don’t intend to bathe her in it, I’m not too worried about it. Besides, she’s in her playpen.”

“What? Alone?”

“Well, it’s too small for me,” she said, laughing. “And it’s right here on the back porch. I just thought I would get back to work.”

“But—”

He clamped his mouth shut. Flora had given her the house to use, and he could hardly keep her from working on her own house, however much he wanted to insist that she stay outside and keep guard over her baby daughter.

“All of the floors will need mopping,” he admitted reluctantly. They would

probably also need scraping, sanding, and polishing, but at least the wood beneath the carpets appeared to be in reasonably good shape.

“All right. I’ll start in the back bedroom.” Her eyes sparkled at him in a way he refused to find endearing. “Do you want to make sure I’m using the right mop?”

“It’s the one with the green handle,” he said automatically, then realized she was probably teasing him.

For a moment he recalled how other kids teased him when he returned to Fairhaven, but he decided there was no malice on her face, just gentle good humor. He no longer thought that there had been spite in his classmates’ teasing either, but at the time, he had been too defensive to know the difference.

“I’ll be sure to get that one,” she said solemnly. “I should be able to hear Daisy with the windows open, but if by some chance I don’t, just give me a holler.”

She smiled at him and left, apparently not noticing his frozen position. Now he was responsible for the child’s wellbeing? He stood there for a moment longer, afraid to move lest he miss some sound indicating that the child was in distress. But there was nothing from outside except the soft breeze through the trees and the distant song of a blackbird. He returned to his mopping, lifting the mop up from the bucket with infinite care to avoid loud splashes and moving the mop back and forth with gentle strokes. There was still no sound from outside, but possible disasters kept flashing through his mind.

Finally, he couldn’t stand it any longer and quietly placed his mop back in the bucket. He tiptoed out of the kitchen and onto the porch. The child was asleep in her playpen, her cheeks flushed and her small mouth pursed. As he watched, her lips moved in and out as if she were sucking on the air. What did that mean? Was she hungry again? Did she need her mother? Before he could decide, her eyes flew open, and big blue eyes looked up at him. They stared at each other, and then she gave him that wide, toothless smile and waved her arms at him again. At that moment, Trogar was completely smitten.

CHAPTER 6



Pippa had worked her way to the bedroom door, and she was looking around and smiling at the results when Trogar appeared. Without the curtains, she could tell that the windows were large and well-proportioned, sunlight flooding into the room. The floors gleamed with the water from the still-wet mop, and she could envision how they would look once they had been sanded and polished. Add in a fresh coat of paint and some pretty fabrics, and it would be a delightful bedroom for her daughter. She turned to share her delight with Trogar and realized he was hovering at the end of the hallway, an almost panicked look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” she demanded.

“Daisy is awake,” he whispered, and her heart rate subsided.

“You almost gave me a heart attack. It’s fine. I wish she slept a little longer, but it’s all right.”

“What do we do?”

“Do?”

“Does she need to be held? Or entertained? Or fed? What’s her routine?”

“I just fed her, so she’s not hungry. She doesn’t need to be held all the time. And at her age, everything is entertaining. She can watch her mobile, and the sun flickering through the leaves, and listen to the birds.”

“But she’s alone.”

Why did that thought seem to distress him so much?

“She’s not alone. I’m here, you’re here. Trust me, she’ll let us know if she wants attention. Or a clean diaper,” she added dryly, but that only seemed to increase his concern.

“Diapers. I didn’t consider that.”

“Of course not. Why would you? That reminds me, I should check and make sure the washing machine and dryer are working. Since I’ll need to do laundry soon.”

“You wash diapers?” He looked even more appalled, his expression turning from panic to horror.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “It’s better for the environment.”

It was also less expensive than purchasing the disposable kind, but she decided not to mention that.

“I’ll check the machines.”

He disappeared with the air of a man on a mission, and she shook her head. The combination of his lack of knowledge and his anxiety was oddly endearing. *Would Cody have been like that*, she wondered, but she already knew the answer. Her husband had never admitted that he didn’t know anything, and he wouldn’t have considered doing anything as mundane as laundry. She certainly couldn’t see him ever doing anything involving diapers. She wasn’t even sure that he would have been willing to watch over his daughter.

It had been made quite clear to her first by him, and then by his brother, that in the Reynolds’s world, childcare was a woman’s job. Liam had made it perfectly clear after Daisy was born that he had no intention of holding her, feeding her, or changing her diaper. Not even when she was at her most exhausted during those first few weeks. Looking back, she could only be glad because when he suddenly announced that they should get married, she’d known something was wrong. She just hadn’t had any idea of exactly how wrong.

Trogar reappeared a few minutes later.

“The washing machine is functional, but the dryer isn’t working.”

“That’s all right. I can always string up a clothesline. Do you have any rope?”

“Of course I have rope,” he said, looking offended. “Do you want to let me know which you would prefer? Or you could come and choose. It’s in my workshop, so you’ll need to bring the child.”

She rolled her eyes at him again.

“I don’t usually walk off and leave her by herself.”

Once again, the worried expression crossed his face, but then he nodded apologetically.

“Of course not. When it’s appropriate for you to pick her up again, I can show you.”

Lord, he seemed to take her literally when she said that Daisy needed unstructured time.

“Why don’t we go now? With any luck, I’ll have enough time to get a load washed and hung out to dry before nightfall.”

He nodded and followed her out onto the back porch, watching intently as she picked Daisy up and gave her a big smacking kiss, making the baby giggle.

“She seems to enjoy that.”

“Of course she does. Most people enjoy being kissed,” she replied.

His eyes dropped to her mouth, and she realized that the words had come out more provocatively than she’d intended. She instinctively licked her lips as her mouth went dry, then blushed when she noticed that his eyes had heated in response.

She quickly turned away and headed outside, only to come to a dead halt on the front porch. The carpets that had been removed from the house had been sliced into long strips, which were then rolled into bundles and stacked with almost military precision. The curtains had been treated the same way, folded so precisely they could have been fresh from the packaging. He followed her

gaze and winced.

“I apologize for the mess. I will arrange to have it removed as soon as possible.”

“I don’t mind,” she said quickly. “But I didn’t think about getting rid of the trash. Before I can start stripping the wallpaper and clearing other things away, I’ll need to find out where I can dispose of all this. I wonder if I should ask Flora about getting a dumpster.”

He frowned and shook his head. “I don’t know. Dumpsters are practical, but I do not want strangers on my property.”

“Your property?” Her heart skipped a beat. “I thought it was Flora’s house?”

“It’s complicated.”

“So uncomplicate it.”

It was one thing to accept help from a kind little old lady. It was entirely different to be beholden to another man, to be living in his house and subject to his whims. Never again.

TROGAR KNEW SOMETHING WAS WRONG, ALTHOUGH HE WASN’T ENTIRELY SURE what. Not only had Pippa stiffened, there was something in her expression, something that looked uncomfortably like... fear. He didn’t like seeing it there, but he didn’t understand why it had appeared.

“All of this—the land, my house, the cottage—originally belonged to Gran. When I needed my own place, she arranged for me to purchase it from her.” He suspected she would probably have given it to him outright, except she knew he would never accept it. “The one condition was that she retain ownership of the cottage. She said it would be needed one day.”

“Needed? For what?”

Or for who? His spine tingled. His grandmother definitely had some... unusual skills, but could she possibly have known ten years ago that Pippa and Daisy would show up in town and need a place to stay? It wasn’t a question he wished to consider so he pushed it to one side.

“She has complete say over what happens with the cottage. She’s never even let me renovate it.” Apparently it was the right thing to say because after studying his face for another moment she nodded.

“All right. Why don’t you show me this rope of yours?”

My rope isn’t the only thing I’d like to show her, he thought, then immediately gave himself a mental smack in the head. She and her daughter were alone and obviously in some kind of trouble. The last thing she needed was her grumpy neighbor having erotic thoughts about her curvy little body and what he’d like to do to it. His cock was pressing painfully against his jeans again and he could only hope that the tight fabric would help to conceal his erection as he led the way over to his workshop.

As always he derived immense pleasure from the tidy, well-stocked space, everything neatly labeled and in its place. He snuck a glance over at her to see her reaction, but she looked more shocked than impressed.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite like this,” she murmured as she walked around the outside of the workshop. Daisy cooed and waved her arms at a display of brightly polished sockets. “You arrange your used nails by size?”

“How else would you find them?”

“I don’t know. Everyone I know just dumps them in a tin can.”

He shuddered.

“I prefer things to be kept in an orderly fashion.”

“Believe me, you didn’t have to tell me that.”

She was smiling again, but once again it felt friendly rather than derisive.

“Now about that rope?”

“I have spools of five different weights. Any of those would have plenty of length.”

The other types he had wrapped into neat skeins and arranged on a pegboard might not be long enough.

“Maybe this one?” she asked, fingering the nylon rope. “It feels smooth enough to not snag on any of Daisy’s clothing.”

She ran it through her fingers as she spoke, and he could all too clearly imagine those small fingers stroking down his cock the same way. *Fuck*. He bit back a growl and forced himself to look away from the hypnotic motion.

“How much do you need?”

“I thought I could tie it around the tree and then maybe around the post on the back porch,” she said tentatively. “How much do you think I need for that?”

Tie it around the tree? That sounded... messy.

“I’ll bring the entire spool.”

He picked it up, along with a pair of eye bolts and a drill, and the three of them trooped back over to the backyard of the cottage. Daisy had started growing restless again, and Pippa gave him an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry, I better feed her. I’ll help you as soon as she’s done.”

“I don’t need your help,” he growled. The words came out rougher than he had intended because he was fighting another wave of entirely inappropriate lust as the memory of her delicious breasts flashed through his mind.

“Oh. Okay.”

She gave him a startled look but returned to the house before he could apologize. *Fuck*. He turned back to his task, fighting the urge to go after her and apologize. By the time she returned, the clothes line was up, each end attached to an eye bolt with a neat knot.

“I made sure to maintain the tension so that the line is perfectly even and won’t sag.”

She bit her lip, and nodded.

“I can see that. It looks very nice. There’s just one little problem.”

“Problem?” He inspected the line again, looking for flaws but couldn’t find any.

“The problem is that you designed it for your height, not mine.”

She stepped in front of the line and raised her hand. Her fingers barely reached it.

“I forgot you were so short,” he grumbled.

The sound of her laughter filled the yard as he started untying the knots, and he found himself smiling. Maybe having a neighbor wouldn't be so bad after all.

CHAPTER 7



*B*y late afternoon, Pippa's back was aching and her hands were red and sore, but she was happy with her progress. All of the floors had been mopped and the bathroom scrubbed. She'd done two loads of laundry, and she'd even washed the windows—although she suspected they wouldn't have met Trogar's standards. She couldn't be sure since he had left as soon as he finished rehangng the clothesline.

He'd asked her gruffly if she was satisfied with the new height, but he'd been smiling—a smile that turned him from ruggedly attractive into surprisingly handsome. She'd returned the smile, and he'd taken a half-step towards her before his face had abruptly closed down. He muttered something about having to get back to work and turned and marched away.

Which was just fine, she thought defiantly. She was starting a new life, or at least trying to, and she didn't want to be dependent on another man, or orc, or anyone. Which meant that next on her list was a trip to the grocery store, even though all she really wanted was to join Daisy for her nap. She couldn't do that, but she decided to wait for her daughter to wake up before she made the trek to the store. She was on her way to the rocking chair when there was a tap on the door.

Trogar? Her heart gave an unexpected leap as she went to answer it, but instead she found Flora beaming at her.

“I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of asking Trogar to deliver a few necessities for you. Everything happened so quickly that I didn't get a

chance to stock up on the cleaning supplies you'll need.”

Before Pippa could even open her mouth to respond, Flora bustled past her carrying two grocery bags.

“And I brought you some groceries—just a few little things to get you started. I figured you would need to save your money for more important things until you start earning some income.”

Earning an income? The reminder made her stomach churn. Even though she wasn't afraid of hard work, she only had a high school diploma, one year of community college, and no real skills. She hadn't planned to stay in Fairhaven Falls, only hoping for a chance to stop running long enough to think, but the town was so pretty and everyone had been so kind. Maybe she could stay a little longer if she found a job.

“Do you know anywhere that might be hiring?” she asked hopefully.

Instead of answering her, Flora looked around the room, beaming.

“I can't believe what you've done with this room already. Why, a brownie couldn't have done a better job.”

A brownie?

“Umm, okay. Thanks?”

“In fact...” Flora tapped her nose thoughtfully. “Would you be open to taking on a cleaning job? The maid at my inn is going to be busy for a while at her other job. Unless you'd rather not take that kind of work?”

“I'll take any kind of job,” she said quickly. “But I would need to make arrangements for Daisy. Is there a daycare that takes infants?”

The thought of being away from her daughter tore at her, but she needed money, as well as an emergency fund in case she had to run again.

Flora waved her hand dismissively.

“Just bring her along. We can fix up a crib for her in the office, and I'll get one of those little monitor things for you to carry. Alison manages the inn for me, and I'm sure she'll love having you both there, especially under the

circumstances.”

“What circumstances?”

“Oh, nothing.” The dark eyes twinkled. “I’m sure Alison will tell you. Once she realizes.”

There was that feeling again, as if she’d missed half the conversation, but she nodded dutifully.

“Thank you for the groceries. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

“Nonsense,” Flora said briskly. “Consider them a housewarming gift. Now why don’t you show me what you’ve done?”

The old lady waxed enthusiastic about her progress, but frowned at the bare bed frames.

“I didn’t think about mattresses.”

“It’s all right,” she said quickly. “I washed all of the blankets. I can just make a pallet on the floor.”

Flora paid no attention.

“I’ll send Trogar over with a mattress.”

“You don’t have to do that. I don’t want to impose on him. I know he has work to do, and he’s already been very helpful.”

“He has, has he?” Flora’s eyes were twinkling again. “Don’t worry, dear. It won’t be any imposition. Trogar can lift a mattress easily enough. And you’ll only need one, won’t you?”

Why was she blushing again?

“Umm, yes. I think Daisy and I will have to share a room.”

“You won’t have to share,” Flora said softly. “Trust me.”

She didn’t have the slightest idea what that meant, but the old woman had been so nice to her that she didn’t want to be rude.

“All right. But maybe we should check with Trogar first. I don’t want him to

think we're taking advantage of his kindness."

"Oh, I'll make sure he knows it's my doing," Flora said cheerfully. "I'll just make a list of things we'll need to get to put everything to rights."

She pulled out a notebook and began writing while Pippa watched helplessly. After a few minutes, Flora snapped the notebook shut and tucked it back into the pocket of her purple tracksuit.

"I think that will do nicely for a start. I'll just go and speak to Trogar."

"But I—" Pippa began, but Flora had already swept out of the room.

There didn't seem to be anything left to do but follow her outside. The afternoon light slanted through the trees and highlighted the massive green figure standing in the driveway. The muscles under another pristine white T-shirt rippled as he effortlessly lifted a large rectangular box from the bed of an equally pristine blue pickup truck.

He looked up as they emerged, and the box slipped slightly.

"Be careful!"

"I have it," he muttered, glaring at her.

She bit her lip and stopped short, but Flora went right to him, patting him on the arm as she thanked him.

"Thank you, dear. I should have known you were handling everything."

He snorted.

"Isn't that why you came to me? I'm just helping out. Temporarily."

"Yes, dear."

Flora grinned up at him, waved at Pippa, and disappeared so quickly that Pippa didn't see her leave. Then again, she might have been distracted by watching Trogar's muscles ripple as he carried the large box into the house. He paused in the living room.

"Is Daisy asleep?"

“Yes. Why?”

He grunted, put the box down, and marched back to the truck. This time he returned with a tightly rolled mattress which he leaned against the wall. On his final trip, he carried what looked like a dozen grocery bags in each hand, taking them straight into the kitchen and adding them to Flora’s bags as she stood there with her mouth open.

“How much food did you buy?” she asked weakly when she joined him in the kitchen.

“Enough for a few days.” His eyes drifted down over her. “Or maybe a little longer. You don’t look like you eat very much.”

