



NEW FLAME

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Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. NEW FLAME has been rated HARD-R, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

Chapter 1

Judy sat back and scanned her office in the back room of the bookstore. The desk lamp alone didn't do the job. Far too many shadows hovered just outside the lighted area to fit into her comfort zone.

"I've got to put a real light back here," she said to the empty room, happy for even the sound of her own voice.

She stole a glance at the dark window with its artificial holly wreath. Locked.

Of course it was locked. She'd double-checked the locks on the front door and all the windows as soon as she had closed the bookstore. That was an hour ago. She'd checked twice more since.

The robbery had taught her to do that. Three weeks later and she still jerked at the slightest sound. Some way to get into the Christmas spirit!

Sweaty from unpacking used paperbacks, she pushed clingy tendrils of damp hair away from her forehead. December or not, this was San Diego, and her little shop didn't have air conditioning. Time to knock off work for the night and retreat to her apartment on the second floor. Her sister was supposed to come over in the morning and help her with the latest batch of estate-sale boxes anyway.

She stretched her T-shirt away from her damp breasts and wished she had the nerve to open the window beside her for a breeze. The outside temperature dropped to refreshing coolness after dark. But the thug who had threatened her with a knife and cleaned her out of a full day's cash remained on the loose. Thank goodness for the bounty of holiday shoppers.

She stifled the impulse to make another circuit of the doors and downstairs windows. Instead, she picked up a small rectangular box from today's mail, bearing her

mother's return address in Denver. Business stuff got opened immediately; personal stuff waited 'til the store closed. Now that the store was closed, she was entitled to a break from bills and insurance forms. Too many bills. After all her work, the danger of losing the shop still hadn't passed. This latest blow just piled the burden higher.

She shook the box. No rattle. "What's this? Early Christmas present?"

She cut the tape, turned back the lid flaps, and unwrapped the bubble paper, accidentally pinching one of the bubbles. Its sharp pop made her jump. Trembling, she breathed slowly until her heartbeat steadied. Peeking into the box, she found an old-fashioned oil lamp, its glass discolored from apparent decades of use. Tucked next to it was a folded piece of paper. The note read, "Dear Judy: This belonged to Aunt Marta. Before she died, she said you should have it. Something about how you needed it, because you're the only single woman left in the family. Who knows what she meant by that (ha, ha)? She always was a character. So—Merry Christmas. See you soon. Love, Mom."

Judy lifted the lamp out of its box. The base felt too heavy for brass—bronze, maybe?

She ran her fingertips over the smooth curve of the chimney. It looked like an antique, probably brought from the old country. Old enough to be worth money? Could she sell it for enough to cover one of those pesky bills?

Marta, her mother's aunt who'd died recently at the age of ninety-nine, had emigrated from Eastern Europe as a girl. Judy remembered her only as a tall, slim woman with steel-wool-colored hair. She'd met her great-aunt at infrequent family reunions. Their unmarried status was likely all the two of them had in common.

Experimentally turning up the wick, she felt a sudden impulse to light the lamp. Why not? Its parts seemed in working order.

She had a bottle of bayberry-scented oil stored with the hurricane lamp she kept for earthquake-related power outages. It took only a minute, rummaging through a cabinet next to the desk, to find the bottle. After pouring a small portion into the lamp, she set a

match to the wick. On first try, it blossomed into a clear glow, flooding the room with the sweetish scent.

At the same moment, a bright streak flared at the edge of her vision.

She spun around in the swivel chair, ready to climb the wall. Or run out screaming if the thug had come back for seconds.

In the corner of the room loomed a pillar of fire. A six-foot column of orange-red flame, fading to indigo and violet at the edges. It undulated slowly like a candle in a light breeze.

Oh, Lord, she had set the place on fire! Her books! She leaped to her feet.

The apparition radiated none of the fierce heat expected from a blaze that size. And how could a spark have jumped from the desk to the center of the room without igniting anything in between?

While she stared, the flame's outline shifted, growing curves and appendages. It took a few seconds for her to recognize the emerging shape as the figure of a man. The fire had all but died away. She saw an apparently solid body, although it still emitted a faint glow.

The naked man, lean and graceful, stood about a foot taller than Judy. He had tawny-bronze skin, an angular, striking face. Coppery hair growing to his shoulders floated as if stirred by a phantom wind. With his every move, his muscles appeared to flow like molten gold. While she stared at him in stunned disbelief, his penis hardened, lengthened, and sprang to attention. The gleaming shaft made Judy's hands curl with the temptation to encircle it. A treacherous tingle started between her legs.

She plopped down in the chair. She'd lost it completely; she was going nuts from stress. Or else she'd fallen asleep at the desk and plunged into one ever-more bizarre dream. Either way, she wanted it to stop right now. She reached for the lamp to extinguish the wick.

A voice echoed like a chime inside her head: *No! Please...Do not send me away.*

She looked around wildly, expecting she didn't know what. Just something that would make sense of the voices in her head. "Who's that?" she growled to the room. "What do you want?" she demanded of the figure in front of her.

I want to stay here and enjoy your world. I exist only while the lamp burns. A sigh echoed through Judy's mind. I have drifted in darkness for so many weary years—

"You're not real. I'm dreaming—or crazy." Yeah. Judy's logical brain had her saying stuff like that even while the intruder stood right in front of her.

You are not mad. A smile illuminated his face. *The lamp called me. I have been sent to care for you. To cherish you.* The man glided toward Judy. His amber eyes snared hers, then roamed downward to focus on her breasts. She became achingly aware of how her nipples showed through the clinging shirt. A fragrance like sandalwood incense mingled with the smell of bayberry from the oil.

She swallowed a lump. "Cherish?" No real man had ever used that word to her. He sure talked pretty, for an apparition.

She shoved the chair back against the desk. "What are you?" Now she could feel an aura of heat from the figure, warming rather than burning.

Your folk in the homeland know my kind as zmeu.

"What's that mean?"

A shrug, like the flicker of a candle. It is what I am. Please believe that I intend you no harm.

Definitely a weird dream, but kind of interesting. "Yeah? So what do I get for releasing you from limbo?"

My friendship. My passion. I exist only to lavish these upon you.

"Hey, not even three wishes?" She groped for the edge of the desk and pressed her fingernails against it while she tried to joke. She needed the solidity of the wood right then. "Or a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow?"

