

The Perils of Christmas Shopping

by Sheila Paulson

A thousand years ago a group of gargoyles protected a Scottish castle. Stone by stone, they assisted humans until a spell made a fragment of the clan sleep for a thousand years. Awakening to find their castle had been rebuilt at the top of a New York skyscraper, five gargoyles, Goliath as their leader, and their gargoyle dog began to learn about the twentieth century.

Summoned to Avalon accompanied by his human friend, New York City Detective Elisa Maza and Bronx, his dog, Goliath learned his clan's eggs had survived there, and discovered he had a daughter, Angela. The four of them were sent out from the isle of Avalon in a small boat, learning the interesting fact that Avalon didn't send them where they wanted to go. It sent them over and over where they were needed.

Meanwhile, in Chicago, a police detective and his unlikely best friend and partner, a Mountie stationed in the Windy City, prepare for Christmas in their own peculiar way...

Winter, late 1995

The streets were chaotic, but then to Constable Benton Fraser, of the Northwest Territories, used to such thriving metropolises as Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk, Chicago's streets were always chaotic. This particular chaos was seasonal, for it was nearly Christmas. New to Chicago, the Mountie had been astonished by his first American Christmas. Now, nearing his second, he had seen the commercialism that ran rampant everywhere, the frenzied pursuit of gifts by maniacal shoppers, the people who found the holiday only one more lonely day to endure but, being Fraser, he looked past all that and also discovered wonder. It was there in the faces of the children as they darted about in the snow or stopped to gaze rapturously at another store Santa in a moth-eaten costume; it was there in the magic of Christmas decorations, and even if the canned Christmas music that played everywhere.

The Christmas spirit seemed to be in short supply at the precinct where his best friend, Ray Vecchio worked, though, and in even shorter supply in Ray himself. Fraser knew Ray's large, boisterous and exuberant family would rally around for the day itself; but he'd known them long enough to understand that getting to the day might not be a piece of cake for his partner. Ray, who viewed Christmas shopping as a modern form of Chinese water torture, might have agreed if he hadn't been hip deep in cases. The stack of folders on his desk, never small, had turned him into a modern-day, balding version of Ebenezer Scrooge. While others at the precinct might manage to display a feeling for the season, Ray's face was tight this afternoon, filled with a frustration not even the end of his shift was likely to improve.

“Look at it, Fraser,” he said tightly, gesturing at his desk. “‘tis the season to rip off old ladies — another one was killed yesterday by this maniac who’s been grabbing purses to steal pension checks and Christmas money. That makes three dead so far, and another one still in intensive care.” His mouth drew a tight line. “Bad enough gangs are wasting each other right and left. They ask for it. But those old ladies...” Clearly it was depressing him. He nudged the stack of folders and it collapsed in a heap, sliding off the desk and to the floor. The toppling pile exposed a squashed cruller, probably several days old.

Ray let out a string of profanity that caused Fraser to catch his arm and say warningly with a gesture at their civilian aide, Elaine Besbriss, “Please, Ray, there are ladies present.” Elaine smiled winningly at Fraser and Ray fell silent, bending sulkily to retrieve the files. Taking advantage of the distraction, Fraser’s wolf, Diefenbaker, gobbled the stale cruller, then presented a supremely innocent face to his master.

“Diefenbaker!” chided Fraser, frowning reproachfully at the animal.

“My doughnut!” Ray wailed, dumping half a dozen files on the desk just before Diefenbaker could venture back for the crumbs. “Fraser, he ate my doughnut.”

“Yes, and I will chastise him for it most severely,”

“Like he cares. You’re talking hardened junk food junkie here, Fraser. If you ever take him back to the Great White North he won’t be able to do more than waddle.” His words evidently created a different thought and his scowl deepened. “So are you gonna...” he began, his voice trailing off as if, for once, he wasn’t sure what to say.

“Am I ‘gonna’ what, Ray?” Fraser studied him thoughtfully, uncertain of what was coming.

“You know. Take him back to the Great White North — for Christmas, anyway?”

So that was it. “Of course not, Ray. I shall be spending the holiday right here in Chicago. As you know, I have no family there now. It would prove pointless to return simply for the view. Perhaps I have grown accustomed to crowds, but Christmas alone in my cabin no longer seems as pleasant a concept as before.”

Something in Ray’s face relaxed, but all he said was, “In that case, Ma says you’re to be there first thing Christmas morning, in time for the gift exchange, and stay for dinner. She’s already working on it. You haven’t lived until you’ve tasted Ma’s special turkey and dressing. Old family recipe.” He grinned wickedly, his spirits reviving. “Besides, Franny’s got a present for you.”

“Oh dear,” said Fraser involuntarily. Ray’s sister’s dead set for him had often left him utterly speechless, not to mention slightly panicked. He could chase a hardened killer across an ice floe without a qualm, but the thought of being shut up in a small room with Francesca Vecchio made his collar feel too tight. Although she didn’t quite pursue him as vigorously as she had done the previous

year, Fraser was never quite sure what she would do or how publicly she would do it. He had a sudden, horrified idea that the 'gift' might prove to be herself, suddenly appearing naked — except for a big red bow — in his bed.

