THE BOY WHO HATCHED MONSTERS

Books by T.C. *Shelley*

The Monster Who Wasn't
The Werewolves Who Weren't
The Boy Who Hatched Monsters

T.C. SHELLEY

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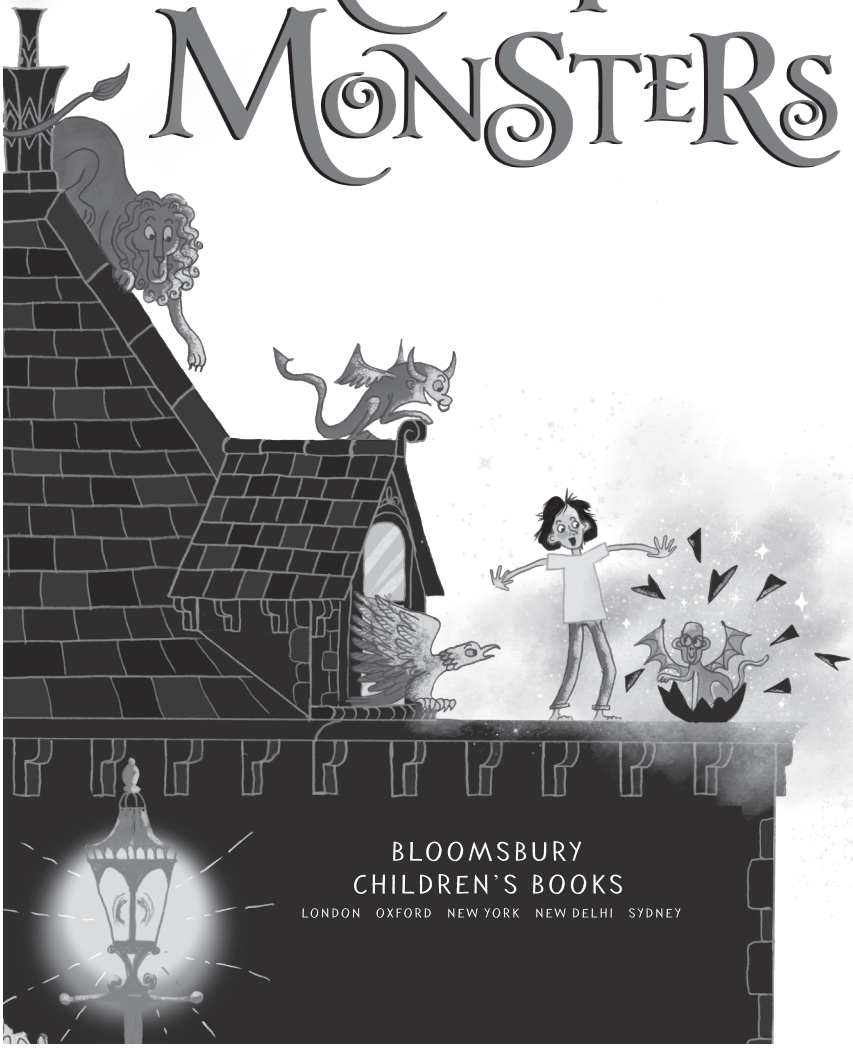

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To Holly and Tess for your advice. You are both very clever and know how to make fictitious characters very miserable. You have the opposite effect on your aunt and mother

The Sirens

Where the sirens live, you sail their oceans;
Their singing makes fools love their destruction.
Wretched is the soul, whom the music calls
To siren shores and under their spell falls.
That poor chump will not see the joys of life,
His growing kids, or his beautiful wife!
On rocky outcrops, they wait; human bones
Nestle and settle in the cracks of stones.
Away now, escape this horrible coast.
Avoid listening to them or you'll be toast!

