

## **SHROOM** by Olivia Leigh Blacke

### **CHAPTER ONE**

Elle York considered herself an observant person, and she was almost certain that the gargoyle perched on the roof of her apartment building hadn't been there an hour ago. Sure, she wore mismatched socks on occasion and had more than once locked her keys inside the car (who hadn't?) but she was convinced that she would have noticed something like that. She paused on the front steps, her arms laden with grocery bags, and stared up at the stone statue.

“Oh yeah,” she muttered to herself. “Definitely new.”

A man with a Bichon Frise on a pink leash walked by, pausing long enough to let his dog squat next to a potted tree on the sidewalk. He stared at her for a moment. Elle noticed him watching her and gave him a tentative smile. “Lovely weather we're having, isn't it?” she asked. He hastily looked away and hurried off, dragging the dog behind him.

In New York City's West Village, a weirdo talking to herself was nothing out of the ordinary, but a friendly stranger was downright bizarre. “Serves me right for trying to be nice,” she said aloud, and returned her attention to the roof.

The gargoyle had moved. A minute ago, his thick red talons had been wrapped around the water stained bricks immediately above the entrance, and now he was slightly off center. He was at least a foot away from his previous position.

“It's going to be one of those days, isn't it?” Elle asked herself as she trudged up the steps. Juggling the groceries, she freed a hand and unlocked the door. Three flights of stairs

later, she let herself into her tiny apartment and dumped the bags on the kitchen counter. Her keys clattered against the cheap faux marble countertop.

Elle wrenched the window open and carefully eased her way out onto what she graciously referred to as her balcony. A plastic chair and empty planter that served as her patio furniture took up most of the narrow ledge of the fire escape, or at least the pot should have been empty. Now there were three cigarette butts and a Snickers wrapper in the bottom of it. She craned her head up, relieved that the gargoyle hadn't made his way around to this side of the building yet, and began climbing the ladder.

It was a warm afternoon for January, but even so, she shivered as the wind cut through her jacket. From the roof of the building, Elle had a great view of her neighborhood. A sliver of the Washington Square Park Arch was visible between two brownstones and to the north, the Empire State Building reflected the setting sun. She picked her way across the cracked tar, cringing at the sight of rats fighting over a morsel someone had left in a three-legged hibachi grill.

The gargoyle sat on the far side of the roof, facing Mercer Street. The two foot high statue was almost the same shade of red as the bricks. Crimson wings arched out of his shoulders, throwing shadows against the tar. A ridge of spines rose along his back and a tuft of stone hair grew out of each of his comically large ears.

“Well, you got my attention,” Elle said, trying for the direct approach. “What do you want?”

The gargoyle didn't react. She'd almost expected him to turn around and snap at her, but it stayed perfectly still. She wasn't sure what to do next. She'd never seen one up close before, so she approached cautiously. Sure, it was only a third of her size, but it was made entirely out

of rock and in her experience, when mythical creatures suddenly appeared out of nowhere, it wasn't usually a cause for celebration. In the back of her head, she wondered when she'd become so jaded that nothing, even a gargoyle hanging out on her building, surprised her anymore.

Carefully, she inched closer to his perch and peered over the edge of the roof. She had no fear of heights, but wasn't exactly the most coordinated person in the world. Her friends often remarked that Elle was probably the only person capable of tripping while sitting perfectly still, and she didn't want to press her luck. Still, she hadn't climbed all the way up here to chicken out now. Placing both hands firmly on the edge of the roof, she leaned out as far as she could and twisted around to get a good look at the squat red creature.

He had tiny clawed hands on the end of stick-like arms. His oversized feet made him look like a demonic kangaroo. His eyes were closed, but his mouth hung open in a goofy grin. Something white caught her attention as it flapped around inside his sagging jaws.

"Figures," Elle said, climbing farther out onto the ledge. She grabbed one of the gargoyle's diminutive elbows to balance herself and reached her free hand towards his open mouth. "If you try to bite, I swear they'll be sweeping what's left of you off the sidewalk tomorrow," she warned.

Quickly, she shoved her hand in between his fat lips and pulled it out again, grasping a slip of paper about the size of an index card. She let out a sigh of relief that she still had all of her fingers, and stared at the blank paper. "Wow, talk about anti-climatic," she grumbled and flipped the paper over. There was nothing on that side, either.

"Oh goodie," Elle said, sitting back and letting her legs dangle over the edge of the roof. "I wonder what second prize would be, a blank post-it note?" She glanced over at the motionless

gargoyle. “Well, it’s been real fun, but unless you can do better than that, I’ve got milk to put away.”

She backed off the ledge, and once she was on solid ground again, glanced one last time at the paper before crumpling it up and tossing it away. It was no longer blank. The words, “HELP SHROOM,” were printed in neat, blocky letters.

“Who’s Shroom?” she asked, turning to face the gargoyle’s back.

The words on the card faded and were replaced with, “SHROOM IS I.”

Involuntarily, Elle smiled. “That’s a good trick. Got any others?”

“NO TRICKS. YOU HELP SHROOM?”

Before she could answer, a man’s voice called out, “Elle?” For a second, she thought that the gargoyle had spoken, then she realized that she recognized the voice that had come from behind her. She hurried to the fire escape and peered down over the edge.

Her boyfriend, Jonathan Eberly, a New York City homicide detective, was standing on her balcony, leaning over the edge to scan the street. His thick brown hair stood up on its ends like he’d run his hands through it all day, and his shirt, as usual, was untucked from his tight blue jeans. For a moment, she allowed herself to enjoy the view. Even from three stories away, the man was the very definition of attractive. “Up here,” she called down.

He looked up, his smoky gray eyes zeroing on her, and threw her a dazzling smile that made her heart skip a beat. “What are you doing up there?” he asked. “Not working on your tan again, I hope. Isn’t it a little cold for sunbathing?”

Last summer, she had climbed up on the roof with a book, trying to get a little alone time. She’d fallen asleep after three chapters, and when she awoke four hours later, her delicate skin was as red as her hair and her nerve endings felt crispy around the edges. It was three days and

countless bottles of Aloe Vera lotion later before she could wear anything other than a tank top and shorts. “Very funny. Hold on, I’ll be right down.” She looked over her shoulder. “I’ll be back later,” she promised the gargoyle.