Passing by, Detective Jack Huey snickered, proving he may have conjured up the same mental image as the Mountie. "What's the matter, Fraser, is Ray's sister too much woman for you?"

"Of course not," Fraser said involuntarily, realized how that sounded, and looked acutely embarrassed.

"Now wait a minute," began Ray hotly, letting his eyes linger suspiciously on Fraser's face. "You lay one hand on my sister..."

"Ray, I assure you — "

"Told you," Huey said to his partner, Louis Gardino, nudging him with an elbow and grinning in Ray and Fraser's direction. "That'll be five bucks."

Fraser didn't want to learn the exact nature of their bet. He watched the partners make the monetary exchange while Ray glowered at them all impartially, muttering inarticulately under his breath. Then Vecchio slammed the last of the files down on his desk. "Come on, Fraser, we're leaving," he said in a tone that would brook no argument.

"But Ray, your shift doesn't end for another three minutes."

"We're *getting out of here,*" Ray growled in exasperation and stormed across the room, scooping up his coat on the way. "Didn't *you* ever sneak out a few minutes — never mind, stupid question," he concluded before Fraser could open his mouth. He paused in the doorway only long enough to make sure Fraser intended to follow, then he stalked out. Diefenbaker gave a woof of approval — he'd denuded the squad room of anything edible; there was no longer a reason for him to stay — and followed Ray. Fraser shot an apologetic smile at Elaine, nodded at Huey and Gardino, and hurried after him, his hat tucked under his arm.

It had been snowing for much of the afternoon, and a lowering sky and growing darkness met them as they emerged on the street and headed for Ray's Buick Riviera. Once out of the precinct house and into the chill and snow, Ray's temper calmed a little. He paused to wait for his friend as Fraser shucked on his heavy coat over the red serge. "So where do you wanna eat tonight, Benny?"

Taking it as a positive sign, Fraser named a small restaurant they often enjoyed after work and ushered Diefenbaker into the back of the car. "Christmas would be very nice, Ray," he added hastily, realizing he hadn't made that clear earlier. "What time would your mother like me to arrive?"

Suddenly Ray's bad temper faded and a grin blazed on out on his face. "Try seven o'clock," he said. "There's no way we can keep Maria's kids away from the tree one second longer than that. They'll probably be awake at five, but not even Ma will start the gift exchange quite that early."

Fraser looked forward to it. He couldn't ever remember a big, bustling Christmas filled with small children dancing eagerly around the tree, and the anticipation was unexpectedly pleasant. "Seven will be fine, Ray."

"Great," Vecchio returned, clearly delighted. His dark mood retreated, even if it returned in part when he scraped away at the snow on the Riv's windshield and discovered ice beneath. "Look at this," he fussed as Fraser came to help him clean the window. "I *knew* everything was gonna go wrong today." But Fraser had seen his earlier smile and he fell to work with a good heart as Ray began to enumerate the number of Christmas gifts he had yet to buy, the high prices of everything, no doubt jacked up by the season, and the mugger who was killing little old ladies. It was a nasty world out there. That made Fraser scrape ice all the harder. He couldn't deal with the whole world at once, but this bit of it...

They had nearly finished when silent snowflakes began to fall again. Ray gave a growl of annoyance and leaped into the Riv, cranking up the heat to full and turning on the windshield wipers. "Come on, Fraser, I don't know about you but I want to eat before I get turned into a solid block of ice." He flexed his fingers on the steering wheel in an attempt to thaw them out. "Or is this just another balmy day to a Canadian?"

"Of course not, Ray," Fraser replied. It was true he'd often faced far worse weather than this in the Territories but it wouldn't be politic to say so. "As you know, the majority of Canadians live fairly near the border in any case..."

"Yeah," muttered Ray as if he suspected he was being conned, or simply didn't want to hear a lecture about the population dynamics of his northern neighbor. He turned on the car's radio and Bing Crosby was suddenly dreaming about a white Christmas. "Looks like Bing's gonna get his wish this year," he muttered, twiddling the dial. The effort produced still more Christmas music, and he shifted the stations three more times before giving up and leaving one of them on.

"Let's go, Ray," Fraser urged. "Maybe you're just hungry."

"Well, Dief isn't. I was saving that doughnut."

"For what, Ray, the next ice age?" Fraser couldn't resist asking. "It was scarcely fit for human consumption."

Vecchio turned and glared at him, then, reluctantly, a grin emerged. "How do you keep up with him anyway?" he asked. "Doesn't he eat you out of house and home? Or do you just turn him out to forage?"

"He stays on a strict diet at home," Fraser replied.

"And cadges food when he's out and about. I bet he knows every handout in your neighborhood, and it's even money Willie gives him pizza and other goodies when he's watching him for you."