T*he* O*dyssey*, Book XII, attrib. Homer, translated by
Solomon Jedidiah (1865)

CHAPTER 1

Kylie whimpered as she watched the red-haired woman wandering along the kerb on the opposite side of the street. Russell was busying himself in the alcove, unrolling his sleeping mat and bag, readying himself for sleep. He stopped and threw a few chips in Kylie's direction. When she ignored them and growled, he put a comforting hand on her head. But Kylie didn't want to be comforted.

Russell peered up and down. He couldn't see anything for Kylie to growl at; they were alone on the street, but he didn't have her corgi's nose or eyes, so he returned to patting down his bedding and pulling out a couple of treats for her from a paper bag. She didn't even sniff them.

'S'all right, girl. What are you whining at?' he asked.

This wasn't the first visit the red-haired woman had made. Kylie had smelt her before. She'd been over at the square the week before throwing sparkly air at Maxie. Then

Maxie'd wandered over to Russell blathering about how they had to keep a lookout for a fairy-boy and someone called Sam. 'Gotta watch for him,' Maxie had said to Russell.

'What you talking about, Max?' Russell had asked, then looked googly-eyed as Maxie had taken off his shoes, laid himself down on Russell's bedding and had a nap for an hour. Kylie had breathed in his scent until the madness-making sparkle wore off. Maxie had woken up jittery and confused. It was a nasty business, Kylie knew that much. And now the woman was back.

Underneath the red-haired woman's smell of awful, Kylie detected desperation. H*umans* were scary enough when they got desperate, let alone this ... this monster. *Yes*, Kylie's nose agreed with her, *You got that right*. She wasn't human, no more than Kylie. Even less so: at least Kylie had a soul. You could smell a soul in a body; a good one gave off a scent warmer and more sugar-spiced than Christmas. Russell's soul smelt like that. This woman left sour soullessness everywhere, like that horrible stuff people put over sores and wounds. It stung Kylie's nose just like that stuff, but unlike that stuff, it meant no good.

Kylie snarled as the strange woman turned her attention to Russell. He bustled under the alcove as she pushed back her red hair and strode in their direction.

Kylie barked. 'Back off! Don't want your kind here.'

'What are you making noise about, Ky?' Russell asked, and patted her, studying the street as he did so.

'It's time to go,' Kylie said, pulling at Russell's trouser leg.

'Whatsa matter, girl? Timmy got stuck in a well?' He chuckled at his own joke.

'Get goin', you drongo!' Kylie barked at him. 'I'll bite you if I have to.'

'Don't you like our nice little nest, then? You coulda told me before I started unpacking.' Russell, God bless him, started packing. He was a good soul and Kylie was his best mate. He'd leave a spot if she didn't like it. Not many humans would do that.

Kylie jittered about as Russell moved too slowly, rolling up the bag, looking around for its cover, chatting to himself, giving the horrible woman time to get halfway across the road.

A car came drifting out of the night, bearing down on the woman as if it didn't see her. It looked like it might crash into her and run her down, but it swerved a couple of metres beforehand, clipped the kerb and forced the car's front wheel on to the pavement. The driver, a young man, stopped and stared at nothing. As Kylie watched his perplexed face, she realised he couldn't see the woman. He had no idea why he'd veered.

Shaken, the driver peered around, saw Kylie and her human and decided not to get out. They wouldn't hurt the poor love, but Kylie supposed he didn't know that. The awful sound of grating metal dragged over the concrete as the car took off again, leaving Russell gawping after it.

'Wonder why ... ?' he started.

The incident was over in a couple of seconds, but the red-haired woman hadn't flinched, hadn't slowed at all.

Soon she stood a metre or two away from them on the footpath.

'Go away,' Kylie barked at her. 'Begone, whatever you are.'

Russell turned back to his packing. 'I'm hurrying, I'm hurrying.'

Kylie couldn't wait. She bit his trouser leg.

'Hey, what you doing?'

Kylie nipped at him again, and Russell backed off, at last putting distance between himself and the monster woman. Kylie would have sunk her teeth into him, made him bleed, if only he'd run. He had no idea how close to a monster he stood.

Russell tapped Kylie on the nose. 'Stop it! Stop it! What you doing?'