His voice sounded disapproving, but his gaze contradicted it. Before she could respond, he started unpacking the groceries and soon every square inch of countertop was covered in cans, jars, boxes, and bottles. She bit her lip as she realized he’d also purchased baby food ranging from infant cereal to toddler food. In the bags he’d yet to unpack she also saw a vast amount of baby supplies for an equally wide variety of ages.

He looked unexpectedly sheepish as he followed her gaze.

“I wasn’t sure what to get.”

“So you bought out the whole store?”

She tried to sound as if she were teasing him, but her voice shook.

“Don’t cry,” he said quickly, alarm spreading across his face.

She managed to blink back the tears and give him a somewhat watery smile.

“I promise I’m not normally such a watering can. It’s just... it’s just been a long time since anyone was so nice.”

Giving into an unexpected impulse, she put her hand on his arm and rose up on her tiptoes. She had only planned to kiss his cheek, but he turned his head to look at her and her mouth landed directly over his. *Oh*. So this is what it was like to kiss someone with tusks. Her mouth fit neatly between them, his lips warm and firm beneath hers.

At first he didn't respond, the arm beneath her fingers as rigid as stone, and somehow that very lack of response gave her courage. Giving into another impulse, she licked tentatively at his lower lip. Mmm. He tasted delicious, like spice and smoke and something undefinably masculine, but he was still frozen against her and she started to drop back down to the ground. Then he made an odd growling noise and a huge warm hand slid around her waist as his mouth opened over hers, and she discovered what it was really like to kiss an orc.

CHAPTER 8



*A*larm bells sounded somewhere in Trogar's head, but he ignored them as Pippa melted against him. The taste of her overwhelmed him, impossibly sweet and tempting. He knew he should stop kissing her, but she tasted so damn good he couldn't tear himself away. Her tongue tangled with his, their mouths moving together perfectly despite the difference in their sizes.

"Mmm."

She moaned into his mouth, and arousal surged through his body. He tugged her closer, her soft curves yielding to his much harder body as his cock jerked against her stomach, and she gasped into his mouth. The sound penetrated the haze of lust, and he pulled back with an effort, breathing heavily as he stared down at her. Her eyes were dazed, her cheeks flushed, her lips plump and damp. *Too much, too fast*, he told himself grimly. His instincts were already clamoring for him to claim her.

He took a quick step back, but he could still feel the press of her body against his. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

Long dark lashes swept down to hide her eyes.

"I was the one who kissed you."

Yes. He wanted to growl his approval. Instead, he shook his head.

"We're neighbors. That's it."

Her expression was still hidden, but small white teeth clamped down on that swollen lower lip and he wanted to punch himself in the face. *Fuck*. Of course he had just made everything worse. But it couldn't happen. He couldn't allow it to happen. His breath was still coming in ragged pants when she looked back up at him, and this time her eyes were clear.

"I understand. We're just neighbors. Thank you for the groceries. I'll finish putting them away."

"I'll help—"

She held up a hand to stop him.

"You don't need to do that. You've done enough."

She bent her head over the groceries, and her hair fell across her face, concealing it. He should have accepted the dismissal and left, but he only made it as far as the living room. Then he sighed and started opening the box he'd brought in.

"What are you doing?"

"Putting together the crib," he muttered.

He didn't look up, but he heard her breath catch.

"That's very... neighborly of you."

"A child needs a bed."

She came up behind him, her sweet, intoxicating fragrance filling his senses. Their kiss had aroused her, he realized, and his shaft jerked once again.

"Thank you," she said, her small hand resting lightly on his shoulder for a moment.

She left before he could respond, but once again he found himself smiling as he worked. Why was it so satisfying to provide for her—for both of them? *Because they are mine*. No. He immediately rejected his instinctive response, but he had the uneasy feeling that his instincts would not be so easy to overcome.

When he was finished assembling the crib, he returned to the kitchen. She

had put away most of the groceries, and he did his best not to wince at the uneven rows and lack of organization.

“The crib is finished. Where do you want it?”

“In the back bedroom, but I can move it after she wakes up. That is...” She looked at him from under her lashes. “Would you like to stay for supper? It seems like the neighborly thing to do.”

Even though he knew he should refuse, he found himself grunting an assent, and she gave him a pleased smile.

“That’s great. What do you like? I mean, do orcs eat anything specific?”

“What do you think we eat?” he snapped, still unsettled by his own behavior. “Raw meat and the bones of our enemies?”

Color flooded her cheeks as she bit her lip and looked down again, and he immediately felt even worse.

“We eat the same thing as everyone else. Except rather more of it,” he added in a feeble attempt at humor.

Even though it wasn’t much of an effort, she smiled, no longer looking quite so embarrassed.

“I’m not a fancy cook, but I can manage quantity. You will stay, won’t you?”

He knew he shouldn’t, that he would only be encouraging his already possessive instincts, but when she looked up at him with those big green eyes, as wide and hopeful as her daughter’s, he couldn’t resist.

“All right,” he said roughly.

She looked at the selection of groceries he’d purchased, tapping her lips thoughtfully. Did she realize that the action only drew his attention to her pink, plump, perfect lips? That it made him remember how delightful they had felt beneath his mouth? His cock pressed painfully against his jeans again as he turned away, hoping she wouldn’t notice his erection.

“I know. I’ll make chili. There are some spices in the cabinet—they may be kind of old, but I don’t think spices go bad. At least, do they?”

“No, but they will not be as flavorful. I will get you a fresh supply.”

“You don’t need to do that. For tonight, I’ll just add a little extra. And once I get paid, I can buy them myself.” She gave him a radiant smile. “I didn’t get the chance to tell you that Flora offered me a part-time job cleaning at her inn. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“What about the child?”

“That’s the best part. I can bring Daisy with me. Depending on the circumstances, I can carry her around with me, or put her in her playpen in the office. I know it’s only part time, but it will be such a relief to have a job and be able to earn some money.”

He frowned, not liking the idea, although he wasn’t exactly sure why. He should be relieved that they wouldn’t be here in the cottage distracting him when he should be working, but he didn’t feel relieved. He felt uncomfortable that they would be out of his sight and away from his protection. *Fuck*. This possessive instinct, no matter how much of it was due to protectiveness, was exactly why he needed to keep his distance. He shouldn’t even be remaining for supper, but as she grinned at him and started pulling out ingredients, he just couldn’t bring himself to tell her that he wouldn’t stay.

Instead, he found himself leaning against the doorframe, watching as she started chopping vegetables while she sautéed the meat. She moved with an easy competence around the kitchen, her face relaxed.

“You enjoy cooking.”

“I do. Like I said, I’m not a fancy cook.” The shadow crossed her face as she looked down at her chopping board. “My husband always wanted me to cook more elaborate meals, but even when I tried, he still wasn’t impressed.”

“Your husband?” The doorframe creaked ominously under the grip of his hand.

CHAPTER 9



*H*usband? Trogar had somehow never considered the possibility of a husband, even though the child must have a father.

“Yes. He died a year ago, not long after I found out I was pregnant with Daisy.”

He couldn't help the feeling of relief that swept over him, even though he knew it was unworthy. Her eyes were still focused on the chopping block, and he studied what he could see of her face. Her voice had been completely neutral when she made the announcement, and she didn't look as sorrowful as he would have expected.

“I'm sorry?” He winced when he realized it had come out as a question.

She opened her mouth, but before she could respond, the child cried. She looked down at her at the half-chopped onion, then gave him a tentative look.

“Would you mind getting her? If I can just get everything in the pot, it can simmer while I feed her.”

“Me?”

“Well, there isn't anyone else here, is there?”

“I have never held a child before.”

“Just keep your hand under her head. And don't drop her,” she added with a smile.

He was reasonably sure she was joking, but the thought filled him with appalled horror and he couldn't move. She took in his frozen expression, then sighed and put down her knife.

"It's all right. I'll get her," she said as she reached for the tap.

"No, I'll do it," he said, suddenly ashamed of his nerves.

"You sure?"

"Yes," he said with a firmness he didn't entirely feel.

"Thank you. It'll only take me a couple of minutes to finish up and get everything in the pot."

Daisy's face was scrunched up into a pathetic pout, tears gleaming on her round pink cheeks as she sobbed. He bent down over the playpen, momentarily forgetting his trepidation in his desire to comfort her. Those big eyes flew open as soon as he did, and her sobs came to a stuttering halt as she stared up at him. He stared back, then cleared his throat.

"I am Trogar. I'm going to pick you up now and take you to your mother. Is that all right?"

He waited for a moment, not entirely sure what he was expecting but she only continued to stare up at him. Gathering his courage, he slid one hand under her head and the other beneath her small body, then very carefully lifted her into the air. He held her at arm's length for a moment, then remembered the way Pippa kept the baby tucked against her and carefully pulled her against his chest.

He was immediately aware of two things—how impossibly small and fragile she felt and the eye-watering stench emanating from her. He started to hold her away from him again, but as soon as he did, her lower lip trembled and she hiccupped in the beginning of a sob. Steeling his nerves, he pulled her back against his chest and hurried to the kitchen.

"I think something is wrong with the child."

Pippa immediately dropped her knife, giving him an alarmed look.

"What do you mean something's wrong?"

“She has a most unpleasant aroma.”

Her face relaxed as she pressed her lips together in an obvious attempt not to laugh.

“That means her diaper needs changing. I’ll take care of that in just a minute.”

His nose twitched unhappily, and he gathered his courage once more.

“Do you want me to do it?”

She gave him a skeptical look.

“Do you know how?”

“In theory, yes.”

He was sure he had seen the event on television at least once or twice. After studying him a minute longer, she nodded.

“All right. Her diaper bag is there on the table.”

He nodded as confidently as possible and headed for the dining room. After all, how hard could it be?

TEN MINUTES LATER, SHE WALKED INTO THE DINING ROOM AND STARTED TO laugh.

“This is not amusing,” he growled.

“All I can say is that it’s a good thing you bought so many supplies,” she said when she finally got her laughter under control. “It looks like you used an entire container of baby wipes, three diapers, and half a bottle of lotion. Also, what happened to her outfit?”

He looked down at Daisy, who was gurgling cheerfully and waving her chubby little arms and legs in the air. Who knew that those four small limbs would be so impossible to contain? Not to mention the horror that had awaited him when he removed the diaper. He shuddered at the memory, not sure that he would ever feel clean again.

“She resisted being dressed.”

She laughed again, picking up the child with an effortless confidence that he envied. At least the diaper stayed on this time.

“Are you being a wiggly worm, sweetheart? Let’s go ahead and get your jammies on.”

She disappeared into the bedroom while he gathered up all the toxic waste, double sealed it inside two garbage bags, and carried it outside. He came in just as she returned and she looked at him, looked down at the child, then bit her lip.

“Since it is getting cooler outside, I’m just going to feed her in here.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No, it’s fine. I just don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

Uncomfortable? Once again the image of that swollen red nipple flashed through his mind but discomfort was not the way he would have described his response, unless she was referring to the discomfort of having his cock pressed so tightly against his jeans.

“I don’t mind,” he said gruffly, and she shot him a quick smile as she sat down in the rocking chair and started to lift her T-shirt. “I’ll just go check on the chili,” he added hastily and fled.

He managed to keep himself busy for long enough that he returned just as she was gently disengaging Daisy. Once again, he had a fleeting glimpse of a pale breast and a distended red nipple before she pulled her shirt back down.

“Is she asleep?” he whispered.

“Not quite, but I don’t think it will be long. If you can sit here and rock her for a few minutes while I make some cornbread, she should be asleep by the time we’re ready to eat.”

“I can do that—that is, will she need another diaper change?”

She laughed.

“There are never any guarantees, but she should be fine.”

“Very well.”

She stood up and he reached for the child. As he did, his fingers brushed lightly against the side of her breast. He heard a quickly muffled gasp, but then Daisy was safely in his arms and Pippa was backing away, her cheeks pink. Refusing to look at him, she hurried back to the kitchen and he assumed her place in the rocking chair.

It creaked somewhat alarmingly under his weight, but held together as he slowly started rocking the child. She looked up at him and gave him that wide toothless grin again and his chest suddenly ached. He tucked her a little more snugly against him and began to rock. Were children supposed to have bedtime stories? He had the vaguest recollection of his mother telling him stories a long time ago, before everything went bad. He couldn't remember any of the details, so he started on the one in the tale he was currently illustrating.

“Once upon a time...”

CHAPTER 10



*A*lthough Pippa couldn't make out the words, she could still hear the low tones of Trogar's voice as she fled into the kitchen. That deep voice did nothing to quell the arousal that had flared so suddenly and embarrassingly. The entire time she'd been cooking, she'd been trying to convince herself that her response to his kiss was simply due to the circumstances. It had been a very long time since she'd been kissed—and never with such passionate intensity. It felt as if he wanted to devour her, and she'd been absolutely fine with that idea.

That was the part that had surprised her the most—not that the physical contact had aroused her, but that her mind and emotions had been so willing to go along with her body. She could have sworn that she was no longer interested in men. *Although he's an orc, not a man*, a mischievous inner voice prompted her. Perhaps that was why it had been not only arousing, but comforting to be locked in those massive arms.

But she told herself that that was all it had been—just an unexpected encounter after a long spell of celibacy. Since the last thing she needed was to get involved with her new neighbor, she'd tried her best to push it out of her mind. But when his fingers brushed against her breast all that arousal came flooding back. Even now her nipples tingled, and she could feel the slow, heavy pulse of her clit. It was the first time since Daisy had been born that she felt like a woman, and not just a mother. An attractive woman at that, and it had been even longer since she felt that way.

By the time she had mixed and poured the cornbread batter into the skillet,

the pulsing had eased. With any luck, her body would have calmed completely by the time they ate dinner. She listened intently but she couldn't hear any more sounds from the living room. When she peeked around the corner, Daisy was sleeping soundly, her chubby little fist curled around Trogar's large finger.

The sight sent another unwelcome jolt of arousal through her body. She could so easily imagine those big strong hands on her own body. The thought of what it would be like to be lifted in those massive arms, of what it would be like to have sex with someone of his size and strength, brought an even stronger surge of heat. She rubbed her thighs together, willing it to go away, and Trogar's nostrils flared.

"Dinner's ready," she said quickly. "Do you want me to take Daisy?"

He nodded and rose to his feet, then hesitated. She was suddenly quite sure he was remembering their earlier exchange. Her cheeks flaming, she reached for the baby, but sliding her hands between her sleeping child and the warm, firm muscles of that massive chest was almost as arousing. He made an odd sound low in his throat, then turned to pick up the crib.

For the first time she realized that not only had he assembled the pretty white crib, he had covered the mattress in a fuzzy sheet patterned with adorable baby animals adorned with pink bows. Tears pricked at her eyes again, but she blinked them back. She refused to keep crying over his kindness.

"I'll put the crib in the back bedroom."

Afraid her voice would shake, she only nodded and followed him. He positioned the crib against the wall, and she carefully placed Daisy inside. They stood side by side for a moment, looking down at her.

There had been a family nursery in Liam's house—a huge room with an ornately carved dark wood crib that had been passed down for three generations and was draped with elaborate silk hangings. Her daughter looked much more at home in this simple setting.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You don't need to thank me."

His voice turned gruff again as he stepped back, but she was beginning to realize that it was from embarrassment rather than dislike. She started to follow him out of the room, then almost ran into his back when he stopped again and frowned at the bed frame.

“I should unroll the mattress so it has a chance to expand. Do you think that will disturb the child?”

“I don’t know. She’s a good sleeper, but this is a new environment. Maybe you could put it on the bed in the front room and then I can move it later.”

“All right, but I will move it,” he said firmly before stalking off to retrieve the mattress.

She absolutely did not watch his muscles flexing as he easily hoisted the rolled mattress over his shoulder and carried it into the front bedroom. He ripped off the plastic holding it in a roll with equal ease, and it expanded with a soft whoosh, filling the frame as he frowned down at it.

“It’s too small.”

She gave him a confused look. “It’s the right size for the bed frame.”

“I know. I measured it. But the bed is too small.”