The printing on the card changed again. “SHROOM STAY HERE.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea,” she agreed and climbed down the rickety ladder. By the time she reached her apartment, Jon had gone back inside. He was waiting for her on the other side of the window with an outstretched hand to steady her as she climbed back in.

“Hope you don’t mind,” Jon said, after giving her a quick peck on the lips. “The door was open so I let myself in.”

“Oh,” Elle said, glancing towards the now-closed door. After nearly four years of living in Manhattan, locking the door should have been second nature, but between the gargoyle and the groceries, she hadn’t bothered. “I should probably have a key made for you. You’re here more often than you’re at your place, anyway.”

The words slipped out before she could think about what she was saying. Had she really just made that leap? They’d just gotten back together a few weeks ago after a six month hiatus, and she wasn’t entirely sure where they stood on the whole relationship scale and the last thing she wanted to do was scare him off.

“That would be nice,” Jon said, his casual tone sounding more forced than usual. “Hell, what am I saying?” He swept her up in a bear hug and swung her around.

At six two, he was only four inches taller than her, but he lifted her off the ground and planted a thick kiss on her as he crushed her to him. “It’s about time,” he said with a sparkle in his eyes and kissed her again before letting her down. “Now, what on Earth were you doing up on the roof?”

“Just poking around,” she replied.

Before he met her, Jon Eberly was just a regular guy, although admittedly he was more attractive than most. But when she accidentally introduced him to the truth that there were real monsters in the world, he’d joined the ranks of the few humans that knew the big secret. After dinner, she’d take him up on the roof and see what he thought about her newest neighbor, but right now there was something more important on her mind. “When did you start smoking?”

Jon put a hand to his mouth and blew into it, sniffing the air. “Sorry, did I just ruin our kiss? I chewed half a pack of Juicy Fruit on the way over.”

“Nice try, but if you’re trying to keep a secret, you should probably hide the evidence better.” She emptied out a grocery bag and shoved it in his hands. “Go clean up my balcony, would ya?”

Sheepishly, he leaned out the window and emptied the planter. He went down the hall to toss the bag in the incinerator chute. When he came back, said, “I wasn’t hiding anything from you, babe. Picked up the habit years ago. Thought I’d broken it, but I was on a stake out last month, and well, you know.” He shrugged. “Does it bother you?”

Elle turned away so he wouldn’t see her grimace, “Not so much.” She didn’t particularly like him smoking, but she wasn’t going to ask him to quit. What really upset her was when he talked about his work. She knew that cops had dangerous jobs, and New York cops had it harder than most. She also knew that she had no room to complain.

Jon’s line of work might have been scary, but hers was worse, a lot worse. Elle York was a monster hunter. When she wasn’t climbing around ledges trying to have a conversation with a gargoyle with immaculate penmanship, she was usually chasing big hairies through the alleys of Manhattan. If Jon’s job was dangerous, then hers was downright suicidal.

“So, where are we going tonight?” Jon asked, breaking the silence.

“I thought I’d cook for you,” she replied, spreading the contents of her shopping trip over the counter.

He came over and wrapped his hands around her waist, peering over her shoulder.

“You’re kidding, right?” he asked incredulously.

“No!” she replied, only slightly offended. “I’m making us dinner.”

“Honey, the last time you made anything, you burned peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”

“How was I supposed to know you didn’t like them toasted?” she asked, a pout perched on her lips. “Grab a beer and go watch TV or something. This kitchen isn’t big enough for two.”

“This kitchen isn’t hardly big enough for one,” he corrected her. “How about you go put your feet up while I whip something up for us?” he asked in a last-ditch effort to keep her from cooking.

“Nice try.” Elle grabbed a bottle from the refrigerator, shoved it in his hand, and pushed him in the direction of the living room. “Go!” she ordered.

She knew she’d never be a world class chef. She had a hard time making mac-n-cheese, and anything more complicated than that always came out horribly wrong. In all honesty, if it wasn’t for her collection of takeout menus, she’d probably starve. But she was bound and determined to make a nice meal for dinner.

She’d searched the internet all day for a fool-proof recipe that he might like, and finally settled on vegetarian lasagna with pre-cooked noodles. All she had to do was mix it all together

and bake it. How hard could that be? She set the oven to pre-heat and started shredding carrots. She nearly took the tip of her finger off with the slicer when Jon yelled, “Elle? Get in here!”

Angrily, she dropped the carrot in the sink and wrapped her finger in a paper towel as she marched into the living room. “No more arguments. I’m making you dinner, and that’s that. So just let me concentrate, okay?”

“Sure, whatever you say,” Jon replied absently. His beer dangled, forgotten, from one hand as he pointed towards the window with the other.

## CHAPTER TWO

The red gargoyle was pressed against the glass, his wings spread behind him. His eyes were wide and round, and his open mouth touched the window pane. He looked more like a suction cup Garfield in the rear view window of a minivan than a stone monster.

“I swear that wasn’t there a minute ago,” Jon said with forced calm.

“And here I was, thinking I was the observant one,” Elle replied. She opened up the window, letting the cool air inside. “I thought I told you to stay?” she told the frozen gargoyle.

She stepped away from the window. “Shroom, this is my boyfriend Jon. Jon, meet Shroom. I guess it will be three for dinner, then. Do you like lasagna?” she asked Shroom.

Suddenly, a piecing wail split the air. Elle clasped her hands to her ears. Jon gave her a startled look and dashed into the kitchen where black smoke billowed out of the doorway. She followed quickly, but couldn’t see a thing through the thick air. There was a whooshing sound followed by silence when Jon knocked the smoke detectors down.

“Good thing the window’s open,” he said, waving a hand in front of his face to clear away the smoke as they staggered out of the room. He held a fire extinguisher by his side.

“Funny, I didn’t even know I owned a fire extinguisher,” Elle said. “Thanks!”

He gave her a pained look. “I’ll bet you forgot you were storing books in your oven, too, didn’t you?”

Elle slapped a hand to her forehead. “So that’s where the dictionary went. I’ve been looking for that for ages.”