'Have you seen Sam?' the monster woman asked.

'Wha'?' Russell turned and saw her for the first time, startled by her sudden appearance.

'Sam! I'm looking for my Sam! If you see him, tell him I need him, he's in danger. Tell him, he has to be careful. There's danger coming.'

Kylie crouched at Russell's feet and turned to the monster, growling so low and constant no one would take it as anything but threat. 'I don't know if you bleed, but I'm willing to take a bite out of you to find out,' the corgi said.

The monster woman blew a kiss at Kylie. Tiny sparkling lights flew from her fingers and they fluttered towards the dog's nose. Kylie held her breath. She couldn't let any get inside her. Maxie had gone nutty when he'd breathed it in.

She blew air out of her nose and the twinkly dust floated up and settled in her eyes instead. Her sight blurred. She felt sleepy, but at least her mind was still her own.

'Sam's worth a thousand humans and ten thousand dogs. You've got to help me help him,' the monster woman said.

'What?' Russell asked.

Despite her sleepiness, Kylie smelt fear on Russell, almost as sour as the desperation the woman gave out. The corgi dropped to the concrete, too tired to stand.

'I want to know where my Sam is. He's in this town and one of you creatures must know.'

'Lady, I don't know a Sam,' Russell replied. 'What you do to my dog?'

'Yes, you do, you must know Sam. Where is he?' the woman said. 'It's a simple enough question. If he doesn't show up, they will talk like waves.'

'Sam? Is he the old bloke who lives near the racing course?' Russell asked.

'He's as young as dawn, is my boy. He needs me.'

The sleepiness took a stronger hold on Kylie, but Russell picked her up, and she smelt his fear again, and the scent cleared her head a little. She cracked open an eye to see the monster woman's chin a few centimetres from her furry snout.

Kylie growled deep in her throat.

'Kylie, settle,' Russell said.

'Yes, settle the beast before I break its neck. What is wrong with this place? A thousand years ago I could go

into any town and ask any human to locate someone and they would know how.'

'A thousand years ago?' Russell laughed shakily. 'You aren't that old, love. Still, if you'd been looking thousands of years ago, towns were a lot smaller.' He turned to go. 'Look, lady, I don't know your problem, but I gotta get my dog some help.'

The woman grabbed Russell by the throat and lifted him. Kylie rose with him, clutched in his clenched arms. Kylie yelped as she saw his widening eyes, then found herself squashed between Russell and the woman. Above her the woman's face changed, her humanity seeping away, the colour leaching from her hair, so Kylie and Russell both saw a grey-haired, grey-faced witch. At last Russell could see she was a monster, but it was too late to do anything. He wriggled in her grasp, his breath trapped in his throat as she clamped his windpipe.

As Russell's hands grew cold, Kylie fought off the sleepiness. She didn't know how long she could hold on; the sparkly stuff weighed down her eyes so heavily.

Russell gagged. With the last of her energy, Kylie lunged up and dug her teeth into the bony wrist of the hagged monster. The creature screamed and released Russell's throat. Kylie's head fell back, limp.

Russell's instincts and the size of his terror did the rest. He ran. Kylie bobbed in his arms and let the sleep take her. She didn't have to fight it any more.

'Saaaaaaaaaaammmmmmmmm!' the monster wailed.

* * *

Sam loved sitting high up on the roof of his house, peering at Brighton Beach. He looked out to sea. Daniel, Sam's guardian angel, had promised to visit, and Sam missed him. The angel hadn't been around for over a week, which was longer than Sam liked. Sometimes Sam saw him in town, or at school, but Daniel had said he'd definitely show at the house today. Here they could actually talk, not just nod at each other as Sam pretended he couldn't see his friend.

With his sensitive gargoyle hearing, Sam could just make out his family downstairs. Michelle, Richard and Nick were being particularly quiet, their movements heavy and sluggish. Nobody had given Sam so much as a smile since he'd woken up, so it was good to get outside to spend some time with the gargoyles.