The man—the zmeu—gazed at her with a small frown of puzzlement. I can find lost treasure if needed, but that is not my purpose here. Many of your folk claimed to enjoy my companionship—your Tante—

He reached out and touched the hollow of Judy's throat with one tapering fingertip. A painless electric spark sizzled on her still sweat-dampened skin. Heat danced from the point of contact to her breasts, making both nipples tighten and tingle. She blushed and crossed her arms over her chest to hide the telltale peaks.

A crash sounded from behind her. She leaped to her feet before she realized she'd even reacted.

The back alley door! Had the creep returned for another day's receipts? Easy money for him meant a threat to her livelihood. She'd sunk every dollar of savings from seven years as a school librarian into this place.

She should have replaced that lock. How could she think that flimsy latch was secure? For that matter, she should have closed up shop after the first robbery. Her family kept reminding her it was insane to stay in this part of town.

The flame creature turned to face the doorway. Terrified, her pulse pounding in her temples, Judy noted that the creature looked only half-human from the rear. His upper back showed only the fiery silhouette of a vaguely masculine shape.

A man clattered into the office. Judy immediately recognized his blond buzz-cut and stocky build. The same man who'd robbed her the last time.

He brandished a knife and grinned when he saw her. "You still here, bitch?" He shook his head as if she'd been a bad girl and took a single step toward her. "I told you not to call the cops, honey. You too dumb for your own good or what?" He stepped past the zmeu as if he couldn't see the glowing figure. "I'm gonna have to teach you good this time. Hard—so even a stupid bitch like you ain't likely to forget."

Her stomach clenched. She imagined the blade slashing her face or ripping into her belly. This time she might lose something worse than cash.

He waved the weapon at her as he moved closer to her. Inches away, he clutched her breast. The rough grip wrenched a yelp from her.

“Shut up!” He held the blade to her neck and unsnapped her jeans.

The flame-man darted forward and grabbed the robber’s wrist. The thug convulsed as if from a high-voltage shock. The knife hit the floor.

The zmeu jerked him away from Judy, who saw the two of them in profile, the creature a blur of half man, half whirling fire. The robber’s face screwed up in anger and fear as he grabbed at the hand holding him. His hand went through the creature’s arm as if it weren’t there.

The thug’s anger evaporated, and he stared at his own arm with widening eyes. There was only fear left in his face. The zmeu shoved him onto his back. His head made a dull thump on the floorboards.

With both hands the creature gripped the top of his trousers and yanked. The denim ripped like newspaper. The shredded fabric fell from his legs. The tatters of his briefs immediately followed. A burning smell stung Judy’s nose.

Mewling , the man lay flat with his hands grasping his genitals to hide them. The creature forced his legs apart and pinned his splayed thighs to the floor with its knees. He lay exposed like a dog ready for the vet’s castration tool.

The flame-man’s nails swept down the thug’s torso from shoulders to groin, shredding his shirt on the way.

He screamed.

With her mouth dry, Judy watched, half hoping the creature would actually maim him. And, like the good liberal she tried to be, praying it wouldn’t.

The zmeu reached down to run a fingernail over the man’s scrotum. He gasped, his whole body jerking. Judy was almost sure she saw a wisp of smoke.

The man howled and tried to pull free. His large hands batted at the air above his groin.

The creature slapped them away. Again Judy caught a whiff of singed skin. The man bucked helplessly under the zmeu's sinuous body, while claw-like nails scored red lines on his chest and abdomen.

The zmeu planted both hands on the man's chest. The robber's torso went rigid, and he shrieked. This time she couldn't mistake the odor of charred flesh.

The creature stood upright and flowed into his flame shape, then reverted to human form. The man scrambled to his feet. Burns branded every visible part of his body.

In a swirl of light, the zmeu snatched up the pieces of his pants and shoved them into his hands. The robber fumbled, almost dropping the rags, then recovered enough to lurch toward the exit.

Tears streamed down his face as he staggered out, clutching his tattered clothes. The door slammed.

An image of his trying to explain his naked, burned condition flitted through Judy's mind. Her lips formed a grin while she hastily shoved a chair in front of the damaged door. *Got to get a new lock first thing on Monday.*

Chapter 2

When the zmeu turned in her direction, his flawless shape undulated like the fire he resembled. The ripple of his muscles and the thrust of his erection shut off her breath and evoked a throb of response between her thighs.

Her terror faded, leaving her suddenly aware only of the flame-man's lethal grace. The gleam in his amber eyes made her lightheaded. Whether this moment was real or not, she yearned to mold every inch of his magnificent body to hers.

She gritted her teeth to keep from moaning. Her hands brushed her breasts, making her nipples tingle still more. Her heart raced, but no longer with fear. She crossed her legs and squeezed to relieve the ache. The pressure only made her crave more.

She cupped one breast with her left hand, feeling the firm tip through the T-shirt and thin bra. Her right hand crept downward. It settled between her thighs and pressed hard against the swelling there. Squirming with frustration, she couldn't hold back the moan that rose in her throat. She rubbed herself through her jeans, stimulating a flood of wetness but bringing no relief.

She watched, mesmerized, as the creature's gaze caressed her body, and his imposing penis, springing from its nest of coppery curls, began to lengthen and rise still taller. Into Judy's head popped an image of that erect organ thrusting into her. She wanted to yank her pants down and finger her clit until she convulsed in violent release. Or, better yet, grab the creature and impale herself on his cock.

I don't believe I'm doing this right in front of him! Flushed with a blend of embarrassment and lust, she removed her hands from her breast and crotch.

The flame-man strode toward her, muscles rippling under golden skin, his silken, copper-red hair floating around his finely sculpted face.

Oh, God, if this is really real, he's dangerous!

As if hearing her thoughts, the zmeu answered inside her head, I told you that I would never harm you. He smiled shyly. But that beast will not return to bother you again.

Behind him the knife burst into flame and rose from the floor. In mid-air, hilt melted into blade and disappeared.

Judy choked down a nervous laugh. "No, I guess he won't. Uh—thanks. You even got rid of the evidence."

The creature frowned, his expression darkening. *We want no trace of his kind here.*

"I'll second that. I never want to see—" Her throat constricted. Suddenly it hit her—she'd been inches away from getting raped, maybe killed. She burst into tears.

The flame-man enfolded her in his arms. Judy clung to him with shuddering sobs. Her face rested on his firm chest. The smooth flesh felt like sun-warmed metal, yet animated. The sandalwood scent prickled Judy's nose.

I will never allow anyone to harm you. Before she died, your Tante Marta told me she would send you the lamp. She ordered me to take care of you.

Judy blinked in surprise at the tenderness in the voice that caressed her mind. Take care of her? Nobody had done that in quite a few years. Not even her last, far from lamented lover. An independent businesswoman wasn't supposed to want caretaking. It sure sounded nice, though, even as part of a dream.