“Why the hell would you think it was a good idea to leave it in the stove in the first place?” he asked, dazed.

She gestured around her crowded apartment. Her bookshelves were crammed full and every conceivable surface was covered. “Where else would I put it?” she asked. “Any way, what’s the harm? It’s not like I do a lot of cooking.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “I guess we’re going out tonight after all.” He glanced towards the empty window. “Looks like the smoke detector scared your friend away. Gonna lock the window, just in case,” he said, closing the window and flipping the latch. He didn’t really believe that would keep a gargoyle out, but it was better than nothing.

“Don’t worry,” Elle said as she zipped up her jacket. “I have a feeling he’ll be back.”

An hour later, when they returned to Elle’s apartment after dinner, Jon sighed and said, “You’re right, as always. Your friend’s back.”

Elle looked up. Sure enough, Shroom was perched above the main entrance of the building. She gave him a wave and led the way inside. “I told you he would be.”

“What does he want?” Jon asked as she stopped to pick up her mail from the overflowing box in the foyer.

“Not sure,” she replied, rifling through the advertisements. “Said he needed some help. Didn’t say with what, though.”

“He told you that, did he?”

“In a way,” she said, handing him the card that read, “HELP SHROOM NOW?”

“That’s a little creepy,” Jon commented as he followed her up the stairs. “I mean creepier than normal, which around you...” he shrugged.

“Just wait,” she promised. “It gets creepier.” She opened the front door. Shroom was again plastered to the window. “You know, for a guy who isn’t supposed to be able to move, you’re pretty fast.”

Jon glanced at the card. “When you’re right, you’re right,” he said as he handed it back to her.

Now it read, “FAST, MUST. SHROOM RUNNING OUT OF TIME.”

“Then enough with the cryptic,” Elle replied. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Jon took her elbow and pulled her aside. “Are you sure helping this thing is the right thing to do? Don’t you normally, you know, kill these sorts of things?”

Elle glanced at the gargoyle over her shoulder. He hadn’t budged. “He hasn’t done anything threatening. Not even close. Let’s hear him out, at least.”

She looked back at Jon, who reluctantly nodded his head in agreement. When she turned back to the window, Shroom was hanging upside down, his eyes bulging out and his wings extended downward like a bat’s. His mouth hung open in a silent scream.

Jon flinched. “Can you at least ask him to stop doing that?”

“Give him a break. He’s obviously nervous.” Then to the gargoyle, she asked, “What’s wrong, Shroom? What do you need help with?”

The words flowed across the paper, disappearing almost as quickly as she could read them aloud. “HELP SHROOM BEFORE TOO LATE. HURRY. THEY’RE COMING. NO NO NO. NOT AGAIN. TOO LATE. HELP SHROOM, HELP. TOO LATE. THEY’RE HERE!”

As the last words materialized, there was a loud knock on Elle's door, and they both jumped. Another knock came, and she visibly composed herself. Leaning against the door, she stared into the peephole. She reached for the security chain.

Jon grabbed for her hand. "No, wait a minute," he said, but Elle had already turned the knob and the door flew open.

A huge black man filled most of the doorway. His dark, almost purple skin contrasted sharply with his tight white thermal shirt and fitted camo pants. "Red, you're a sight for sore eyes," Tyrone Jackson said as he strode into the apartment without waiting for an invitation. "Damn, you look good. You must have known I was coming over." He kissed her cheek. "Miss me?"

"Always, T," Elle replied with a wide grin. She poked her head into the empty hall. "Where's your brother?"

"Watching the back door," he replied with a wink. Tyrone and Dwayne were identical twins that billed themselves as 'special security consultants,' which loosely translated into muscle for hire. If there was anything the six foot five, two hundred and seventy pound each brothers had, it was muscle to spare.

"Smells like you burned dinner." Tyrone surveyed the room, acknowledging Jon for the first time. "Oh, you have company. Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"You remember my boyfriend, Jon," Elle said, not quite managing to keep her voice as light as she'd intended. At one time, it Tyrone was in the running for that title, and he hadn't accepted defeat gracefully.

"Everlily, of course. Good to see you again, man," Tyrone said, extending his enormous dark hand.

“It’s Eberly,” Jon corrected him icily. He knew just enough about Tyrone and Elle’s history to make him nervous. “Sorry, I get you Jerseys confused.” The twins had picked up the nickname Jersey brothers in boot camp, and it had stuck. “Are you the funny one, or the one who keeps trying to get into my girlfriend’s panties?”

To Tyrone’s credit, he didn’t miss a beat. “Dwayne’s the funny one, asshole. He’s on his way up.” Ignoring Jon, he turned his attention back to Elle. “Damn, woman, it’s been way too long. Got a job for you, if you’re interested.”

Elle had worked several cases with the Jersey brothers. Once, they’d saved Manhattan from a goblin infestation together. Another time, they’d tricked her into eradicating a litter of Cerberos spawn from their aunt’s crawlspace. Whether they were chasing werewolves or tracking down a flock of Coaxoi, migratory termites of the underworld with a voracious appetite for iron, they’d emerged victorious every time because they made a great team.

“Love to,” Elle said even as Jon made a strangled noise in his throat. “But I’m right in the middle of something hot right now. Can it wait?”

“Nope,” Tyrone replied with a wicked grin. “But don’t you worry your pretty little head, darlin’, because you won’t even have to lift a finger.” He glanced down at the gadget in his hand. A little larger than a cell phone, it beeped softly and glowed with red lights. “It’s going down soon, and close. Mind if I borrow your window?”

Jon stepped in front of him, blocking his path. “I mind,” he said sternly. Physically, he was no match for Tyrone. He was a few inches shorter and fifty pounds lighter, but he had one notable advantage, the service Glock holstered on his hip.

For a split second, Elle let herself indulge in the fantasy of two gorgeous men fighting over her, but then reality clicked into high gear and she stepped between them. “Boys, behave,”

she ordered sharply, well aware that Jon's eyes were fixated over her shoulder as she stared up at Tyrone. "Just back off, please."

"When are you going to get it through your thick skull that she's off the market?" Jon asked, still trying to stare Tyrone down.

