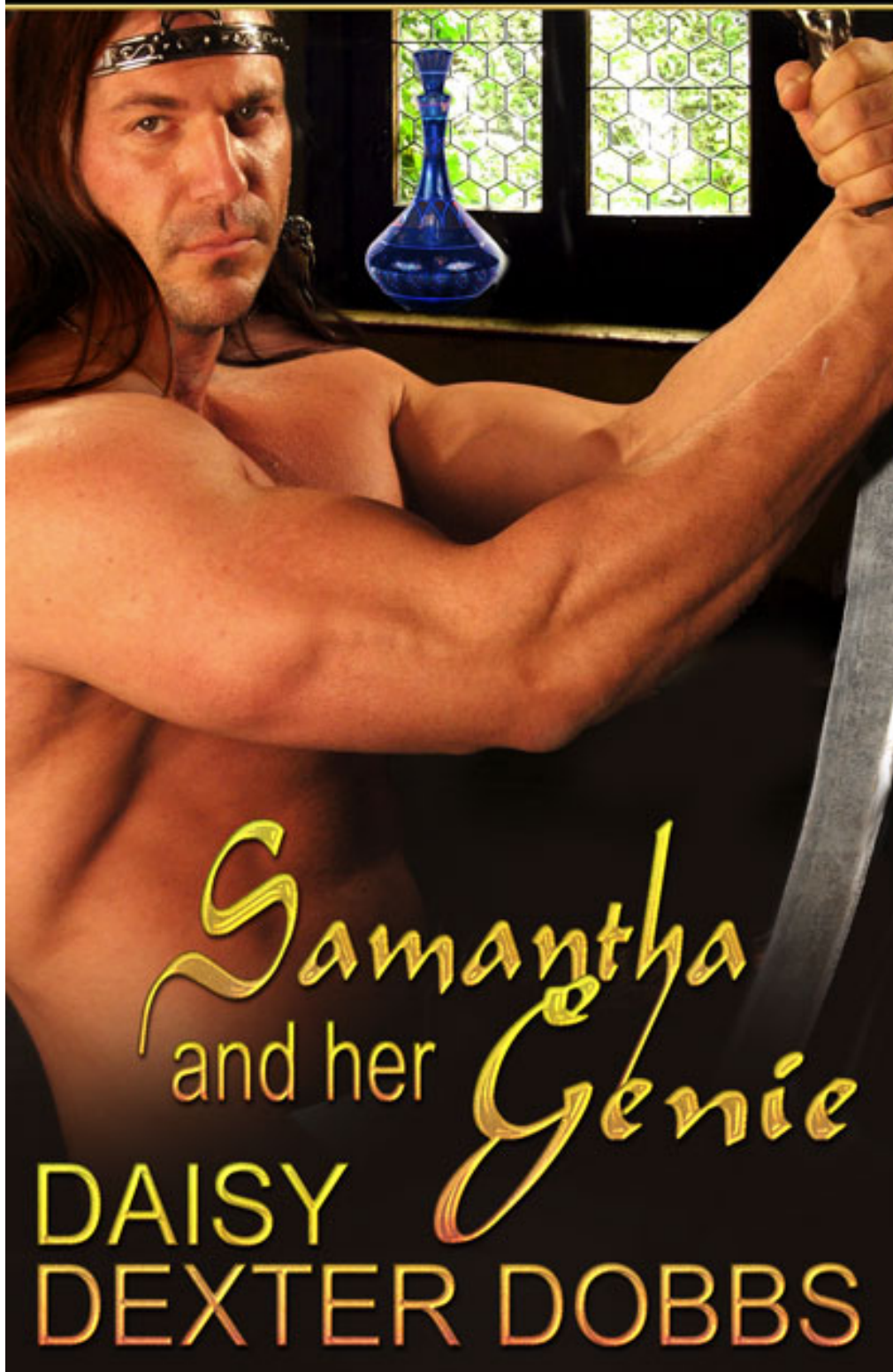


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Samantha and Her Genie

ISBN 9781419915932

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Edited by Briana St. James.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication May 2008

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SAMANTHA AND HER GENIE

Daisy Dexter Dobbs

Dedication

To my ever-patient, always supportive and wonderfully encouraging husband and daughter.

And to Bree, for being the most patient and considerate editor on the planet.

Acknowledgements

As a confirmed research junkie, I ask you, where would I (or this story) ever be if it weren't for the miracle of Googling?

Author Note

I've always been enamored of stories woven around a magical theme. When I first read of Ali Baba observing the rock gaping open for the forty thieves at their *open sesame* command, I was mesmerized. Aladdin and his magic lamp? Oh be still my heart! And, of course, my favorite TV shows when I was a kid were *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched*. I'd had the concept for a genie story rolling around inside my little brain for years and finally decided to get the words out. *Samantha and her Genie* is the result. I hope you enjoy reading this magical tale as much as I loved writing it!

—Daisy

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Prologue

Sumer – Third Millennium BC

It was the gentle hum of a woman's chant that stirred Lugal Damu-zid from the oppressive fog of shadowed darkness. Calling upon his warrior's strength, he fought to fully rouse himself from the dream—the commanding trance that had imprisoned his awareness. His head was thick and heavy as he tried to shift position, the weight of his eyelids hindered him from opening them to scrutinize his surroundings.

How long had it been since he'd been trapped between worlds, drifting amid the living and the shades? The last thing Lugal remembered was defending the mud-brick walls of the Sumerian cities against the siege of Sargon of Akkad's army. On the bloody banks of the Euphrates he ordered his men into phalanx formation, shouting the battle cry to protect and defend at all costs as he led them forward.

Wielding his great penetrating axe with its narrow blade and strong socket, Lugal had just pierced the bronze plate armor of yet another Akkadian soldier when... He struggled to remember what occurred next. There was the ever-present metallic tang of blood in his nostrils...hacked bodies stacked all around him...the anguished cries and groans of dying men roaring in his ears...and then... And then there came the pain. The searing sharpness of a sword slashing his back, his ribs, his shoulder.

By gods, he—the great Lugal Damu-zid—had been felled!

Agonized by the realization, Lugal once again found himself focusing on the soothing sounds of the woman's song...

Nay, there were no women on the battlefield to offer the comfort of a sweet melody or the tender warmth of a soft breast. It could only be— Lugal's body tensed as the unsavory prospect of his own death assailed him. The alluring voice tempting him back from the abode of the dead no doubt belonged to Ereshkigal, goddess of the underworld.

Owing to his rank and reputation as the bravest, noblest and fiercest warrior throughout all of Mesopotamia, the dark queen had come personally to escort him through the seven gates of *Kurnugi*, the land of no return.

"O my mighty, magnificent Lugal," the woman's voice said, interrupting his introspection. He felt the cool, bracing touch of a damp cloth dabbed against his face. "Under your fearsome radiance, your terrible glare and storm, the Akkadians turned their steps away from you and your men in mute dread."

"Ereshkigal?" he managed to speak, his voice sounding dry and raspy to his ears. "Is it you, come for me?"

"You awaken!" the woman said. "At last."

On her sharp intake of breath Lugal's eyelids parted. His unsteady gaze was met by a softly lit room and what appeared to be an abundance of voluminous veils hanging around him. It was then that Lugal understood he was flat on his back on a padded platform, a bed far softer than those to which he was accustomed.

"The gods be praised. Fear not, Lugal, for it is only I, Sabit the priestess, who calls you back from the brink of the underworld."

He listened to her words, which only brought more questions to mind. Her voice and her countenance were indeed familiar, but he could not remember from where or when exactly. "Do I know you? Why am I here?"

Shushing him and forcing him to remain still as he struggled to sit up, Sabit hummed the same haunting melody Lugal had heard earlier. "You have been in my care for near half a lunar cycle." Her small hands roamed his thighs as she removed the large fur covering him. "We have come to know each other quite well, I think, as you lurched back and forth over the threshold of the living and the dead."

With considerable effort, Lugal finally pulled himself up far enough to brace himself on his elbows. A glance left, right and ahead brought a series of food, beer and wine-laden altars into focus as well as precious gold, lapis, ornate mosaics, harps, pottery and decorated clay tablets. These sumptuous accouterments were found only in the dwellings of royalty, abodes of the upper class or in *ziggurats*, the towering temples to the gods.

His brow furrowed in confusion. "I am in a *ziggurat*?"

"The tallest in the city," Sabit answered proudly. "Because of your rank and extraordinary service to Sumer and the gods, Ibi-Utu deemed you should remain here for the duration of your mending." She smoothed her soft, cool hands over his body from the top of his head to his feet.

"Ibi-Utu..." he repeated. "The name is familiar."

"He is *patesi* of this temple," Sabit explained, her fingers traversing the path of dark hair from his chest, down his belly to beneath the flax cloth covering his cock. As she spoke, Lugal remembered Ibi-Utu, named for the sun god, Utu, was the powerful and revered high priest. "Do you remember what happened to you?" she asked.

Lugal glanced at his body and the new set of jagged marks zigzagging across his flesh, adding to the extensive assortment of previous battle scars. "I was felled from behind," he surmised.

"Yes, you were sorely wounded in battle. Most feared you were doomed to be whisked away to the nether regions in the arms of Ereshkigal but I saved you from that fate, Lugal, my beloved." She combed her fingers through his hair and kissed his forehead.

She was a pretty young thing, if somewhat plain, boyish and certainly too young for his tastes. She wore the traditional gown baring one shoulder, which appeared bony. His gaze fell upon her breasts. They stood firm against the softly draping cloth of

her garment but were far less than a handful. As Lugal lifted his gaze he noticed that she stared at him as if she wanted to devour him lick by lick.

If he wasn't feeling so vague at the moment he would have chuckled. He was used to women seducing him, throwing themselves at him. His reputation as an exceptionally skilled lover perhaps even exceeded his celebrated standing as a great leader and warrior. Of course, his rumored heritage as half-god only added to his apparent appeal.

"My thoughts are hazy, Sabit," Lugal said, still trying to regain his senses. "You call me your beloved, and yet I don't recall the two of us ever..." He arched an eyebrow in question.

"Nay, you have not yet moored in my new moon crescent, Lugal, but I wish nothing more than for you to take my chaste cunt and make it yours forever. I have fallen in love with you."