The man's hands petted her like a cat, sweeping down her back in long strokes. Again his voice chimed in her head: *She showed me your photograph and told me of your strength and determination. I have longed to meet you, to give you pleasure.* At his radiant touch, she momentarily stiffened. *He burned!* The luxurious sensation quickly melted away her fear. It felt like a pair of electric heating pads with fingers.

Each downward swirl became longer. The hands massaged her rear through the jeans. Aware of liquid heat in the pit of her stomach, she involuntarily wrapped her

arms around the zmeu and pulled him closer. His rigid cock pressed against her stomach, its astonishing length delighting her senses.

Tentatively she ran her hands over the curve of his buttocks, feeling the muscles flex as he reacted to her touch and thrust his cock more firmly against her. The hot skin made her palms tingle. When she stroked upward, her fingers encountered a zone of swirling warmth instead of solid flesh. She remembered how he had looked from behind. She hastily shifted her hands lower, her head buzzing with confusion. After all, this creature wasn't human —

His next move drove that thought out of Judy's head. Sliding his palm across her stomach, then brazenly down to cup her mound, he lingered only a moment before moving back up to unzip her jeans. The zmeu reached inside her clothes to squeeze her bottom through her panties, his fingers flexing and relaxing as he kneaded her flesh.

Judy leaned toward him. *Yes, please!*

He drew slightly away from her, took her right hand, and guided it to his cock. Once more struck by the image of what he'd done to the robber, Judy tried to tug free of his grip.

I need your touch, came the silent whisper. It will renew my strength.

Judy's own eagerness extinguished whatever was left of her fear. She explored the hair between the man's thighs, as silky as a Persian cat's. She jiggled his balls in her open palm, sliding her thumb across them, claspings and releasing as she played. The zmeu gave a sigh like a distant breeze. Judy insinuated a finger into the crack of his buttocks, pressing upward while watching his face tighten with passion. The flame-man moved his hands to Judy's shoulders for stability and swayed back and forth, thrusting his rigid cock at her. It looked like a flaming arrow ready to pierce her to the heart, and she'd never felt more eager for piercing. When she reached for her waistband he grabbed her hand and guided it to his shaft again. Locking his sultry gaze to hers, he wrapped her fingers around it, holding her hand tightly within his as he moved his shaft back and forth with the rocking of his hips. Fascinated by the loose skin that

covered the head of his penis, she worked it up and down. A gleaming droplet welled from the tip. She ran her thumb over it and gasped, shocked by the molten heat. She kept her eyes on the zmeu's, watching them glow like coals on a hearth.

When the pace of the rocking grew more frenzied, she squeezed tighter and pumped his shaft more vigorously. He growled like a tiger. A halo of golden light strobed around him. Judy's heartbeat quickened, and her own inner places pulsed as she felt his cock throb. Suddenly the flame-man dug his fingers into Judy's shoulder and convulsed, his eyes closing as he leaned into her, his sinuous body rippling from head to toe.

A prismatic rainbow of color sprayed from his cock, pounding like a heartbeat in her hand. The sparks shot onto her forearm like the output of a holiday sparkler. She felt pinpoints of fire that faded almost instantly. He threw his head back and roared his satisfaction.

They clung to each other, while his chin rested on top of her head, and he stroked down the length of her back. She burrowed her face against his chest, luxuriating in the incense fragrance of his skin. Her lips moved to touch and taste him, her tongue licking a sensitive nipple as his muscles flexed and jerked in reaction. Sighing contentedly, Judy relaxed against his superior strength. In the back of her mind she dreamily reflected how unlike her this dependent posture was. But it felt so good to be sheltered for a change.

The zmeu displayed none of the exhaustion normally expected after an orgasm. He stood as firmly as before while Judy trembled, limp, in his arms. An intense tickling sensation tormented her breasts and thighs and the cleft between her legs. She needed —

What's happening to me? I don't screw around with strange men. And this is the strangest man I've ever met. She stifled a hysterical giggle. Moral issues didn't count right now, because this whole experience was obviously a dream or hallucination. Psychoactive chemicals in the base of the lamp, maybe?

The next moment, all those thoughts flew out of her mind. The flame-man kissed her on the forehead, a sensation like a painless brand. His lips moved to Judy's neck, and his tongue touched her skin as he trailed kisses across her shoulder. She shivered at the unexpected contact. His hands moved to her waist and he murmured reassurances seductively against her ear as he began to pull the shirt upward. She raised her arms and let him remove it, not even flinching when his fingers returned to glide across her shoulders and slide the bra straps down, then deftly unhook it and toss it to the floor.

Beautiful!

"Who, me?" That word ringing in her head made her feel like laughing again. With mousy-brown hair and an overly rounded figure, she had never seen herself as beautiful.

The zmeu explored her curves and angles with a touch as light as a summer breeze. *Now that I have seen your face, I begin to understand human love. I never knew it could be more than nourishment.* His hands cradled her breasts, making the nipples stand at attention. The tapered fingers then danced around to her back and traced a burning network of caresses on her bare skin. Moaning aloud, she leaned into his chest, wordlessly begging him to relieve the ache in her nipples. The man's fingertips again circled to the front, to brush her breasts in feathery whorls, sending sparks through her body to ignite in her loins.

The zmeu bent to lap each breast in turn, licking and tugging at her nipples. His tongue, longer and more flexible than a human one, felt like a flame itself, as it explored her beaded flesh. The burning tip caused no pain to mar the piercing thrill that shot through Judy's insides.

Scarcely able to stand, she held onto the flame-man while trying to shove her jeans down her thighs.

He paused in his licking to help her strip. Now conscious only of her need, Judy pressed full length against him. The creature's flesh curved to fit hers. His hot skin teased her nipples. Without thinking about it, she caught herself shifting to clasp one of

the zmeu's thighs between her legs, to rub her swollen clit against him. The feel of his skin, like polished bronze, teased and tormented her ravenous pussy. The pulse pounded in her temples. Her breath came shallow and fast.

The zmeu thrust his hand between them, evoking a sob of frustration from Judy. Cupping her butt with his other hand, he began to stroke Judy's melting flesh. Her slit eagerly squeezed the probing fingers, while her clit twitched, impatient for attention.

She thrust frantically, too excited to settle into a rhythm. Gradually the touch moved from the inner lips up to her clit, strumming it with a light butterfly-flick that drove her wild. She tried to beg for release, but her voice wouldn't work.