Tyrone grunted and ignored him. "Sorry, Red, I'm not here to cause trouble. Not this time, at least." He gestured with his hand-held device. "My tracker says I'm close. Real close. Move aside and I'll be out of your way in a jiffy."

Sudden realization dawned on Elle. What were the chances that Tyrone would show up the same time as a gargoyle? "Tracker?" Shroom had been terrified of something coming for him right before he knocked on the door. *Talk about a rock and a hard place*, she thought to herself. "Exactly what are you tracking?" she asked with feigned ignorance.

Just then another face appeared at the doorway, a carbon copy of Tyrone's. "Told you we should have called first," Dwayne chided his brother. "Looks like we came at a bad time."

"Yeah, timing has never been his strong suit," Elle agreed, looking pointedly at Tyrone. "So, Dwayne, any chance you can talk this big lug into backing down?"

Dwayne looked at the tracker in his brother's head, and shook his shiny bald head. "You know better than that. When he's hot on the trail, there's no stopping him." He glanced at Elle's hand. "What's that you're holding?"

Elle froze and looked down at the note, the words "THEY'RE HERE!" still visible in blocky letters. "Nothing," she said, hastily stuffing it into her pocket. "What are you guys tracking, anyway?" Instead of answering, Tyrone squeezed past them and headed for the kitchen. "Well, you might as well come in and make yourself comfortable," Elle said reluctantly.

Tyrone reappeared, munching a carrot and carrying a blackened dictionary. “What do you have against Webster?” he asked.

Elle gave him a dirty look, snatched the charred book out of his hand, and dropped it in the trash can. “Look, you two, it was great catching up with you and all, but I’ve already got plans for tonight. Maybe you can come back later,” she added, trying to coax Dwayne towards the door.

He shrugged her off and glanced at his brother. “Knock it off, Elle. We know he’s here.”

“Who’s here?” Jon asked, and Elle looked at him with newfound respect. *And the Oscar goes to Jonathan Eberly.*

Tyrone gave him a piercing stare. “The gargoyle, damn it!” Finally noticing the open window, he made a beeline for it.

Elle blocked his path. “T,” she said in a quiet voice, “I’m gonna have to ask you to leave. Please.”

He looked down at her, his hand unconsciously reaching up to play with the ends of her long hair. “What’s really going on here?” he asked. “Talk to me, Red.”

Elle took a deep breath. “He came to me, asking for help.”

“He what?” Dwayne asked loudly. “Gargoyles can’t talk.”

“No, but that doesn’t give you license to scare the pebbles out of him,” Elle snapped, suddenly aware that she was siding with a monster over two of her best friends. “Why are you two after him? What did he do?”

“Do?” Tyrone asked, frustrated. “He didn’t *do* anything. He’s stone. About the worst he can do is frighten pigeons, and he’s not even so good at doing that.”

“Then why do you want him so badly?” Jon asked. He’d managed to hook one arm around Elle’s waist and pulled her towards himself while still keeping themselves between the window and the big twins.

“We were hired to bring him back,” Dwayne explained. “This little guy belongs to some art collector in Queens. He broke out last night, and has been on the lam ever since. Owner’s worried he might cause a lot of damage if we don’t reign him in fast. Willing to pay us a lot of money to pick him up and chain him down.”

“Chained?” Elle asked, a little nauseated. “Someone chained Shroom?”

The brothers exchanged glances. “Elle, you’re missing the point,” Tyrone said. “This isn’t someone’s pet. It’s a gargoyle. He’s dangerous under the right conditions.” He grabbed her shoulder and pulled her forward. She stumbled and landed against his chest. “We need to get him back, before...”

“Before what?” she demanded, trying to untangle herself from his grip.

“Before that!” Tyrone said loudly, pointing toward the fire escape. A split second later, the window imploded as Shroom launched himself into the apartment, glass flying everywhere.

### CHAPTER THREE

The red stone undulated as he doubled in size and kept growing until eight feet of angry gargoyle filled the room, his massive head bent against the ceiling and his enormous wings stretching from wall to wall. A roar erupted from his throat as he advanced.

Automatically, Tyrone wrapped himself around Elle and threw them both to the ground, rolling out of the path of the oncoming gargoyle. For a moment, she lay beneath his bulk in shock before realizing she couldn't breathe. Elle beat her fists against his muscled chest, but he refused to budge.

“Lay still!” he barked at her, pushing her arms down.

Unable to catch her breath, Elle struggled to get away from him, but was pinned to the floor. Stars danced in front of her eyes. Fixated on the mammoth stone creature advancing on them, Tyrone was oblivious to her plight. Out of options, she elbowed him in the throat.

“What the heck is wrong with you?” he sputtered. Then, he noticed her bulging eyes and convulsing throat. Quickly, he lifted himself up, relieving the pressure on her chest. “Sorry, cutie, I forgot you like to be on top.”

“Idiot!” she hissed. For a moment, she lay gasping for breath while thinking murderous thoughts about the eldest Jersey brother. But she instantly forgot about them when Shroom tossed her couch across the room and it slammed into the bookshelf. Several of the shelves collapsed, their contents raining down nosily. The gargoyle loomed over them both. Ignoring the shouts from Dwayne and Jon, Shroom grabbed Tyrone with his diminutive arms and threw him against the far wall like a sack of coal.

“Wait!” Elle panted, her throat raw. She scrambled to her feet and grabbed Shroom’s big red shoulder before he could continue his attack. “It’s okay! Leave him alone. He’s not hurting me. I promise.”

Slowly, the gargoyle turned to face her, his bulk rubbing against her desk and sending her computer monitor crashing to the floor. Pictures rattled on their hooks as his wings scraped the wall. He bent his head down towards Elle until his forehead rested against hers.

A glint of metal caught her eye and she screamed, “No!”

Jon hesitated, his service pistol aimed at the beast’s back, “Give me one reason.”

“You can’t kill him with that. If you shoot him, you’ll just upset him,” she said, holding her hand out as if she could stop a bullet. “And face it, if you thought you could throw Tyrone across the room, you would have tried it already. Anyway, I think he was protecting me.” She turned her attention to the gargoyle. “Right? You wouldn’t hurt me, would you, Shroom?”