Wheedle lay semi-snoozing on his back behind Sam. The stone bull hardly left the roof these days, due to his parenting responsibilities. Spigot the marble eagle watched the street, giving short, informative shrieks every now and then, and Bladder leaned against Sam's leg while Nugget cuddled into Sam's lap. Wheedle put up his head every time the baby gargoyle peeped.

'She's a little grotesque,' Bladder said, pointing at the newest addition to their pack.

Sam stared at Nugget, whose cute monkeyish face grinned up at his. He patted her head. 'I don't think you should say that. She's gorgeous.'

'He don't mean she's ugly, Sam,' Wheedle said, dark granite shadows deepening under his grey eyes. 'He means she's a mixed gargoyle. They're very common. Gargoyles

like us, made of a single animal – a bull, an eagle, a lion – are rare.'

'Mixed gargoyle?' Sam asked.

'Yeah, she's a mixture of monkey and dog an', an' ...' Wheedle trailed off. 'I got no idea ...'

Spigot squawked.

'Yeah, she's got bat wings for sure,' Wheedle agreed.

'Whatever she is, I think she's beautiful,' Sam said.

'Stunted though,' Bladder replied. 'She's nearly three months old and hardly grown. An' in the last month, she's taken to ...' Bladder's voice dropped. 'Sleepin'.'

'Dada,' Nugget said, rubbing her face in Bladder's mane.

Sam loved that she could call Bladder that with such confidence. To be honest, he was jealous.

'An' her words ...' Bladder started.

'What's wrong with her words?'

'Mama.' Nugget looked at Wheedle with fond grey eyes.

Bladder winced.

'What's the matter? That's a nice word,' Sam replied.

'But what *real* words does she know?'

Nugget sat up. 'Tham, chocklit, sleep, nap, hungee, play, Mama, Dada.' Nugget's nose nuzzled into Sam's hand. 'Nuggee sleep, Tham.' She shuffled around on his lap, and her eyes fluttered closed.

'What's wrong with what she says? They're lovely words.' Sam peered at Bladder.

'Exactly. Lots of warm, cosy, cutesy words, like a

human baby. Not like a monster at all. Where'd she get 'em? What about "maim", "thump", "tease"? "Belch"? Where are her full sentences? I've been trying to teach her, "Wipe that look off your face, ya twit." All she does is hug me.'

Wheedle sighed. 'Well, she's Sam's first attempt. He likes nice words. Maybe she'll get more knowledge as she grows. We did.'

'But *we* started with enough to keep ourselves alive, all breathed in right from the get-go. It means she's not safe, Sam. We gotta get more fairy dust, breathe the important stuff into her head. She's all hugs and kisses and can't look after herself. Look, she's napping. It's morning.' Bladder's volume dropped. 'An' Wheedle's started on it too.'

'She sleeps better on Sam than on me,' Wheedle said. 'I'd like a nice rest as well.'

'Which ain't right. Wheedle won't petrify, so he's doing this instead ...' Bladder pointed as the stone bull yawned. 'It's not natural for gargoyles. The worst thing is, Sam ...' Bladder stared at Nugget. '*You* did this.'

Wheedle groaned. 'We know Sam did this. You've been going on non-stop about it since it happened. An' I can barely think about my next minute. What's your point, Bladder?'

'My point? My point is no one but an ogre king has ever hatched any kind of monster before. Every month for decades me, you, Spigot and the whole of monsterkind went down to see Thunderguts sigh those beads into being, and never once has anyone else done it. Only an ogre has ever been able to do it before.'

'It's not me,' said Sam, 'it's the fairy dust. It made me sneeze and then ...'

'Pop, pop, pop ... a beautiful little gargoyle came into the world.' Wheedle stared at Nugget and sighed.

'I think I'm gonna throw up my breakfast,' Bladder said, then his voice dropped. 'The point is, what if Maggie finds out all she has to do is blow a bit of fairy dust into Sam's face and monster eggs'll be hatching left, right an' centre ... ?'