Lugal's thoughts reeled. The bold, lovestruck young wisp of a woman, this seemingly naïve virgin priestess loved him? Wanted him to bed her? He felt his cock stir at the thought. Not because she was particularly alluring, but simply because she was there, available and evidently more than willing.

Moreover, it seemed to Lugal it had been a near eternity since he'd...how had Sabit phrased it? Ah yes, since he'd *moored himself in a new moon crescent*. He clamped down on his tongue to keep from laughing at the lustful girl and her romantic, poetic terms.

"Didn't you say you were a priestess, Sabit?" he asked gently.

"Yes." She breathed a melodious sigh. "I am priestess of Nanna, the Moon God of Ur. He is my betrothed. Symbolically, of course," she added quickly. She locked her gaze on Lugal's cock swelling beneath the cloth covering his groin, a look of anticipatory bliss across her features. "Now that you are awake and well, Lugal, we can join."

To Lugal's amazement, the young woman tore the bed covering from his body and straddled him. By gods, she was preparing to mount him!

"Sabit!" he said firmly as he held her in place. It was then that he felt how much of his strength had yet to be restored, for he was near as weak as a lamb. "Sabit," he said more softly this time, "you must know it is against our laws for you to bed a mortal man once you are betrothed to a deity."

"But once I take my sacred oath I shall never have my hungry cunt soothed. I must experience a proper bedding at least once in my life. And who better to do it than the brave warrior whose wounds I have tended – the man I have come to love?"

"You could be beheaded if it became known you seduced a man, Sabit." Memories of her benevolent and loving ministrations flooded his thoughts. She sang to him, spoke incantations, fed him, dressed his wounds with herbs and poultices as he lay immobile, battling his way back from the clutches of eternal darkness.

"You have been good to me, Sabit. Kind, sweet and caring. You are far too lovely to lose your pretty head." Lugal stroked her arm, patting it with brotherly affection.

"Oh, Lugal, must I resort to tearful pleading, lamenting and wailing before you will agree to bed me?"

Lugal groaned as his cock strained at her provocative words.

"I long to feel your mighty essence inside me," she continued. "Your powerful arms around me as, enraptured, we take wing to the stars together." Sabit leaned forward, clutching his biceps with one hand while resting a finger on his bottom lip and tugging down with the other. She smoothed the tip of her finger over his teeth and gave him a wistful smile.

"With your legendary strength, a tooth can even crush flint. Crush me, Lugal. Pierce me. Let me bear your babe."

"My babe?" Lugal said, startled.

Sabit's eyes became wide. "How could the gods be angry if a priestess bedded one of their own?" she reasoned. "Are the stories not true that you have a mortal mother and were fathered by Enlil, the great god of air and storms?"

Lugal closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his thoughts. Women oft sang praises and composed poems about his supposed, yet unconfirmed, half-god heritage and striking masculine beauty. They seemed to favor his long, below-the-shoulder locks of dark-as-night hair, his firm jaw and bark-brown eyes. It was both a blessing and a curse to be so favored.

Sabit's eyes were still wide when he opened his eyes again. Her cheeks pink with expectancy.

"My mother has said it is so," he told her, "but —"

Before Lugal could stop her, Sabit drew up her skirts and sank fully onto his engorged cock, yelling out in pain as the membrane in her virgin channel tore.

The sweet feel of her chaste tightness wholly clasping his cock was overshadowed not only by the shock of what Sabit had done but by the sound of rapid footsteps approaching the chamber in answer to her anguished cry. Gathering every measure of his strength, Lugal switched their positions, fast withdrawing himself from her depths as he now knelt astride her.

"Lugal Damu-zid!" Ibi-Utu's thunderous voice rang out as he raced to the bed, eyeing in horror the lightly bloodied bit of cloth between Sabit's thighs. Soon three other priests had sped into the chamber, all staring with revulsion at the incriminating scene. "Is this how you repay me and my priestess for the healing care we have given you? What say you, man?"

"Nay, Ibi-Utu," Sabit said. "It is not as you suspect. Lugal is innocent. I am the one who —"

"Silence," Lugal roared, interrupting the death sentence the foolish, callow girl was about to draw upon her head. He had led a good, mostly honorable life, had led many brave Sumerian men into battle in honor of their king and the mighty gods. While his heart spoke of breathing his last as a white-haired old man, blessed with a good wife

and many grandchildren at his knee, as a warrior Lugal never really expected he'd live that long.

Perhaps he had been meant to die in this last, fierce battle against Sargon's army. Sweet, idealistic Sabit had given him life...it was only fair that he reciprocate in a like manner. He'd butchered many a warrior for Sumer, not out of enjoyment, but out of necessity. But he couldn't imagine living with the knowledge that this young, naïve girl he'd unintentionally sullied had met a fearsome death simply because she was enamored of him. Nay, Sabit did not deserve to have her life cut short on his account.

"Do not try to protect me, Sabit," Lugal soothed, gazing down into her terrified eyes. "I alone am responsible, Ibi-Utu. I-I awoke with a start from my long sleep between worlds and, in my clouded mind, somehow mistook the innocent young priestess for one of my consorts."

Ibi-Utu's gaze again fell upon the blood-spotted cloth. "You have ruined Sabit for her betrothed. Nanna, the Moon God of Ur demands his wives be virgins. She is no good to him now, nor to this sacred temple. Both of you must die."

Sabit gasped, a strangled cry escaping her lips as her small hands flew to her throat.

"It is not Sabit's blood," Lugal lied, unobtrusively digging his thumbnail into one of the still fresh scars at his side and slicing along the tender ridge. Once he felt the warm trickle of liquid he continued, "It is mine. You see?"

Rising from the bed and gesturing to his side, he held his bloody fingers out and away from his ribs. "The wound still oozes blood. You arrived just as I was about to thrust into her but her cry of terror brought me to my senses before I could enter her channel. Sabit is still pure."

"Is this true, Sabit?"

The petrified girl looked up at Lugal, who did his best to give her a reassuring nod and smile. He saw the pain in her eyes, the deep sorrow, the longing, fear and dread. She turned her head to face the priest. "I-yes," she said, collapsing into tears. "Lugal speaks the truth."

"Make peace with the gods, Lugal. Your beheading will take place first thing in the morning." Ibi-Utu spun on his heel to leave.

"*Patesi*, spare his life, please!" Sabit cried out. "You must know it was not Lugal in his right mind who came upon me in such a crazed manner. He was fevered and under the influence of the potent healing tonics we have forced him to swallow." Rising to her knees, gesturing with one hand outstretched to Lugal and the other to Ibi-Utu, she pleaded to the high priest, "You know this man. You know his reputation. He has fought and won many wars for our people, our king, the gods, has he not?"

Arms crossed over his chest, Ibi-Utu was silent, although he remained in place, evidently digesting Sabit's beseeching words.

"Stories of queens, maidens and wives falling to Lugal's feet, offering themselves unto him abound, Ibi-Utu, do they not?"

The priest frowned at Lugal. "They do. But that does not mean he has the right —"

"It is clear," Sabit forged on, "the mighty warrior Lugal Damu-zid can have his pick of the fairest and most succulent women of the land — of any land, for that matter. Look at me, Ibi-Utu." She swept a hand from her head downward as tears coursed down her face.

"Do you really believe a man of Lugal's uncompromised beauty would have any reason to even glance twice at a plain, unappealing girl like me when the temple and streets are filled with dazzling, full-breasted, fair of face women only too willing to bed him at the mere crook of his finger?"

Until that moment, Lugal had forgotten he still had a heart buried deep within his chest, but he was reminded of the fact now because he felt sure it broke just a bit as he listened to Sabit's harsh depiction of herself.

It seemed as if a small eternity passed as the priest stood silently, gazing from Sabit to Lugal and back again.

Finally, he spoke. "What you say is true, Sabit. I have followed Lugal's exploits since he was a boy just entering Sumer's army and never was there a time when I did not believe him to act with honor. However, his past actions do not excuse his present. The gods are clear on that. Our laws state directly that Lugal must pay with his head for the intended ruin of a virgin priestess. Unless..."

Ibi-Utu's frown grew deeper still while Lugal's heart pounded out a hasty beat as he awaited his fate at the hands of the pious high priest.

"Unless?" Sabit asked, a glimmer of hope lighting her eyes.

"Imprisonment," Ibi-Utu finally muttered. "For the rest of his days."

Both Lugal and Sabit gasped. "By gods, I would rather die," Lugal spat. Folding his arms over his chest he stood tall, bracing his still-weakened body against a pillar as he elevated his chin in a proud manner. "Just lop off my head and be done with it so I may accompany Ereshkigal to the underworld. I am ready to die."

"Nay, Lugal, do not speak that way!" Sabit implored. "What about the incantation of service to womankind, *patesi*?" she suggested. "It is more deserving than death and more humane than watching a valiant warrior rot away in chains."

"A fair solution." Ibi-Utu nodded. "It shall be so," he said, walking to one of the small altars and selecting a clay tablet inscribed in cuneiform.

"Nay!" Lugal said, not even understanding what an incantation of service to womankind was. But whatever it was, he had learned long ago to be wary of the spells, rituals and incantations of those in devout service to the ferocious and mighty gods.

"Do you have an appropriate vessel, Sabit?" the priest said, ignoring Lugal's protest.

Sabit scanned the chamber, pointing to a small stone box secured with metal strappings atop one of the altars. "There, *patesi*. Inside there is a bottle of the finest spun glass brought as an offering by one of the city's wealthiest matrons. It was meant to

hold perfumed oil or for use as a tear vase, but is still empty and should be a perfect vessel."

Ibi-Utu gestured to one of the lesser priests who immediately brought the box forward, opening the latch for Ibi-Utu's scrutiny.

"Yes, this will do," he said. "It has significant weight, appears strong and sufficiently protected to survive at least one lifetime." Nodding to Sabit, he stated, "We can proceed quickly because our altars are already set with lambs for sacrifice, lard and roast meat, as well as dates, fine meal, dried fruit and a confection of honey and butter. The goddess will be pleased."