The motion of his fingers became harder, faster. The pressure built in her groin, focused on the intolerable tingling in her clit. She exploded into convulsions of ecstasy, humping the caressing hand until she had to collapse, sobbing, onto the man's chest. Tightening his arms around her, he buried his face in her hair. His rapid breathing matched her own.

The zmeu guided her limp, melting body onto the chair. To her surprise, he then knelt in front of her, sliding his hands along her thighs and spreading her legs. "No more—I can't—"

Let me taste you. The creature bent over to flick her thighs alternately with an incandescent tongue. When Judy groaned and stretched her legs wider apart, his gaze flicked up to lock with hers, burning in its intensity. A small, sexy smile curved his lips as he bent his head and stroked his tongue along each delicately quivering inner thigh, until Judy once again was squirming and clutching at his shoulders.

Her hips undulated in eager response. He parted her slick folds. *Sweet petals*, his thoughts purred in her head, *wet with dew*. She stifled a scream when the tongue circled her clit. It pulsed like a second heart as he licked faster and faster, targeting the hypersensitive tip as if he knew the precise spot.

This time the build-up didn't last long. Judy clamped her legs around the man's shoulders and let out a pent-up scream as her sheath rippled in delicious fulfillment. He

pressed his mouth even more tightly against her and moaned his satisfaction into her drenched flesh.

When she opened her eyes after long minutes of near-oblivion, the zmeu stood beside the desk, looking down at her. *Thank you for letting me share your pleasure. You have given me a great gift.* His form wavered, and the solid shape faded at the edges into blue and orange flame. *My time for this visit is almost done.*

Judy sat up and peeked into the lamp. Only a trace of oil remained. "That's right—the lamp brings you to life." She pushed damp hair back from her forehead. "So every time I light it, you'll appear?"

The flame-man swayed toward her in a graceful nod.

Recalling how he'd handled the intruder, Judy realized that with him on the premises, she would have nothing to fear. If this whole evening had been real, of course. She still had her doubts. "And when you're here, you'll protect me? The way you just did?"

Of course. I exist to take care of you. In all ways.

She reached out to touch the man's fingertips, flashing from solid to fire and back again. "You don't have to disappear now, do you? I have plenty more oil. We could take the lamp up to my apartment—" A blush suffused her skin.

Then you want me to stay? The glowing eyes searched Judy's hopefully. You will remain my friend, my lover?

"Sure." She grinned up at him. "After all, it's a family tradition, isn't it? And 'tis the season for tradition." No matter how crazy this dream might be, she wanted to extend it as long as possible.

Lamp in one hand and bottle of oil in the other, she led the way through the front room to the stairs. She had been lucky to find a rental in a location zoned to let her live above the shop. Her apartment comprised a living room with a kitchenette alcove in one corner and a bedroom with attached bath. *Lucky I have a king-size bed*, she giggled to herself, turning to ogle the zmeu's long, muscular legs.

He glanced at the half-decorated Christmas tree by the front window as if he'd never seen one before. Well, maybe he hadn't, if he'd spent most of the past few decades in limbo.

In the bedroom, Judy raised the window to let in the coolness of the night. With the zmeu beside her, she didn't fear having it open, especially on the second floor. The breeze on her bare flesh made her nipples pucker. She set down the lamp and fiddled with it for a second. "Looks like I have to blow this out to refill it."

An expression of panic leaped into his eyes. *Please don't send me away! I need you!*

"Take it easy, it's only for a minute." Before his wide, golden eyes could distract her, she removed the lamp chimney and blew out the wick. The zmeu flared into a floor-to-ceiling column of flame but didn't vanish.

"Whoa, that's intense!" With shaking fingers, she refilled the base of the lamp, reassembled it, and lit the wick.

The flame shape again coalesced into man form.

"See, it worked," she said, clasping his forearm and luxuriating in the smooth, hot firmness of his flesh. "And you didn't even disappear. Nothing to worry about after all." Maybe the lamp hadn't been extinguished long enough to dismiss him. On the other hand, why should it, since he was only a figment of her frustrated imagination, right?

His penis stirred. Thank you. I should have known you would not abandon me so soon.

"Not a chance. Not when you're the first man—or whatever—I've had in too many years." A blush spread over her naked body. The first in the seven years since graduate school, in fact. Tentative engagement plans had fallen apart after a fight in which she had called her lover a mindless lackey of the corporate establishment and he'd called her a "flaky English major airhead." He would've seen this store as a money-sucking black hole. Well, she'd said "good riddance" to him then, and she wasn't about to let the memory spoil this luscious hallucination.

She flipped the covers down, threw herself on the bed, and smiled up at the zmeu. "I just realized we don't even know each other's names. Mine's Judy. What's yours?"

He sat on the edge of the bed, his large body relaxed, and ran his fingertips from her throat, between her breasts, down to her navel, a hot hungry gaze tracking each movement. *I don't have one. My kind live apart from each other, surrounded by you mortals. We have no need for names. And even with your Tante Marta, I never remained aware long enough to require such a label.*

The heat of his fingers, strangely, made her skin prickle with chills. She wiggled under his touch. Her thoughts momentarily veered to the concept of her ancient aunt frolicking in the hay with this creature. Now, that was an image she could live without! "Well, I need a name. I have to call you something."

Then you choose one for me. He trailed his finger up to her breast and tweaked a nipple.

"Oh, heck, I don't know —" The fingertips dancing over her skin turned her brain to mush. Suddenly, she remembered an old beau Aunt Marta had mentioned a few times, who had died in World War I. Zarek, that was his name. "How about if I call you Zarek?"

Most satisfactory. My dear mistress, you honor me by giving me a name.

She blushed even deeper. "Mistress? I don't own you."

You own the lamp, and I am bound to it.

She reached up to wrap her arms around him. "Well, Zarek, if I'm your mistress, get busy serving me."

With greatest delight, he crooned inside her head. How shall I pleasure you, my beautiful one?

Judy decided she could quickly get used to this kind of treatment. "Kiss me."

He obeyed with moth-like kisses that alighted on her forehead, her cheeks, her mouth. She inhaled his cinnamon and sandalwood fragrance. When she parted her lips,

his tongue darted inside, caressing and probing. The tip of hers welcomed it. He tasted delicious. The flickers of his tongue made sparks dance through her body.

She clutched his shoulders without moving her hands downward, remembering the swirl of fire she'd felt on his back. The pressure of his smooth, warm chest against her breasts made her nipples ache. Her legs automatically splayed open to form a V for his hips, as he settled against her. His shaft pressed on her clit. Every tiny movement made the swollen nub twitch with the craving for more, as he undulated his hips slowly between her spread legs.