'Ah, I see,' Wheedle said. 'Dada is worried little Sammy may be an ogre.'

Bladder harrumphed. 'Of course I'm not. An' he's not an ogre, he's a gargoyle, but I worry about all of you. You're my pack. If Maggie finds out about this, she'll want him making monsters *for her*.'

'You're such a fusspot. Sam is safe here at the Kavanagh house, Maggie hasn't shown up for ages, so she's probably lost all trace of him, an' it don't matter if she's got a tonne of fairy dust. If she can't find him, she can't spray him, an' he can't hatch any other beads. Her plans to force him to make more monsters ain't going to help an' ...' Wheedle faltered. 'Something, something. Too tired.'

Sam didn't want to think of it either. What good would it do? He wished he could forget everything: the monsters roaming the earth because he'd set them free by breaking the soul sword, the fact Maggie might be looking for him because she thought he could make more ogres to build her a monstrous army. He also suspected there was an outraged fairy queen stomping about somewhere, angry with him because he'd stopped her trapping his friends'

souls in a weapon to force Maggie and her minions back in The Hole. He wondered if there was anyone outside of his house who wasn't annoyed with him.

It was November, and getting colder. He hadn't seen monsters (other than gargoyles) since he'd accidentally hatched Nugget three months before. Nothing from The Hole had bothered him, no were-people were sniffing around, no fairies tried to pull him into a war, and Maggie had been unheard of for ages. The blessings and wardings over the Kavanagh house held strong. When the sun hit them, which was happening less and less as the temperature fell, Sam saw them glowing on the paintwork where Daniel had traced them. Those sigils kept the wrong kinds of monsters and non-humans away.

'You do need to think about it though, Sam,' Bladder said, cutting through his thoughts. 'You hatching Nugget is reason to worry.'

There was so much to think of that little Nugget wasn't getting any of his worry time.

A*ctually*, Sam thought as he stroked her grey chin, *she's one of the good things*. Sam pulled his coat over Nugget so she could snuggle closer to his belly.

'It's not her herself,' Bladder continued, as if he knew what Sam had been thinking. Sam saw the soft glow in the lion's eye. 'We're all happy to have another gargoyle in the world, aren't we, Wheedle?'

Wheedle replied with a snore.

'It's that *you* made her. *You* did that. *You* got fairy dust up your nose and sneezed on her and she came about.

Maggie won't stop looking for you if she finds that out. You can't ever let your guard down. There's no new ogre king, so you and a handful of fairy dust are the closest thing to an heir she's got. Even your angel Turkey Breath is worried, an' if he thinks ...'

Wheedle's hoofs stopped mid-trot. He opened one eye. 'What you saying about the angel? What I miss?'

'What if Maggie shows up and tries to get Sam to make more ... ?' Bladder waved his paw over Nugget.

Wheedle yawned. 'Maybe his next one will be better.'

'We don't want there to be a next one! And we especially don't want it to be better!' Bladder said. 'That *would* make Sam the ogre king.'

'Not an ogre,' Wheedle muttered. 'All gargoyle, aren't you Sam?' Another yawn.

Sam sighed. 'I think she's lovely the way she is.' He stroked Nugget's ears again. His hand felt gritty and he rubbed it on his trousers. 'She will grow up though, won't she? She's a bit bigger than when she hatched.'

'We don't know.' Bladder stared at Nugget. 'I wish she could talk better. She gets these looks on her face and can't tell us nothing.' He shook his head before letting out an enormous burp. 'Pardon.'

'How's your tummy?' Sam asked. Nothing seemed to agree with Bladder any more, even chocolate. Especially chocolate.

'What do you mean?' Bladder replied. 'There's nothing wrong with my tum. Don't get me off-topic. We was discussing Nugget.'

'Who is a baby. Babies don't do what you want.' Wheedle dragged himself over and put his heavy head on Sam's leg.

'Not supposed to be a baby,' Bladder replied.