Lugal's mind whirled. How he wished he had both his strength and his full senses about him to help him comprehend what was happening. Stories from his childhood of men imprisoned in jars and bottles, trapped in the abomination of perpetual servitude, slowly surfaced. Surely this is not what the *patesi* had in mind?

As the high priest and his subordinates examined the clay tablet bearing the incantation, Sabit rose to stand at Lugal's side.

"Fear not, brave and honorable one," she whispered, "for I shall discern a way to free you from your servitude as soon as it is possible. I shall never forget that I owe you my life as well as my eternal gratitude, dearest Lugal." With that she crossed the room to join Ibi-Utu, who held his right hand aloft and began to read aloud from the tablet.

"O great Inanna, Queen of Heaven, goddess of love and war, I summon you. I am Ibi-Utu, he who withdraws the first fruits from the temple. He who has received divine powers from the most elevated dais. You are the great lady of the gods. Your terror is fearsome as it weighs on the land. No man anticipates your commands. The heavens fold themselves in your presence like a mourning garment. You are she who hastens like a north wind storm into the midst of the people. You are she who hears prayer and pleading."

He looked to Sabit and nodded. She took the tablet from him and continued.

Lugal released the pillar when he felt the room shake. He tried to take a step forward but realized he was frozen in place.

Drawing upon his warrior's courage, he steeled himself for whatever may come, for he would not cry out in fear. Never! Lugal Damu-zid feared nothing and no one! Even to the gods and demons who toyed with the lives of mortals, he feared not. Given that he no longer had the power of speech, Lugal kept repeating those words inside his head, fortifying himself as the incantation continued.

"Great Inanna, I, Sabit, priestess of Nanna, the Moon God of Ur, summon you to intern Lugal Damu-zid, mighty warrior who has fought many battles in your name, into this sacred vessel." She motioned to the open box containing the bottle, which Ibi-Utu held aloft, bowing as he did so. "So that Lugal Damu-zid may obliterate his transgressions to womankind by serving them for all eternity..."

Eternity. The thought of ceaseless captivity rose in Lugal's throat like the bitter tang of bile. Sabit's words seemed to drone on forever as she delineated Lugal's verdict of indentured servitude.

"The language of his possessor will Lugal Damu-zid speak and understand," Ibi-Utu added, as the lesser priests chanted in the background while lighting fragrant incense.

"The matter of pleasing his female possessors and satisfying their every urge shall be Lugal's sacred duty," Sabit read.

"Within the period of six lunar cycles," Ibi-Utu, said, "will Lugal grant his possessor three wishes..."

As the priests chanted and Sabit and Ibi-Utu spoke the endless words of the incantation, Lugal became aware of a pervading heaviness seeping into his being. Servitude to women. By gods, Lugal, the great and mighty warrior, the sought after lover of queens and woman of the greatest beauty and wealth would be reduced to no more than a slave to women's peculiar impulses, which, he knew, could shift with the mere blink of an eye.

Lugal would have shuddered at the thought had he not still been frozen in place like a great pillar of salt. Truly, it was a foul fate worse than death to which he was being condemned. He only hoped Sabit would be true to her word and quickly discern a method for his liberation.

"O make it be, great and wondrous Inanna! Let it be so!" Ibi-Utu nearly roared as he pulled the stopper from the bottle, again elevating the container high above his head.

The ethereal visage of a woman, as beautiful as she was fearsome, suddenly loomed over the proceedings.

The last thing Lugal remembered seeing before feeling his body curl and contort into naught but a vaporous substance that voyaged through the air of the temple chamber and into the bottle, was the tortured expression of repentance mixed with gratitude on Sabit's tear-stained face.

Chapter One

Portland, Oregon

"Empathy, people. Empathy and sympathy. That's the key," Bunny Turner stated with conviction as she rapped her pointer against the board. "If we want to keep those clients coming back, we need to convince them we know exactly what they're going through. Let them know we've been there too. That we feel their pain."

The absolute picture of sincerity, she clapped her hand against her heart, tapping the area with her fingers as her gaze roamed over the crowd.

"But what if we never *have* been there?" Lenore, the newest Tuned by Turner weight-loss counselor asked with a shrug. "How am I supposed to make fat people believe I've been fat and can relate with their problems if it's not true?"

"By being creative," Bunny advised through a calculated smile. "I'm not advocating hurtful lies, mind you, but there are ways to embellish our past experiences to fit most situations. Remember, Lenore, while Tuned by Turner offers a fabulous weight-loss program incorporating proper diet, nutrition, counseling and exercise as well as a complete assortment of packaged foods, those aren't the things that keep our satisfied clients coming back each week."

"They're not?" the doe-eyed Lenore said, biting like a fish on a baited hook as Bunny had clearly intended.

"No, Lenore," Bunny said in a reverent whisper. "It's you." Nodding, she gave Lenore a benevolent smile, bordering on heartfelt tears. "You and every other dedicated counselor in this room. Without all of you, TBT would be just another diet program. But that's not what we are, is it, people?" Bunny's brown-eyed gaze swept the room of eighty or so men and women. "Come on, everyone, let's tell Lenore what we are!"

"We're number one! We're number one!" Hoots, hollers and clapping ensued as the troops rallied. Bunny punched her fist high into the air, boasting a toothy, triumphant grin.

At that point, Samantha Rutledge resisted the temptation to roll her eyes and groan. After working for Tuned by Turner for more than a year, she'd been through enough of Bunny's mandatory corporate training classes and rah-rah seminars to be able to repeat her pat answers word for word.

With a surreptitious gaze around the packed room, she noted less than a quarter of the mostly twenty-something counselors in attendance had ever been overweight by more than five pounds or so. Most of them wore nothing bigger than a size four.

Samantha knew that because the skinny counselors openly discussed it while snickering as they ridiculed the overweight clients behind their backs. The thin, young male counselors were just as bad as their female counterparts.

At thirty five, and a solid one-hundred-pound-weight-loss veteran, Samantha felt dumpy and practically ancient compared to the eager, aggressive young counselors in her midst. Hell, she'd even spotted a few strands of silver peeking through her shoulder-length, deep auburn hair last week.

Naturally, the fact that her social life had been akin to a black hole the past year or two probably didn't help matters. She kept waiting for all the dramatic changes, all the astounding magic to happen after she'd lost her weight. Her life was supposed to blossom like a dewy, blooming rosebud...wasn't it?

Damn. Where the hell was her knight in shining armor? Men were supposed to fall at her feet, dumbstruck by her newly *almost* slender visage, weren't they?

At last count she hadn't had to sweep any knights or other hunky admirers off her front porch.

"Take me for example."

Bunny's voice snapped Samantha back to the present as the chic owner of TBT gestured to her gray-suited model-thin frame.

"Whenever I talk to clients I make sure to tell them I fully understand what it's like to diet, exercise and be deprived. Looking as sincere and sympathetic as possible, I say, 'I know it's hard to tell by looking at me, but I once battled a heartbreaking weight problem myself.'"

"Wow..." Staggered, newbie Lenore's gaping expression was one of sheer awe.

"It's true," Bunny assured. "I used to be practically obese." With a sensitive sniffle, she shuddered a little as she smoothed her TBT-pink fingernails along her beige-blond hair, tucking a nonexistent stray lock into the bun at her nape. "I ate my way all the way up to a size six back in college. It took me more than a whole semester of living on coffee, cigarettes and by sticking my fingers down my throat to get back into my size zeros."

Each time she sat through this dimwitted story, Samantha indulged in a satisfying mental fantasy where she strode up to the podium and slapped the emaciated business owner upside the head.

A former deluxe car saleswoman, Bunny Turner had built a financial empire on her reputation as a fat guru. Much to her disappointment, Samantha discovered early on that the woman was cold, calculating and completely lacking in compassion. Especially when it came to the trials and tribulations of TBT clients—people who struggled, often for years, with the pain and complexities of living as a fat person in a thin world.

"Get ready," Rosie Dudchowski whispered into Samantha's ear. "Here comes the glorified bullshit."

Samantha had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing at her friend's knowing remark. Rosie was one of the only other people over the age of thirty in the room – and one of the only who'd lost a lot of weight.

Their lives paralleled each other's in many ways, except for the fact that Rosie had found her knight in shining armor, married him and had two adorable kids with him. After supporting each other through their weight losses, the funny, sassy brunette had become Samantha's closest friend. Together they gathered the courage to apply for jobs at Tuned by Turner.

"Of course, Lenore," Bunny continued, "when I'm speaking with clients it wouldn't be prudent for me to expound on how I actually lost the weight. Instead, I let clients believe I accomplished it by following proven TBT methods. While it may not be true, it's essentially a helpful LWL. *Little white lie*," she clarified, hanging invisible quotes over the words with her fingers.

"A lie that can't hurt anyone. Why? Because Tuned by Turner is the best weight-loss solution for our clients. Since we care, *really and truly care*, about their health and wellbeing, we understand that, on occasion, an LWL might help them achieve their desired goals. Isn't that right, people?"

The room exploded with shouts of "Right!" and booming applause while Samantha slunk down in her chair, exchanging dubious looks with Rosie.

"Before we end our time together today," Bunny said, holding aloft a black canvas bag embroidered with the company's logo in pink, "I want to give each of you a TBT tote containing our ten newest food items. These are dynamite, people. Delicious, nutritious fat-burning gems. Our food technicians have really outdone themselves this time."

Placing the bag on the table behind her, she drew out each *gem*, one by one, describing it in such a way that it would make most anyone not familiar with the TBT line of foods salivate. Of course, those already familiar with TBT's barely palatable edibles knew better.

"Each of you is invited to stay for lunch. You'll be able to try our tofu-based salad dressings as well as our no-refrigeration-needed Plum Dandy Chicken Cakes and...are you ready?" Bunny looked as if she were ready to announce they'd be partaking in rich, gooey hot fudge sundaes. "You'll all be the first to taste our brand new Mango-Lime Tapioca Pudding Cups!"

Again, rousing applause.

Samantha and Rosie engaged in joint shudders.

"Right now my mind is screaming *cheeseburger*!" Rosie whispered. "What say we grab one after we get the hell out of here?"

Samantha gave her friend a sideways glance. Rosie was *so* bad and if Samantha didn't watch herself, under Rosie's evil influence she'd start packing on the pounds again. "I'll split one with you," she whispered back.