“Maybe for you, but it’s just fine for me.”

Her words hung in the air as she suddenly imagined the two of them curled up together in the too-small bed. She suspected he was envisioning the same thing, because he made that same odd sound before picking up the plastic wrapping and turning on his heel. But he didn’t move away fast enough to prevent her from noticing that he was erect again.

She knew she was blushing as she followed him, but her voice came out remarkably calm.

“Just have a seat while I serve up.”

“As soon as I dispose of this.”

It hadn’t escaped her notice that he’d already removed all traces of the packaging that had surrounded the crib, and she simply nodded.

Only one bulb was working in the small dining room chandelier and it cast an oddly intimate glow over the table as she set out the bowls of chili and the plate of hot buttered cornbread. She'd made iced tea earlier and she put the pitcher on the table as well, suddenly wishing she had something else to offer him, but he smiled at the table when he returned.

"This looks wonderful, and it smells delicious."

"Thank you. I hope you'll like it. Have a seat and we can try it."

He took one of the chairs, and it squeaked in protest. She winced, but it held together as she took the other chair. They were both quiet as they ate except for some appreciative murmurs on his part, and the food disappeared rapidly. When he finally leaned back, he gave her an awkward smile.

"I'm not used to eating with anyone else."

"That's all right. I'm used to only having Daisy to keep me company."

He opened his mouth and she waited for him to ask the inevitable question, but he clearly changed his mind.

"You're a good cook," he said instead, after an awkward pause. "Everything was delicious."

"You certainly had plenty of it," she said dryly as she surveyed the empty dishes, then smiled at him. "But I was hungry too. It must have been all the fresh air."

She pushed her empty bowl away but didn't make any attempt to get up. Neither did he, watching her from across the table.

"Why did you come to Fairhaven Falls?" he asked abruptly.

"It's a long story." And one she wasn't sure she was ready to talk about. "But I'm happy I found it. It's such a nice, friendly town. Have you always lived here?"

The chair creaked as he made a restless movement, his face hardening. She suddenly felt frightened—not of him, but of whatever lay behind that grim look.

CHAPTER 11



For a moment Trogar considered just walking away. Then he looked across the table at Pippa's pretty, earnest face and suddenly found himself talking about a time he'd done his best to forget.

"We lived here when I was a child, but then my father died. A year later my mother found a new mate." *Frukag*. He still shuddered at the memory. "He was just passing through town, and after they were mated, he packed up my mother, my brother, and me, and moved us all back across the country to the Pacific Northwest."

It had seemed to him like a land of endless gray skies and rain, with the kind of damp cold that seeped into the bones. He'd gone back once, a long time later, for his mother's funeral and had been astonished at how beautiful it was compared to his memories.

"I'm sure that was hard," she said solemnly. "I spent most of my life in the same small town, but my mother remarried, and it was a... difficult adjustment."

Difficult? She had no idea.

"Was he a good man?" she added. "Your stepfather?"

"No."

But *Frukag* had managed to hide just how bad he was until they were all three thousand miles away from everything they had ever known. Trogar had been small for his age, an easy target, but his brother Holdar stepped in to protect

him, just as he always had, just as he always would. He could still remember Holdar standing in front of him, no more than twelve or thirteen, his fists clenched as he glared up at Frukag. It had been a battle he couldn't win, but it hadn't stopped him from trying and challenging his authority had infuriated his stepfather.

His mother had tried to intervene that first time, but his stepfather had silenced her. Their family descended into years of hell until the night Holdar appeared in his bedroom. He'd been twelve and Holdar must have been seventeen, but he was already massive even for an orc. The bed creaked as he put a cautionary hand over Trogar's mouth.

"We're leaving," he said quietly.

He didn't question him. The fights between Holdar and his stepfather had been escalating. His stepfather was growing afraid of his brother, but that only made him more dangerous.

"What about Mom?" he asked as he slipped out of bed. Holdar shook his head, his face tortured.

"She won't come."

He didn't question that either. There had been a few times over the years when someone had tried to intervene, but his mother had always refused help. She and Frukag possessed a twisted kind of bond that nothing seemed to destroy.

They left that night. Holdar found several jobs as a laborer before stumbling onto the illegal underground fight circuit, where humans paid a lot of money to watch Others get beaten to pieces. Not that Holdar ever saw much of the money, but it was a regular job—one that steadily proceeded to destroy his brother.

Trogar could see it happening, see his brother turning cold and angry as he shoved his emotions away, but there was nothing he could do. He buried himself in the drawings that were his only solace. He'd been working on them when their grandmother finally tracked them down. It was the only time he'd ever seen her cry, tears trickling down her cheeks as she looked around at the cramped, dirty room, the stained hotplate that only worked

occasionally, and the too short bunks with the thin, tattered blankets.

Then she dashed away the tears and put her hands on her hips.

“That’s it. We’re leaving. Don’t bother packing. There’s nothing for you here.”

He instinctively put his hand over his pile of drawings, and she smiled at him.

“Except those. Make sure you bring every one of them.”

Holdar rose slowly to his feet, looming over the tiny old lady as he glared down at her.

“We’re not going anywhere with you.”

“Oh, yes you are.” She returned his glare, not even remotely intimidated by his size. “I’m taking you home to Fairhaven Falls. Back to a home that’s clean and safe and where there’s plenty of food.”

It sounded almost too good to be true. Trogar gave Holdar an uncertain look. His brother hesitated, then jerked his head.

“It’s all right. Go with her.”

“What? No—”

“Both. I’m taking you both,” Flora interrupted.

“He needs you. I don’t—”

“Oh, sweetheart. You need me even more than he does.”

The two of them looked at each other, and then, to his great relief, Holdar slowly nodded. So Flora had brought them back to Fairhaven Falls. She brought them back to clean clothes and clean rooms, to beds that weren’t too small and all the food they could eat, but in many ways, the damage had already been done. What they had endured had made them different.

Trogar had mostly come to terms with it, but he still found himself more comfortable with only his drawings for company. Despite that, he was content with his life. Holdar, on the other hand... He sighed as he often did when he thought about his brother. Holdar still carried a well of pain and

anger so deep he worried that no one could reach it.

He returned from his memories to find Pippa looking at him thoughtfully. He expected her to question him, but she didn't.

"My stepfather wasn't a good man," she said quietly. "That was one of the reasons I got married so young."

"What were the others?"

"I was in love. Or maybe I was in love with the idea of love. I'm not sure anymore. Cody was my first boyfriend, my first kiss, my first everything." She gave a startled look. "Did you just growl?"

"I was just clearing my throat." He had definitely growled; he hated the thought of another male touching his female, especially one who seemed so undeserving.

"I thought he was so good-looking, and his family... His family ruled our town, while my family was definitely at the bottom of the social pecking order. I couldn't believe he was interested in me." She looked down at her hands, studying her fingernails. "Maybe that was part of it. I adored him, and he wanted, needed, that kind of hero worship. He was always in his brother's shadow, because he was the younger brother and Liam never let him forget it."

"What happened?"

"We got engaged our senior year of high school, but he went off to college and I got a job working at Walmart, taking night classes at the junior college." Her mouth twisted into a smile. "I was half-convinced he'd forget all about me once he was in college. I think most of the town expected it too. But we were married the next summer and when he went back to school, I went with him. Not to attend classes, of course. I played the dutiful wife and kept his home and entertained his friends."

He didn't miss the fact that everything had revolved around the unworthy male who had mated her and had to bite back another growl.

"I got pretty bored after a while. But then I discovered that as long as I was quiet and sat near the back, it wasn't hard to sneak into some of the college

classes.” She rose to her feet and started clearing the table. “I never told Cody what I was doing—which should have been a pretty good indication that there was a problem. But then he decided he’d had enough and dropped out of college. That’s when things really went wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Moving back to Rock Creek meant that Cody was back under Liam’s thumb, and he hated it. Cody went back to an easy life where he didn’t have to work or study, but Liam controlled all the money. There were no more classes for me to take, and I certainly couldn’t get a job because no wife of his needed to work. My old friends thought I was stuck up, and Cody’s friends thought I was trash. Eventually I had enough and told him I was leaving. He started crying, begging me to stay, and I gave in.” She bit her lip, her voice wavering as she started filling the sink with hot, soapy water. “A month later, I realized I was pregnant. Two months after that, he died. He killed himself.”

“What? He chose to die, knowing that you were carrying his child?”

“No—at least I don’t think so. He actually seemed happy about the baby, although it wasn’t enough to settle him down. I meant that it wasn’t anyone else’s fault. He’d been drinking, and he was driving way too fast in the car Liam gave him and drove into a tree.”

He was beginning to dislike this Liam character almost as much as he disliked her previous mate.

“So there I was, broke, pregnant, and widowed. I was having a very difficult time with the pregnancy as well. When Liam suggested I stay on in the family home, it seemed like the right thing to do.” A shadow crossed her face. “It didn’t work out.”

She turned back to the dishes, her confidences clearly at an end. He picked up a plate to dry it, and it gave a slight crack. He quickly relaxed his grip, despite his raging fury at her worthless husband and the older brother who, unlike his own brother, seemed more focused on destroying his younger brother than protecting him.

His protective instincts were also quite sure that there was something she

wasn't telling him, but he decided to let it go—for now—even though he silently resolved to keep an eye on her from here on out.

CHAPTER 12



*W*hy did I tell him all that, Pippa wondered as she concentrated on washing the dishes. He probably thought she was another ignorant girl who used her looks to trap a wealthy husband. Certainly everyone in Rock Creek had thought as much. She hadn't realized until recently that Liam had done everything in his power to reinforce that impression. The thought of her former brother-in-law sent a prickle of unease down her spine. Had she said too much? Would Trogar be able to determine her real identity?

Stop that. You're just being paranoid, she scolded herself. Trogar had no reason to suspect she was anybody other than who she said she was, and even if by some chance he found out, he had even less reason to contact Liam. Her logic didn't entirely eliminate the fear, but when she looked over at him, so carefully holding the plate in his big hands, she relaxed a little. No, she didn't think she had anything to fear from Trogar.

"I should go," he said when they finished the dishes.

"Oh. All right."

She fought back an urge to protest. The last thing she needed was to become dependent on another man, even though everything Trogar had done so far had been intended to help rather than control. But why had he been so helpful?

"Why did you bring me the crib? And the mattress and the food?" she blurted out.

“You and the child needed them.” He shrugged awkwardly. “Just as my brother and I needed help before Flora found us.”

“It means a lot to me that you want to help,” she said softly, then tried for a lighter note, afraid she would end up crying all over him again. “Does that mean you’re like my fairy grandfather now?”

“Oh, no, angel.” He took a deliberate step closer, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating off that big body as her mouth went dry. “I don’t feel in the least like your grandfather.”

She stared up at him, unable to speak, completely unsure what to do. Part of her wanted to melt against him again, to let him hold her and make everything better. Another part of her remembered how helpless she had been with Cody and the aftermath with Liam. Either way her instincts told her that she should avoid getting involved, especially with a man who was so large and dominant. He could overwhelm her completely, and then she would lose everything.

Despite her instinctive alarm, she found herself leaning towards him. He responded to her movement, bending down over her with an intent expression on his face. Then his hand was suddenly on her chin, forcing her head up. He wasn’t hurting her, but she froze as his eyes scanned her face.

“Are you afraid of me? Of what might happen between us?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted.

“I would never hurt you—I would never even threaten you. I understand that you may not be ready to trust another male, but know that you have my word. I would not do anything to harm you and I would defend you with my life if necessary.”

She sucked in her breath. She desperately wanted to believe him, but she didn’t dare. She knew far too much about the vulnerability of trusting the wrong person. She started to pull away, but he was already straightening, his face closed and withdrawn.

“I should go,” he said again, turning away, then came to a halt. “Fuck. I forgot about the mattress. Do you want me to move it into the back bedroom?”

“It’s not necessary. I can still hear Daisy from there. And it’s been a long day. I’ll just make up the bed and have an early night.”

“I’ll help you.”

He was already heading for the bedroom so she didn’t bother arguing. They worked in silent harmony to spread the clean, sun-dried sheets and blankets over the bed and she pretended not to notice when he refolded all her corners and tucked everything in with military precision.

“I didn’t think to get pillows. I’ll go and get some from my—”

“Trogar, stop.” She put her hand on his arm as he headed for the door. “You’ve done enough. I’ll be just fine without a pillow.”

He looked down at her hand as his muscles tightened under her touch, and then his gaze shifted to her face, his eyes burning. She wasn’t quite sure who moved first, but then she was in his arms and he was kissing her with the same ravenous hunger as he had earlier. Only this time he wasn’t content just to kiss her. This time he cupped her breasts with his big hands, massaging them firmly as his lips trailed down her throat. She clung to him as her nipples puckered against his palms, the tingling sensation reaching all the way down to her clit.

He groaned and moved his hand up under her shirt, squeezing and tugging her breast as she shivered against him. Then he bent down and took her nipple in his mouth, sucking hard through the fabric. God, that felt good. He made a startled noise as her milk let down, and she started to pull away in embarrassment, but then he growled and his hands tightened on her waist as he sucked harder.

This felt nothing like nursing the baby. Her knees threatened to give out as sensations washed over her, and unable to resist, she wrapped her fingers in his hair and held his head against her breast. As he suckled, he lifted her higher so that his thick thigh was wedged between her legs. She moaned and squirmed against him, and he dropped her down on the freshly made bed.

She gave an incoherent protest, and then his fingers slid between her legs, rubbing her clit through her jeans. He made a growling sound that vibrated against her nipple and her body exploded, thrashing helplessly against him as

her climax swept over her. He made another low growling noise and slid a finger under the waistband of her jeans, and she arched up against him, her body trembling.

Then she heard the sleepy little cry that preceded the baby waking up, and the reality of the situation came rushing back.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

Trogar’s head shot up, his eyes unreadable as he stared down at her. Then he quickly pushed himself away and began adjusting his clothing. She knew she ought to do the same but she was still too shocked to move.

“I’m sorry.” He wouldn’t look at her. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I wasn’t trying to stop you—” she began, but Daisy gave another, louder cry and she sighed. Any discussion would have to wait. “I need to feed her.”

He raised his head at that, his expression horrified.

“Did I... take what she needed?”

“Of course not.” She did her best to smile at him as she sat up, trying to ignore the wetness spreading across her shirt. “In fact, you helped release some pressure. I just need to feed her and change her diaper and put her back to sleep.”

“You stay there. I’ll bring her to you.”

He stalked away before she could argue, and a moment later she heard him talking to Daisy. No one had ever done that for her before, she realized, other than the nurses in the hospital. From the moment she’d returned to Liam’s house, she’d been the one to drag herself out of bed, no matter how tired she felt, to get her daughter. It wasn’t that she’d minded, but she hadn’t realized until now how nice it would have been to have a partner.

But Trogar isn’t my partner. I can’t get used to this.

“She needs changing. I’ll bring her to you as soon as I’ve changed her diaper,” he called, his voice unhappy but determined.

Gratitude and amusement fought for dominance as she hurried to the

bathroom, stripping off her shirt and replacing it with a clean one. By the time she returned to the bedroom, a sweet-smelling Daisy was nestled happily in Trogar's arms. He looked more awkward than ever, his eyes flicking to her face and away before placing the baby gently in her arms. Once again his fingers brushed against her breasts, and this time she knew how good they could feel touching her.

"I should go."

His voice was harsh, and she could see the outline of his erection pressing against his jeans.

"You don't have to. You could stay and talk to me while I feed her."

He nodded reluctantly and lowered himself down onto the edge of the bed, as far away from her as possible, his muscles rigid with tension. Daisy gave an impatient grunt, and she quickly raised her shirt. Trogar watched as she began to nurse, his expression unreadable.

"Does this bother you?" she asked quietly.

"No. It should, but it doesn't. I have never been so aroused in my life." He said the words almost angrily, then gave her a reluctant smile.

He was aroused? Even while he was watching her nurse the baby? That sent a whole new wave of heat through her body. She realized that he was staring at her as a rumbling purr started deep in his chest. It felt surprisingly soothing, and she leaned back against the bedframe and closed her eyes, just enjoying the sensation of nursing while her body still hummed with pleasure.