Slowly, he shook his head. Across the room, Tyrone shakily rose to his feet. “No, stay down,” Elle warned him. She placed her hands on either side of Shroom’s sagging jowls. “They’re friends. Do you understand friends?”

She fished the card out of her pocket. It had changed again. “SHROOM FRIEND.  
SHROOM NO HURT FRIEND.”

“Good boy. No one’s going to hurt anybody, okay?”

The gargoyle blinked silently.

“That thing’s a menace,” Tyrone grumbled.

“So are you!” Elle replied angrily. She wasn’t going to forgive him for the ‘on top’ comment anytime soon, and doubted Jon could have missed it. “You almost smothered me to death, you big doofus. Now, everybody just chillax while we work this out.”

“Uh, Elle?” Dwayne said cautiously.

“What?” she snapped.

“There’s a ginomous gargoyle wrecking your living room and you’re telling *us* to chill out?”

She turned towards him, and for the first time, she noticed the sawed-off shotgun he had pointed at the ground. “I don’t even want to know where you were hiding that puppy. But yes, that’s the general idea. One of you better tell me what’s going on quick, or what Shroom just did is going to look like child’s play.”

Tyrone rotated his shoulder and it popped back into place with an audible crack. “As I was saying before we were interrupted, we were hired to capture a runaway gargoyle and bring him back to his proper home before he, well,” he looked around at Elle’s destroyed apartment, “wrecked anything.”

Shroom roared again.

“I think it’s perfectly clear that he doesn’t want to go back,” Jon said, and the gargoyle nodded. “So unless you have a death wish or really good insurance, I would suggest that you back the hell off and leave him alone.”

“Agreed,” Elle said, flashing Jon a brilliant smile for backing her up.

“If we do that,” Dwayne asked, “who will keep your little friend here from rampaging through Manhattan every time he has a bad day?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Elle suggested. Turning to Shroom, she asked, “What do you want?”

“HOME.”

“You want to go home?” she asked, perplexed, as she read the card. “Then why’d you go to all the trouble to run away?”

“NEW HOME. WITH FRIENDS.”

“Don’t tell me you want to stay here with me,” Elle said, frustrated. “Cause I really don’t have room for you.”

“OTHER FRIENDS.”

“You want to stay with other friends? Where? Now I’m really confused.”

“I think I can help you out, here,” Dwayne volunteered. “You want your other friends, the other gargoyles, to go with you?”

“BRING FRIENDS HOME.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Elle said. “What other gargoyles?”

Tyrone spoke up, still rubbing his shoulder. “The man who hired us had lots of other gargoyles sitting around. Stands to reason if your boy Shroom here is the real deal, then he’s not the only one, right? But even if I thought it was a good idea to let a bunch of prehistoric monsters loose in the city, and I really don’t, we were paid good money to bring him back, not liberate a whole flock of them.”

“Shroom, if we set your friends free, where would you go?” Elle asked.

“HOME,” the card said, and he pointed towards the ceiling. “KEEP NEW FRIEND SAFE.”

She shook her head, “No way. That’s sweet and all, but the last thing I need is a bunch of gargoyles crapping on my fire escape. Any better ideas?”

“Elle, before you start printing out change of address labels for your new buddy, maybe you should stop to consider what you’re proposing. Even if setting them free is the right thing to do, the owner’s not going to let them go without a fight,” Tyrone reminded her.

“Then we fight,” she replied staunchly.

Jon asked, “But first, we ask nicely, right?”

“Spoil sport,” Elle answered. “You can’t own animate objects.”

“What about Elvis?” Jon asked, pointing towards the huge enclosure. Her iguana, startled by all of the activity, huddled in the corner. “Don’t you own him?”

“Naw, if anything, it’s the other way around.”

“Says the girl who’s not in a cage,” Jon snorted.

“Oh please, there’s a big difference between keeping a pet and chaining an intelligent being to your roof for decoration. That’s more like slavery.”

“Fine,” Tyrone interrupted before she could argue any further. “You’re not going to change your mind, so we’re all going to follow your lead, like always. Think you can talk your little buddy into, well going little again before we set off on your quest? I’d hate to think of the structural damage he could do if he tried to sit down.”

In response, Shroom began to collapse in on himself. Within seconds, he was back to being two feet tall, but a heavy cloud of dust filled the room. “Good thing the window’s busted,” Jon said, coughing, “or this would be a real mess.” Coughing, he made his way to the door, followed closely by Elle and the Jersey brothers.

After arguing over seating arrangements, they all settled into Dwayne’s truck and headed towards the Queensboro Bridge. Dwayne, as always, drove like his pants were on fire and Elle clutched the passenger side door handle as if her life depended on it. Jon and Tyrone looked

more uncomfortable about sitting so close to each other than they were about being squeezed into the back of the cab.

As Dwayne darted in and out of traffic, Tyrone leaned forward to be heard over the angry horns of the cars they passed. “You sure you know what you’re doing, Red?”

“Always,” she replied with a confidence she didn’t feel. Dwayne swerved out of his lane and Elle fought back the hot sting of dinner rising in her throat.

“Uh huh,” Jon snorted derisively. And then, as if realizing he’d just agreed with Tyrone, he quickly changed his tune. “I’m sure she has a plan.”

“Mind sharing it with the rest of us?” Tyrone asked. “Because last time I checked, you were better at killing monsters than befriending them.”

“Killing bad guys is one thing, but chaining them up? That’s just wrong!” Elle replied, glossing over his question. “If Shroom’s dangerous, and I don’t think he is, he should be exterminated, not locked away. I’m not that cruel.”

“Of course he’s dangerous!” Tyrone snapped. “Have you already forgotten he tried to make a pancake out of me?”

“You were suffocating me! Shroom was just trying to help.”

“Need I remind you that the last evil S.O.B. that got overprotective of your sweet Irish ass was just keeping you alive so that he could have the honor of killing you himself?” Tyrone asked angrily.

“Enough!” Dwayne barked, wrenching the truck to the right and slamming on the breaks. They came to a skidding stop on the shoulder, a chorus of frantic cars bleating at them as they zoomed past. “If you two kids don’t shut up, I’m going to let you out right here and you can damn well walk back!”