Such thoughts had occurred to Fraser before. Diefenbaker's diet was a sore point with him but he couldn't spend every minute of every day monitoring the wolf's food intake, so he changed the subject. "Tell me, Ray, what is the actual state of your Christmas shopping?"

Ray said something extremely profane under his breath.

* * *

The small boat cut through the icy waters of Lake Michigan, snowflakes thick around its passengers, only one of whom actually noticed. Darkness came early at this time of year and Elisa Maza pulled her thin, red jacket more tightly around her shoulders and wished Avalon would have sent her out with a heavy coat, a suitcase full of clean underwear, and a healthy supply of hot food. Wrapping her arms across her chest, she huddled on her seat. Though it was too overcast to see exactly when the sun set, somehow she knew and steadied the boat as Goliath came to life with a roar. Beside him, his daughter Angela burst from her stone prison and Bronx shook off the stone of the day and eyed her eagerly, wagging his tail. They didn't feel the cold as she did, and they had the advantage of the regenerative stone state for half the day.

"Where has Avalon brought us this time, Elisa?" asked Goliath, sitting back in the stern.

"I know that skyline," Elisa said, pointing to the lights rising from the water in front of them. "It's Chicago."

"It's cold," Angela murmured. "Elisa, you must be freezing."

They landed at a small platform beneath a tangle of docks where Goliath helped them climb out. A warehouse area; their arrival hadn't been noticed, which was just as well. The secret of the gargoyles' existence was something Elisa was determined to protect. Standing beside the shivering human, Goliath wrapped one wing around her to provide momentary warmth. A few snowflakes floated gently to the earth, and in spite of the stark unloveliness of the warehouses around them, the coating of white provided them with a transient beauty. Leaning against Goliath, Elisa enjoying the peace of the moment.

"Is Chicago like New York?" Angela asked, staring around. "The skyline made it look huge, but it's not very pretty."

"Not here," Elisa replied. "But parts of it are. I wonder why we've come here. Maybe we should head that way." She pointed between buildings where a busy street appeared, the vehicles' hurried pace only slightly hindered by the snow. "We'll stay in the shadows. As far as I know, there are no gargoyles in Chicago."

"Perhaps I should go aloft and try to discover why we have come here," Goliath rumbled,

looking around hastily to make sure they were unobserved. "Bronx, you stay with Elisa. Come, Angela."

Shivering, the detective watched them climb the side of the nearest warehouse to gain altitude then soar off into the snow-filled sky. Bronx whined as they disappeared and she bent down automatically to scratch his ears. He leaned into the stroking for a moment, then he whined more pointedly and led the way to the nearest building.

It was derelict, its door standing ajar, several windows broken, but it might provide shelter from the storm. Elisa reached for her gun and held it before her, ready for trouble, though if truth were told, she had only two shots left. When she had followed Goliath into the boat for Avalon, she hadn't had time to stop for bullets.

Dim light flickered in a far corner of the warehouse, a fire burning in a big barrel with several homeless people gathered around it. They hadn't noticed her arrival, and she would prefer to keep it that way, especially since Bronx was pressing up against her leg. The heat of the fire was promising though, so she decided to risk it; the gun would help. "Stay here, Bronx," she instructed, motioning him into the shadows, knowing he would come to her rescue if the men around the fire proved dangerous. He whimpered disapprovingly but obeyed her, and Elisa approached the fire, concealing her gun as she realized she had found a trio of homeless people rather than a gang in their hideout.

Two of the men were older but the third didn't look a day over seventeen. All three of them wore threadbare coats, and one of the older men had draped a blanket over his shoulders and knotted it under his chin. They regarded her with suspicion as she approached, but not with hostility, then the boy bounded forward. "You look cold," he said. She didn't know what had brought him to the streets, but it didn't seem to have hardened him yet. "Come and get warm."

"You don't know who she is," said the younger of the other two men. He was probably in his late forties. "She could be a cop."

"Sure, running around out here in a thin coat like that?" the boy said. "Look at her. She's been on the streets. You can tell."

Elisa glanced down at herself. She'd tried to stay clean and even to wash her clothes, but since her first journey out from Avalon, there hadn't been much time for the luxury of hot water baths and laundromats.

"Yeah, right, she's neat and reasonably clean," the older of the two, the one with the blanket, replied. He had a deep, gravelly voice and was probably about the age of Elisa's father. She didn't care for the look of him. As a cop, her instincts had been honed on the streets, and she knew this character meant trouble.

"So are you, Hob," the boy said quickly. "But I know the look of living in your clothes. She's got it. Come on and get warm. I'm Jack, this is Hob, and that's Michael."

“I’m Elisa.”

Michael smiled winningly at Elisa and nudged over a notch. He dug into the front of his ratty overcoat and produced a bottle in a paper bag. “Want to warm up inside as well as out?” he offered generously.

“It’ll eat your insides up,” Jack warned her. “Sterno or something.”