When she opened them again, she caught sight of his strained features and realized that his cock was even more visibly distended.

"Maybe you should go."

Her voice came out as a hoarse whisper, and he didn't hesitate this time, but jumped to his feet and hurried to the door. At the last minute, he looked back.

"I'll see you tomorrow?"

It was a question rather than a statement, and she nodded.

“That would be nice.”

His face softened into something that resembled a smile, and then he was gone, leaving her staring after him thoughtfully. Everything had happened so quickly. She wouldn't have believed that she would have responded so quickly to someone who was so different from her in every way, but it had felt so right—*he* had felt so right. She couldn't escape the feeling that there was some kind of bond between them, inexplicable as it might be.

Daisy released her nipple, and she stroked the plump little cheek, her heart swelling with love.

“You like Trogar, don't you, baby girl? I do too, even if we're just neighbors.”

Although after tonight, that was more like neighbors with benefits. Her body still hummed with contentment. The baby gurgled at her, and she laughed and hugged her.

“Now let's finish up and get you back to bed.”

She had just switched Daisy to the other breast when Trogar reappeared in the doorway of the bedroom carrying two large pillows covered in pristine white pillowcases. Her heart melted just a little bit more.

“I told you that you didn't have to do that.”

“I know, but you need to rest properly. I'll lock up when I leave.”

He hesitated, looking down at her and the baby, then bent down and brushed a quick kiss across her mouth and curved his hand around Daisy's head before he left again. She rocked Daisy back to sleep, laid her down in her new crib, and climbed back into her own bed with a tired sigh. She buried her head in the pillows that still held a hint of Trogar's comforting fragrance and drifted off, hoping she would dream of him.

CHAPTER 13



If Pippa dreamed of Trogar, she didn't remember the dreams, but she woke with a feeling of contentment despite the early hour. She fed Daisy and gave her a bath, then dressed her in one of her prettiest outfits. As she did she noticed that it wouldn't be long before her daughter outgrew it, and she sighed. She needed to ask Flora if there was a thrift shop in town. Everything done, she packed the diaper bag and set off for the inn.

The Fairhaven Falls Inn was a huge old house that had been converted into a bed and breakfast, set back from the street in beautifully landscaped grounds. As she walked tentatively through the ornately carved front door into a two-story entrance hall, a pretty brown-haired woman, a few years older than her, emerged from the back of the house.

"Oh, you must be Pippa. I'm Alison. Flora told me you were coming."

"I hope you don't mind. She told me you needed help, but I'm sure you would have preferred to at least meet me first."

Alison laughed and shook her head.

"First of all, Flora is always right about people. And second of all, I really do need the help. Annie, the brownie who was doing the cleaning, wants to go full-time at the coffee shop. And this must be Daisy," she added as the baby gurgled.

"You don't mind that I brought her, do you? She's really not any trouble."

"Of course I don't mind. I love children, and she looks like a little angel."

Why don't you bring her back into the kitchen, and we can have a chat about what I'd like you to do?"

She nodded and carried Daisy back through an old-fashioned parlor and an elegant dining room with several small tables and into a large modern kitchen that opened onto a black-and-white-tiled conservatory full of lush, flowering plants.

"Your plants are beautiful."

"I know. I wish I could take credit for them, but it's all Sylvie's doing. She's a nymph. She has such a way with plants—with anything growing."

"A nymph?"

"Yes, she's an Other." Alison tilted her head, taking in Pippa's expression. "I get the feeling this is all kind of new to you."

"I'm afraid so. I come from a small town called Rock Creek, and the only Other in the whole town was an old water witch who told people where to dig their wells. To be honest, I was always kind of nervous about them, but everyone here has been so kind."

And more than kind, she thought as Trogar's image flashed through her mind.

"Anyone in particular?" Alison asked, and Pippa felt the color rise up in her cheeks. Alison laughed. "Don't worry. I know the feeling. I'm mated to a troll, and we're getting married in the spring. You'll have to come."

Her chest suddenly ached. Would she still be here in the spring? Would Fairhaven Falls turn out to be the sanctuary she needed? Fortunately, Alison didn't press her, offering her tea and freshly baked muffins instead.

"You don't have to feed me," she said quickly.

"Don't be silly. It's one of the perks of the job." The other woman made a face at the plate of muffins. "Besides, I don't seem to have much appetite in the mornings, and we don't have many guests at the moment."

She hesitated a moment longer, then took one of the muffins, which turned out to be as delicious as it looked. Daisy reached for it, and she gently pulled her fingers away.

“Not yet, sweetheart.”

After Pippa let herself be talked into a second muffin, Alison went over what she needed. They decided on daily maintenance of the guest rooms and public spaces with a rotating deep clean each week. Pippa would work six mornings a week and have her afternoons free.

Once everything was decided, Alison hopped down to prepare a breakfast basket with more muffins, fresh fruit, a carafe of coffee, and a small pitcher of freshly squeezed orange juice.

“Do you offer room service?” she asked curiously, and Alison shrugged.

“Not really, but I have this one guest who doesn’t want to come out of her room. She probably won’t let you in to clean either. She said she prefers to keep her own room clean. Annie just switched out her sheets and towels whenever she asked, but maybe you can try talking to her. She hasn’t opened up to anyone else. Flora said she just needs time to think, but I worry about her.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she promised.

Daisy was drifting off and Alison showed her the portable crib Flora had placed in the office. She put the baby down, picked up the monitor, and set to work.

Everything was already so tidy that the downstairs didn’t take long. Then she decided to start with the bedrooms on the top floor and work her way down. She quickly refreshed the empty one, then hesitated before knocking on the other door. A moment later, the door opened to reveal a pretty woman with curly red hair and freckles. She would have been even prettier if she didn’t look so pale and worried and Pippa’s heart immediately went out to her.

“I’m Pippa. Is something wrong? Can I help?”

Tears swam in the other woman’s eyes as she shook her head.

“No. I got myself into this mess, now I have to get myself out. But thank you for asking. I’m Ginger,” she added, and Pippa smiled at her.

“I won’t press you, but I know what it’s like to be in trouble. I’m probably

still in trouble, but everyone I've met here just wants to help."

Ginger's mouth trembled.

"I remember. I grew up in Fairhaven Falls."

"That must've been amazing."

"Mostly. But you know what they say. You can't go home again. Especially after you've locked the door behind you." Ginger stepped back and started to close the door.

"I meant what I said, and I'm not from here. If it's easier to talk to a stranger, I'm always willing to listen."

Ginger flashed her a brief, tremulous smile and whispered thank you before she shut the door.

As she moved down to the second floor, she couldn't help wondering about the woman's story. If she didn't think she could go home again, why had she come back? And now that she was back, why was she remaining locked in her room?

An hour later, she had finished the remaining bedrooms and came back downstairs to find Daisy awake and sitting on the lap of an enormous troll with pale blue skin and a shock of pale green hair. She froze, trying not to panic, and he looked up and gave her a friendly smile.

"You must be this little one's mother. Alison asked me to look after her for a moment while she went to check out a guest."

"I appreciate it, but I didn't expect anyone to babysit her. If I'd known she was awake, I would've come and gotten her."

"Don't be silly. She's no trouble at all, are you, sweetheart?"

He tickled Daisy's stomach, and the baby gurgled happily.

"I think your daughter is flirting with my fiancé," Alison laughed as she rejoined them.

"You know I can't resist a good girl," Will said, and Alison blushed.

Pippa was pretty sure she was missing something but decided she didn't want to know. She told Alison about her conversation with Ginger, and Will frowned.

"You don't mean Ginger Harrison, do you?"

Alison shook her head.

"I don't think so. The name on the registry is Ginger Malone. Why do you ask?"

"There was a Ginger who was a few years younger than me. A human with curly red hair and freckles. But her family left town a while ago. I wonder if it's the same person."

"She fits the description," Alison agreed then frowned. "Do you know why she might be hiding? Do you know why her family left? Did something happen?"

He shook his head. "Not really. That was about the time I was leaving myself so I didn't pay much attention."

Before Alison could ask him anything else, a third woman entered, grinning madly.

"I made it at last!"

Pippa couldn't help smiling at her dramatic expression, and Alison laughed.

"Nakor didn't want to let you go?"

"Dragons are so possessive. I think it was only the fact that I mentioned shopping that convinced him. You know how much he likes me to spend money." She shook her head, then smiled at Pippa. "Forgive my manners. I'm Charlotte. I'm new in town."

"I'm Pippa, and I'm new too."

"Is this your baby? She's adorable."

"I'm kind of partial to her myself," she agreed, smiling down at her daughter. "Her name is Daisy."

“Very pleased to meet you both. Do you want to come shopping with us?”

She bit her lip, then lifted her chin, already bracing herself for their reaction.

“I’m afraid I don’t have enough money to go shopping. Although I might see if there is a thrift shop in town.”

Charlotte’s expression didn’t change. In fact, she grinned.

“A thrift store. That would be perfect. Is there one, Alison?”

“Of course there is.”

Flora popped up in the doorway, wearing a shiny silver tracksuit.

“You should go to the Whimsical Wonders Warehouse.”

“You’ll love it,” Alison promised. “I found several things there for the inn, and they were very reasonably priced. Come with us.”

Although Pippa suspected that Alison’s idea of a reasonable price was not the same as hers, she found herself nodding. It wouldn’t hurt to take a look.

CHAPTER 14



Trogar's first waking thought was of Pippa. He'd dreamed about her all night—nothing specific, just little fragments of images—but they'd left him impossibly hard and aching. He wasn't exactly a virgin, but his experience was minimal at best and he'd certainly never experienced anything as erotic as their encounter the previous night. He wanted to repeat it again immediately—and that thought set alarm bells ringing in his head. He refused to become the same type of possessive monster his stepfather had been.

He stomped into the bathroom to shower, sternly ignoring his aching cock. It would just have to deal with his abstinence. He was dressed and halfway down the stairs before he realized that for the first time in years he had forgotten to make his bed. Scowling, he returned to the bedroom and made the bed, doing his best not to remember helping Pippa with hers. For good measure, he also dusted the already dust-free shelves and swept the pristine floor.

The resulting order did not satisfy him as much as it usually did, and he was still feeling unsettled when he started to cook breakfast.

"You're not your stepfather, Trogar."

Flora's voice from behind him almost made him drop his tenth egg into the pan without cracking it.

"Of course not." He turned around to scowl at his grandmother. "He was an abusive bastard."

She nodded, looking surprisingly serious. Her pale blue tracksuit was remarkably subdued, giving her an unusually innocent appearance, but her eyes were as perceptive as ever.

“It doesn’t have to be like that,” she added.

“What doesn’t?”

He put the broken eggshells carefully into the waste disposal unit and wiped down the counter before flipping the eggs.

“Your relationship with Pippa.”

“I don’t have a relationship with Pippa,” he said automatically, but she just snorted.

“If you say so. Just don’t let fear stop you from moving ahead.”

“I’m not afraid—”

But he was too late. She had already gone.

He gloomily consumed his eggs and a stack of toast, then scrubbed the kitchen and went to his desk. The technical intricacies of his latest set of mechanical drawings didn’t distract him, and even when he switched to a delicate pen and ink illustration he couldn’t lose himself in the process the way he normally did. Maybe he should just check and make sure Pippa didn’t need any more supplies for Daisy...

He was halfway across the yard before he even finished the thought.

I’m just being neighborly, he assured himself, but when he emerged on the other side of the hedge, her car was gone.

An unreasonable surge of panic filled him before he remembered that she had mentioned going to work at the Inn. Was that old car of hers reliable? Perhaps he should just check and make sure she’d made it safely... *No*.

This time he managed to rein in his instincts, but the fact that they had flared so quickly only worried him more as he stomped back to his house. His curiously empty house. The silence that he usually found so soothing felt desolate instead.

He spent the rest of the morning on the computer, working on his drawings and occasionally giving the keyboard an angry thump because his thoughts kept straying to the empty cottage next door and his missing female. Around lunchtime, he found himself checking to see if she'd returned, but her car was still gone.

She was just working. She hadn't abandoned him. Even though he tried to reassure himself, he only had the appetite for three sandwiches before returning to work. By the time someone knocked on the door, he was thoroughly annoyed. Didn't she know he would worry?

How would she know? Ignoring the inner voice of reason, he stomped to the door and snatched it open. But instead of one errant, adorable female, he found a large scowling dragon.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

He considered Nakor a friend, but he wasn't in the habit of showing up unannounced in the middle of the day.

"Charlotte is having something called girl time."

Charlotte was Nakor's new human mate. She seemed like a nice enough female, and Nakor was obviously entranced by her. He frowned at the other male.

"So?"

"So I don't like it. And I can't work." A puff of smoke trickled from Nakor's nostril.

Ah. That he understood. He sighed and pulled the door open.

"Then I suppose you'd better come in. Do you want some coffee?"

"Your coffee?" Nakor shuddered as he followed him into the kitchen. "No."

He shook his head, but he'd known Nakor long enough not to be offended.

"If you didn't like it, why did you let her go?" he asked. Dragons were as possessive as orcs when it came to their mates.

"She told me it would make her happy. I told her that I could make her

happy, and she laughed.” Nakor scowled at the unsuspecting coffee pot. “She said it wasn’t the same kind of happiness. At least she promised to spend some of my money.”

Was that the difference, he wondered. Nakor was willing to be unhappy to please his mate. He didn’t think that Frukag would even have considered such a thing. He sighed and changed the subject.

They had moved out to the side porch when Pippa’s beat-up car finally pulled into his driveway and Charlotte waved cheerfully at them from the passenger seat.

“It’s about time.”

Nakor pushed his chair back and stalked over to the car. As soon as he opened the door, he lifted Charlotte out and kissed her, his tail wrapped possessively around her waist.

Trogar found himself opening Pippa’s door, resisting the urge to do the same. She gave him a shy smile as she climbed out, her cheeks an adorable shade of pink.

“I’ll get Daisy—”

The baby caught sight of him at the same moment, squealing happily and waving her arms, and warmth filled his chest.

“I’ll get her.”

It wasn’t until he’d released Daisy from her car seat and stood with her cradled carefully against his chest that he realized all three of them were staring at him. Charlotte was smiling, but Nakor looked shocked. He couldn’t read Pippa’s expression, but she didn’t seem unhappy.

“Where have you been?” he asked gruffly, trying to hide his embarrassment.

“We went shopping. Look!”

Nakor recoiled as Charlotte pulled out several bags marked with the logo Trogar had designed for the thrift shop.

“What are those?”

“I bought some embroidered pillows that will look wonderful on our bed, and I found the most perfect vintage sweater.”

“You bought used items?”

His friend looked so appalled that Trogar had to turn away to hide his smile.

“Yes, I did.” Charlotte gave the dragon a determined smile. “And you’re going to love them. The sweater even has diamonds around the neck.”

“Real diamonds?” Nakor asked hopefully, and she laughed.

“No, but they’re very pretty.”

He hid another smile at Nakor’s disappointed growl and looked down at Pippa.

“Did you buy anything?”

She looked pleased and guilty at the same time as she opened her own small bag to reveal a tiny red velvet dress trimmed with white fur.

“I probably shouldn’t have, but she’s going to need winter clothes and it was such a good deal.”

“The child needs clothing?” he asked, annoyed that he hadn’t considered the matter before. “I will arrange for—”

“You won’t arrange anything,” she said firmly. “Daisy isn’t your responsibility.”

He reared back as if he’d been slapped. All he wanted to do was provide for the two of them, and she was rejecting his efforts.

“I think it’s time for us to leave,” Charlotte interrupted. “I know you’re busy with work and the baby, but I hope we can spend more time together. I had a lot of fun today.”

Pippa blushed and gave the other woman a shy smile. “I enjoyed myself as well.”

“Are you sure you want these things?” Nakor grumbled as he picked up Charlotte’s bags.

“Yes, and you will too once I model the sweater for you. It’s even softer than my pink one.”