Nugget woke. Wheedle picked her up in one limp hoof and cuddled her. The little gargoyle shivered, nuzzled Sam's hand one more time and bounced on to Wheedle's back. 'All your whingeing, Bladder, now that's what's ruining everyone's sleep,' Wheedle said.

'No one. Is supposed. To sleep.' Bladder's voice came out in a roar and Nugget started to cry.

'Bladder, not today, hey?' Wheedle said.

'Bladder went to reply, then stopped with his jaw ajar. He frowned, blinked as if he'd remembered something and glanced at Sam, his mouth still open. The stone lion gave an artificial laugh. 'Yes, that's right. I forgot.'

'Why don't you go down and get yourself a warm drink, Sam? It's cold up here.' Wheedle winked at Bladder.

'What? Oh, yeah, good idea, Wheedle. You should definitely do that, Sam,' Bladder said.

Sam did feel cold, but he wondered about the wink and what Bladder had forgotten.

Sam jumped through his bedroom window, landing on the floor with a soft bump.

'Tham?' a voice called. Nugget peered in from the window sill.

'Go back up,' he whispered, pointing at the roof.

Nugget watched him with a sad face, her eyes growing larger as she pouted.

'Oh, all right, come in.'

Nugget bounced to the bedroom floor and in three quick jumps landed on Sam's bed. 'Nuggee hungee, Tham.'

'You want some chocolate?' Sam opened his desk drawer and pulled out a bar. He spent most of his pocket money on chocolate, to keep the gargoyles happy.

Nugget shook her head. 'Nuggee hungee.' She rubbed her gurgling tummy.

'You want something else?'

Nugget nodded.

'I don't have any sugar mice. Would you like some milk?'

Nugget frowned. She didn't know what milk was. Until recently, she'd been fine with chocolate and sugar mice, but last night she'd pushed away third and fourth helpings and looked for something else. Just like Bladder.

'Are you getting tummy aches like Bladder?'

Nugget rubbed her tummy again. 'Yucky.'

'All right, we'll try some milk. But you stay here.'

Sam tucked the quilt around Nugget and she put her small head on the pillow. Sam kissed her forehead like Michelle kissed his and pulled the door to as he left.

Michelle and Richard sat in the kitchen. They stopped talking as Sam entered the room. He hadn't been listening – Daniel had had a few words about Sam snooping too much, so he'd trained himself to stop eavesdropping.

Nick stood peering into the fridge. 'Sorry, Mum, I'm not feeling hungry,' he said. 'Do you mind if I go back to bed?'

'You do that, son,' Richard replied. He comforted a cup of coffee in one hand and held a pencil in the other, but there were no words written in his crossword puzzle.

'Thanks, Dad.'

Mum, Dad. They were every second word Nick said.

'What about you, Sam – you still have your appetite?'

'Mu … Mu … Michelle,' Sam started.

Michelle peered at him expectantly.

'I just wanted a warm drink. Maybe some milk too, if that's OK.'

'Warm milk? You can get that yourself.'

'Hey, Sammy.' Nick mussed his hair, then plodded off to the stairs.

Whatever was making them all down, Sam guessed it wasn't anything he'd done. Hair mussing was a sign of affection, Daniel had told him. Sam went to the fridge. Today's date on the calendar had been marked with a hand-drawn heart. Sam wondered why. Everything else was written out: *Nick's app: Dentist; Aunt Colleen's hip surgery; board meeting.*

Sam poured out a large glass of milk and, as he microwaved it, he studied the heart.

He heard a bump upstairs. So did Michelle and Richard. Something solid, possibly stone, hitting the floor.

'What's that?' Michelle asked.

Not 'What?' Sam thought. '*Who?*'

'Nick's dropped something,' Richard said. 'I hear it all the time. Actually, that's more your thing, isn't it, Sam? You bang that chair around a lot. It's surviving very well, considering.'

Sam didn't respond. The banging from his room was never his chair; it was generally the heavy footfall of a careless gargoyle. Sam listened. The solid bumping was not coming from his part of the house.