"Fries too?" Rosie added. "I mean, seriously...what's a cheeseburger without the fries, right?" She gave a wicked wink.

Already salivating, Samantha groaned. "Maybe just a few." She could already feel the weight of the guilt hammer whacking the top of her head. "But only if we go for a walk afterward. Deal?" Begrudgingly, Rosie concurred.

As soon as the seminar ended, Samantha and Rosie scrambled to get out before Bunny could corner them. They almost made it but Bunny's piercing voice calling their names caught them before they could escape.

Bunny gave each of them a sealed letter from TBT's corporate office. After less than thirty seconds of innocuous small talk, she turned on her stiletto heel, wiggling her miniscule butt as she walked back toward the exceedingly unappetizing lunch spread.

"Come on. Let's get the fuck out of here while we can," Rosie said, snagging Samantha's sleeve and hauling her to the door.

Their cheeseburger lunch was delectable. It was amazing how good everyday fattening food tasted when you've been away from it long enough. Samantha made sure to leave a bite of the burger on her plate along with a small handful of fries, just to prove she could. They called to her during the rest of the time she and Rosie sat there chatting, but Samantha remained unflinchingly strong.

"I want to open my own weight-loss center one day," Samantha admitted after they'd paid the check and headed out of the restaurant. "Nothing would be more fulfilling than to offer a viable, reasonably priced weight-loss solution for overweight people. Each counselor would have to truly want to help, not be there just for the money, you know?" Rosie nodded. "They'd have to be caring, compassionate and they definitely would have had to be fat in the past."

"You mean like a size six?" Rosie guffawed.

"Yeah, right. Poor obese Bunny," Samantha scoffed. "Can you believe her? Sheesh, I don't think I've ever been that small, except maybe before I reached my teens. After puberty it seems I just zipped right past single-digit sizes and ended up yo-yoing through the entire gamut of double-digit sizes for the next twenty years."

"You and me both," Rosie agreed. "Last time I checked though, I think one of my thighs was a size six." She and Samantha laughed. "But," Rosie continued, patting her short hair, "I think we look damn good now, no matter what that dumb-ass letter of warning from TBT headquarters said."

"That letter! What a bunch of crap." Samantha picked up her pace as they walked up a tree-lined side street. "For chrissakes, Rosie, you and I have the biggest number of clients – more than any other counselor – and you know why?"

"Yup. 'Cause we've been there. And when we talk it's not through our ample asses."

"Exactly." Samantha gave a resolute nod. "The clients don't care that we're not a size two. In fact, they can relate to us better because we're not! They feel more comfortable with us because we wear a double-digit size. They've told me that, Rosie."

They know we care, that we're not just giving them lip service to make a buck off their problems."

"Well, corporate doesn't see it that way," Rosie said. "They want us to...what was it they said?" She stopped, digging the letter out of her purse. "*Streamline your body in accordance with the lean, healthy TBT image.*" Rosie huffed a humorless laugh as she stuffed the offending missive back in her bag and resumed walking. "They've, ahem, *suggested* I lose twenty-five pounds in the next six weeks. Hah! Ain't gonna happen."

Samantha laughed. "Not when you're eating cheeseburgers and fries, it's not."

"Hey, look at me," Rosie offered. "I'm walking, aren't I? And uphill, no less. I'll have that grease bomb burned off by the time we get back to my car."

"By walking just a few blocks? In your dreams, Rosie. In order to burn off the number of calories we ingested it would take—"

Rosie clapped her hands over her ears. "La-la-la-la. I'm not listening, Sam. Don't burst my exercise bubble, no matter how unrealistic it may be. After all, walking a few blocks is better than just sitting on my ass, isn't it?"

"Absolutely." Laughing, Samantha pulled Rosie into a buddy hug as they trudged along the sidewalk. "Corporate says I'm supposed to drop thirty in six weeks. Honestly, Rosie, I'm pretty satisfied with where I am now. I've mostly maintained my weight loss for almost two years and that's been difficult enough. I really don't want to start crash dieting now—even if it means not keeping a job I love."

"Same here. I wish we'd crossed those stupid no-more-than-ten-percent-weight-gain clauses out of our employment contracts before we signed on with TBT."

"That makes two of us."

"You know, Sam, if you had your own weight-loss company you'd make a fortune. Me too, because you'd hire me, of course, and I'd help you to build an empire so big and successful it would put TBT out of business in a flash." Rosie snapped her fingers. "We'd crush 'em."

"Well, you dream big. I have to give you that." Samantha chuckled. "Of course I'd hire you. And lots of money would be nice but that's not why—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Rosie cut her off with a dismissive wave. "I've seen those big blue idealistic eyes of yours look off into the distance with grandiose thoughts of selflessly helping thousands of unhappy fat people often enough to know your intentions are pure."

"Jeez, you make me sound like some sappy televangelist or something." Samantha gave Rosie's arm a playful whap. "It doesn't matter anyway. There's no chance in hell I'd ever have enough money to start up my own company. All I can do is to try to sidestep TBT's rules enough to make sure my clients know there's somebody out there who genuinely cares about them."

Stopping in her tracks, Samantha pointed to a sign at the corner. "Hey, look. There's an estate sale just down the block. Wanna go?"

"You know damn well being a packrat is second only to being a foodie on my list of vices." Rosie looped her arm through Samantha's and they headed for the sale. "Maybe we'll find a one-of-a-kind treasure that will bring us untold wealth and then you can start your business."

"Right. My house and yours are filled with dozens of *treasures* we were sure would catapult us into multi-millionaire status, remember? Crap. All of it. Pretty and interesting but entirely worthless crap." Samantha's eyes twinkled with a devilish gleam. "Let's go get some more."

Once they reached the address they stood out in front, gaping in awe at the large Victorian home. The whimsical fretwork, gingerbread shingles, balustrades, spindles, turrets, and wealth of fanciful ornamentation captured Samantha's attention. It was exactly the sort of house she'd always wanted to live in.

"Wow...this place is huge," Samantha said, mesmerized. "And adorable."

"And so old it's practically prehistoric," Rosie added as they raced up the long concrete walk and stone steps to the house.

Samantha felt almost the same current of anticipation coursing through her veins as when she contemplated devouring a pint of super-premium, fudge-laced ice cream. There was something deliciously appealing about digging through other people's castoffs and discovering fabulous little goodies like first edition books, decades-old jewelry, decorative household items or fashion accessories from eras long past.

Even though she knew better, Samantha couldn't help the rush of excitement that whispered, *Maybe this time you'll hit the jackpot and find a rare, priceless trinket that will change your life forever.*

It was a whole house sale, the estate sale's organizers explained as they handed out information sheets and shopping bags. The kind of sale Samantha and Rosie loved best. They could scrounge around in the attic, basement, garage and every room in between, giddy as they hunkered down on hands and knees, checking dark, cobwebbed nooks and crannies for treasures.

A brief paragraph about the house's history stated it had remained within the same family since it was built for Abigail Henley in 1859. The last owner, Franklin Henley, a retired attorney and avid collector, had recently died, leaving no heirs. The first floor of the zoned commercial residence housed the offices of Franklin's law practice. The entire contents of the house were being sold, with the proceeds going to the Abigail Henley Foundation.

"Look at this." Samantha ran the tip of her finger along the last sentence of the paragraph. "It says Henley House will be made available for purchase next week!" Samantha's heart leapt at the words.

Rosie shrugged. "Yeah, so?" She rubbed her friend's back in a sympathetic gesture. "Sorry, sweetie, but you can no more afford to buy a house like this than you can a weight-loss center."

Samantha craned her neck, looking at the vast number of rooms and abundant space. "It might be big enough to have the weight-loss center on the first floor," she said excitedly. "I could live upstairs. Wouldn't that be amazing?"

"Mmm-hmm." Rosie gave her an encouraging pat. "Once you shell out the couple of million the house is worth, you can have it renovated for another mil or so. A mere drop in the bucket." She snapped her fingers.

Samantha's shoulders sagged. "You never know...maybe I'll win the lottery."

"Uh-huh. And maybe I'll lose that twenty-five pounds corporate wants me to drop in the next six weeks." Rosie rolled her eyes. "That's okay, you just keep thinking positive, sweetie."

Already swarming with other hopeful treasure hunters, the old house was a *junque* lover's paradise. After rifling through the kitchen and finding a few small items to add to their shopping bags, Samantha and Rosie headed for the basement, carefully navigating the narrow, rickety wood steps that led to a dank, dim, cavernous area piled floor to ceiling with stacks of...junk. There were few others milling about the room, apparently not eager to dig through the layers of dust and cobwebs or whatever it was that smelled of mildew.

"These are kind of cool," Rosie said, rummaging through deep wood shelves full of salt and pepper shakers in all sizes, shapes and colors. She cooed over a cute pair of porcelain cherub-shaped shakers, discarding them a moment later for a delft blue set of ceramic wooden shoe-shaped shakers. "Do you still collect these?"

"I stopped hoarding them when I finally realized my little house wasn't big enough for both them and me." Samantha chuckled. "I sold them all at a flea market and figured I'd steer clear of them in the future." Still intrigued with the vast assortment, Samantha spent time searching through them.

"Then how come you're still over here looking, instead of going off in search of something else?" Rosie snickered.

"Old habits die hard." Samantha shrugged. "Plus you never know when I might find the world's rarest, most sought after salt and pepper shaker set, right?" She beamed a grin at her friend before getting down on her hands and knees to examine the lower shelves. "My new slacks are going to look like shit when I'm finished," Samantha noted with a sigh.

As she leaned forward, tucking her head under the shelf above and bracing her hand on the bottom shelf so she could get a better look, the rotted wood gave way. Her hand plunged through the soft, splintered surface while her cheek fell hard against the wood.

"Oh shit!"

"Jesus, Sam, what happened?"

"The shelf was rotten."

"Are you okay?" Rosie joined Samantha on the floor. "Can you get your hand out?"

"Yeah, I think —"

After a long moment, Rosie piped up again. "Well? What? You think what?"

"Rosie, there's something under here."

Rosie's eyes bugged. "Something as in treasure something or as in huge nest of spiders something?"