The dragon stopped arguing, scooping up both the bags and his mate and leaping into the air as Charlotte called a laughing goodbye. Pippa’s mouth dropped open as she watched them leave.

“That’s not something you see every day. Or at least I don’t. This town is full of surprises.” She turned to smile up at him and must have registered his expression because her voice softened. “What is it, Trogar? What’s wrong?”

“You don’t want my help.”

CHAPTER 15



Daisy hiccupped, startled by Trogar’s outburst. Pippa started to glare at him, but then she took a closer look at his face and realized he looked more hurt than angry. She sighed and put her hand on his arm, trying not to be distracted by the feel of those warm, firm muscles.

“I know you want to help,” she said gently. “But I can’t be dependent on anyone again. That’s how I ended up in this mess.”

“I’m sorry you find your current situation so distasteful,” he said stiffly, and she sighed again.

“That’s not what I meant at all. Fairhaven Falls, Flora, you—all of you have been lifesavers and I’m very grateful—”

“I don’t want your gratitude,” he growled.

“I don’t care. I am grateful—we both are, aren’t we, sweetheart?”

Daisy gurgled happily, and his face relaxed the tiniest fraction.

“It’s just that I went from being dependent on my husband to being dependent on his brother, and I don’t like feeling so helpless. I need to know that I can make a life for Daisy on my own. Do you understand?”

His shoulders finally relaxed as he nodded.

“I suppose so. My brother was the same way, and he had a hard time accepting help. I don’t want to make you feel weak or dependent, but it gives

me satisfaction to help you. The same way Flora helped us,” he added.

“Flora is part of your family,” she pointed out.

He opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again, and she found herself wondering what he had intended to say. Did he feel the same sense of connection that she did?

He cleared his throat. “What type of help would you find acceptable? Changing diapers?”

His nose wrinkled as he spoke, and she couldn’t help laughing.

“I’ll never say no to that, but you don’t have to.”

“It is not a pleasant experience,” he agreed. “But I find satisfaction in restoring order.”

“I can’t say I ever thought of it quite that way.”

“May I?”

He gestured at the diaper bag, and she nodded, then followed him into his house. She wasn’t surprised to find that it was extraordinarily neat and tidy, the wood floors gleaming and the furniture arranged in precise lines. The walls were covered with paintings and sketches, arranged as neatly as if they were on display in a gallery. Nonetheless, the house felt surprisingly warm and cozy, and she could easily envision curling up with him on the big leather sofa in front of the fireplace or having breakfast in the sparkling white kitchen where he carried Daisy.

She watched as he changed the baby’s diaper, impressed by how quickly he had learned. He even managed to snap the little pink onesie back together despite Daisy kicking her legs merrily. Then he handed her the baby as he quickly restored the kitchen to its previous pristine state.

“Have you eaten? Would you like some lunch? You cooked for me last night,” he added hastily.

“I know.” She nodded solemnly. “I think sharing meals is a neighborly thing to do.”

He flashed her that surprisingly attractive smile as he turned away and began compiling an enormous stack of sandwiches. *And it is neighborly*, she assured herself. No matter how much she wished to assert her independence, she didn't think that sharing a meal, or even two, with her neighbor was any threat to that.

The sandwiches were perfect—thick slices of ham, cheddar, and tomato on what tasted like homemade bread, slathered with butter. She only managed one, but he devoured the other five without any problem.

Daisy tried reaching for the food again, then started sucking on her fingers. She hesitated for a moment, then decided there was no reason to worry about modesty at this point and unfastened her blouse and began nursing her. Trogar watched avidly for a moment, then lowered his gaze, the tips of his ears growing darker.

“I'm sorry for staring. And for last night.”

“I already told you not to be sorry. It felt... nice to be seen as a woman, a desirable woman, for a change.”

That brought his head up.

“How could you doubt it? I have never met anyone more desirable.”

Even though she felt the color rise to her cheeks again, there was an undeniable ring of sincerity in his voice.

Daisy's eyes drifted closed as she finished eating, and she fell asleep almost immediately.

“Why don't I carry her back to the cottage while you move the car?” Trogar suggested.

“All right.”

This time when he came to take the baby from her, his fingers lingered against her still-bare breast, and she felt herself melting into that touch. He gave a low growl as his thumb brushed across her swollen nipple, then stepped back with Daisy securely in his arms. She took her time restoring her clothing, letting his gaze linger on her until she fastened her blouse and went

to move the car.

After he settled Daisy into her new crib, he gave her a hesitant look.

“I had intended to offer to help with removing the wallpaper this afternoon. Is that too intrusive?”

She thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. Although she knew she could do it on her own, it would be faster with him helping, and it would be silly to let pride get in the way of creating a more pleasant home for her daughter.

“I don’t mind, as long as we both work on it. And as long as you let me fix supper for you again.”

That devastatingly attractive smile broke out again.

“I would be delighted.”

They managed to remove all of the wallpaper from the living room walls, and Trogar disposed of it with his usual neat efficiency. The walls still needed scrubbing before they could be painted, but she decided that was enough for one day and went to prepare supper. He played with Daisy while she cooked, and then watched as she put the tiniest bit of mashed potato on the baby’s tongue.

“Is she ready for food?”

“Not quite, but she’s interested, and a little bit won’t hurt. When she starts eating solid food, she’s more likely to sleep through the night as well.” She gave him a rueful smile. “I have to admit I’m looking forward to that.”

“I could stay and help—” He broke off, putting his hand over his face. “I’m sorry.”

The thought of him spending the night in her bed was far too appealing, and she shook her head.

“It’s all right. I know you mean well.”

“I do, but I also enjoyed last night very much.”

“I did too, but perhaps... perhaps we should take it slowly.”

He nodded, and she thought she saw a flash of what might have been relief mingled with his obvious disappointment.

Over the next week, they fell into a surprisingly easy routine. She and Daisy went into work each morning while he concentrated on his own job. However, as soon as she returned home each day, he would appear with a simple lunch, and then they would spend the afternoon working on the house. She cooked for him each evening, and each night it felt increasingly as if they were family, no matter how much she tried to remind herself that this was a temporary situation.

He didn't offer to spend the night again, but after their second evening together, he asked if he could kiss her good night—and she agreed with embarrassing eagerness. He tasted and felt as good as she remembered, and the one kiss turned into half a dozen before he finally pulled himself away. She'd felt the size of his erection against her stomach, and her own body was aching with desire, but she didn't attempt to stop him when he gave an abrupt nod and almost ran for the door.

Each night the kisses escalated, and a week later she found herself on his lap, his mouth once more on her breast as his fingers worked frantically at her swollen clit before plunging into her with a deep, satisfying thrust. She came with a soft cry, trembling in his arms, then opened her eyes to find him looking equal parts satisfied and strained. She tried to slip her hand between their bodies, but he drew it away, just as he had every time she attempted to touch him.

“Why won't you let me touch you?”

“I do not wish to take advantage of you.”

“You're not. I really want to touch you.”

Before he could refuse her again, she slipped out of his lap and down on her knees in front of him, then wrestled the zipper of his jeans down over that enormous erection to let his cock spring free.

Oh my God.

CHAPTER 16



Trogar flinched at the look on Pippa's face and instinctively tried to cover himself.

"I'm sorry. I know it's not right."

"Not right? What are you talking about?"

Her small fingers slipped between his to caress his shaft, and they felt so good on his naked flesh that he shuddered.

"I am not marked," he managed to say.

"What do you mean? Marked?"

She gently pried his hands away, and he let her, even though he winced as she inspected the smooth, unadorned flesh of his swollen cock. The lack of piercings might be considered acceptable since many orc males chose not to have that done until they met their mate. However, the fact that he did not even have the ritual tattoos designed to enhance her pleasure was not.

He had wondered if that lack was why his limited sexual experiences had been so unsatisfying, but the pleasure that surged through him as she ran her hand along the wide shaft suggested an entirely different reason—that he'd simply never found the right female before.

"You look perfect to me. Almost too perfect." Her fingers danced along his shaft again. "There's just so much of you."

His cock jerked again at her praise, seed pearling on the tip. Her eyes widened and she swiped her thumb across it. He shuddered again when she looked thoughtfully at the drop of moisture, then licked it off her thumb. His spine tingled, and he was afraid that he would disgrace himself like an untried youth. Although even a youth would have received the first markings.

“You do not mind that I am not marked?”

“I don’t understand what you mean by marking,” she said absently, as she tried to enclose his cock in her small hand.

“They are like tattoos, raised tattoos, designed to enhance a female’s pleasure.”

She licked her lips, but then she smiled up at him.

“That sounds... intriguing, but I’m sure you’re more than capable of providing pleasure exactly the way you are.”

And then she leaned down and enclosed the tip of his cock in the hot, wet tightness of her perfect mouth.

He exploded, his body jerking in helpless spasms as his seed erupted. She did her best to swallow, but she hadn’t been prepared for the explosion and it splattered around her mouth and dripped down on her chest as his body finally went limp. He tried to gasp an apology, but she only smiled and shook her head.

“I’m glad you finally had a chance to enjoy yourself.” She grinned up at him. “And this time you’re the one who made the mess so I get to clean it up.”

Before he could protest, she climbed to her feet and disappeared, returning a moment later with a warm wet cloth. She then proceeded to clean him so carefully and so thoroughly that he was completely erect again by the time she finished.

“I see you don’t have a problem with recovery time either,” she said, giving him a teasing smile.

“Not when you’re around.”

Nonetheless, he somewhat painfully refastened his jeans over his erection

before pulling her back onto his lap and sighing.

“I should go.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. As reluctant as he was to leave, he needed time to think about what happened.

“But I was wondering... Since you’re not working tomorrow, I thought perhaps I could take you and Daisy into town for lunch.”

“I think we’d both like that very much.”

She kissed him, and he could taste himself on her lips, the erotic combination making his shaft strain against his jeans. She giggled, looking as young and carefree as he had ever seen her.

“I guess you better go or I’m going to be tempted to do some more exploring.”

He knew she was right, but it didn’t stop him from holding her for a few more minutes, relishing the sweet warmth of her body against his despite his aching erection.

Once again, he endured another sleepless night. The fact that she had accepted his deficiencies so easily only added to his conviction that she belonged with him, but it had also strengthened his possessive urges. The trip to town would be a test, he decided. His stepfather had always hated his mother being around other males, even when he was with her. He’d even insisted on accompanying her to the grocery store, glaring at any male who looked in her direction and punishing her for any perceived encouragement.

“But I’m not like that,” he assured himself, desperately hoping that he was correct.

The afternoon started out well. He joined them just as Daisy was discovering the somewhat dubious pleasures of rice cereal. Most of it seemed to have ended up on her face, her hands, and even her hair, but she was clearly enjoying herself and he did his best not to flinch.

“Another mess,” Pippa said cheerfully, shooting him a teasing smile.

“One I am happy to take care of.”

“Maybe you’d better.” She gave herself a rueful look. “I think she got almost as much on me as she did in her mouth.”

She went to change, and he took care of the baby.

“You should not throw food at your mother,” he told her sternly as he wiped her face.

Daisy sputtered into the washcloth, then gurgled happily, giving him her wide toothless grin, and he couldn’t help laughing. He was as captivated by the child as he was by her mother.

He was carefully fastening a bow into her wispy blond curls when Pippa returned, pausing shyly at the entrance to the dining room. Instead of her usual T-shirt and jeans, she was wearing a green sweater dress, a few shades darker than her eyes, that clung lovingly to her slender figure.

“Is this all right? It’s a little tighter than it used to be.”

“You look beautiful. I am a very lucky male to be escorting the two of you.”

She blushed, then bent down and kissed his cheek.

“I think we’re the lucky ones.”

Happiness filled him as he escorted them out, carrying Daisy to the truck. He’d already purchased a car seat for the back row, and he saw Pippa frown.

“Your car is too small for me,” he said quickly. “She needs to be protected.”

“I could have just transferred mine over.”

“I know, but this way you have a backup.” He hesitated, looking down at her. “And I hope this will not be the last time that we go somewhere together.”

Her face relaxed as she smiled up at him.

“I hope so too. Thank you.”

Once both females were settled, he drove carefully into town. The town square was bustling with preparations for the Halloween Festival the

following weekend, so he was forced to park behind the town hall.

“I should have thought to bring her stroller,” Pippa said as he helped her out of the truck.

“I am perfectly capable of carrying her.”

“I know you are, but sometimes it’s nice to have a hand free.”

“I don’t need another hand,” he said as he picked up the diaper bag and tucked Daisy securely against his chest, then placed his other arm around Pippa’s shoulders.

She didn’t object. Instead, she settled against his side with a contented hum. The three of them received several admiring looks as they followed the river path along the edge of the square, and he suddenly realized that he was beaming proudly, that he didn’t feel annoyed by the looks or have any urge to shield Pippa from their gaze.

He was so distracted by the thought that he almost bumped into the mayor. The big minotaur was frowning distractedly at a human male carrying a video camera, and he muttered a hasty apology.

“Sorry, Trogar. I wasn’t paying attention. We’re doing a little early publicity for the Halloween Festival.” The mayor clearly made an attempt to shove aside whatever was concerning him as he smiled at Pippa. “I am Mayor Howard Ironmane, but please just call me Howard. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“This is Pippa and Daisy,” he said proudly.

He did find himself tugging Pippa a little more closely against his side, just to remind her of his presence, but he decided that was acceptable. Many females did find the big mayor attractive after all.

“Pippa?” The mayor’s expression changed, focusing on her with an intensity Trogar didn’t appreciate. “You’re working at the inn, aren’t you?”

“That’s right. How did you know?”

“It’s a small town,” Houston said evasively. “I was just wondering how many guests Flora had these days.”

Pippa gave him a puzzled frown.

“I think you should ask her about that.”

“Yes, of course. It’s just... Be sure and tell any guests that they are welcome at the Halloween Festival.”

“All right, I’m sure she—they will be happy to know,” Pippa said, but before Houston could respond, the cameraman called to him, and he hurried off.

“So that’s the mayor?”

“Yes, and his father was mayor before him, and his grandfather before him.”

She made a face as they started walking again. “Why is it that one family seems to dominate most small towns?”

“In this case, I suspect it’s because his great, great, great, great-grandfather actually founded the town. And Houston’s not bad,” he added reluctantly. “He was a friend of my brother’s a long time ago, and he’s always tried to do right by the town.”

“Houston? I thought his name was Howard.”

“It is, but everyone has always turned to him with problems for as long as I can remember. That’s how he got his nickname.”

She laughed as they reached the café. As always, it was overflowing with people, but Rona hurried over to give Pippa a hug and kiss Daisy’s cheek.

“It looks like everything is working out for you. I’m so glad. I don’t have a table inside, but there’s one out on the deck if you don’t think it’s too cold for the little one.”

“Perhaps we should wait—” he began, alarmed at the thought that Daisy might get cold. But Pippa patted his arm.

“I’m sure she’ll be just fine. It’s a beautiful day, and I have extra blankets in her diaper bag if we need them.”

He sighed, and they followed Rona out to the deck.

CHAPTER 17



Pippa smiled as Rona led them to the same table she had occupied on her first day in town. The light breeze that ruffled the surface of the wide, placid river carried the smell of dry leaves and the faint scent of smoke. The hills rose up on the other side of the river, most of the color already gone but enough remained to create a pleasant contrast with the deep green of the evergreens.

“This is such a beautiful place,” she murmured as she settled back in her chair. The surface of the river rippled, and she blinked, quite certain that she had seen a tentacle emerge and then disappear. “Different, but beautiful.”

Trogar settled down next to her, still appearing perfectly content to hold Daisy.

“It is,” he agreed. “I never paid much attention as a child, although I certainly remembered the sunshine after we left.”

She nodded. “It is one of the advantages of living in the South.”

“Is Rock Creek like this?”

For once the usual spike of anxiety didn’t strike her as she remembered her hometown. Perhaps because she felt safe here, it was easier to be objective.

“It’s nice enough, especially in the spring when the azaleas are in bloom. But despite the name, it doesn’t have a river and the land is very flat. I prefer the mountains. I like being able to look up towards the sky and the sense of freedom it gives you.”