His tongue wandered along her jaw-line to her ear, tickled her earlobe, flicked from there to her neck, and tasted the hollow of her throat. Rising onto his elbows, he shifted downward to lick one of her nipples. *Ah, you taste like salt and honey. Savory and sweet together.*

The hot swirl of his tongue forced a moan from her. But the change of position left her clit and the wet cavity below deprived of the stimulation they so urgently needed.

She raised her hips. "Now—I want—"

Do you want me sheathed inside you?

"Yes!"

His body covered hers again, skin to skin, his weight pressing her down, as the plum-shaped head of his cock probed her hole. She arched upward, stroking his muscled body with hers and silently begging him to enter. He slid into her, inch by inch, stretching and opening her with his insistent invasion. It had been so long since any man had penetrated her. Her sheath felt incredibly full as he flexed his hips and buried his enormous cock to the balls.

He echoed her thoughts. *So tight. And you feel like the finest velvet.* He closed his eyes and touched his forehead to hers, as if savoring the feel of her wet heat as lust burned through him. She felt the electricity of his arousal thrum through his body into hers.

She gasped at the thrill his words sent through her. The throbbing in her clit and her hole grew unbearably intense. Grasping him tightly and rubbing her body against his, she frantically pumped her hips to urge him to thrust.

Despite her frenzy, he slipped in and out with long, silken strokes designed to torment. Wrapping her legs around his, she humped harder.

"Faster!" Her labia and the inside of her canal tingled. The sensation spread to her clit, tickled by the hair at the root of his penis, yet not getting the relief it needed. She clamped her teeth on his shoulder. "Don't stop!"

Is that your command, mistress?

"Yes, damn it!"

As if he magically read the sensations racing through her, he rocked forward to make contact with her clit. Vigorous strokes drove into her depths while rubbing the tight button with the pressure it craved. Her climax exploded. Groaning with need, he thrust in deeply one more time, then tensed and stilled as his fiery eruption filled her. The painless burning set off a fresh wave of convulsions.

The seismic ripples seemed to go on for hours until they finally died away. She opened her eyes and saw a halo glowing around him as he rested on his elbows above her. "Wow," she whispered.

Thank you, my beautiful mistress. I have not shared such joy with any woman for as long as I can remember, Zarek said. We need more light, so I can fully enjoy the bliss in your eyes.

He leaned on one elbow and waved toward the dresser, where a holly-trimmed Advent wreath sat. The four candles in the circle and the white one in the center burst into flame. Their soft glow complemented the waning light from the lamp.

"Neat trick." Judy glanced at the lamp on the nightstand. "How did you get enslaved to that thing like a genie or something? Do all your kind live this way?"

Oh, no. I was punished. He cuddled her and smoothed her hair. An ancestress of yours, almost three hundred years ago, cursed me with this fate.

“No kidding? Why?”

Like all my brothers and sisters, I dwelt in a mountain cave, venturing forth to seduce young mortals and partake of their pleasure. One maiden I visited became so enchanted with me that she ended her betrothal. She abandoned all other concerns and lay in her bedchamber pining for my embrace. When her health began to fail, I ceased visiting her.

Judy pulled away to glare at him. “That sounds awfully cold.”

No, I am never cold, always hot. She sensed bewilderment in his thoughts. If you refer to my emotions, I confess that we think of mortals only as a source of carnal delight. Until now. You are different.

“Oh, yeah? How?”

No one, not even your Tante, has ever kept me enfleshed this long, much less inquired about my past. And you are the only woman I have been commanded to care for. A command I knew would delight me to obey, as soon as I saw your likeness.

Though still dubious, she lay down and rested her head on his shoulder again. “So what about the curse?”

He sighed, flickering like a candle. The maiden became ill and died. On her deathbed, she summoned her sweetheart and begged his forgiveness. After hearing the tale, he appealed to his grandmother, the wise woman of the village. She cursed me with bondage to the lamp. I would never find freedom, she said, unless I saved a life to atone for the one I’d destroyed.

“And you’ve been stuck that way for almost three centuries?”

Except for the brief times when the lamp is lit, and a woman allows me to share her passion. Your family has passed the lamp down through the generations. I have picked

up bits of knowledge about the changes in the world since the doom came upon me, but it is all very strange.

“Doesn’t matter, I guess, because you don’t need to know anything about the outside world to give great sex.”

No, the needs of a woman’s body do not change. He guided her hand to his cock, already standing erect. Like my own needs. I need to enter you again and feed on your passion.

“No way, I’m exhausted.” But she wasn’t. To her surprise, she felt a fresh stirring. “Are you doing something to me?”

It’s a power native to my kind. We rouse desire in mortals so we can enjoy satisfying it.

She gazed at his erection, like a blazing spear, more beautiful than she could have ever imagined. “You mean you project some kind of magic whenever you’re aroused? How often does that happen? Most men, human men, can’t get hard again this fast.” She couldn’t resist encircling his shaft and sliding that sheath of silken skin up and down.

Sighing with obvious pleasure, he leaned toward her, lambent heat in his gaze, encouraging her strokes. I have existed half-starved for many years. Your Tante was ill at the end of her life and seldom called upon me. Now my – tool – what do your people call it? A cock?

Judy’s face flushed hot. “That’s one thing we call it.”

My cock becomes hard quickly because I crave you so desperately. The bond between man and woman made no sense to me when your ancestress cursed me for breaking it. Now it does, now that I have touched and tasted you. He swept one hand down her body to the moist hair between her legs. Smiling slyly, he stroked his finger through the damp crease. You have an erection, too.

He tickled her clit. She couldn’t deny it was erect. In fact, it swelled and thickened more every second. His deft fingertips made her squirm.

What do people of this day call your secret parts? He extended one finger, sliding it into her tight passage, stroking the sensitive walls, until it was buried deep inside, where he pressed upward, taking her breath.

"Oh, pussy, I guess," she gasped, feeling a blush spread from her face over her shoulders and breasts.

Like a small, furry animal. So soft. He stroked her pubic hair. Allow me to pet your pussy.

"Be my guest." With his fingers expertly targeting her most sensitive parts, her voice came out as a strangled whisper.

The delicious sensations mounted even faster this time. His long fingers felt everywhere at once, teasing her clit and probing her vagina with impossible dexterity. *Magic, it has to be magic!* She soared to the peak and screamed while her clit pulsed, and her inner muscles squeezed his fingers, until she melted into a puddle of mindless pleasure.