"It's hard. It feels like stone or marble...or maybe metal. I can't tell."

"The world's most valuable salt and pepper shaker, maybe?"

Samantha laughed. "Don't make me laugh when I'm stuck down here on all fours with my face plastered against a mildewy, rotten old shelf." She snaked her hand in deeper, trying to get a good grasp. "It's too far to the right. I can't reach it completely. And it's heavy." The challenge spurred her on. By this time Samantha didn't care what in the hell it was under there, she *had* to have it.

"Sam."

"Maybe if we try to punch out some more of the shelf I can get to it," Samantha went on, pounding on the wood with her other hand to no avail. Apparently she'd found the only vulnerable spot. "Come on, Rosie, help me pound on it."

"Sam."

"What!?" she barked, frustration tingeing her voice.

As she removed the ceramic, animal-shaped salt and pepper shakers from the bottom shelf, setting them on the concrete floor, Rosie erupted with laughter.

"Just go ahead and sit there laughing at me," Samantha grouched, "as I'm scrounging around in this spider-infested hole struggling to unearth a possibly costly treasure for us."

"Hold off on your treasure hunting for a minute, oh great white huntress, until I get this shelf cleared off," Rosie said. Once she'd emptied the shelf she reached in the back, looping two fingers in the small circular hole at the center and easily lifted the removable shelf.

"Oh," Samantha said sheepishly. Sitting back on her knees she carefully withdrew her hand from the rotted wood, cringing as she brushed cobwebs and bug carcasses from her skin. Returning her attention to the area beneath where the shelf sat a moment before, Samantha zeroed in on the item she'd been trying to reach. The stone box was about five by seven inches wide and three inches high.

"It looks really old," Samantha whispered.

"Maybe it's filled with rare gold coins," Rosie whispered back as Samantha grasped the box with both hands, carefully drawing it out of the grubby cavity.

"Look at that strange writing on the metal strips around the box." Samantha blew a thick layer of dust from its surface. "Maybe it's an antiquity."

"It probably says made in Taiwan," Rosie quipped. "Well open it, for chrissakes."

Samantha fiddled with the latch. "I think it's stuck, she said an instant before the latch seemed to pop open on its own. Cradling the heavy box in her lap, Samantha lifted the cover and gasped at the sight of the multi-colored glass bottle nestled in layers of what look like silk. "Oh, Rosie, isn't this beautiful? It looks like it was made of thousands of strands of glass. I've never seen anything like it before."

"Neither have I. It looks like a perfume bottle. Whatever's inside is probably so old it smells like ass."

Samantha laughed at that. "I'm going to wait until I get it home to examine it more closely so I can safely set it on something other than a concrete floor crawling with age-old crud." She closed the box, latching it, and placed it in her bag. A wave of shoppers approached the shelves full of old salt and pepper shakers. "Come on, Rosie, it's getting too crowded."

They rose from the floor, brushed themselves off and finished exploring the house. A few more items of interest were found, though none as intriguing as the stone box and its contents. As they were about to leave the last upstairs bedroom, Samantha paused at a Victorian writing desk, fingering an old faded photo.

"Find something else?" Rosie asked, snapping her gum as she came to Samantha's side. "Ooh, damn, he was a hunk."

"What a gorgeous man," Samantha breathed, gazing at the sepia image of a tall, thirty-ish man dressed in Victorian garb and standing behind an elderly woman seated at the writing desk Samantha now stood at. "Look at those dark, piercing eyes, Rosie. It's like he's looking right at me through the centuries. And that big, broad chest..." Samantha felt a delicious twinge of longing as she studied the man's striking features and powerful-looking physique.

Look how long his hair is and how it's pulled back in a ponytail," Rosie noted. "Maybe he was an Indian."

"Native American," Samantha absently corrected. "I don't think so. His features look more...Mediterranean or something."

"Yeah, like a big Greek." Rosie took the picture from her, turning it to the back. "Abigail Henley and unknown gentleman, 1859," she read aloud. "Interesting." She traced her finger over the man's arm to where his hand rested on one of Abigail's shoulders.

"What?" Samantha asked.

"The way he looks all solemn and stern, while Abigail's expression suggests she was definitely quite pleased about something. I'd say it looks like Miss Abby had herself a boy toy."

"Imagine what he must have looked like naked." Samantha and Rosie exchanged glances and wistful moans. "I have to have him." Samantha quickly stuffed the unframed photograph into her bag of treasures.

She laughed when she glanced up again to catch Rosie's knowing smirk. "So he's been dead for more than a hundred years," Samantha offered with a shrug. "So what? I've got a vibrator and an imagination, don't I?"

Chapter Two

"Are you sure you can't come in for a while?" Samantha asked before getting out of Rosie's car. "I'll make us a couple mugs of sugar-free hot cocoa and we can examine our new treasures together."

"I'd like to, sweetie," Rosie gave Samantha's thigh a pat, "but I've got to pick Mandy and Kevin up from daycare and I'm already running late. I'll give you a call later, okay?" Samantha nodded. Hesitating before she drove off, Rosie worried her bottom lip. "Listen, Sam, are you sure you still want to watch the kids tonight? It's no problem if you've changed your mind. The twins can be a real handful."

"Don't be ridiculous, Rosie! I've been looking forward to watching those pink-cheeked little cuties all week. I even did some research online and found some new games specifically geared for three-year-olds." Rosie and Charlie rarely got a chance to get out for dinner and a movie anymore and Samantha was more than happy to babysit. She adored the twins. And Lord knows she didn't have anything better to do on a Friday night.

Their goodbyes said, Samantha carried her TBT tote full of unappetizing foodstuffs and her bag full of goodies from the estate sale up the steps and into her small house.

Depositing bags and purse on the kitchen counter, she headed for the pantry. Hot cocoa sounded good. The sugar-free, fat-free kind she kept on hand was virtuous, low in calories and not too bad tasting, either. Returning to the counter, single packet of diet cocoa mix in hand, she eyed the reprimanding letter from TBT that had slipped out of her purse.

"Thirty pounds in six weeks. Bastards," she grumbled through a sneer. After staring at the offending envelope for moment, she made a beeline back into the pantry, emerging with a second packet of cocoa, a bottle of Kahlua and a bottle of Baileys.

"I'll just walk an extra mile on the treadmill tomorrow," she promised herself as she searched a cabinet for her oversized mug.

Once her chocolate treat was ready, she added a big ruffle of lowfat whipped cream to the top and sat at the kitchen table, her sack of newfound treasures at her feet. One by one she drew out her special finds, investigating their surfaces for any sign of possible one-of-a-kind priceless rarity. She paused when she came to the photo of Abigail Henley and the darkly handsome young man. With a hearty sip of liqueur-laced cocoa and a wistful sigh, she set the picture aside, making sure to keep it within drooling distance.

The stone box was at the bottom of the bag, cushioned in a pair of thick, crocheted doilies Samantha had purchased. The entire bag of *junque* had only cost her twenty-eight dollars, with the stone box and bottle accounting for twelve of that.

As Samantha set the box in front of her, studying it over the rim of her half-empty mug of cocoa, the latch popped open of its own accord again, just as it had back at Henley House. She examined the curious writing, some engraved into the stone and some on the metal bands. It resembled Egyptian hieroglyphs in a way, but not exactly. Samantha didn't remember seeing anything quite like it before.

Upon close inspection she noted the silk fabric cushioning the bottle was old, fragile and delicate. It looked as if nothing more than a harsh breath could shred the aged fibers. The bottle, on the other hand, appeared to be in excellent condition. Holding the weight of the glass object in her hand it was sturdy and yet had an air of fragility because of the fine spun threads of glass making up the entire shape, including the bottle's stopper.

After draining the rest of the liquid in her mug and licking the last vestiges of chocolate from her lips, Samantha mused, "Let's see if Rosie was right and whatever's inside smells like ass." She chuckled at the memory. Grasping the stopper firmly, she pulled, twisting slightly.

In a moment the small bottle lay open in her left palm as she held the stopper in the fingers of her right hand. The kitchen table and floor vibrated, as did the light fixture above her head.

Another one of Portland's mini earthquakes, she figured, having grown used to the mostly innocuous quakes after living in the Pacific Northwest since she was a kid.

Before she could bring the bottle to her nose to sniff it, it shuddered in her hand.

And then the bottle grew warm.

"Holy shit," she muttered, slipping it back into the box so it was propped up against the back. She set its stopper on the table, scooting her chair back across the tile floor a foot or two when the bottle visibly shook.

"This isn't happening," she said when a blue-gray vapor wafted out of the bottle. "This is *not* happening!" She dragged her gaze from the growing vapor long enough to eye her empty cocoa mug. "Jeezus, maybe those liqueurs were way past the sell-by date or something."

Her eyes snapped back to the smoky mist as it rose from the bottle and journeyed to the kitchen floor, where it hovered more than six feet high before she watched it morph into the shape of a man. A huge, too-handsome-to-be-believable man who was dressed like—

"A genie!" Samantha screeched. Leaping out of her chair, she didn't know whether to scream, laugh, cry or pee in her pants. She wasn't sure, but maybe she did a little of all four. She heard a harsh, grating noise and realized she was gasping. It sounded worse than the racket she made when she had bronchitis and tried to take a deep breath.

"I am at your command," the genie said in a deep accented rumble so erotic it set Samantha's insides aquiver. "To give you pleasure...to act upon your every urge." Hands steeped together in front of his face, he made a small bow.

Like the genie characters she'd seen in the movies and on TV, he wore balloon-like pants made of some silky, billowy material. Sultan-style pants. The color was a deep, rich turquoise and it seemed to shimmer. A wide belt of the same material but in golden yellow hugged his trim waist.

He wore a short black vest, which showcased his broad, bare, sculpted chest. Embroidered all around the edges with the same colors found in his pants and belt, the vest also had touches of deep red, which appeared to be tiny embedded rubies.

Her eyes roamed the genie's perfect-Greek-statue body. He was barefoot and wore no turban or headpiece. He was one incredibly tall hunk of sun-bronzed muscles, long, thick hair, dark, hypnotic eyes, and a sizeable bulge tenting the crotch area of his voluminous pants. Mmmm, luscious.