They talked idly about the additional work needed on the cottage until Rona reappeared a short time later with two bowls of a hearty meat and potato stew. She grinned as she realized that Trogar's bowl was three times the size of hers. Rona also put down two mugs of nonalcoholic cider, a big plate of buttered bread, and a small bowl of mashed potatoes.

"For the baby," she said with a wink before she hurried off.

"I see another cleanup job in my future," Trogar grumbled, but he looked more pleased than annoyed.

"I can feed her."

"I don't want you to spoil that pretty dress. Potatoes don't do much damage to a flannel shirt and jeans."

"You could even take them off," she suggested and blushed. "I meant the shirt," she added hastily.

He picked up the infant spoon that Rona had also brought and began feeding Daisy, ignoring his own bowl of stew, and her heart melted. She was well aware of how much he loved to eat, but he still took care of the baby first. She hurried through her own bowl so she could take over whenever he was ready, but he didn't seem to be in a hurry. He did an excellent job of keeping the food in the baby's mouth, despite Daisy's tendency to push it back out again with her tongue, and the result was much neater than her own efforts earlier that day.

"You're a natural," she told him, and he beamed proudly.

Once it became clear that Daisy was only playing with the potatoes, she pushed her bowl away and reached for her. Daisy nursed eagerly for a few minutes, then drifted off to sleep. Pippa adjusted her clothing and sat back in her chair, enjoying the sunshine and cradling the sleeping child as Trogar finished his meal. Several people came by to speak to Trogar, and he always made sure to introduce her. It was such a simple thing, and yet one that both Cody and Liam tended to forget.

Despite his alleged preference for solitude, he seemed quite at home amongst the other members of the town. She was a little hesitant about some of the Others, especially the ones who sported fangs or claws, but everyone was

very friendly, and she knew that Trogar would never let anything happen to her. The thought startled her, but the more she thought about it, the more she felt the truth in it. *I trust him*, she realized. Somehow, this huge male had worked his way completely into her confidence.

He reached for the still-sleeping Daisy again when Rona brought out two big slices of warm apple pie with scoops of ice cream melting down over them. She deliberately leaned into his hands, hoping he understood what she was offering. From the heat that flared in his eyes, she suspected he did, but he didn't say anything, just held the baby while she ate the pie, and they switched up again when it was his turn.

"This wouldn't have been necessary if we brought the stroller," she pointed out.

"I know, but I think I prefer this way." He stroked his thumbs across her sensitive nipples and smiled when she gasped. "Don't you think?"

"I suppose it does have some advantages."

After they finished, they strolled around the square, and he pointed out where they would light the bonfire and set up the booths for the various traditional activities, such as the dunking booth.

"Did you come here when you were little?" she asked.

"I think the festival was a lot smaller back then. I mainly remember going door-to-door with a group of friends." A shadow crossed his face. "By the time I came back, I was too old."

"I definitely think we should bring Daisy back next week for her first Halloween, even if she's too young to remember it. That is, if you'd like to join us?" she added quickly.

"Nothing could prevent me." He winced. "I mean, as long as you want me to come—"

Honestly, both of them were ridiculously awkward.

"I want you to come," she said firmly. "I... I like you being part of our lives."

"I do as well."

Daisy had woken up while they were walking, and Pippa could tell she was starting to get restless.

“But right now, I think the three of us should head home before this little angel turns into a devil.”

“I’m ready to go, but would it be all right if I made one quick stop first?”

“Of course it would. I just know she’s going to get a little fussy soon.”

They returned to the truck, and then he drove up the alley that ran behind Main Street and parked behind one of the buildings. He disappeared for a moment, then returned with a large object wrapped in moving blankets which he deposited in the back of the truck before climbing back in and giving Daisy an anxious look.

“I wasn’t too long, was I?”

“Not at all.” She waited, but he didn’t volunteer the purpose of this visit or any information about what lay beneath the blankets. Her curiosity finally got the better of her. “What did you put in the back?”

“You’ll see.”

She sighed but didn’t pursue it.

He drove straight to the cottage and helped her and Daisy inside before going back out to the truck. She wasn’t entirely surprised when he carried the blanket-wrapped bundle inside, but she frowned at him.

“Before you say anything, it’s simply a changing table. It’s not sanitary to keep changing her on the dining room table. It wasn’t expensive, and I got it at the thrift store,” he added hopefully.

She didn’t have the heart to refuse, especially when he was so clearly trying to follow her wishes.

“I suppose it’s all right.”

“It’s just a neighborly gesture,” he assured her, clearly relieved by her agreement as he began removing the wrapping.

The changing table was a vintage piece that had been painted white to

perfectly match the crib, and it was exactly what she would have chosen herself—not ornate or fussy, but simple and pretty and perfect for Daisy.

“I love it,” she told him, and he gave a relieved sigh.

“Would it be all right if I added a few extra details? I thought she might like it if I painted some animals on the front to match the ones on her sheet.”

He looked so anxious that a lump appeared in her throat.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

“Good.” He wrinkled his nose. “Although right now, I think it needs to be put to use as is.”

She laughed and agreed as they began what had become their familiar nightly routine. Since they’d had such a large lunch, she simply cut up fruit and cheese and set it out on a tray with a basket of crackers. After a moment’s thought, she added a small bottle of sparkling cider.

“Let’s go sit on the porch,” she suggested when he returned from putting the baby down.

She shivered as they finished eating, realizing that the heat of the day had disappeared quickly once the sun went down. He immediately stripped off his flannel shirt and wrapped it around her shoulders before lifting her onto his lap.

“Aren’t you cold?” she asked, fingering the thin white T-shirt he’d been wearing underneath.

“Not often, and definitely not when I’m holding you.”

“You really say the nicest things.”

“I never say anything I don’t mean.”

“I know, and that’s what makes them so nice.” She took a deep breath, then reached up and put her hand on his face. “I want you to stay with me, with us, tonight.”

“Are you sure that’s really what you want?”

“More than I’ve wanted anything for a very long time. Do you want to stay?”

Instead of answering, he stood up with her in his arms and carried her to the bedroom.

CHAPTER 18



Trogar slowly lowered Pippa to the floor next to the bed. He wanted to stretch her across it and feast on her, but he didn't want to scare her. Or perhaps he was the one who was scared. As much as he wanted to make love to her, he couldn't stand the thought that he might disappoint her.

She didn't seem to share his doubts, smiling up at him as she slipped her arms around his neck.

"What are you waiting for?"

"For you to change your mind," he said honestly, and she shook her head.

"I'm not going to change it. I know what I'm doing."

"Then take your clothes off," he demanded, his voice raw.

She must have heard the desperation behind the demand because she only smiled and took a step back. Her eyes still on his face, she slowly unwrapped the pretty green sweater dress to reveal the black lace bra he'd glimpsed while she was nursing Daisy. Matching black lace briefs accentuated the delicious swell of her hips.

He drank her in greedily, memorizing every inch of pale, soft skin. The scraps of lace only served to emphasize her lush curves, and his fingers twitched with the need to remove them. Her cheeks turned pink at his scrutiny, but she let him look before reaching out and tugging at the hem of his shirt.

“Now you,” she whispered.

He stripped his T-shirt over his head and automatically started to fold it neatly. She giggled, and he groaned.

“Sorry. Habit.”

He couldn't quite make himself throw it on the floor, but he placed it on the chair, then skimmed out of his jeans and added them to the pile. The laughter disappeared from her expression as he turned back around, and she ran her tongue across those pretty pink lips as her eyes dropped to his cock. It jerked in response, and she sucked in a breath, her nipples stiffening beneath the lacy bra. The desire on her face reassured him, and his worry about his lack of adornments faded.

He closed the distance between them with a single stride and ran his fingers across her swollen nipples. She sighed and arched into his hands, her responsiveness adding to his own arousal. His cock pressed insistently against her stomach as he reached behind her and awkwardly unfastened her bra.

He kissed his way down her delicate jaw to the heady sweetness of her mouth as her bra slipped free and her breasts surged into his hands, impossibly full and soft. He lightly pinched her nipples between his fingers, and she gave a muffled cry against his mouth, then urged him lower. As he latched on to a nipple, sweetness immediately bathed his tongue and he growled approvingly. Then he moved to the other side, drinking from her hungrily as he lowered her onto the bed.

His hand slid down over her soft belly, slipping into her panties to cup her pussy. He growled again at the slickness between her thighs and swallowed another spurt of milk. She rocked against his hand as he stroked the slippery bud of her clit, and he plunged a finger into her tight, welcoming heat. Her channel pulsed around his finger as she gave a muffled cry, and he couldn't wait any longer.

Ripping her panties away, he spread her legs, then dipped his head between her thighs to explore those sweet, tempting folds. Her hips bucked up against his face as he licked her soft, swollen flesh until she came again in a rush of wet heat, coating his mouth with sweetness.

He rose up over her, gripping his aching cock with one hand as he looked down at her. Fuck, she was beautiful—all pale, soft skin and dark red nipples and a smile that made his chest ache. She tugged impatiently on his shoulders, and he slid his cock the length of her slit, making her shudder as it passed back and forth across her clit. The swollen green shaft looked even larger compared to that delicate pink flesh, and he felt another flicker of doubt.

“Tell me what you want,” he said hoarsely, the thick head of his cock throbbing as he pressed it lightly against her small entrance. His hips threatened to surge forward as he fought for control.

Her eyes were shining, her gaze clear and determined.

“I want you, Trogar.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me. I need you inside me.”

She lifted her hips up against him, and he automatically responded, the head of his cock pushing past the initial resistance to be enclosed in a hot silken fist. They both moaned, and then she tightened her legs around his waist, urging him deeper. Her eagerness undid him. He gripped her hips and pulled her hard against him as he surged forward, impaling her on his massive shaft. She cried out again, her inner muscles gripping him so tightly he could barely move as he seated himself to the hilt. He shuddered, pleasure ricocheting down his spine.

He locked his elbows to hold himself still, gazing into her wide green eyes as he waited for her to adjust to his size. Her breath came in rapid pants, and then her tight little channel fluttered around him and the pulsating grip broke him. Fire streaked through his body as he exploded in long, heated waves, his body jerking helplessly against her.

“Fuck,” he groaned as his orgasm rushed through him, and he buried his face against her neck, embarrassment washing over him. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she whispered. “It just shows how much you wanted me. Besides, I know how fast you recover.”

He dared to raise his head and look at her. Instead of the disgust, or even disappointment, he'd feared, her face was as sweet and open as ever. Then she gave him an impish grin and rocked her hips. Pleasure and need sizzled through his blood as he felt his cock immediately respond to her movement. He pulled back a little, then surged forward, driving into her heat, and realized that his climax had helped to ease the way.

"Yes," she sighed happily, her head falling back against the pillows as he started to move within her.

Her body was so perfect, so responsive, her little moans urging him on as her arms came around his neck and her hands danced over his skin, touching and teasing him until he thought he might go insane.

"Trogar," she chanted, over and over, his name almost a prayer on her lips.

His hips thrust faster and harder, needing to claim her, needing to feel her come around him. Her back arched as her thighs tightened around his waist. He reached down to stroke his fingers over her swollen clit and she shattered around him, crying out his name again as she came. Her body milked his cock, pulling him deeper, and he exploded, spurting his seed into her tight, wet sheath.

He collapsed onto the mattress beside her, his body shaking as he clung to her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, unable to raise his head and look at her.

She turned on her side and pressed a kiss against his chest.

"I am more than okay. You were wonderful. *We* were wonderful together."

Relieved, he pulled her closer. She sounded so happy, so satisfied, that an unexpected pride filled his chest. Despite his limitations, he had pleased his female.

His female. His mate. Their joining had only confirmed what he already knew—Pippa belonged with him. Pippa and Daisy. His family.

The thought filled him with happiness—but it also strengthened his urge to care for them and keep them safe. Even now his instincts wanted to demand

that they move into his house where he could provide for them and watch over them, but he resolutely kept his mouth shut. He needed to be sure that his feelings wouldn't cause him to destroy their lives. Today had been a good start, but he needed time to be sure—perhaps they both did.

“We were wonderful together,” he agreed. “And I promise it will be even better next time.”

She gave a sleepy laugh, burrowing against him.

“I'm not sure I can take better, but I'm willing to try.”

Her voice was thick with sleep, and a moment later she drifted off with her head on his shoulder.

He stayed awake for a while longer, stroking her hair and studying the soft perfection of her face as she slept. At that moment, he was perfectly content.

CHAPTER 19



Trogar was still asleep the next morning when Pippa slipped quietly out of bed. She hated to leave him, but she'd heard Daisy's sleepy little pre-wakeup cry and knew it wouldn't be long before her daughter was demanding her breakfast. He deserved to sleep a little longer, especially after his efforts the previous night. Her lips curved into a satisfied smile as she picked up Daisy and carried her into the living room.

She'd never realized that sex could be both so warmly intimate and so physically exciting. She shivered with remembered pleasure at the thought of his huge cock entering her, almost too much, but actually perfect, reaching places inside her that had never been touched before. She'd woken during the night, her body still humming with pleasure, and reached for him. He'd responded with gratifying eagerness, licking her through two more climaxes before driving so deep inside her that she couldn't tell where his body ended and hers began.

She only wished they had time to repeat the experience this morning, but she had to work today. As soon as Daisy had finished eating, she put the baby in her playpen and decided to make sure she had enough supplies for Trogar's breakfast. She didn't even make it out of the living room before there was a knock on the door.

Flora was the only person she could think of who would show up at this hour, and it certainly wouldn't surprise her to see the old lady—probably gloating about the fact that Trogar had spent the night. She shook her head, but her lips were already curving into a smile as she opened the door.

But it wasn't Flora. A strange orc stood on the doorstep. He was big, even bigger than Trogar, with an intimidating scowl on his hard face. A plain black T-shirt and black cargo pants clung to his alarmingly large frame, and his eyes were hidden behind dark glasses. She automatically started to step back, but this was her house. She raised her chin and stood her ground.

"May I help you?"

"You're human." The harsh voice made the hair on her arms prickle, but she kept her chin up.

"Yes, I am. But it seems a little early to be conducting a census."

His mouth twisted in what could have been a smile, but could equally possibly have been a threatening grimace, and her fist tightened on the doorknob.

"I'm looking for—"

"What the hell are you doing here, Holdar?" Trogar appeared in the entrance to the living room, looking sleepy and disheveled—and angry?

"Flora called me, so I came."

Trogar's expression didn't soften.

"Of course you came when she called you. Unlike when I call you."

Did the stranger look hurt?

"You know that's not true."

Trogar sighed, his scowl finally fading. "I know you'll always come when I need you. I wish you would come just because I want to see you."

"I've been busy." Before Trogar could respond, the stranger looked in her direction. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Of course. Pippa, this is my brother, Holdar. Holdar, this is my Pippa. And that's Daisy," he added, gesturing to the baby.

For the first time, the hard face softened. "A child?"

“Why don’t you come in, Holdar?” she suggested, and somewhat to her surprise, he nodded, then crossed the room to look down at her daughter.

“You forget how small they are,” he said softly.

“I can’t imagine Trogar ever being that small.”

“He was. I still remember our dad bringing him home from the hospital, putting him in my arms, and telling me it was my job to care for him. Not that I did a very good job,” he added.

“Yes, you did,” Trogar said firmly as he joined them. “You got me out of there, and you kept me safe. You did everything a big brother should have done.”

Holdar only grunted and turned away.

“Why don’t you all sit down? I’ll fix breakfast.”

She only hoped Holdar wasn’t any fussier than his brother—and that she had enough food to feed them both. Holdar hesitated, then shook his head.

“Thanks, but I’d better be going.”

“You’re not staying?” Trogar looked so disappointed that her chest ached, but his brother just shook his head again.

“I only came because Flora said I was needed, but it looks like she was wrong for once.”

“Are you on a job right now?” Trogar asked, then gave her a quick look. “Holdar does private gigs for a security firm.”

That certainly explained the outfit and the intimidating appearance.

“No,” Holdar admitted reluctantly. “But I have another one starting next week.”