Elisa had seen the wasted look on Michael’s face and realized alcohol had brought him to the streets. Yet there was a wisdom at the back of his eyes that proved he’d once been something more. She didn’t ask. Unless Avalon had sent her here to get Jack off the streets, she had encountered these three by chance. Michael seemed harmless enough, and Jack was more of a danger to himself than he was to her, but Hob... There was a hard look in his eyes that Elisa knew well. He wouldn’t care who he hurt as long as he got what he wanted. The way his eyes lingered on Jack, it was pretty clear what he wanted from the boy.

She stuck her hands out to the fire, and Jack, noticing how hard she was shivering, bounded over to a corner and came back with a ratty old army blanket. “You can use this to get warm,” he said.

Knowing it was what protected him while he slept, she draped it loosely over her shoulders and smiled at him. His cheeks flamed. She didn’t ask what had brought him here; it was too soon. Besides, the problem of Hob had to be resolved. The more she studied him the more she realized he wasn’t typical. The coat he concealed under his blanket was new and expensive and he had a gold ring on one finger. He was no doubt familiar with the streets, but what had lured him out here to pretend to be homeless was nothing honest. He wanted Jack, whether for a prostitution ring or for his own personal gratification she didn’t know. Right now he was working on getting the boy to trust him. If Jack was naive enough, he might go with Hob to a promise of shelter. Elisa was glad she had come.

* * *

“It’s beautiful,” Angela said as she and her father glided above the city of Chicago. “Why are there so many colored lights?”

“Because it’s nearly Christmas,” replied Goliath, who had spent one Christmas in the Twentieth Century already.

“I know about Christmas,” Angela admitted cautiously as if she didn’t want to commit herself to a greater knowledge than she possessed. “But I thought it was a great religious festival.”

“Once, it was. In these modern days, it is that and much more. Humans give each other gifts to celebrate the birth of Christ, but sometimes I think they forget His birth and concentrate on the gifts, the greeting cards they exchange, the decorations they create in their homes. Last year Elisa had a huge

Christmas tree in her living room, decorated with many-colored ornaments and strung with lights. Special music has been written for the occasion. I wonder..." His voice trailed off thoughtfully.

"You wonder, Father?"

"I wonder if we have come here so Elisa won't have to miss the holiday. She will not be with her family — "

"But she will, Father," Angela cried. "She considers you a part of her family. She loves you."

"All of us value Elisa," Goliath returned, but he knew it was true. He loved Elisa, too, although they had never defined the feeling between them, and might never do so. "We would never have survived without her in this century. She has taught us much."

"I think she has learned from you, too," Angela replied. Realizing her father was uncomfortable with the subject, she turned it quickly. "We must find a way to celebrate Christmas for Elisa. We celebrated it on Avalon, although not like this." She swooped lower over a huge, decorated tree, then caught an updraft.

"I want to find a coat for Elisa," Goliath said. "Or shelter before dawn."

"Can we borrow one?" she asked.

"We will go lower and see what we can find."

* * *

Dinner had mellowed Ray Vecchio enough to bring out a 'doggie bag' for Diefenbaker, who had waited for them in the car. "Or should I say 'wolfie bag', Fraser?"

"Please, don't. He'll start expecting them. Take the remains home with you, Ray."

"Well, if you in — what was that?"

"What was what, Ray?"

"Something huge just flew overhead. I saw it out of the corner of my eye."

"A bird, Ray. I've read that hawks and falcons like to nest on the sides and roofs of high rise buildings. Perhaps that was what you saw."

"Yeah, right," Ray returned, gazing up into the sky, ignoring the snow that fell into his face. "A hawk bigger than a man. I know what I saw, Fraser, and there were two of them."

"Maybe it was something blowing in the wind," Fraser replied. He couldn't imagine what could have flown past, but Ray wasn't given to wild imagination, and they hadn't enjoyed liquor with their meal, Ray because he was driving and Fraser because he didn't drink very often. He hadn't seen what Ray had seen, but he'd felt a subliminal sense of movement. He couldn't discount it, but neither could he imagine it was dangerous.

“Yeah, right as big as Batman,” Ray retorted. “Hey, that’s it, it *was* Batman. Batman and Robin, dropping in from Gotham for the holidays.” He dug in his pocket for the car keys, then groaned. “Look at this. I’ve gotta clean the windshield *again!*”

“I’ll help,” Fraser volunteered. “Then we come to the problem of your Christmas gifts.”

“Look, it’s *my* problem, Fraser.”

“How many of your gifts have you purchased already, Ray?” asked Fraser as he brushed snow off the Riv’s rear window.

“Well, uh, one, okay,” admitted the detective sourly.

“And how many do you have left to buy?”

“Well, Ma’s and Franny’s, and Maria’s and something for her kids, and I suppose I’ve gotta get Tony something.” He groaned. “And I better get a box of chocolates for Elaine, she won’t do any work for me for a month. And if I don’t get something nice for Louise, I’m dog meat.”

Fraser received this list in silence. “But then whose gift *have* you bought, Ray?” he prodded.

Ray busied himself in a flurry of scraping. “Uh, yours, okay,” he snapped as if he’d been caught out in a good deed and was embarrassed by it.