And he said he was here to give her pleasure? Oh. My. God.

A huge, imposing curved sword hung sheathed at his hip. When she finally looked up at his face, she saw he was smiling at her and her breath caught.

"I am glad you finally resolved to unfasten the bottle, Sam," the genie said.

"How do you know my name?" she said, thinking he did look awfully familiar. Nope, on second thought she doubted whether she'd run into any sexy-as-sin genies at the mall lately.

Samantha sidestepped slowly to the drawer where she kept the silverware and cooking utensils. The guy may be gorgeous beyond words, but he was carrying a weapon plenty big enough to make mincemeat out of her with just a few swipes. She needed protection, just in case his idea and hers of pleasure were at odds.

"I have heard your every word since you first set your delicate fingers on the box," he answered her. "I also heard the other woman, Rosie, call you by name. Though I could not see you, Sam, your compelling voice spoke to my loins."

"Your—" Samantha's gaze fell to the obvious bulge between his legs as the genie grasped his cock through his pants and held tight. "Excuse me?!" she squeaked out. *Oh, well that's just great. I finally get my very own genie and the guy's a sex maniac. A perv. Maybe even a rapist.*

"I was in the midst of envisioning you," the genie said, still clasping his cock, "imagining your womanly visage as I stroked my shaft just before you set me free. I assure you, your beauty far surpasses anything I could have imagined, Sam."

Ignoring the liquid heat gathering between her thighs at his deliciously outrageous comments, she sped to the drawer, searching for the biggest knife she could find. She pulled out a plastic soup ladle. It was either that, a pair of tongs or a rubber spatula. Everything else was in the dishwasher or the sink and she'd have to move past him to get at them.

"You just hold it right there, buster," Samantha warned as he took a step toward her.

"I am not Buster, I am Lugal Damu-zid," he said proudly. "Great warrior of Sumer."

"I don't care what your name is, pal. What I care about is that you're standing in the middle of my kitchen with your hand wrapped around your-your..." Her hand fluttered wildly as she gestured at his groin.

"Cock," he said. "And I would much rather feel it cloaked in the warm, wet silk of your channel than by my gruff hand."

"What! Oh my God, I am *so* calling the police." That would have worked really well if she hadn't left her purse with her cell phone in it on the table. And if she hadn't finally given in and cancelled her landline just last week.

She could scream at the top of her lungs and pray that old Mrs. Willoughby next door might hear her and come toddling over and thrash the genie into a stupor with her walker. Everyone else on the block would still be at work.

"You appear to be frightened, little one."

Samantha huffed a laugh. "Gee, ya think?" Soup ladle in hand, she slowly made her way across the kitchen, step by agonizing step as he watched her every move like a hawk scouting his prey. "It's not every day a genie comes popping out of a bottle, brandishing a gigantic sword and making lewd and lascivious comments to me as he stands there masturbating, you know?"

"I am *not* a genie," he said, a ferocious scowl taking hold. "And my weapon is no mere sword, but a saber," he finished, ignoring the rest of Samantha's accusations.

Her thoughts whirling, Samantha narrowed her gaze. "Do I get any wishes?" she asked.

The genie nodded. "I am able to grant my possessor three wishes, each of which must pertain to the possessor's self-interest and not be cause of harm or misfortune to others."

"Uh-huh. So you came out of a bottle in dramatic puff of smoke, you're wearing balloon pants, and you can grant me three wishes." Samantha ticked each item off on her fingers. "A rose by any other name is still a genie."

"Your speech is strange to my ears, little one. My attire and the saber were given to me by a grateful sultan's daughter in Persia after I kept her body trembling with delight until she collapsed in rapture."

Samantha's traitorous pussy drooled as erotic images floated across her mind.

"But if it makes you feel better to believe I am a genie, then let it be so. There will be time enough to educate you later. Just know there is no need to fear me. I am here to see to your pleasure only, not to harm you. What kind of man would I be if I inflicted injury on a small, helpless woman?"

First he called her *little one* and now he said she was small. This guy definitely had a way with words. And, gosh, he just wanted to pleasure her, that's all. Oh, Lord, it had been so long since anyone had bothered to do that.

Samantha's gaze flew to the metal sheath housing the massive saber again. Heck, she had to die sometime anyway. Why not at the hands of the most perfect-looking specimen of manhood with the biggest damn cock she'd ever set eyes on through a pair of balloon pants?

Samantha blinked. Shit! What in the hell was the matter with her? Her libido was riding roughshod over her sensibilities. This wasn't like her at all.

"Just so you know," she shook the ladle at the genie, struggling to maintain rational thought, "I am *not* helpless. I am well versed in all manner of self defense, karate, judo, chai tea —"

"I believe you mean tai chi, little one. One of my possessors was proficient at it. Do you mean to slay me with your spoon or are you priming yourself to prepare food? My insides cry out in hunger."

"Right, tai chi. That's what I meant to say. And this may look like a spoon but it's a deadly weapon in the hands of someone like me who's been trained in self defense. I could knock your block off with one swift, calculated tai chi move while rendering those man parts of yours completely immobile, so watch out." With another wave of her ladle, Samantha kicked her leg into the air, wincing and stumbling when she felt a pull in her groin.

Jeez, even in the face of death she was a klutz.

"Thank you for the warning. But tai chi is not a means of defense," the genie explained with a know-it-all kind of smirk. He stepped closer and she stepped back. "It is meant to heal and calm the body, mind and spirit. It involves subtle moves that I would be happy to teach you if you should so desire. After which I would be more than happy to pleasure you until you beg for mercy. "

He strode toward her, no, he swaggered—all muscle and sinew and sizzling hot sexuality—with moves smoother and more sensuous than any male stripper could ever hope to mimic.

Samantha felt an unmistakable zing at her clit at the same time her nipples tightened. "The only thing I desire is for you to keep your distance," she said not at all convincingly, half wondering if distance was what she really wanted at all.

"Listen," she went on, "my husband and his motorcycle gang will be home any minute. They're...they're absolutely huge. Monstrous. Deadly. You better just get back into your bottle now before they tear you apart, limb from limb."

"Ah, a battle!" The genie's eye's lit up. "It has been far too long since I have engaged in face to face combat. I will crush each one of these monsters with one clutch of my mighty fist," he said, releasing his cock to gaze at his hand and arm as he flexed his biceps.

Watching him curl into position was like watching the magnificent ballet of a body builder in the heat of competition.

"Then I will pick my teeth with their little bird bones." He stood arms akimbo, looking proud and fierce and threatening and glorious and, oh God, how Samantha wanted to strip naked and rub herself all over his dazzling body.

Whoa! Okay, either she'd somehow managed get ridiculously drunk on a couple shots of Kahlua and Baileys, or she'd developed some rare form of alcohol poisoning that had her hallucinating as if she'd eaten magic mushrooms.

Or maybe she'd suddenly flipped her lid and gone completely crazy.

Yeah, that's it, a stress-induced brain malfunction she'd developed after reading that TBT letter, warning she'd better lose that extra weight.

There couldn't be any other answer, because this simply could *not* be happening. The man came out of a bottle, for chrissakes! Things like that only happened in fairytales and cartoons. And this guy was definitely no cartoon. He was flesh and bone and muscle all wrapped up in balloon pants, which Samantha had never thought of as being particularly sexy until she saw them on her genie.

Genie. Sheesh. The idea was ludicrous. Preposterous!

"You said you're not a genie...are you some sort of a magician?"

"Nay." He laughed now, displaying a full set of beautiful white teeth. "I am...how did you say it? Ah yes, I am the gorgeous man with the big broad chest and the dark, piercing eyes. Eyes that seemed to be looking right at you through the centuries."

Samantha sucked in a sharp breath as she recalled the words she'd uttered when she'd first spotted the old photograph at the estate sale. Curiosity and wonder overriding her better judgment and sense of panic, she walked back to the kitchen table and picked up the faded photo she'd set there. She studied the man's picture a moment before transferring her gaze to the genie and studying him.

"It's-it's you! But...but it can't be. The man in this photo has been dead for well over a hundred years. This picture was taken in—"

"In 1859," the genie said. He stood so close, Samantha felt his warm breath on her ear. She hadn't even been aware that he'd moved. "As you can observe, Sam," he was only a whisper away from her now, "although I have been held captive these many years, I do not smell like an ass."

Lord, no, he certainly didn't. In fact, he smelled of something spicy and exotic. Faintly of incense perhaps. Like sandalwood and patchouli. "You heard that, huh?"

"From your friend Rosie and then from you, just as you released me from my vessel."

"Sorry, I thought you were just a bottle of stale old perfume. You definitely don't smell like ass." Samantha chuckled. "You're not saying you've been cooped up in that bottle since 1859, are you?"

"It is true." The genie nodded. "It was the last time I walked the earth. When Abigail Henley was my possessor."

"Wow. Things have really changed since then. A lot."

"I can see that," he said, glancing around the kitchen before settling his gaze on her. "Do all women of your time dress like men?" he asked, gesturing to Samantha's slacks.

Samantha tried to remember the last time she had on a dress or skirt. She suddenly wished she was standing there dressed all frilly and feminine for him. Like a helpless little Southern belle. Mint julep in one hand...his cock in the other. *Why, ah do declare! It's a genie, come to pleasure me up until I expire from bliss.*

"We often wear pants," she answered. "It's the custom."

"I do not think I like this custom." She saw the confusion in his gaze as he frowned down at her, appraising her from head to toe. "Is it also the custom of your time for soft, womanly creatures to bear masculine names? Sam," he spat her name with distaste. "You do not look like a Samson to me."

She felt her cheeks color. "Actually, it's short for Samantha."

"Samantha," he repeated, his smile a white flash in his tawny face. "Yes, a much better name for you."

She sighed at the way her name sounded like poetry spilling from his lips. "So while you were in the bottle you heard what I said about you—I mean, about the guy in the photograph?"

"Not only did I hear you, I could feel the sensation of lust emanating from you as you gazed upon my image."

Samantha felt her cheeks flush crimson. Just behind her, he nuzzled her neck with his cheek and she sighed as she found her big old sex-starved self sinking back against his chest, loving the feel of hard muscle pressing into her—the one between his thighs as well as the ones in his chest.