“Then why don’t you stay until after the Halloween Festival?” she suggested, and Trogar immediately nodded.

“Houston is making a really big deal of it this year.”

“Of course he’s staying.” Flora popped up in the doorway and shook her finger at him. “I told you that you’re needed.”

“Where? And when?” Holdar demanded, but she ignored him, walking over and throwing her arms around his waist.

The big orc stiffened, then very gently returned the hug.

“Hello, Gran.”

She sniffed and stepped back.

“You’re staying, and I don’t want to hear any more arguments about it. I’m sure your brother can clean out a room for you.”

Trogar looked so outraged that Pippa had to hide her smile.

“Would you like to stay for breakfast, Flora?” she asked quickly.

“Certainly, dear. I’ll even help you cook.”

Both males groaned, and Trogar grabbed Pippa’s hand, tugging her towards the kitchen.

“We’ve got it, Gran. Can you and Holdar watch over Daisy instead?”

The breakfast turned out to be a complete success. The two males devoured everything she cooked while Flora beamed at them. Daisy was enthralled by Holdar and he seemed equally enchanted, holding her on his knee and listening intently as she babbled.

She’d called Alison to let her know she’d be a little late, but she finally sighed and rose.

“Come on, little one. Time to go to work.”

Holdar frowned.

“You are taking her to work with you?”

“Yes. She enjoys being at the inn.”

She did her best not to sound defensive, but it didn’t help that Trogar nodded gloomily.

“I offered to watch her, but she wouldn’t let me.”

Holder’s frown deepened. “You don’t trust your mate?”

Mate? The word dropped into the room like a stone, and everyone went silent. She had the sudden feeling that she was missing something, but then Flora jumped up.

“Don’t be an ass, Holdar,” she said cheerfully. “Of course Pippa trusts him, but trust doesn’t grow breasts and she’s still feeding the baby. If you two are so concerned about helping, you can wash the dishes while I catch a ride to the inn with Pippa and Daisy.”

Flora barely gave Trogar time to kiss her goodbye before she whisked them out of the cottage.

“Don’t mind Holdar,” she said as they drove off. “He means well, but he has—what’s the current term? Oh, yes. He has issues.”

“Trogar told me a little bit about their past. And that you showed up to rescue them.”

Flora stared out the window, her expression troubled.

“I’ll never forgive myself for not realizing sooner how bad things were for them. Their mother lied to her mother—my sister—and my sister believed her. It wasn’t until after she died that I started digging into things and realized something was wrong.”

“But you did realize and you helped. That’s what matters.”

“I just wish I’d been there sooner. Holdar might not have been so damaged.” Flora sighed, then gave her a hopeful smile. “But he’s here for the next week anyway. I’m sure some bonding time with Trogar will be good for him.”

CHAPTER 20



*B*y the time the Halloween Festival rolled around, Pippa suspected that Flora had been a little too optimistic about Holdar. He'd agreed to stay, but he spent most of his time holed up in Trogar's spare bedroom—at least when he wasn't subjecting his body to some kind of intense physical training. He would run for hours or perform a long series of intricate movements against invisible opponents.

He did occasionally agree to eat meals with them, and he was obviously smitten with Daisy. But the smiles her daughter won from him so easily never extended to anyone else, although he was always polite to her. And even though he obviously cared for Trogar, he wouldn't let him get close to him.

"Why is he like this?" she asked Trogar one night when they were in bed. Despite his brother's presence in his home, he spent almost every night with her.

"I don't know. No, that's not true. He's convinced he failed me even though he was just a child himself." He hesitated, staring up at the ceiling as he stroked her hair. "But it's more than that. Something is broken inside him, and he either can't or won't let it heal."

He frowned into the darkness a moment longer, then sighed and rolled over.

"Right now I'd rather concentrate on my beautiful mate."

There was that word again, and her heart skipped a beat.

“What does that mean? Your mate?”

“It means you’re the person I want to be with,” he said slowly. “Always. I understand humans don’t know as quickly—”

“I know,” she interrupted him. “I want to be with you too.”

“Always?”

Even in the dimness she could see the hope on his face. The lump in her throat wouldn’t allow her to speak, but she managed to nod and smile and he gave a great shuddering sigh of relief.

“Thank the gods. Does that mean you’ll move in with me now?”

He’d hinted at it before, but she’d always avoided the question and he hadn’t pushed it.

“Yes—but not right away,” she added quickly. “I don’t want to uproot Daisy again so soon. Can you give us a little more time?”

“Of course. I understand, even if I don’t like it. And as long as I’m still in your bed every night.”

“Now why would that matter?” she asked innocently, even as she reached down to tease his cock.

“Because I can’t stand being away from you. I need our nights together to make it through the days when we’re apart.”

Her urge to tease him disappeared at the sincerity in his voice, and she drew him closer.

“In that case, let’s make sure you’re well stocked for tomorrow.”

TWO DAYS LATER, THE DAY OF THE HALLOWEEN FESTIVAL DAWNED BRIGHT and sunny. Holdar had joined them for lunch, and he hesitated when Trogar asked him to join them.

“You don’t want to miss seeing Daisy in her pumpkin costume, do you?” she added, and he actually smiled.

“A definite enticement,” he agreed. “I guess I’ll come.”

Daisy did look adorable, her chubby little face beaming from beneath the leaf hat and her orange-clad arms and legs waving happily through the holes in the plush round body. Almost everyone they passed stopped to admire her. Holdar had a tendency to scowl at anyone who approached, but apparently most of the townspeople were familiar enough with him to ignore the forbidding expression.

Even though most humans would have considered the Others to already be dressed for Halloween, many of them were also in costume. She saw a witch in a unicorn outfit, a goth fairy dressed as Carrie, and a werewolf in a tutu. The children, human and Other, were equally as colorful, squealing happily as they raced around playing games and begging for candy.

The adults sipped hot cider and mulled wine, and the scent of cotton candy mingled with smoke from the huge bonfire in the center of the square. The breeze from the river made the torches around the edge of the square flicker as the late afternoon shadows turned to dusk.

Daisy watched everything with wide-eyed excitement, and Pippa could easily imagine her joining the gang of kids in a few years. How nice it would be for her to grow up here, loved and accepted. And Trogar would be there too, to watch over her as she grew. She squeezed Trogar’s hand as a wave of happiness swept over her.

As they skirted a stall selling zombie fingers and eyeball cake pops, they bumped into the mayor, once again looking distracted as he searched the crowd. When Trogar greeted him he nodded politely at Pippa, then grinned at Holdar.

“I heard you were back. Why didn’t you come see me?”

“I’m not back.”

“But you’re here now.” Houston tilted his head thoughtfully. “And I have a little job for you.”

Holdar frowned. “I’m not taking any jobs.”

“It’s to raise money for the children’s library.”

She wasn't surprised when Holdar sighed and nodded. Houston sent him off with one of his assistants, then grinned at them.

"He really should have come to see me."

She found out what he meant a short time later. Holdar was perched on the dunking stool, scowling fiercely at everyone who approached.

"You're not going to raise much money that way," Trogar called.

"I'll make a donation."

"Oh, I think they just need a little encouragement. I'll take a bucket of balls," he said cheerfully.

She was watching in amusement as Trogar aimed balls at the target, trying to dunk his brother when someone grabbed her arm. Human, she realized immediately, although he was dressed in an outrageous parody of an Other in a snarling werewolf mask with blood dripping from oversized fangs.

"Let go of me," she demanded, more annoyed than afraid. Trogar was only a few feet away, and she knew he'd come if she called.

"If you don't want to lose your daughter, you'll keep your mouth shut and come with me."

Her blood went cold, truly terrified for the first time. *Liam*.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," she hissed.

"You will if you want to keep seeing your kid. I have an order granting me custody." She swayed dizzily, and his fingers tightened on her arm. "Don't make a fuss."

"But you can't. She's *my* daughter."

"Judge Willard was more concerned by how irrationally you've been behaving, especially this latest escapade—running away in the middle of the night, leaving a secure, financially successful home for no reason. Most erratic."

Her stomach churned in frustration. Judge Willard was a close friend of Liam's. If he had really granted Liam custody, was there anything she could

do about it?

“You better come with me now. Quietly. You don’t want to make things worse by creating some kind of hysterical scene.”

“And if I don’t come quietly?”

“Then I’ll be back in the morning with a law officer to take Daisy—and you won’t be coming with her.” He shrugged, but she could hear the gleeful satisfaction in his voice. “Come with me now and I’ll still marry you. But that’s the only way you can stay with her.”

She gave a choked sob, and Daisy began to fret, picking up on her distress. She started rocking her, doing her best to keep her quiet as she tried desperately to think. The custody order couldn’t be legal, but how could she prove it? She certainly didn’t have enough money for an attorney.

Trogar will help me. But although she was certain he would try, he led a modest life. He didn’t have the resources to go up against someone of Liam’s wealth and influence. Did she really have a choice? Maybe if she went quietly now, she’d have a better chance of escaping and returning to Trogar. She’d done it once; she could do it again. She could only pray he’d understand.

Heartbroken, she gave an abrupt nod, hating the thought that he was smiling triumphantly behind his mask.

“Start walking,” he ordered.

She obeyed, although she moved as slowly as she dared, unable to resist casting a quick glance over her shoulder at Trogar, still cheerfully lobbing balls at the target. A tear slid down her cheek, but she managed to prevent herself from sobbing out loud.

“How did you find me?” she asked, her voice flat and dull.

“It was only a matter of time. I had a private detective searching for you. But as it turned out, I didn’t even need one. You made it too easy.”

“What do you mean?”

“A photographer did a puff piece for the local news, promoting this stupid

little town, and you were in the background. As if anyone would want to come and visit somewhere filled with a bunch of monsters.”

“They are Others, not monsters, and it seems like a lot of people want to visit,” she added, gesturing to the crowd. “Not everyone is as prejudiced as you are.”

“You used to be the same way,” he sneered.

“I was just nervous because I didn’t know any of them personally.”

“I suppose you do now. Is that what you’ve been doing here? Fucking that big orc? Maybe both of them? I always knew you were a slut beneath that innocent exterior.” He laughed again, sending another chill down her spine. “But what the hell. I’d rather have a slut in the bedroom than a brainless little idiot.”

The horror of that thought broke through her frightened daze. *No*. She wasn’t going back to that miserable, restrictive life to be Liam’s plaything, and she certainly wasn’t going to allow her daughter to be a pawn in whatever twisted game he was playing. She would fight this custody battle no matter what it took. She came to a dead halt, and then she opened her mouth and screamed for help.

CHAPTER 21



The last ball slammed into the target, and Trogar gave a triumphant yell as the platform collapsed, dumping his brother into the vat of icy water. Holdar roared, and everyone watching cheered.

He turned around to share his triumph with Pippa, but she was gone. His heart skipped a beat. What had happened to her? Did Daisy need something? Surely she knew that would be more important than playing with his brother. He looked around again, but there was no sign of her in the colorful throng.

“You’re going to pay for that, little brother,” Holdar growled as he joined him, dripping water everywhere.

“Pippa and Daisy are gone.”

Holdar’s irritation immediately vanished, and he went on the alert, surveying the laughing mob that surrounded them.

“How long have they been gone?”

“I don’t know. I was paying more attention to the game. Goddamn it, how could I be such an idiot?”

Holdar hesitated, still scanning the crowd.

“Is there any chance she left voluntarily?”

“No,” he said immediately.

Their connection was still new and untested, but even if she had doubts, she

never would have just disappeared. Holdar accepted his answer without question.

“Then we’ll find her. The closest parking lot is behind the town hall. I’ll head in that direction. In the meantime, can you alert the sheriff?”

“We’re between sheriffs right now. Bobby Ray quit, and the election isn’t scheduled for another month.”

“Fine. We’ll do it without him. Do you have any friends?”

“Well, yes.”

“Start spreading the word. Tell them to start searching at the edge of the festival.”

He nodded, texting Nakor as Holdar left. Despite the increasing darkness, the dragon would have a better view from the air. Nakor had just texted back and promised to help when he heard Pippa scream, the sound clear and piercing despite the noise of the festival. It came from the direction that Holdar had headed, and he ran that way, forcing his way through the crowd.

He arrived just in time to see Holdar rip an atrocious mockery of a werewolf mask off of a human male. His brother delivered a powerful blow to the man’s uncovered face, and the human started to crumble, but Holdar didn’t let him. He held him upright, striking him again and again as the man groaned.

Pippa and Daisy were just behind them, and he snatched them into his arms with a relieved cry. She sobbed something incoherent against his chest as his brother continued to beat the shit out of the human. He didn’t want to let go of his female, but if someone didn’t stop him, Holdar was going to kill the man.

“I have to stop him,” he muttered, and she nodded, swiping at her tear-stained cheeks.

“I know.”

He grabbed Holdar’s arm, but his brother seemed oblivious to everything except punishing the human. Then Nakor landed next to him and grabbed

Holdar's other arm, and together the two of them pulled his brother off of the asshole. The human collapsed to his knees, somehow still conscious enough to sneer at them despite his bloodied state.

"You bastards are going to pay for that. Don't you know who I am?"

Holdar growled, but Nakor raised a condescending eyebrow.

"I don't know, and I don't care. And I'm quite sure that my lawyers are better than yours."

Pippa joined them, clutching his arm.

"He says he has papers giving him custody of Daisy."

"Over my dead body," he growled, advancing on the man.

This time Holdar was the one to grab him, giving him time to regain control. Nakor's wings flared as he sneered down at the human.

"I don't believe that for a moment. But if any judge was foolish enough to grant custody to a kidnapping bastard, I'm sure my lawyers will quickly remedy the situation."

"I didn't kidnap her. She came with me voluntarily."

"Looked like a kidnapping to me," Aidan snarled, and the man paled as he realized he was looking at an actual werewolf.

"Me too," Mrs. Carter chimed in, and the rest of the onlookers nodded in agreement.

"I believe you're outnumbered." Nakor flicked a gold-edged business card at the pathetic male. "But if you are foolish enough to pursue it, contact my legal team."

He turned his back on the human as Charlotte came running up, giving Pippa an anxious look.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, thanks to Trogar, and Holdar, and Nakor. Thanks to all of you," she added, giving everyone in the crowd around them a watery smile.

“All right, then. Move along, all of you.”

Flora stepped out of the crowd, wearing a bright orange jumpsuit with a sequined ghost floating under the words Haunted Hearts and Hot Bodies. He wasn't at all surprised when the crowd quickly dispersed, but he was more interested in holding his female and his child, warm and reassuring in his arms. Daisy's lower lip suddenly trembled as she gave a piteous cry and he immediately panicked.

“What's wrong? Did he hurt her?”

“New fathers,” Flora snorted. “Just a little too much excitement. Take her home and give her a nice bath and put her to bed. The two of you should probably do the same,” she added. “The best thing for stress relief is a good f —”

“Gran!”

“Flora!”

Thankfully, the chorus of protests drowned out what he had no doubt she was about to say. She grinned unrepentantly, waving her hands to shoo them away.

“Go. I'll deal with this.”

He gladly obeyed, only stopping long enough to place a hand on his brother's shoulder.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “You okay?”

“I'm not sure I've ever been okay,” Holdar said almost too quietly for him to hear, then shook his head. “I'm fine, but I'm leaving in the morning. I'll say goodbye before I go.”

“Make sure you do.”

He squeezed his brother's shoulder again, then urged Pippa towards the truck. As he did, he saw Dr. Jekyll bend down next to the human, his eyes gleaming green. He reached into his bag and withdrew a very long, very sharp syringe, and Trogar shuddered. He had no doubt that the doctor would heal the man's injuries, but he was also quite sure the doctor was going to do it in the most

painful way possible.

“Come on, angel. Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER 22



*A*t Trogar's urging, Pippa let him bathe Daisy while she took a long hot shower. She cried in the shower for a long time as the water washed down over her head but when she was done, she felt better, lighter. After she dried off, she pulled on a long white flannel nightgown, opting for comfort over sex appeal. From the way Trogar's eyes heated at the sight of her, he still found her just as desirable.