"My cock needs relief. May I come inside you?"

"Oh, yeah!"

When she spread her legs, he knelt between them, teasing her eager slit with his cock-head. She squirmed with impatience, but he slid in and out with slow, shallow strokes, a teasing smile on his lips. She drew her legs up until her heels rested on his shoulders. The taut stretching drove her into a near-frenzy. "Come on! Please!" He plunged in, and she locked her legs around him. She wouldn't have believed she could rise to another climax. Yet when he started thrusting, she rocked with him and felt fresh waves of heat surging through her. He drove in to the hilt and poised above her, racked by tremors of violent release. A roar of ecstasy erupted from him. Shuddering, she clung to him until the last sparks faded from volcanic explosions into a quiet glow.

Zarek guided her hand to his lips and kissed it, turning it over to flick her palm with his tongue. Tremors coursed through her, despite her exhaustion.

His eyes shone. How can I thank you for the joy of this night? Even if you never summon me again, you have gifted me more lavishly than any other woman I have known.

"That's okay," she murmured, drifting on the verge of sleep. "You're just a dream anyway."

She turned onto her side. Snuggling close to spoon behind her, he answered, *Do I truly feel like a dream?* His erect penis nudged the crease of her derriere.

"You can't be ready again."

I have waited a long time for this night. I cannot have too much of your abundance. Let me rest within you while you sleep.

His cock glided between her slick labia, sliding back and forth until languid heat flowed from that spot throughout her body. He entered her, tucked his arm under her breasts, and draped one leg over hers. Wrapped in his warmth, she felt safe.

Chapter 3

Judy woke up with crimson and gold flames swirling behind her closed eyelids. *Wow, what a wild dream!* The soreness in her muscles and between her legs made her feel as if she really had spent the night with an insatiable stud. Yet she'd slept sounder than in all the nights since the robbery. As if something had guarded her rest.

She opened her eyes and sneaked a peek at her familiar bedroom. The sunlight seeping between the curtains confirmed what the clock radio said—almost nine. Good thing she didn't have to open the shop today, it being Sunday. No naked man lay next to her on the mattress. Of course not, because she had dreamed him. Too bad, considering what an excellent bodyguard he would have made.

Never realized I had that vivid an imagination, she thought as she dragged herself out of bed to the bathroom. She cast a wistful glance at the empty bed, remembering the words of love the creature had lavished on her. Too bad that part couldn't have been real. After a quick shower, she returned to the bedroom, still nude.

A pillar of fire blocked her path.

She covered her mouth to stifle a scream.

The flame contracted into the zmeu's human shape. "Why are you afraid? Surely you know I am here only to care for and delight you." He plucked a sprig of holly from the Advent wreath and tucked it in her hair, then gazed at her hopefully like a little boy presenting a dandelion to his girlfriend. "Please allow me to share that joy with you."

His hurt tone made her want to throw her arms around him and make him feel better. She resisted the impulse. "You can't be here at all. I dreamed you. Even if I didn't, you were supposed to vanish when the lamp burned out. And come to think of it, why can you talk all of a sudden?"

He spread his hands in a show of bewilderment. "Perhaps whatever freed me from the lamp gave me that boon also."

"Wait a minute, what did you say about that curse? You had to save a life to make up for ending one?"

He nodded. "So the witch told me."

"You did save a life. Mine."

Wonder dawned in his golden eyes. "Then the curse is broken. I can stay with you and care for you." He reached for her.

"Hold on, who said anything about staying?" She evaded his outstretched hands. "I didn't bargain for this. Oh, jeez, if you're real, I could get pregnant."

"I do not think that is possible. My kind are not born. We rise full-grown from the fires in the earth's depths. We do not age, breed, or die. So you have nothing to worry about." He clasped her hand and kissed it. His wet tongue sent chills racing up her arm.

"I damn well do!" She snatched her hand away. The way he stared at her, as if she were a hot fudge sundae, made her head spin and her blood fizz. "If you don't conveniently vanish, what the heck am I supposed to do with you?" Recalling what she'd done with him the night before, she blushed all over. Good grief, she'd acted like a wild woman and used language that would've made her mother wash her mouth out.

"Let me satisfy you. That is why I exist." Before she could dodge again, he clasped her face between his hot palms. Molten sweetness surged through her veins.

"Stop it, we have to talk. I don't want you doing that." What a lie. Her nipples were puckered, and her crotch was damp.

"You do want me. I can tell your pussy is ready for my cock." The head of his penis nudged her pubic hair.

Squirming backward, she said, "Only because you're doing that magic stuff. Quit it!"

"I cannot. I radiate that power whenever I need a woman's passion. I have no control over it." His fingers insinuated under her hair to rub the nape of her neck.

She gritted her teeth in resistance to the shivers that trickled down her back. "Then get some control. Just because we feel needs doesn't mean we have to act on them. We're two intelligent human beings. Well, an intelligent human being and an intelligent whatever."

Again he gave her that hurt-puppy look. "But I will starve without your sweetness."

"Likely story." She opened the dresser drawer to grab a pair of underpants. "Why can't you do it by yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

For some kind of sex demon, he sure seemed naive. "You know, beat off. Come. Take care of your own hard-on." Her blush burned even hotter. She simply didn't discuss this stuff with men.

"That is impossible. Your passion sustains me. I can't relieve my own lust."

"You can't come by yourself?" In response to his blank look, she said, "Ejaculate. Shoot your load." Sheesh, he had her talking like an X-rated video.

"Spend? No, and even if I could, I would get no benefit from it. I need the passion of your heart as well as your body." He reached out to flick one of her nipples with a fingertip. "Why do you put on clothes? Let me make you come again."

She hissed at the teasing touch. "There'll be no coming until we get some things settled, and maybe not even then." After wiggling into a pair of shorts, she pulled on a T-shirt. "And you have to wear clothes, too."

"Why? I have never worn any before." Zarek arched his brow and looked affronted.

"Because I can't think straight while you're poking that at me." She forced herself to tear her eyes away from his cock. If she started thinking about how it had felt thrusting

into her, she wouldn't be able to form a coherent sentence, much less decide how to handle this unexpected houseguest. What could she give him to wear?

She remembered when her brother-in-law Josh, after helping her paint the shop a few months ago, had changed into clean clothes before they'd all gone out to dinner to celebrate finishing the job. Rummaging in the bottom of her closet, she found the paint-spattered sweatpants and T-shirt she'd never gotten around to washing and returning. She tossed them to Zarek. "Here, put these on."