Elle stared at Dwayne in the glow of the passing headlights, shocked. Dwayne was the easy-going side of the coin, and he almost always deferred to his twin's lead. She'd never seen him yell at anyone before, least of all his own brother.

"If I have to listen to you bitching about Elle's tragic taste in men one more time, I'm disowning you," he warned without a hint of humor in his voice. "And as for you, princess, if you don't learn how to think with that pretty little head of yours before you act, the next time I see you, I'll be tossing dirt on your grave. And I hate funerals."

Elle stared at him, wide-eyed for a second. Then, in an uncharacteristic display of physical affection, grabbed his face in her hands and gave Dwayne a noisy, but brief, kiss on the mouth. Confused, he jerked away from her. "What the hell was that for?" he asked sharply.

"I was being impulsive," she said with a pleased shrug. In the backseat, Tyrone roared with laughter. To everyone's surprise, Jon joined him.

"Sweet Jesus," Dwayne swore, throwing the truck into gear and punching the gas so hard that the passengers were thrown against their seats. "If I didn't love the two of you so much, I'd kill you myself and save everyone else the trouble."

"What about me?" Jon asked between snorts of laughter.

"Don't press your luck," Dwayne growled into the rear mirror.

Elle had a sudden urge to crawl into the backseat and curl up on her boyfriend's lap, but she resisted. She was pleasantly surprised that he hadn't thrown a tantrum when she kissed Dwayne. Jon tended to be more jealous than necessary, but he wasn't stupid. He knew he had no reason to worry about her plutonic feelings toward Dwayne. Tyrone on the other hand...

She briefly caught Tyrone's intense gaze in the rearview mirror and her smirk froze. As if he'd been reading her mind, he winked and she felt the blush rush into her cheeks, as well as a

few other choice places that always seemed to heat up whenever he was near. Sensing the silent exchange, Dwayne reached up and readjusted the mirror until she was staring out the back window.

Jon had somehow managed to miss the entire conversation, probably because he was too busy staring out the windshield. “Holy shit,” he said in an awed voice. “I’m going to go out on a limb and say this is the place.”

“Yup,” Dwayne confirmed.

Elle’s gaze jerked back to the road. She’d been too lost in her own admittedly inappropriate thoughts to notice when they’d exited the Long Island Expressway and started up a very long, very private driveway. Looming in front of them was the largest house she’d ever seen. She was debating whether to call it a big mansion or a small hotel.

## CHAPTER FOUR

They pulled up to ten foot high iron gates which swung open smoothly as they approached. Headlights became unnecessary as the immaculately maintained yard was flooded with motion-activated security lights. Rising high into the night sky was five stories of gothic architecture, capped with towers and flying buttresses. Silhouetted against the crags of the roof were the unmistakable shapes of dozens of gargoyles. Elle strained her neck to take it all in.

Dwayne parked in a big circular driveway ringing a fountain. As they walked up the curving path leading towards the entrance, Tyrone suggested, "Let me do the talking."

"Fat chance," Jon muttered, placing one hand possessively on the small of Elle's back.

They stepped up to the ornate doors, which swung open silently. A tall, handsome man in his late forties, with thick black hair and an immaculately tailored Armani suit, stood in the brightly lit foyer. "Come in," he said cordially as his eyes swept over the visitors, lingering on Elle for a moment. "You'll have to excuse my surprise. I wasn't expecting guests."

Tyrone nodded over his shoulder. "These are our associates."

"I take it that means you haven't recovered my property yet?" the man asked, his gaze drawn to the empty bed of Dwayne's truck.

"Not exactly," Tyrone replied, leading the way inside.

"We need to examine your collection," Elle added, earning a dark look from Tyrone.

"What ever for?"

She smiled and offered her hand. "Forgive my manners. I'm Elle York. Maybe you've heard of me?"

The man's lips parted, revealing brilliant white teeth. He took her hand in both of his and held it for a moment. "Of course. Dr. York. I'm quite a fan of your work. Reginald Digby, at your service."

"Mr. Digby," Elle began.

"Please, call me Reginald," he corrected her, bringing her hand to his lips before releasing it.

"Reginald," she repeated, fluttering her eyelashes flirtatiously. She sensed both Tyrone and Jon stiffen slightly, but didn't acknowledge their reaction. She was too busy hiding her relief that the Jersey brother's mysterious client was entirely human. She hooked her arm in his and continued, laying on the charm as thickly as she dared. "Then you'll understand why I could never pass up the opportunity to see your marvelous acquisitions."

"Of course," he replied graciously. "This way." Digby led them to a wood-paneled door that slid open to reveal an elevator. Doubtless, there was a freight elevator elsewhere in the mansion, but this one was built for passengers and would hold four average-sized people, maximum.

Unfortunately, there were five of them and neither Tyrone nor Dwayne was average anything. A silent look passed between Jon and Tyrone before Tyrone announced, "We'll take the next one." He and Dwayne waited in the grand foyer with grim expressions as the doors closed.

The elevator rose with a soft whirl of gears and when it stopped, the doors parted on an enclosed rooftop atrium. "Spectacular view," Elle murmured appreciatively, admiring the sparkle of lights that marked the city. They were far enough away from the smog that they might

see actual stars through the glass ceiling on a clear night, but the security spotlights washed the sky out to a pale gray.

“Follow me,” Digby said, clasping a hand over Elle’s wrist where it rested on his sleeve. “Watch your step.” He held the glass door open as they left the atrium.

Elle shivered as she stepped onto the roof. It was her second foray onto a roof on the same day, and tripping now would mean landing on the hand-cut cobblestone walkway below. It might be a more elegant death than tumbling onto the sidewalk along Mercer Street, but it would be just as painful and final.

Digby paused at the first stone gargoyle. It was made of white marble shot through with veins of green and gold. Squatting over the courtyard, it was three feet high with just a hint of feathered wings and a long whip-like tail. Elle extricated her hand from Digby’s arm and laid it on the gargoyle’s smooth head, searching for any spark of life, but felt nothing. Behind her, she heard the twins approaching. “Very nice. Excellent craftsmanship. But it’s a fake.”

“Rather true,” Digby replied with a hint of satisfaction in his voice. “Most people can’t tell the difference. Sixteenth century. Italian. Beautiful art, but nothing more.”