"I have a question about the words you spoke as you gazed at my image."

"Hmmm?" she hummed dreamily. "What's that?"

"What is this vibrator you spoke of? I am not familiar with the term. To vibrate is to tremble, to pulse, is this not so?"

"Um...yes..." Samantha giggled. She couldn't help it. "It's...well, a vibrator is just a special sort of device. A modern tool, of sorts. Maybe I'll tell you about it another time."

"I'm glad you find me gorgeous, Samantha. Of course, I'm not surprised. All women do. It pleases me that you were trying to picture me naked. I am most certain you will not be disappointed once I have shed my clothing and pose before you."

She felt the delicious heat of his large hands on her upper arms, turning her to face him. As if she was a mindless doll, Samantha allowed him to move her about, only to feel her knees go weak as she peered up into those mesmerizing eyes with the killer set of long lashes hooding them.

"Gee..." she squeaked and cleared her throat before trying again. "I mean, gee," she said, her voice coming out closer to normal that time. "Nothing like being just a wee bit egotistical." She did her best to sound unaffected and nonchalant when what she

actually felt was the prickle of thousands of nerve endings standing at rapt attention throughout her pleasure-deprived body, urging her to jump her hunky genie's bones.

"Egotistical? This word means confident, yes?" the genie asked and Samantha nodded. He elevated his chin and puffed out his chest—which was really a case of pure overkill because Lord knew the man didn't need to draw any more attention to his meticulously defined, drool-worthy body.

"And why should I not be confident? My hard, battle-scarred warrior's body is what women crave. What they dream of. Centuries of experience with women of many different lands and times have proven this."

"Well it's not what I crave or dream about," Samantha said. *Liar, liar. Pants on fire.* She clamped her fingers on his arm to push him away, a restraining action about as effective as trying to bend a crowbar. Lured by the solid feel of his flesh, she found herself overcome with the urge to explore every inch of his hard body. Her attempt to conceal a whimper failed miserably.

"We shall see." He ran his hands up and down Samantha's arms and she felt her panties soak. "Let me prove it to you, little one."

"I'm sorry, but smug, arrogant men who walk around with swelled heads aren't my type. They don't interest me," she went on, knowing that was exactly the way she'd always felt before. This guy, however, had every right to strut around with supreme confidence because he was the embodiment of male perfection. And she was so fucking turned on by him it was making her nuts.

But Samantha would be damned if she'd admit it to him. She'd had more than her share of experiences with cocky, self-serving guys in the past. She knew damn well what it was like to fall hard for a gorgeous guy only to have him use and then discard her.

"You do not speak the truth, Samantha." He increased the pressure on her arms, yanking her flush against his body. "I can see it by the way you look at me with burning hunger in your beautiful, wide, blue eyes."

Samantha really wanted to respond to that, to make some clever, witty, cavalier remark. To spout some glib line that would make him believe she thought he had rocks in his head, but she couldn't.

It was all she could do just to breathe.

Damn if she didn't feel like she was being held in the arms of some big, sensuous, half-naked savage from the cover of a romance novel. All that was missing was the wind blowing in their hair—and her wearing a bosom-baring dress that he could tear away so he could feast on her breasts.

The involuntary little moan rising from Samantha's throat and spilling out gave her away.

"Your ravenous hunger for me is nothing to be ashamed about, Samantha. I share the same hunger for you. I have not held a magnificent, well-rounded woman like you in my arms for centuries. I long to gaze upon those big, soft breasts of yours." He

cupped one of her breasts with his hand and she moaned again. "I am eager to see if the tips are pale or rosy, or perhaps a light shade of brown, before I take them in my mouth, torturing them ever so sweetly."

"Oh God..." Samantha didn't even recognize her own needy voice at that point. Her breasts ached, yearning to feel his tongue lash across the taut peaks while his hands explored her body. Hell, if he kept on talking that way her body would ignite. Mmmm, what a way to go.

"As I said, Samantha, I am but at your command. You are my possessor. You only need to ask, to express your desires. Give me your consent, and I will have your full, ripe body quaking with bliss the whole of the night. I am hard, strong, and expertly skilled at giving women pleasure in ways you cannot even possibly begin to imagine."

And then the jet-haired genie brought his mouth down over hers, mashing his soft lips against hers, seeking entrance with his probing tongue. This time Samantha's knees did buckle and the genie held her tight, supporting her as he kissed her absolutely fucking senseless.

To Samantha's horror and mortification, she felt the unmistakable throbbing and pulling that came just before an orgasm. It wasn't possible—she'd never come without direct stimulation to her clit before. And certainly not from nothing more than a kiss. But, holy shit, it was happening now.

Tightening her muscles, she brazenly rubbed her belly against the turquoise satin covering the genie's cock and no more than a blink of an eye later she was screaming out an orgasm. As ribbons of ecstasy tore through her, he cradled her in his powerful genie arms.

Okay, that was really embarrassing.

Good God in heaven, she was needy. And, hot damn, but that was just about the best, most powerful, climax she'd experienced in years. And all he'd done was stick his tongue in her mouth. Just imagine what would happen if—

"There, you see, little one? Now just allow yourself to imagine how I can make you feel once we are both naked in your bed."

Oh, I am...I am...

"You know you want it, Samantha. You want my hands on you, my mouth on you. Do not deny yourself the pleasure of my highly skilled services."

An instant before Samantha was about to beg her genie to drag her off by the hair and have his way with her—minus any head-lobbing sort of sword play, of course—somewhere inside her head a tiny alarm went off. She fought to push it aside, to ignore the sudden discomfiture and just give in to the delicious heat and passion of the moment. She wanted nothing more than to feel him thrust his big magical genie cock into her pussy over and over again as she begged him for more.

Oh God, how she wanted that.

But there was that damned warning bell going off.

"You called me your possessor," she said, oh so reluctantly, drawing away from his warm embrace and already missing the feel of him.

"Yes."

"Is that like an owner? Does that mean I own you and you have to do whatever I tell you to do?"

"Yes. It is my duty to fulfill your every desire, little one. To service you in any that I am able."

Samantha expelled the deep breath she wasn't aware she'd been holding. "Duty," she repeated as her shoulders sagged. "And service. Yes, of course, that's what I thought."

Oh sure, she was pitifully needy. Starved for male affection and sizzling, sweaty sex with a warm blooded man instead of her triple-action plastic vibrator, no matter how great the sex toy was. Jeez, she hadn't had a man make love to her in so long she could barely remember—and her last boyfriend, the cheating toad, sure as hell didn't look anything like Mr. Sexy Sultan at Your Service over here.

But, gorgeous and extraordinarily hot as her genie was, Samantha still wanted a man to be attracted to her simply because he was. Period. Not because it was his duty to service her. To pretend he found her appealing, just to please her. She did have some pride left, after all. And, seriously, how could anyone who looked like this guy be even remotely interested in her?

"That's enough," she said finally, stepping a good two feet away from the genie. "I don't want to carry this any further."

"But, Samantha—"

"Hold it right there, genie." She held up her hand like a crossing guard. "If I understand you correctly, I'm the one in charge and what I say goes. I give the commands and you obey," she said in a no-nonsense manner.

A look of defeat, torment or anger—or maybe a combination of all three—crossed the genie's features so quickly Samantha almost missed the change in expression. In an instant he composed himself, steeling his features as he tightened the muscle in his jaw, making his emotions unreadable.

"I am your slave and you are my master, if that is what you mean. Yes."

Suddenly Samantha wanted to give him a hug, but she thwarted her impulse and remained in place.

"Genie, I—"

"I have a name, Samantha. It is Lugal. I would ask that you use it, unless, of course, the idea displeases you." He regarded her with a flat, cold stare.

"Loo-gal," Samantha repeated the name the way it sounded with a smile that was met with his same guarded expression.

And then the cell phone in Samantha's purse rang.

With the seeming speed of light, Lugal drew his saber and adopted what couldn't be mistaken for anything other than a fighting stance. Eyes flashing and teeth bared as the musical tone chimed again from her purse, Lugal raised the saber above his head.

"No! Oh, shit! Oh my God!" Samantha screamed out, wanting to snatch her purse from the table before Lugal could turn it into mulch, but afraid her arm might get chopped off in the process.

"Get behind me, Samantha. I will protect you from this malevolence."

"Lugal, stop! I-I order you to stop! It's only my phone for chrissakes."

"Phone?" Arching an eyebrow he eyed her with a quizzical expression.

"Yeah. Just hold on a minute, okay, Conan?"

"Lugal."

"Right."

As Lugal stood ready to strike, his muscles bunched and prepared for action, Samantha made a swift grab for her purse. She took out the phone and held it aloft. "See?"

It rang again. His eyes wild, Lugal growled. The untamed sound shook Samantha to her knees. Standing firm, the saber still positioned above his head, he spouted something in a foreign language as he gazed menacingly at her phone.

"Holy shit!" Thinking again of the arm she'd become fond of over the past thirty-some years, she dropped the phone on the floor like it was a red hot poker. Just before it left her hand, Samantha saw Rosie's name and number on the lighted digital display. "It's just Rosie," she told him.

"This?" Lugal jerked his head toward the phone on the floor. "This strange, loud object with its own light source is your friend, Rosie? I do not understand." Right after he finished speaking, another musical tone indicating voicemail played. "What is this wizardry? This black magic, this witchcraft?" Lugal said, cautiously studying the phone while keeping his distance.

"It's okay. Really." Samantha held her hand up, in what she hoped was a calming gesture. "Please don't start slicing." Moving slowly, so as not to alarm Lugal further, she squatted to retrieve her phone, turning it off, just in case her brave genie warrior got the heebie-jeebies and started hacking away if it rang again.

"Rosie's not actually inside there, Lugal. And it's not magic. It's just technology. Part of the advanced skill and knowledge of our time."

"Technology," he repeated, voicing the four syllables of the word slowly.

"Yes. Remember how you felt the first time you saw your own image captured in that photograph, Lugal?" He nodded. "You probably believed that was some sort of black magic too, right?"

"I am still not convinced that it is not."