Fraser very carefully didn’t smile. “If you like, I know of a rather good department store just a block from here. It isn’t fancy, but I’d be willing to go with you.”

“Can’t we do it tomorrow?” Ray asked. He *hated* Christmas shopping.

“Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, Ray. We’ll do it tonight. We can even walk there. The store is right around the corner.”

Ray heaved a vast, unhappy sigh. “And if I don’t go, I suppose you’ll march me over there anyway, and push your way through the shoppers — well, no, you’d be polite. ‘Excuse me,’ and ‘pardon me,’ and ‘thank you kindly,’ to all the mob of last minute shoppers. We’re gonna come out of this scarred, Benny, I swear it.”

“You underestimate the Christmas spirit, Ray.”

“You bet I do,” Ray returned. “Franny dragged me shopping with her last week. I’m still sore. A little old lady jabbed me with her purse to get me out of the way. I swear it, Benny, right in the crotch. What kind of little old ladies are they making these days? And then a mother and her two kids tried to kill me.”

“I doubt that, Ray.”

“You wouldn’t if you’d been there. I had to pull my badge to get ‘em to back off.” He glowered at the memory.

Fraser held back a smile. “Come along, Ray. You’ll find a pleasant attitude will endear you to the sales personnel and the other shoppers.”

"In an alternate dimension, Benny. Not in Chicago two days before Christmas." But he heaved a fatalistic sigh and let himself be dragged down the snowy street.

* * *

"Okay, kid, let's move it," Hob said suddenly to Jack.

"Where are you going?" Elisa asked involuntarily. She was warmer now, and thinking clearer, but the question had been a bad idea.

Hob squinted at her through narrow eyes. "What the hell business is it of yours, bitch?"

"Sorry." She spread her hands conciliatingly. "Just didn't want to have to give back the blanket."

"You can have it," Jack told her quickly. "Hob knows a big store where the prices aren't too high. I want to get something to send home to my mom. That's where we're going."

Elisa believed in Jack's motives but she had a lot of trouble buying the idea of Hob as a benevolent helper. She would follow them; she'd have to. But she gave no evidence of it as she watched them walk away. Hob's arm went around the boy's shoulders in a way that made her skin crawl but Jack didn't seem to notice. He couldn't have been on the street very long.

"Fagin," said Michael unexpectedly as the mismatched pair crossed the abandoned warehouse heading for the door.

"What did you say?"

"Corrupter of the young," the wino explained. "I used to know things like that once. Now I forget sometimes, but I know. He wants that boy for two reasons, one to team with; he mugs old ladies, killed a few, too. He bragged about it."

"And Jack still went with him?"

"Didn't brag in front of Jack," Michael said, pausing to take a healthy swig from his bottle. He coughed then continued. "Wants an ally, but he also has a thing for innocent young men. Uses 'em up, dumps 'em when he's through. But Jack's smart and quick, and ol' Hob wants more from him. He's gonna get Jack to stand guard while he snatches another purse, then he'll tell the boy he's an accessory and that if Jack doesn't do what he tells him, he'll turn him in. Kid's from some little hick burg south of here. He'll believe it. When he's through, Jack'll be just one more kid who's dead inside, out there selling himself to stay alive. I don't know why Hob didn't pick up you were a cop. Undercover?"

"No, I'm not undercover," Elisa said. "But I'll stop him." She shrugged out of the blanket. "Look, if Jack comes back, here's his blanket. But I hope he won't be coming back."

"Me too, lady. I hate to see another one go down like me." Michael chugged from his bottle once more. "Go on. You can't save me. I'm too far gone. But if you're lucky you can save the kid in time for

Christmas.”

“Thanks.” Elisa raced for the door, pulling out her gun. Bronx emerged from his corner and followed her.

Michael blinked at the unlikely sight then he stared blankly at the bottle in his hand. “It’s gonna be pink elephants next,” he muttered and took another swallow.

* * *

“This is *nuts*, Fraser,” Ray said as they headed for the store. It was big and well-lighted and the parking lot on the other side of the street was jammed with cars. The side street near the restaurant was mostly empty, but that was because it hadn’t been plowed yet. Ray and Fraser had to wade through knee-deep drifts. There were a few people about but not very many, and most of them were shoppers. It wasn’t what Ray would consider a particularly upscale neighborhood; in fact one of the muggings he was investigating had taken place about three blocks from here. That particular little old lady had survived. To the astonishment of all concerned, she had a black belt in Karate, and though arthritis had limited her in recent years, she still had enough of an edge to fend off the mugger. It was thanks to her CPD had a description of the killer.

“Why nuts, Ray?” Fraser asked.

“Because we’re gonna have to come back this way with our arms full. It won’t be fun.”

“It’s only once a year, Ray.”

“It’s okay for you. You love it. Just like a big kid in a red suit. Come to think of it, maybe you’ve got a Santa fixation; after all you both wear red.”

Fraser smiled. “Ray, Christmas should be a good time.”

“I’m a cop, Fraser. I see more people than you can count who *don’t* believe Christmas is anything special. You think the mugger is gonna stop because it’s nearly Christmas?”