He heard baby Beatrice giggling from her room. *Oh boy.* If she yelled, Michelle would be up the stairs in a shot.

He grabbed the milk and moved with quick intent to the stairs.

He wasn't really out of earshot, so Daniel couldn't call it snooping, but as he left he heard Richard sigh, then say, 'I'm glad he's here with us, especially today.'

'Yeah,' Michelle replied. 'I know he's not … but he … anyway, it's good.'

The heart on the calendar. What's today?

He followed the bumping to Beatrice's room to find Nugget in the cot with the baby. They were each sucking an arm of a tortured teddy, its resigned face staring at Sam.

'Tham!' Nugget said.

'Ah, you've finally met,' Sam said.

'Tham!' Beatrice said.

'And introduced yourselves, I see.'

The teddy forgotten, both babies jumped up and leaned on the cot railing. 'Tham! Tham! Tham!' They slapped hands and paws on the wood.

'Is Beatrice awake?' Michelle called out.

'Yes, she is,' Sam called back. He put the milk on the changing table, rushed to the cot and grabbed Nugget. The baby gargoyle clutched the wooden edge, her stone claws holding tight. 'No, Tham. Nooooo. Play.'

'What's the matter, Beatrice?' Michelle called out from the top of the stairs.

'Let go, Nugget!' Sam said.

'No, Tham,' Nugget repeated.

'I have milk.'

Sam pointed his chin at the milk on the table. Nugget stared at it as Michelle's tired feet clumped nearer.

Nugget's tummy grumbled and she let go of the rail and reached towards the cup.

Baby gargoyle in arms, Sam rushed to the changing table, put the cup in Nugget's paws and pushed the straw into her mouth. She knew exactly what to do and sucked up the warm liquid. Sam shoved Nugget into the box of nappies on the lower shelf of the table as Michelle came in the door.

'Mama!' Beatrice called.

Sam sighed. Even Beatrice called Michelle 'Mum'.

'Oh, you're such a good boy, Sam,' Michelle said. 'You don't have to change her.' Michelle reached the cot. She studied Beatrice's face. 'There's dust everywhere.' She patted Beatrice and the cot mattress. Nugget quietly drank up her milk. Sam watched her eyes widen in pleasure.

Michelle brought the human baby to the table. 'Out the way,' she said to Sam, and popped Beatrice down on the pad. With two quick motions she had Beatrice un-nappied and clean.

Nugget sat a paw's reach from Michelle's knees, and Sam wagged a warning finger at the gargoyle. Michelle leaned over. Her hand moved towards Nugget's nose, and

Sam realised what she wanted. He ducked and pulled out a fresh nappy. As Nugget stretched to touch Michelle's fingers, he pushed down the gargoyle's paw and handed the nappy to Michelle. 'Here you go,' he said.

'What's this?' Michelle asked.

'A nappy?'

'More dust.' Michelle replied and shook out the nappy before turning it over, making sure the clean side was under Beatrice.

Sam stepped back so he could watch Nugget. The gargoyle let the empty cup fall to the floor. Bump!

'Huh?' Michelle said.

'It's my cup, it's all right.' Sam grabbed it and glared at Nugget, shaking his head. The gargoyle reached for Sam. 'In a second,' he whispered.

'What?' Michelle asked.

'I'll take it downstairs in a second,' Sam replied.

'Good boy. You put that milk away quickly – maybe you need something more filling.' She scooped Beatrice into her arms and walked to the door. Sam put himself in front of the table, blocking the view of the gargoyle as Michelle turned to look at him. 'I'm so glad you're here, Sam,' she said.

'Me too.' Sam smiled, which was hard as Nugget butted her stone head on the backs of his knees.

Sam listened until he heard Beatrice burbling at Michelle downstairs. He knelt down. 'Bad girl,' he said.

Nugget burped in his face. 'Mik,' she said and patted her protruding tum. 'Yum.'