He obeyed, surveying the room with a bemused frown as he did so. "This is the first time I have stayed in a woman's home for so many hours. I explored your rooms while you slept. This place looks quite different from others I have seen. Mistress Judy, do you realize you have a tree in your parlor?"

"It's a Christmas tree. Haven't you ever been, uh, awake at Christmas before? And cut out the 'mistress' thing. Just call me Judy." A sudden image of contact between fresh pine needles and Zarek's incandescent fingers popped into her mind. "You stay away from my tree, you hear? For that matter, you better not get too near the books, either."

"Yes, mistress." At her glare, he said, "Yes, Judy."

"That's better. Now, I need breakfast and coffee." Maybe that would jump-start her brain as well as get her mind off the bulge in his pants and the ache between her legs. "Do you want something to eat?"

"Only if you wish me to eat. I can taste ordinary food for pleasure, but it doesn't nourish me, and it is consumed to nothing as soon as I take my flame shape. Your passion feeds me."

She paused in her rush for the kitchen to stare at him. "Then you meant it literally when you talked about starving?"

"Oh, yes," he breathed. He cupped her breast, making the nipple harden in his palm. He guided her hand to the front of his pants. "Feel how I hunger and thirst for you."

Her insides melted, and she had to fight the impulse to fondle his rigid shaft through the cloth.

She gave him one squeeze and pulled her hand away. With a sigh, he thrust his hips at her.

"Please don't refuse me." The wicks of the burned-down Advent candles caught fire, and the antique lamp burst into flame, too. A guilty look flickered over his face.

Startled, Judy batted away his insinuating hands. "What did you do that for?"

"I didn't intend to. When my needs remain unsatisfied, I have trouble controlling the fire." This is great

"Great, just what I want in a building full of books. Why couldn't you be a leprechaun with a pot of gold? That, I could use."

"If you need treasure, I can help you find —"

The doorbell rang.

Zarek leaped in front of her and flared with a crimson aura. "What is that? Danger?"

Oddly touched by his eagerness to defend her, she patted his arm. "Easy, it's just the front door, nothing to go to battle stations about. I wonder who would—" A quick look at the bedside clock reminded her of what she'd forgotten. "Oh, no, it's Brenda!" At Zarek's blank expression, she said, "My sister. I forgot she was coming over today. Damn, that's all I need. Stay here." She scurried downstairs as the bell rang again.

When she opened the door, her sister, slim and auburn-haired, stepped inside. Brenda's shorts and T-shirt made it clear she'd arrived ready to work.

"I hate to admit it," Judy said, opting for something close to the truth, "but I stayed up late working last night and forgot all about setting the alarm. Now isn't a great time for this after all."

Brenda folded her arms and frowned. "Say what? I get up early to help you unpack all that stuff you bought at the estate sale the other day, and it completely slips your mind?"

"I'm really sorry." Judy strained her ears for any noise from the second floor that might stir her sister's curiosity. With luck, Zarek would stay quiet.

"Relax, I'm not too mad, just a little freaked. It's so not like you, the family workaholic."

"Well, maybe my brain's still a little scrambled from the robbery." The sound of footsteps on the staircase interrupted her. *Oh, no, why didn't he stay put?*

She turned to confront the zmeu as he walked into the room.

"Hey, I told you to stay upstairs," she said with a shooing motion of her hands.

Too late. Brenda stared at him as he stepped into a patch of sunlight. His bare arms and legs gleamed like burnished bronze. Brenda's eyes roamed up and down his hard, lean body with blatant relish. "Oh, I see why you forgot," she said with a grin that verged on a smirk.

Following her sister's gaze, Judy noted the unmistakable tenting of the loose sweatpants. Judy felt torn between the desire to hide under the desk in the office until Brenda went away and the urge to drag Zarek upstairs and hump like a bunny. Feeling her face turn red, she scrambled to attempt damage control. "Brenda, meet Zarek." Last name? Judy dug into her memory and dredged up a scrap from German 101. "Zarek Feuer. He's a friend of Aunt Marta's." At Brenda's skeptical look, she said, "I mean, the grandson of a friend of hers."

"Nice to meet you, Zarek," Brenda said, still scanning him with more appreciation than a married woman ought to show.

"It is a great pleasure," he said with a luminous smile.

With obvious reluctance, Brenda turned her attention back to Judy. "Why is he wearing Josh's clothes?"

“He just arrived from Europe yesterday, and his luggage got lost.”

Judy congratulated herself on that quick save until she noticed Brenda catching sight of a heap of rumpled cloth on the floor – the jeans, shirt, and underwear Judy had discarded in a frenzy the night before. *Please, just let the floor swallow me up!*

Brenda’s smile turned sly. “I see the luggage wasn’t all that got lost. I can’t wait to hear Mom’s reaction.”

“Don’t you dare tell her!”

Zarek stepped to Judy’s side, apparently worried by her distraught tone. A faint glow surrounded his body, pulsing like a heartbeat. She hoped Brenda would mistake it for an optical illusion.

When Judy grabbed his hand to hold him back, the Christmas candles in the front window lit themselves.

Brenda blinked in surprise. “What – ?”

“Just trick candles. You better not mention a word to Mom about Zarek.”

“I won’t have to,” Brenda said, leaning against the checkout counter. “When she flies out for Christmas, you’ll have a lot of explaining to do.”

“What’s to explain? She’s always worried about this neighborhood not being safe. She’ll be glad I’m hiring a man for protection, plus he can help out around the shop.”

Brenda’s eyes wandered to Zarek’s groin again. “Yeah, I can tell he’s a big help.” She interrupted Judy’s indignant spluttering with, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for you. About time you gave up living like a nun. Call me when you’re ready to work on those boxes.” She walked out, closing the front door behind her.

Judy automatically bolted and chained it, then turned on Zarek. “Why didn’t you stay upstairs the way I told you?”

“I need you. I have a hard-on.”

“Yes, I can see that. You don’t have to –”

He was already pulling down the elastic waistband to let his erection spring free. "I cannot wait. Please relieve my cockstand." He stood there, lust incarnate, awaiting her reaction. Every beautiful inch of him pulsing with need.

His smoldering gaze made her eager to do just that. She felt dizzy, almost feverish. With a fingertip she barely touched the tip of his cock, and a golden drop welled out. When she forced herself to pull away, he groaned aloud.

A loud whoosh made her whirl around to look at the trashcan by the counter. Its contents were aflame.

"Oh, God, no!" Grabbing the fire extinguisher off the wall, she sprayed the burning papers until they turned to foam-covered ashes. "That does it! You're a menace. You can't stay here." She deposited the extinguisher on the floor with an angry thump.