“I think it a great pity you let your job take away what might be a time of joy, Ray. You have a family who loves you, even if you argue with them and claim they drive you nuts. You’ll all be together on Christmas.”

“Yeah, fighting like most families.”

“Together, Ray. Because you do love them, and they love you. And you’ll gather as a family and enjoy the day.”

“You’re coming too,” Ray said hastily, hearing a wistful note in his friend’s voice. “You *do* have a family, Fraser; you’re an honorary Vecchio. And they’re all looking forward to seeing you on Christmas morning.”

"I...that's very..." Fraser seemed at a loss for words. Ray, who was too embarrassed himself at his sentimental statement, couldn't come up with a distraction line to save his life. "Ray, that means — "

Movement up ahead distracted Ray. He'd halfway been watching the little old lady who was wading through the snow in front of them. The block was deserted save for her and the two of them, but now a sudden movement at the mouth of the alley caught Ray's eye. He elbowed the Mountie in the side and said in an urgent voice, "Fraser..."

"I see it, Ray."

"If there's any justice, that's the mugger." He tore open his coat to reach for his gun just as the man emerged from the alley and grasped the old lady by the arm.

"Police! Freeze!"

Ray's jaw dropped because the voice was female and right beyond the man and his victim. Popping up beside a dumpster was someone Ray had never seen before, a rather gorgeous woman with long, dark hair, clad in a much-too-thin red jacket. The gun in her hand was steady and she looked utterly confident and competent; she was a cop, all right. She had the moves down pat. Ray drew his own gun to back her.

As if he'd sensed movement behind him, the man grabbed the old lady by the neck and whirled, his back to the alley, shifting to place himself in the direct line of fire between Ray and the woman cop. "Either of you fires, you'll kill each other," he yelled. "Drop your guns or I waste her."

"What are you *doing*?" wailed a much younger voice from the alley. "You're hurting her. Hob, stop it."

"Shut up, kid," yelled the mugger. "Okay, here's the scenario. Drop your guns, both of you, or I blow her head off."

"Can you get a clear shot, Ray?" Fraser asked in an anxious undertone.

"No. The only way I could, I'd hit her." He nodded in the strange woman's direction.

As if she'd sensed that, she shifted sideways to give Ray a shot. But Hob moaned in anger and worry and tightened his grip on the old lady, who burst into terrified tears. "Nobody move. Jack, get out here and grab their guns."

"No," cried the invisible Jack. "I didn't know you were gonna do anything like this. You said we were gonna buy my mom a present."

"It's all right, Jack," called the woman. "I know you didn't intend this. Hob is trying to corrupt you so he can use you for his own purposes. Stay down, get behind something solid. I'll tell you when it's okay to come out."

"It's not gonna be okay," Hob chortled. "Because I've got a clear line on the kid, too, pig." He sneered at the woman.

"You've gotta stop him, Elisa," called Jack.

Fraser measured the shot Ray had and frowned, as he realized a good shot might well take out Hob, but a near miss would almost certainly hit Elisa if it didn't hit the elderly woman. Ray was a good shot; he probably wouldn't miss, but he couldn't take that chance.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Fraser asked Hob.

"What are you, some kind of Dudley Do-Right?" Hob asked suspiciously, eyeing the red serge uniform visible under Fraser's unbuttoned overcoat. "That's no Santa suit you got on, so you're a Mountie? I hate to break it to you, but you got no jurisdiction here. You try anything and I'm gonna tie you up in a nice fat lawsuit."

"And we're gonna take you down for murder," Ray told him. "You match the description of the clown that's killing old ladies to take their purses. So you're going down and that's the bottom line."

"Killing them?" Elisa echoed. "Come on, Hob, you haven't got a chance."

He fired at her, causing her to fling herself flat into the snow. The bullet missed her by inches. Ray took his chance and fired, but Hob had moved and the shot nearly hit the old lady. Hob got off a second shot that plucked the sleeve of Fraser's coat.

Ray bellowed, "Fraser!" as they flung themselves down.

"I'm not hurt, Ray. It just hit the fabric."

Suddenly something massive and dark descended from the sky directly over Hob. Sensing it, he fired wildly but didn't hit the huge, winged shape before a muscular, purple arm reached down and plucked the gun from his hand, twisting it until the barrel curved, then tossing the now-useless weapon aside. He grabbed Hob under both arms and yanked him up, settling them both against the side of the building just within the shadow of the alley. A second, smaller winged creature, this one obviously female, caught the little old lady as she fainted and lowered her gently to the ground.

"Are you hurt, Elisa?" called the bigger of the two creatures.

"No, I'm all right, Goliath," she replied, picking herself up and dusting off the snow. "Jack? You can come out now."

A teenager emerged from the alley, his mouth hanging open as he gaped at Goliath and the female creature.

"What the *hell*?" Ray blurted. "What *are* they, Fraser?"