Elle paced the length of the roof, stopping to admire each of his grotesque statues. They were made from every color of stone imaginable. Some were intricately chiseled, while others were crudely shaped, but each one was unique. “Quite a collection,” Elle said. She looked up and pointed at a gray gargoyle perched on a buttress soaring overhead. “But that’s what really interests me.”

“You have quite an eye, Dr. York,” Digby said with pride. “One of my most cherished pieces.”

“I’m sure,” she agreed. Even from there, she could tell it was different than the others.

“May I take a closer look?”

“That wouldn’t be prudent,” he replied with a disapproving frown.

“That’s because he’s the real thing, right? Discounting the one that flew the coop, of course, how do you manage to keep your menagerie from wandering off?” Jon asked curiously.

Digby looked at him with cold eyes, as if just remembering his presence. “I believe in protecting what is mine. Iron does the trick nicely.”

Elle grimaced. Iron shackles wouldn’t just keep the gargoyles from flying away, it would sear into their stone skin, causing unimaginable pain. Although she’d hurt her share of *unnaturals*, it has always been in self-defense. “Impressive,” she said softly, trying to sound sincere.

“So, do you think you can do the job, Dr. York? Do you think you can return my property to me?”

“Oh, I can do it, no doubt about that,” she said sweetly. She was still smiling when her fist caught Reginald Digby square in the jaw, knocking him back into the waiting arms of Tyrone.

“What did you just do?” Dwayne asked sharply.

“Exactly what you knew I would!” Elle replied angrily.

“He paid us half up front,” he argued.

“And you did half the job. You located his ‘property’. You’re just not going to return it to him.” She turned to Jon. “Find a way up there and release her. Don’t worry, she won’t hurt you.”

“She?” he asked, staring up at the gargoyle above them.

“Yep. Never thought the damsel in distress you’d be rescuing from the bad guy’s castle would be made of stone, did ya?”

Jon grabbed her shoulders and kissed her. “I love you,” he said suddenly, then hurried off in search of a way up to the top of the buttress.

Elle grinned after him like a teenager for a moment, and then remembering that she wasn’t there to make googly-eyes at her boyfriend, her face hardened. “T, keep a good grip on him. I don’t want him trying to do anything stupid. I’m going to take a quick look around and see if I can spot any more live ones. Oh, and Mr. Digby? Start thinking of reasons why I should let you live, and they better be good.”

She wouldn’t kill him, of course. Elle wouldn’t murder a human, even one that tortured gargoyles, but she didn’t have to let him know that. If he was scared enough, he might even leave her and her friends alone when this was all over with.

“I don’t know how you managed to acquire real live gargoyles in the first place, but based on the fact that you had to hire someone else to round one up when he escaped, I’m guessing you paid someone else to do your dirty work. I’m telling you right now, I’m not putting your little collection in a nicer cage somewhere, I’m setting them free. Starting the minute we get into the truck and drive away, there will be nothing standing between you and a bunch of angry monsters. You can try to recapture them. You can even make your stand against them. My suggestion, though, would be to high tail it out of here and hope they never find you, because if they do, you’re dust and you know it.”

Digby wasn’t impressed. “By the time I’m done with you, Dr. York, everyone from Oprah to Ted Koppel will know your name and what you really are. If you ever want to find a minute’s peace in this world, you should leave now and take your goons with you.”

“And here I was feeling sorry for you,” Elle replied with an evil grin. “God knows you’re attractive, and probably richer than the state of California, but I don’t envy what happens to men like you.”

“You really don’t know who you’re messing with, you little bitch, do you?” he replied with a steely gaze. “I don’t give up easily.”

“And I don’t give up at all,” she shot back before turning her attention to Dwayne. “We need to find the others. Dwayne, you go that way. I’ll take the other side. You know what you’re looking for?”

Dwayne nodded. “A big, pissed off hunk of dirt with shackles around his neck, right?”

“Close enough,” she nodded in agreement. Elle tread carefully as she wound her way around the roof, checking out each gargoyle as she passed. A shiver ran down her spine, alerting her to the presence of something otherworldly, but she saw nothing that could account for the sensation until she looked up.

“Figures,” she muttered. A narrow stone tower soared overhead. A shadow loomed from the top, looking very far away. She contemplated calling for assistance, but from the angry curses that carried through the night air, she knew that everyone else already had their hands full.

There was no easy way up, she discovered, as she circled the tower. Nothing short of a crane could have lifted the enormous stone beast to its lofty perch, but she didn’t have a crane handy. “I’d settle for a helicopter,” she said to herself as she grabbed the rough hewn stones and began to climb.

Halfway up, she paused to catch her breath and made the mistake of looking down. The ground was so far away that Dwayne’s truck looked like a Tonka toy. Elle dug her fingers into

the crumbling masonry as the cold wind bit at her face and tried not to think about it as she resumed her quest.

Finally, after what felt like an hour, she reached the top. There was hardly room for her to crouch next to the angry-looking gargoyle. “Before you do anything rash,” she told it in a stern, if slightly breathless, voice, “I’m a friend of Shroom’s and I’m here to rescue you.”

The gargoyle stared at her past his beak-like nose. Then, it blinked once in comprehension.

“Good. We’re on the same page,” Elle said, more than a little relieved. Then, she looked down at the heavy iron chain wrapped around the gargoyle’s legs. A thick padlock secured it in place on one end and a spike driven into the stone tower tethered the other. “Of course,” she said angrily, fighting the urge to pinch herself. “Why didn’t I think to bring the keys?”

She looked around for anything she could use to break the locks, but there were no convenient blow torches or crowbars lying around. “Some rescue this is going to turn out to be.” Lock picking had never been her strong suit, and even if she had a file, it would take hours to cut through a lock strong enough to restrain a gargoyle. “Are a pair of bolt cutters really asking too much?” she asked aloud.

Elle examined her options. She could climb off the tower, and assuming she didn’t break her neck on the way down, she could beat on Digby until he handed the keys over, or she could try to shoot the lock off without damaging the gargoyle. The first idea held a certain appeal, but the collector would never willingly give her the key ring.