To her dismay, Zarek fell to his knees and pressed her hand to his lips. "Please don't banish me! How could I exist without you?" His wide-eyed gaze silently pleaded with her.

"Hey, stop that." His stricken look, as if she'd slapped his face, made her melt all over again. The pit of her stomach quivered. "You won't fade away. You're free of the curse, remember?"

"But no other woman could satisfy me after you. And where could I go?" Closing his eyes, he turned his head, sliding her hand caressingly along his cheek.

Good point, she had to admit. Aside from his total ignorance of the outside world, she imagined the chaos he would produce, starting fires right and left, not to mention seducing dozens of unwary women. That last thought pierced her with a pang of something that felt like jealousy. *After all, Aunt Marta left him to me.* "Okay, granted, you saved my life, so I'm responsible for you. Or is that vice versa? For heaven's sake, get up!"

He nuzzled her crotch for a second before he obeyed. Liquid gushed between her legs. "Cut that out," she said, with less conviction than she intended. "How am I

supposed to let you hang around my bookstore if you've got this supernatural pyromania?"

"That will not always happen," he said. "As soon as I have made love to you enough to make up for my long starvation, I will regain control." Apparently sensing her continued doubts, he said, "Last night you invited me to stay. And you told your sister I was to be your helper and bodyguard."

"But last night I thought I was dreaming. As for Brenda, I only said that to make her stop—"

A hint of golden tears glistened in his eyes.

Her heart constricted. She had to admit she wanted him with her, and not only for his superhuman lovemaking. "Don't do that! All right, I won't make you leave. Not right this minute, anyway."

He kissed her hand again, making her tremble with fever chills. "Thank you, beloved mistress—Judy. Please help me." He embraced her with one arm and grasped her hand to press it against his rigid erection. "I can barely hold my flame in check. It has been hours since we made love. I need to come, really hard, right now."

She reached inside his pants to wrap her hand around his cock. His other arm encircled her, pulling her close. He thrust into her palm. Pumping up and down his shaft, feeling the loose skin at the tip retract with her strokes and hearing his urgent groans, she felt her sheath ache with renewed hunger. Her pussy ached to be filled. *He's doing this to me. It's his magic that makes me want him.* Yet surely the tenderness with which he embraced her meant more than that. At this moment, though, she craved him too much to waste thought on the reason.

His climax spurted iridescent sparks into the air, like a multicolored firecracker. The arm wrapped around her waist moved upward to let him twine his fingers in her hair. He kissed her, his sinuous tongue teasing her lips and exploring her mouth. She couldn't help squirming. With each move she made, her shirt brushed the peaks of her nipples, and the fabric of her underwear tormented her slit.

"Please—" she breathed into his mouth. Hooking her hands into her waistband, she shoved down her shorts and panties, then tugged the sweatpants down his hips.

"You still want me," he whispered in a worshipful tone that almost made her legs collapse under her.

"You know I can't help it, damn it!" She spun around and leaned against the counter, her legs braced wide apart.

Standing behind her, he fingered her slit, spreading the juices over the folds and circling her clit. "Your button is very stiff," he murmured in her ear. His hot breath on her neck made her shake with eagerness.

His cock slid inside her welcoming sheath. He stretched her until the tightness became so intense she could hardly breathe. Unable to move in this position, she could only clutch the counter while his thrusts set the rhythm. Grasping her hip he held her, his cock pounding into her, as the fingers of his other hand strummed her swollen bud. Electric shocks thrummed through her body. All her muscles convulsed in a single prolonged shudder when her sheath clenched his penis and pulsed around it in time with the throb of her clit.

Breathless and limp, she turned in his arms to lean on him. Holding her tightly against his warm chest, he smoothed her hair and kissed the top of her head. Again an unfamiliar feeling of safety enveloped her.

"I may stay and guard your body?" he asked.

She leaned back to look into his eyes. "Okay, we'll give it a try. You may do whatever you want with my body." She blushed. "Including guard it, along with the store. Assuming I still have a store much longer." She rubbed her eyes. "Even if you promise not to burn the place down, I'm not so sure I can keep up with the expenses."

"That is why you asked for a pot of gold? But I can help you with that need, too. In my homeland, blue flames shine over buried treasure on certain nights. My kind, unlike yours, can see those signs all the time, not only on those nights."

"You're kidding." She searched his wide, amber eyes. "No, why should that be any more incredible than the rest of this day? Trouble is, the only buried treasure we're likely to find around here would be at the archaeological digs in Old Town. Not much help for my bank account."

"Treasure need not be buried in the earth." He released her and scanned the shop, pausing at the stack of boxes next to the counter. "What are those?"

"Books from an estate sale. Brenda was going to help me unpack and inventory them."

"I can do that, surely. But as for treasure—" He walked over to the boxes and ran his hand a few inches above them. "Watch. Ah, yes, there."

"I don't see anything."

"Touch me." He reached for her, and they clasped hands. Instantly, hovering above one of the boxes, she saw the shimmer of blue fire.

"The books!"

"Have no fear," he said. "This fire does not burn. Look inside."

Struggling to keep her hands from shaking, she took a box cutter and sliced open the lid of the container where the blue flame had appeared. Plunging her hand into the artificial popcorn pellets, she pulled out the first book she touched.

"Oh, my God!" She sank to the floor, cradling the volume in her lap. "This is an Arkham House first edition of *The Outsider and Others*." She dug into the box and extracted a few more books. "These are all Arkham House first editions. The family who sold me this stuff must've had no idea what their uncle's collection was worth."

Sitting beside her, Zarek put his arm around her and grazed her hair with his lips. "This is good?"

"This is great! You just got promoted to bodyguard, stock person, and assistant buyer. I'm taking you to every auction and estate sale from now on."

"Your desire is my command." His hand wandered down the front of her shirt to brush over her breasts.

She tilted her head back to invite a kiss that lingered until she grew faint from lack of breath. "Right now, my desire is to rush upstairs and jump back into bed. We have to keep at it until you get that supernatural pyromania under complete control."

"As you wish." He stood up and helped her to her feet. "I vow I will not set your shop on fire."

With a grin, she bounced his erect cock in her hand. "Great, as long as you keep setting me on fire."

The End

(Author's note: The *zmeu* is a creature of Moldavian and Transylvanian folklore, found in both male and female forms. It appears alternately as a flame and a seductive young man or woman. This entity is described in *The Vampire Encyclopedia*, by Matthew Bunson, New York, Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1993.)

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