He was seated in the rocking chair in the living room gently rocking a freshly bathed Daisy, and he smiled up at her as he studied her face.

"Do you want to try and feed her?"

"Not if she's already asleep. We can just wait till she wakes up." She yawned, then gave him a rueful grin. "Despite Flora's no doubt excellent advice, I'm exhausted. Do you think you could just hold me?"

"I always want to hold you."

They put Daisy in her crib, then stood there for a moment watching as she slept peacefully.

"Do you think Nakor was right? That Liam was lying about having custody?"

"I do. Courts don't like to remove children from their parents, even when they're actually unfit." A shadow of remembered pain crossed his face. "But you're a wonderful mother. If it does turn out that he's done something underhanded, Nakor's legal team will eat him for breakfast."

“If it does come to that, it’s going to take me a long time to pay him back. Do you think he’ll be okay just getting small payments?”

“I think he would be insulted if you even offered. He enjoys his wealth, but he also enjoys using it to assist others. If it turns out to be necessary, just let him help.”

She sighed, the last lingering tension disappearing from her body and leaving an overwhelming sense of exhaustion.

“Let’s go to bed.”

She grabbed his hand and led him into their bedroom, then slipped under the covers as he tugged off his shirt. His hands went to the button of his jeans, and then he gave her an uncertain look. She gave him a sleepy grin.

“Go ahead and get comfortable. I don’t mind if you take them off. I’m just too sleepy to do anything about it.”

But as he kicked them away to reveal all that delicious naked flesh and that magnificent cock, half-erect even now, she didn’t feel quite as sleepy.

He joined her bed, burying his face in her neck with a muffled sigh.

“I thought I was going to lose you. Both of you.”

“I did too. I’m just embarrassed that I was so scared that I went along with him at first.”

“You were protecting Daisy. You did the right thing.”

“That’s what I thought. I kept telling myself that I’d just have to escape from him again, and I finally realized I would stand a much better chance of escaping here where everyone could help.” She sighed and snuggled closer.

“I just wish I knew why he was so insistent about this. He’s not interested in Daisy, and I don’t really think he’s interested in me.”

“As much as I hate to sound like Nakor, is there any money involved?”

“I’m afraid not. Apparently Cody never even thought to change his will after we were married, let alone after he found out I was pregnant. I’m not sure I would have wanted his money anyway, although it would be nice to know

that Daisy is provided for.”

He raised his head and looked down at her.

“She is. The two of us will take care of her. I love you, and I love her too. The two of you are my family. That’s what I was so afraid of losing.”

“I love you too.” She managed to smile through her tears. “And don’t forget that Daisy will also have a rather scary uncle and an unpredictable great-grandmother on her side.”

He smiled back.

“Of the two of them, I suspect that Gran is actually more dangerous, but I do worry about Holdar.”

“You know,” she said thoughtfully. “I’d be willing to bet that Flora has something – or someone –

in mind for him. I’m quite sure she picked me out for you.”

“Thank God,” he said fervently, and then he kissed her.

And she discovered she wasn’t so tired after all.

TROGAR STARED INTO THE DARKNESS LONG AFTER PIPPA HAD FALLEN ASLEEP. He had faith in Nakor—and his team of lawyers—but he was convinced there was something behind the human’s pursuit of Pippa and Daisy. Maybe his brother could help.

The next morning he drove Pippa and Daisy to the inn. He wanted to insist that they stay home, but she was equally adamant about maintaining her normal routine. She did agree to let him take them, and he had a quiet word with Will about the events of the previous night. The troll nodded grimly.

“I heard. The bastard left in an ambulance after Doc Jekyll was through with him. I don’t think he’s in any state to cause trouble, but I agree that it’s worth keeping an eye out. I’ll watch over them.”

“Thank you. I’m going to talk to my brother. I’ll be back later.”

Will laughed.

“Has he dried out yet? I hate I missed that part.”

“I’m surprised you weren’t there.”

A wide grin split Will’s face.

“We were celebrating—Alison is pregnant. Looks like I’m going to be a family male as well.”

“Congratulations,” he said sincerely, “there’s nothing better.”

“I can’t wait. And in the meantime, don’t worry. I’ll watch over your family.”

He thanked him again and went back to see his brother. He half-expected to find Holdar already packed and waiting by the door, but instead he was frowning at his laptop.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve been doing some digging. Do you remember what Pippa said about that asshole claiming he had custody?”

His fist clenched on the back of the nearest chair and it creaked loudly.

“Don’t tell me he was right.”

“No, I can’t find any such record. However, I hacked into the judge’s records and found something even more interesting.”

“What?” he asked anxiously.

“Her husband left a will.”

“But Pippa said he didn’t.”

“I suspect that bastard lied to her.” Holdar looked up at him thoughtfully. “Her husband left his share of the business to his child—to Daisy—with Pippa as sole executor. Your mate is a very rich woman.”

This time he needed the chair for support.

“She doesn’t know.”

“I agree, but her brother-in-law knew. That’s why he wanted to marry her—to control her and Daisy and the trust.”

His eyes closed in despair.

“Once she inherits, she won’t need any of this—that beat-up old cottage, the thrift store clothes and furniture. She could go anywhere she wanted.”

Will she even need me?

Holdar nodded, still studying his face.

“Are you going to tell her? I won’t say anything if you don’t want me to.”

The temptation was almost overbearing—to keep her close and safe... and dependent. But he would be no better than Frukag if he did that. He slowly shook his head.

“I’ll tell her.”

Holdar smiled at him, the most genuine smile he’d seen since his brother had arrived.

“I knew you would. Although I would have kept it quiet if you asked.”

“I know.” No matter what happened, his brother always had his back.

Holdar snapped the laptop closed and rose to his feet.

“I really do have to go. My next job starts tomorrow.”

“I understand. But maybe don’t wait so long before you come back. Daisy will miss her Uncle Holdar.”

His brother smiled again and grasped his shoulder.

“I’ll be back.”

And then he was gone, leaving Trogar alone in the silent room.

Although he tried to act normally, he could tell that Pippa knew something was wrong as soon as he picked her up. He did his best to smile as she started to tell him about Alison’s excitement over the baby, but she broke off in mid-sentence.

“What is it? What’s wrong? Is it Liam?”

He quickly shook his head.

“Nakor’s lawyers have already filed a restraining order. And Holdar couldn’t find any record of a custody order.”

She sighed with relief, then frowned at him.

“That all sounds like good news. Why the long face?”

“Can we talk after we get home?”

“Those are not the words to inspire a woman with confidence,” she said dryly. “But I suppose it can wait until then.”

Daisy decided to be fussy when they reached the cottage and by the time she’d been fed and changed and played with and finally fell asleep, a considerable amount of time had passed. As soon as Daisy’s eyes closed, Pippa marched him into the bedroom, pushed him into a seat on the bed, then crossed her arms and glared at him.

“Now talk.”

He closed his eyes in despair. Was she going to realize how many better choices she could have now?

She sighed and kneeled in front of him, putting her hands on his thighs.

“Whatever it is, we’ll get through it together. Just tell me.”

“Your husband left a will,” he blurted out.

“Okay. Why is that a problem? He didn’t do something stupid like make Liam her guardian, did he?”

He gave a hollow laugh.

“Far from it. He left his share of everything in trust to Daisy, with you as the trustee.”

Her eyes went wide. “Everything?”

“Yes.”

“So that’s what Liam was really after.” She sprang to her feet and began pacing across the room. “That evil bastard. I knew he didn’t really want either of us.”

He waited silently as she paced and after a few minutes, she sat down next to him on the bed.

“Do you know what this means?”

“That you don’t need me anymore?” he said sadly, and she threw her arms around him.

“Of course I still need you. I love you. You know I do.”

A small spark of hope lit in his chest.

“I love you too. Both of you. But this changes things.”

“How?”

“I can’t compete with that much money. You can go anywhere, do anything you’d like.”

Her face softened.

“Trogar, all the money in the world wouldn’t keep me here if I didn’t want to stay. And no amount of money is going to make me want to leave. I love this town—our town. I love the people in it. And most importantly, I love you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

The tight knot that had formed in his chest eased. He leaned forward to kiss her, but she put a hand on his chest to stop him.

“Trogar, I don’t care if I never touch a cent of that money. The only thing I want is what’s best for Daisy. And I want you to be happy.”

He kissed her then, hard and passionately, pouring everything he couldn’t put into words into his kiss until she melted against him. Then he stripped off her clothing and his own and tossed it carelessly aside before pulling her onto his lap. The swollen tip of his cock nudged between the slick lips of her pussy

and she moaned as she sank down on the thick length, her soft flesh closing tightly around him.

“I thought we were talking,” she gasped.

“Later. Much later.”

He kissed her again and she shivered and started to rock against him. They moved together slowly, their bodies joined in the most intimate way possible, sharing both pleasure and comfort. He was more aroused than he'd ever been, but he was determined to not to hurry. All he wanted to do was make her happy and make sure she felt cherished.

She was his. Now and forever.

Her inner walls tightened around him as they rocked together until she began to cry out with each thrust. His hips moved faster as she gripped his shoulders, throwing her head back as her climax washed over her and she called out his name. Her pleasure sent him over the edge and his seed erupted deep inside her as they clung together, panting for breath.

“I love you, Trogar.”

“I love you, Pippa.”

He lifted her free carefully and lay down next to her on the bed. Her eyes were already closed as he gathered her in his arms, her body limp and relaxed as he cradled her to his chest. He would talk to her again when she woke, and they would make plans, but for now he was content to simply hold her as she slept.

For the first time in his adult life, he truly knew what it was to be happy.

EPILOGUE



*S*ix weeks later...

PIPPA SMILED AS THEY WALKED THROUGH THE COTTAGE, NODDING WITH satisfaction. All of the repairs had been completed. The outside had been scraped and painted, and Trogar had repaired the rickety porch. Inside, the walls had been stripped of wallpaper and painted a soft cream, a pleasant contrast to the polished wood floors. The contact paper had been removed from the kitchen cabinets, and they had been painted a pretty pale blue. Will had even taken the appliances to his garage and powder-coated them in a matching color.

The rooms were still only sparsely furnished with thrift shop finds, but it left the space feeling clean and open.

“What do you think?” she asked Trogar.

“I think you need more furniture,” he grumbled. “Even if you want to keep everything in trust for Daisy, she deserves to be surrounded by pretty things.”

After a long discussion with Nakor’s lawyers, she had worked out an arrangement where they managed both the trust and her interest in the company so she never had to deal with Liam directly. Despite the dragon’s suggestion to have him arrested, Rock Creek needed the business, and as long as she never saw him again, she was prepared to let it go.

She had arranged for a small monthly stipend, but the rest of the trust would remain untouched until Daisy needed it. She'd even continued to work at the inn, not because she needed the money, but because Alison needed the help. There would be time enough to make other arrangements after the baby was born.

As for right now, she wrinkled her nose at Trogar.

"I don't need more furniture, and Daisy is surrounded by pretty things at your house."

It was an understatement. Trogar had created a nursery for Daisy that was the epitome of a little girl's dreams, from a lace-draped crib to a mural of fairies dancing over the waterfall that gave the town its name. He'd told her it was originally called Fairy Haven Falls, and the painting made it look as magical as it sounded.

They had gradually been spending more and more time at his house, although they still spent several nights each week at the cottage. She looked around again, then smiled up at him.

"I'm ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Ready to give up the cottage and move in with you full-time. I fulfilled my promise to Flora to fix it up—with your help—and I want to return it to her, although heaven only knows what she plans to do with it next." Her smile died away as she realized he had frozen in place. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. It's just... You know how much I wanted us together in one house, our house, and now we will be."

"Just in time for Christmas."

He grinned at her, then abruptly turned and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To get packing boxes. I want all of your things in our home as soon as possible."

“Do you want me to help?”

“I’ve got it,” he assured her, and he did. By late afternoon, all of their belongings had been transferred to his house in neatly labeled boxes and were waiting for her to decide where she wanted everything.

“They can just stay in the boxes for a while,” she teased, and he valiantly tried to hide his horrified look.

He’d really been remarkably patient with her somewhat more haphazard ways, not to mention the inevitable chaos that accompanied a baby, but she knew he still preferred a more orderly environment.

“It makes it seem as if you’re going to move out again,” he muttered, and she realized she’d misjudged him.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she promised. “So let’s see how much we can get put away before Alison and Will bring Daisy back.”

Not much as it turned out. Their friends had taken Daisy for a few hours to “practice” for their upcoming child, but they ended up bringing her home early. Alison gave her an apologetic look as she hurried into the house and passed over the unhappy baby.

“I’m sorry. I wanted to give the two of you some time alone, but she wouldn’t take the bottle with the milk you pumped, and she just wouldn’t settle down.”

“It’s not your fault.” She quickly unfastened her blouse as Daisy whimpered, then suckled eagerly. “It didn’t occur to me that she might not take a bottle.”

“You don’t think it means I’m going to be a terrible mother, do you?”

“Not at all,” she said firmly, and Alison sighed with relief as she placed a hand on her still-tiny baby bump.

“I’m so afraid I won’t know what to do, and Will is just as terrified even though he tries to hide it.” Her friend gave her a rueful smile. “His mother is already dying to help out, but the last thing we want is to be dependent on her.”

“I’ll do everything I can to help. If you have any questions, no matter how

small, just call me. I know what it's like to be on your own with an infant."

Once Daisy was full and happy again, Pippa showed Alison the nursery, and then they joined Will and Trogar who were having a beer on the back porch.

"Brr." She shuddered as a cold wind swept down off the mountains, and Trogar immediately removed his flannel shirt and wrapped it around her.

The other couple left a short time later, and they went back into the living room to admire the tree. Trogar had it fastened so securely to the wall that a hurricane couldn't knock it down, but the lights twinkled merrily in the gathering dusk. She smiled at their rapidly growing collection of Baby's First Christmas ornaments, then looked down to find him pulling a neatly wrapped box out from under the tree.

"What are you doing? No peeking before Christmas."

"I want you to have this one today."

She gave him a playful frown, but took it eagerly. As soon as she opened the box she understood. He'd written and illustrated a children's book about a little girl named Daisy, and in the last scene, she was standing at the window of his house—their house—with the two of them behind her, watching as the snow fell.

"It's perfect." Her voice wobbled, but she smiled up at him. "Just like you."

"I'm not perfect, but I'll never stop trying to make you happy."

He kissed her in front of the tree, and neither of them noticed that outside, the snow had begun to fall.

ACROSS TOWN, FLORA SMILED AND GAVE HERSELF A MENTAL PAT ON THE back at another successful pairing—and one that meant her grandson was finally at peace. She hummed to herself as she sipped her tea and looked out at the snow. So many others needed her help, but she wanted to choose the couple that would benefit the most from a little holiday magic. She thought about it a little longer, then grinned. Ahh, yes. Those two certainly needed her help—they would be perfect.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *The Single Mom and the Orc*! I loved confronting our grumpy, order-loving orc with the inevitable chaos of a baby! And Pippa is so sweet and strong and determined, but she needs Trogar as much as he needs her! I hope you enjoyed the story as much as I did!

Whether you enjoyed the story or not, it would mean the world to me if you left an honest review on Amazon – reviews are one of the best ways to help other readers find my books!

Thank you all for supporting these books - I couldn't do it without you!

And, as always, a special thanks to my beta team – Janet S, Nancy V, and Kitty S. Your thoughts and comments are incredibly helpful!

Coming up next - *Mistletoe for My Minotaur*!

Mayor Houston is too busy solving everyone else's problems to worry about his own - until the woman he's never forgotten comes to him with an outrageous proposition.

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The Outlaw Cyborg

The Cyborg with No Name

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Honey Phillips writes steamy science fiction stories about hot alien warriors and the human women they can't resist. From abductions to invasions, the ride might be rough, but the end always satisfies.

Honey wrote and illustrated her first book at the tender age of five. Her writing has improved since then. Her drawing skills, unfortunately, have not. She loves writing, reading, traveling, cooking, and drinking champagne - not necessarily in that order.

Honey loves to hear from her wonderful readers! You can stalk her at any of the following locations...

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