"I would guess they are gargoyles," Fraser replied, his eyes wide as he stared at the unlikely sight. "I've read of a recent urban legend, that living gargoyles have been sighted in New York City. Perhaps Chicago has its own branch." He eyed Jack measuringly, then stripped off his overcoat and passed it to the boy, who wrapped himself up in it gratefully.

"Yeah, right," Ray growled skeptically, but it was hard to maintain disbelief with a couple of

legendary creatures right in front of him. Goliath left Hob hanging on the side of the building, his belt hooked over a protruding pipe and drifted down, landing neatly at Elisa's side.

"They won't hurt you," Elisa said hastily as a third creature, this one looking like one of those weird Terror Dogs from the Ghostbusters movie, bounded over to join them. "You can take Hob in. It'll be your collar."

"I think it was your purple buddy's collar," Ray told her, unable to take his eyes off the gargoyles. Maybe it was all a hallucination brought about by Christmas frenzy. He had no choice but to take it as real, but he couldn't help sneaking surreptitious glances at the huge Goliath.

"You're the local cop," she replied. "I'm Detective Elisa Maza, NYPD. It's your jurisdiction, so it's your collar. Just so long as you realize Jack wasn't with him."

"I was, but I didn't know he was going to rob anybody," Jack said, huddling with relief in Fraser's coat. "I thought he was just being nice to me, but I guess I was wrong." He looked down at the female gargoyle, who supported the old lady in one of her wings. "Is she okay?"

"She fainted. She's breathing. But I'm afraid I helped frighten her."

"I'll take her," Fraser volunteered. "People are rarely frightened of Mounties, unless they are criminals, of course." He gathered up the woman; she was tiny and it took little effort for Fraser to hold her. "This is Ray Vecchio, CPD, and I'm Constable Benton Fraser, RCMP," he introduced them.

Elisa spoke quickly. "This is Goliath, his daughter, Angela, and that's Bronx."

Suddenly a white streak thrust itself between Bronx and Fraser, who had stretched out a hand to the gargoyle 'dog'. Diefenbaker growled threateningly. Ray didn't even want to *think* about how the wolf had gotten out of the car. He was certain Dief hadn't bothered to close the door behind him.

Nose to nose, Diefenbaker and Bronx regarded each other with high suspicion. Fraser broke the tension by going down on one knee. "Friend, Diefenbaker," he explained.

"Is that a wolf?" Jack asked, eyes wide. He looked as surprised as he had when he'd seen Goliath and the other gargoyles.

"I gotta call this in," Ray said quickly and pulled out his cell phone, calling hastily for backup. "Guess that means I won't have time to go Christmas shopping tonight."

"Christmas?" Elisa echoed. "I saw the decorations. Is it Christmas?"

"It's December 23rd," Fraser explained. "Detective Maza, I don't wish to be rude, but don't you think your friends should conceal themselves before our backup arrives?"

She nodded, relieved. "You won't give them away?"

"No. They saved that poor woman's life. Although I suspect it will be difficult to explain what happened to his gun."

Ray looked down at the crumpled weapon. "Metal fatigue?" he hazarded.

"Give her your coat, Ray," Fraser added.

"It's *snowing*, Fraser." But he pulled it off and passed it to Elisa, who hesitated, then slid into it. It hung in huge folds around her.

"Goliath," she said quickly. "Shelter in the alley. Jack, I know it's asking a lot, but please, don't give them away. It's hard to be different in this world. Their safety, their freedom, would be endangered if the world knew about them."

"Wow," breathed Jack, eyes wide. "I won't say a word. Gosh, Elisa, this is really something."

"I know it is. And I can think of something even better."

"What?"

"Go home for Christmas. I bet your mother is worried sick."

Jack looked at Hob, still hanging on the side of the building and his eyes lowered, full of shadows. "I came too close, didn't I?" Suddenly he lunged at Elisa and flung himself into her arms. "I want to go home," he wailed. "I want to go home."

* * *

"So how'd he get up there anyway?" one of the uniformed cops asked an hour later as everything wound down.

"He panicked," Fraser said quickly, his face dead level. "He tried to get away, but he had no options with Ray and this Detective Maza from New York out here and the dead-end alley behind him. Once he was up there, he couldn't get down." Ray realized with surprise he'd managed to phrase his response so carefully there was no direct lie in his words. The truth, but not the entire truth. Maybe Mounties, like Vulcans, didn't lie, they exaggerated.

"And the boy isn't involved?" Huey asked. He and Gardino had shown up toward the end of the wrap-up.

"Only that he almost got sucked in. Detective Maza heard him telling Jack he'd take him to a place where he could buy his mother a Christmas present."

"And I know he's telling the truth." Maza evidently knew her job. She folded her arms across her chest as if defying anyone to doubt her word. Eventually the last of the police cars whisked away. The old lady had revived feisty and blustering, and had not mentioned Goliath; she hadn't even needed prompting. Refusing hospitalization, she had stalked away to the store the minute she'd given her statement. Of course Hob had babbled about winged monsters, but no one had bothered to listen. One of the uniforms had remarked he must be higher than a kite on something, and the three who knew

better had all agreed.