“Here goes nothing,” she said, making up her mind. “Hold still,” she warned, with only a touch of irony. She pulled her gun out of the holster under her arm. There had been a time when she rarely carried a pistol, but working with the Jerseys had taught her a valuable lesson in

always being prepared for the worst. Elle held the .45 steadily, aiming carefully at the U-shaped shackle, the weakest point. She focused on the spot where she could do the most damage to the lock and fired.

Simultaneous with the concussive roar, the .45 jerked in her hands, knocking her off balance. “Crap!” she exclaimed, dropping the gun to clutch at the chain.

Her hands wrapped around the cold metal as it nosily unfurled from the gargoyle’s legs. She regained her feet for a second before the gargoyle spread his enormous wings, striking her in the knees and knocking her backwards. Elle slipped over the edge, her legs dangling helplessly as she struggled to hold onto the chain. Screaming, she hurtled down the side of the steep tower, her face scraping against the stone.

As the chain unwound, she plummeted down, hoping it really was anchored as securely as she’d assumed. Suddenly, she jerked to a halt, almost tearing her arms out of her sockets as she slammed face first into the wall.

“You alright up there?” a panicked Dwayne called up to her.

“Do I freaking look like I’m okay?” she yelled back testily.

“Hold on,” he commanded. “I’ll be right back with a ladder.” He jogged off, leaving her alone.

Blood dripped down her forehead, tickling her nose. Already, her hands were slipping towards the end of the chain. Elle’s feet scrabbled for purchase between the stones as she tried in vain to get enough slack to wrap the iron around her wrists. She felt the stone crumble beneath her feet and she hitched another inch towards the roof below.

She dared a look down. The roof was still twenty feet away. If the fall didn't kill her, she'd break every bone in her body. She didn't relish the idea of spending the next six months in a full body cast, but it sure beat the alternative.

Her hands began to cramp and despite her best efforts, Elle slipped another few millimeters. There was less than a foot of chain left between her and oblivion. "Where are we with that ladder?" she called out, desperate for an encouraging promise of rescue, but all she heard in response was the wind rushing past her ears.

Suddenly it hit her that the wind wasn't blowing up from the river. Instead, it was coming from behind her. Before she could figure out what was happening, something slammed into her back, knocking the air out of her lungs. She felt something grab her shoulders so tightly her fists opened automatically, dropping the chain, and she was sucked backwards through the night. Elle hurtled through the air, the tower receding as she defied gravity and spiraled higher and higher.

Twisting her head around, she came face to face with the enormous gargoyle. It winked at her and pumped his massive wings, sending them soaring over Digby's mansion. With a breath-wrenching change of course, he plunged back towards the rooftop. Elle squeezed her eyes tightly, unable to look as the building rushed up to meet them.

The pressure on her shoulders disappeared as quickly as it came and for one terrifying moment, she was weightless. Elle landed on something hard and unyielding, but instead of unbearable agony, she felt familiar hands. "It's okay, Red, I've got you."

Slowly, she forced herself to open her eyes and found herself cradled in Tyrone's arms. "That was fun," she managed to croak out. "I wanna go again."

“Not on your life,” he replied, gently lowering her to her feet. The worry lines in his face tightened as she stumbled and he had to wrap his arm around her waist to steady her.

“Thanks,” she said, wiggling her toes. She’d been certain that it was all over for her, and now that she was back on solid ground, all she could do was marvel that all of her parts were still in one piece. As the fog in her head cleared, she realized that someone was missing. “Where’s Digby? He didn’t escape, did he?”

“Not exactly,” Tyrone said, pressing his lips to Elle’s head between her hairline and the stinging gash above her eyebrows. “I sort of made a trade.”

“A trade?” she asked shakily.

In response, Tyrone pointed to the sky. The gargoyle that had rescued her was barely a speck now and rising quickly. Something dangled between his claws. A faint scream carried back to them on the wind as Digby disappeared from sight.

“Good trade,” Elle whispered.

“I thought so, too,” he replied, stroking her hair.

The adrenaline drained out of her body, and Elle’s legs turned to gooey rubber. “I think I need to sit down now,” she said in a pitiful voice. Gently, he lowered her, until she was sitting with her head between her legs.

“Oh God, Elle,” Jon gasped as he dropped the ladder that he and Dwayne had been carrying and rushed to her side. “You’re okay, you’re really okay.” He crushed her in his embrace.

“Not helping,” she managed to gasp, wondering if she was doomed to be suffocated by all of the men in her life. He released her. “It’s good to be alive.”

“No shit,” he replied, stroking the side of her face. He wiped the blood away from her forehead with his sleeve. “For a moment there, I was sure your luck had run out.” He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and gently rocked her.

Dwayne gently pushed Jon aside and pulled Elle to her feet. “Come on, sweetie, time to get you home.”

“What about the gargoyles?” she asked.

“Free as little stone birds,” he replied. “Don’t worry about them, they can take care of themselves. Now it’s time to let us take care of you, okay?” None of the men were willing to leave Elle’s side, so they all squeezed into the elevator together, maxing out the weight limit by at least fifty pounds.

“The next time you’re tempted to go off half-cocked, remember this. Okay, hon?” Jon asked as she limped down the front steps, his arm around her waist and the Jersey brothers close on their heels.

“I promise,” she answered. “I learned my lesson.”

“Liar,” he said, stopping so suddenly the brothers nearly tripped over them as Jon wrapped her in a hug. “When we get back to your place, you’re taking a long, hot bath, even if I have to hold you under the water. And I’m not letting you out of my sight for at least a week. If I catch even a glimpse of a gargoyle anywhere near you, I swear to God I’ll take a jackhammer after them.”

“You mean like the one that just saved me?” she asked with a half smile.

“Well, maybe not that one,” he agreed, holding the door of the truck open. Elle crawled into the back and Jon slid in beside her.

Tyrone took his usual position in the passenger seat and twisted around to look at them both in the glow of the interior light. “You scared the shit out of all of us, Red. Don’t do that again.”

“Oh please,” Elle replied as Dwayne slammed his door and the light snapped off. “If any of you really cared about my safety, you wouldn’t let that psycho behind the wheel.”

Dwayne winked at her in the rearview mirror as he started the ignition and revved the engine. “Buckle up, doll, it’s gonna be a bumpy ride.”

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