They'd given Jack over to a representative from Social Services who would find him a bed for the night and in the morning his mother would arrive to take him home. He'd called her from a nearby pay phone and made the arrangements himself, returning, his eyes alight.

"One less kid off the street for Christmas," Ray said quickly, remembering Jack's smile as he waved goodbye. He wasn't sure why, but he felt pretty good about that. Fraser smiled at him.

Ray looked at his watch. "Hey, Benny, guess it's too late to go shopping now," he said quickly. "It's nearly nine o'clock."

Fraser's smile mutated into a rather wicked grin. "I hate to break it to you, Ray, but because of Christmas, they're open until ten."

"Christmas shopping?" Elisa echoed. "Ray, would you mind if I came with you? I've been traveling so much I haven't had a chance to buy gifts for my family. If you would just mail them for me tomorrow..."

"We can do that," Fraser agreed. "See, Ray. Now it will be far easier. You'll be able to enjoy the female perspective."

"Couldn't I let you and Elisa do it and wait here with Goliath?" Ray asked.

"No," said Fraser and bore him ruthlessly away.

* * *

"So we've been traveling for months now," Elisa said several hours later as they sat in Fraser's apartment, drinking coffee and eating pizza. After a shower and shampoo, she sat on the edge of the Mountie's bed, a towel still wrapping her hair. Goliath and Angela had landed on Fraser's fire escape soon after their arrival and were now sitting on the floor side by side. It was just plain weird to see such an unlikely creature as Goliath eating pizza. They planned to stay most of the night and leave shortly before dawn, so they could be traveling again before the Gargoyles turned to stone. Stone! Ray was sorry he wouldn't be able to see that, but he had to admit the thought of Fraser's apartment being filled with giant stone statues for a whole day was mind-boggling. And what would Diefenbaker do about it? Not that the wolf would be alarmed. The way he was cuddling up to Angela, who kept sneaking him pieces of pizza, he'd probably play guard dog and protect his new friends even when they were hard as rocks; even when they *were* rocks.

"And you don't know when you'll go home?" Fraser asked, a look of kindred spirits in his eyes. He'd made a life for himself in Chicago, but part of him would always be an exile.

"That's rough," said Ray sympathetically. His life wasn't always what he'd wanted it to be, but

he'd always had a home and family around, a family that had grown by one since he met Fraser. He hoped Fraser realized he'd been unofficially adopted by the entire Vecchio clan.

"We know we shall return some day," Goliath admitted. "New York has become home to my clan since we awoke to find ourselves a thousand years in our future. I miss my clan very much. But I know I shall see them again. I hope it is soon."

"It's harder at Christmas," Elisa admitted, looking at the tree Fraser had decorated. It wasn't the biggest tree Ray had ever seen, but it was of a considerable size. He ought to know. He'd helped the Mountie haul it up the stairs, since it was too big to fit in the elevator cage. "But then it's really hard to be alone at Christmas, and I'm not alone." She smiled up at Goliath in a smile of great fondness. He reached out at once and engulfed her hand in his huge one, stretching out his other hand for his daughter.

Ray looked at Fraser, who had no family, and who wasn't even in his own *country* for Christmas, and worried that Benny was miserable and hiding it. He could do that and had probably done it lots of times. Vecchio looked around the small apartment so devoid of luxuries, yet filled with a huge Christmas tree. Fraser loved Christmas, and he loved it even without family around, even without being home in Canada. He'd been there for Ray every step of the way.

"Neither are you, Fraser," he said, although it wasn't his way to be so effusive. "It isn't everybody who gets invited to Christmas at the Vecchios. You just remember that."

Goliath's eyes were knowing as they lingered on Ray, but he said nothing, only settled his arm around his daughter. Bronx whined and nudged at him in hopes of a bite of pizza, and Diefenbaker edged closer jealously, reluctant to let a bite go by.

"Diefenbaker," Fraser commanded. "They're company. Bronx gets first bite."

The look the wolf returned was full of irritation but he gave way reluctantly.

Fraser then turned to Ray. "Thank you kindly, Ray," he said, and although the words were common from him, the meaning wasn't.

"Merry Christmas, Benny," Ray burst out.

"And the same to you, Ray." Fraser smiled. "And to our guests. Would you like some Christmas music?"

"How are you going to play it, Benny?" Ray demanded. "You don't have a stereo or a tape deck?"

"I can sing, Ray. And so can you." He opened his mouth and burst out with, "God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay." Fraser had a great singing voice.

Elisa smiled and joined in. Trust a fellow Italian to sing well. A moment later, Goliath's rumbling bass combined with theirs. Angela, who didn't know the words, began to hum along in tune.

“Ray?” Fraser interrupted, his look invited him to help show the travelers a bit of Christmas. Ray looked around the room, and felt so much goodwill there, he couldn’t help it. He started to sing too, and look out to anybody who found fault with his singing voice.

Diefenbaker and Bronx headed straight for the rest of the pizza.