Samantha decided this probably wasn't a good time to show him how she could capture his image with her cell phone camera. "It's not. I promise you. Why don't you

just put that big old nasty saber back in its holster before your arms start cramping, and I'll explain all about it, okay?"

When Lugal hesitated, Samantha smiled. "Really. Trust me. It's just a...a speaking device. There's nothing to be afraid of. It's not going to hurt you."

"I am not afraid! I fear nothing!" Lugal boasted, lowering his saber and holding it in front of him with the tip positioned on the floor at his feet. "I only sought to protect you from harm, Samantha."

"Right. Well, thank you for saving me from the fearsome cell phone, Lugal. I appreciate it." Biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing, once again she felt the overwhelming urge to hug him – and more.

His eyebrow shot up. "You are mocking me, if I am not mistaken."

"Maybe just a teensy bit." Samantha smiled, holding her thumb and forefinger an inch apart. "I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. Now, how about putting the saber completely away, hmm?" She gestured toward the menacing weapon.

Thankfully, Lugal complied, seating the saber in the casing at his hip.

"Good. Now why don't you just sit down here at the table like a good genie and I'll make us something to eat. I have lots of questions to ask you – like about those three wishes I'm supposed to get, for example – and I'll bet you have a few questions of your own."

"Yes, many questions. You must tell me about everything that has changed since 1859." His expression became enthusiastic, eager. "I want to learn all there is to know about your time, to understand this technology you speak of. I thirst to know how everything works, to take this thing you call a phone apart and study the internal mechanisms."

Samantha blinked. Balloon pants and saber or not, her genie was clearly a typical man. She was a reasonably intelligent woman, but not a walking encyclopedia. There was no way she could answer all his questions. And she sure as hell wasn't about to let him dismantle her phone. "Thank God for Google and the internet," she muttered beneath her breath.

"For what?"

"It's..." She gazed at his hungry expression and realized it was ludicrous to attempt to explain all about computers and being online in a few sentences. Especially to someone who'd just stepped out of 1859. "Nothing. I'll show you later." She gave a dismissive wave.

"Sit," she said, patting the top of a kitchen chair. "Please. I'll see what I have in the fridge to eat."

"Food would be good. My belly aches from hunger. Thank you, Samantha."

She waited until Lugal was seated before she went to the refrigerator and opened it. As he glimpsed the first shaft of light radiating from the inside of the refrigerator, Lugal

leapt to his feet again, saber drawn, body positioned to slay the formidable refrigerator beast.

“Oh dear.” Samantha rolled her eyes. “Something tells me this is going to be a very long night.”

Chapter Three

Lugal calmed when an army of glowing armor-clad fiends failed to emerge from the refrigerator.

As Samantha withdrew hearts of romaine, baby spring greens and an onion from the vegetable bin, she wondered for a moment at what she was doing.

Considering the fact that a man had magically floofed out of a perfume bottle in a puff of smoke, by all rights she should be lying on the floor in a dead faint. Or racing down the street uttering a blood-curdling scream. Or be strapped in a straitjacket, cowering in a padded cell.

Instead she was making salad.

And making conversation with the big, brawny, half-naked barbarian of a genie who sat at her kitchen table.

His size and presence riveted her attention as he strode to the refrigerator and opened the door to inspect the unfamiliar object. Good God, the man was stunning. He moved like a panther, sleek, graceful and deadly. Taking in a deep breath, she caught his enticing scent as he walked by and the surge of lust she felt made her tremble.

"You have an entire market inside this chilled, illuminated box," Lugal marveled. "How is this possible?" He slanted Samantha an awed gaze. "Indeed, you must be wealthy beyond imagination."

She barked a laugh at that. A more graceful, sophisticated, confident woman probably would have answered the handsome hunk's faulty assumption with a low, throaty, sexy chuckle, but, dork that she was, Samantha guffawed.

"Hardly," she assured him, mentally calculating how many more days she had before her mortgage, car payment and utilities were due. "Everyone has a refrigerator and freezer, Lugal."

"What an amazing time you live in, Samantha." He lifted a whole fresh pineapple from the refrigerator's interior, examining it. "What is this?" He took a deep sniff.

"Pineapple," she said, amazed that he'd apparently never seen one before. "It's a tropical fruit. We'll have some for dessert. Why don't you bring it here so I can cut it?"

Lugal deposited the pineapple on the counter, next to the cutting board. His shoulder rubbed hers as he bent low, inhaling the onion she was cutting. The casual action was enough to send her poor, needy libido into overdrive.

Until today, the closest Samantha had ever come to rubbing shoulders with a drop-dead gorgeous specimen of manhood like Lugal was... Her thoughts galloped as she sliced the romaine. There must have been a time... Maybe at a dance, perhaps at some job, or maybe... Nope. Never.

Samantha had made it her business to steer clear of confident, too-handsome men because they rattled her, made her feel even plainer, duller and more ordinary that she already was.

She couldn't recall ever being in such close proximity to a man like this, much less making him a salad as she stood at her kitchen counter, trying to be blasé and pretend that her pussy wasn't trickling as she chopped vegetables.

Leaving his side reluctantly, she opened the freezer, scanning the contents. All she had to offer him was dieter's fare. "Let's see...lasagna with meat sauce. I think you'll like that," she said, drawing two small boxes from the freezer and setting them on the counter next to the microwave.

Lugal came to stand next to her, placing his hand on the freezer's icy contents.

"Astonishing. It is like the frozen tundra of Mongolia."

Pulling back the clear top layer of the dinner to allow steam to escape, she paused and looked up at him. "You've been to Mongolia?"

Still entranced by the frosty wonder before him, Lugal nodded. "Hundreds of years ago, one of my possessors belonged to a fierce nomadic tribe. I will never forget the brutal cold of Mongolia's barren plains."

An image of Lugal wrapped in furs and animal skins permeated Samantha's brain. She would have loved to have been his body pillow on those frigid nights. To provide warm breasts for his head and a hot, wet—

"And here you have its coldness isolated in a box," he said, snapping her lusty thoughts back to the present. "Truly astounding." His voice was breathless with excitement at all he had just discovered.

He reached out to touch a freezer coil and Samantha snatched his hand away.

"Don't touch that. You'll get an ice burn."

Lugal touched it.

Whisking his hand back, he examined it. A little capsule of warmth encircled Samantha's heart as she gazed at his awed expression. He reminded her of a rambunctious little boy, eager to explore his fascinating new surroundings.

"Okay, Lugal, pay attention. I'm going to heat our dinners. First you're going to hear a whirring noise." She deposited a Lean Cuisine meal on the microwave's rotating table. "After that you'll hear a few beeps. It's all normal. Nothing witchy or wizardish or anything, so don't go getting all tensed up and ready to pounce again, okay?"

Lugal gave a tentative nod. "How does the heat source get into the box?"

Samantha eyed the microwave and shrugged. "Beats me."

Lugal frowned. "Who beats you?" he demanded. "Tell me. I will lop off his head."

Placing her hand on his arm, she smiled at his chivalrous attitude, quite taken with his protective mode. "No one. It's just an expression. I just meant that I have no idea how it works, other than it cooks with microwaves—and I have no clue what they are."

"I understand." Lugal gave a knowing nod. "You have not been taught these aspects of technology because you are just a female," he said with a grunt. It seemed more a statement than a question.

Leaning against the counter, Samantha crossed her arms over her breasts, eyeing him with a narrowed glare. "It has nothing to do with my gender, Macho Man," she countered, aware that he'd blithely gone from protector to chauvinist in the blink of an eye. "Trust me when I tell you the average man on the street has no idea what microwaves are either."

"What is the meaning of macho man? Is this a reverent form of address?"

Samantha snickered. "It means pigheaded."

He ambled back to the kitchen table and sat in the chair, arms folded across the broad expanse of his chest. "I sense there has been a shift in male and female roles since I last walked the earth. Or, perhaps it is merely you, Samantha, who shows a lack of respect for your superiors."

Her jaw dropped. "My *what*?"

"The men of your time." Her look of shocked disbelief didn't seem to faze Lugal a bit. "Do they not still fight the battles, slay the animals for the dinner table, work and toil to provide shelter and protection for the fairer sex?"

Just as Samantha opened her mouth to reply, the microwave dinged, setting Lugal on edge.

"Things have changed, Lugal," she said, taking the meal out and putting in a second. "A lot. Men and women are equals now." She thought twice about that. "Well, we're getting there."

"Equals." Lugal relaxed his handsome features into a patronizing half smile. "I like you. You are humorous, Samantha." He sniffed the air and pointed toward the small meal. "This small container holds an entire dinner? It does not seem possible."

"Tell me about it," Samantha answered with a chuckle. "But it's possible if you're dieting and limiting yourself to about eleven hundred calories a day. For a big guy like you," she eyed him up and down for the umpteenth time, "it will probably seem more like a little snack. Sorry. All I have in the house is diet food. I wasn't expecting a six-foot-tall genie for dinner."

Lugal straightened in the chair. "I stand six feet and five and three-quarters inches," he stated proudly.

Samantha's lips curled into a devilish grin. Regardless of what time they lived in, size and every fraction of an inch were clearly vital statistics with men. That had her thoughts and gaze settling on Lugal's cock. Specifically its dimensions. "Did you learn that when you got fitted for your balloon pants?" she asked, dragging her eyes from his crotch to his face.

"There is no balloon in my pants." He clapped his inner thighs and gazed down. Samantha's eyes followed. "Every bit of swell you see is my own cock. As for fitting, Abigail Henley had me measured for a suit of clothing during my time with her."

His time with Abigail. The woman looked like she was somewhere between seventy and a hundred in that old photo. Samantha wondered if Lugal and the old lady had slept together. The idea made her cringe a little. But if Abigail was having him measured for clothes, they were probably close enough to be doing the horizontal mambo.

The microwave dinged again, snapping Samantha's attention to the present. She noted that Lugal tried to take the mechanical bell-like noise in stride, although he obviously couldn't help the involuntary tensing of his muscles at the sound.

Pushing her rather unsavory thoughts of Abigail and Lugal aside, she asked him, "How can you survive in that bottle all those years without eating?"

"It is similar to what you would call hibernation. During my time of bottled imprisonment, I exist in a dreamlike state, half alive and half in *Kurnugi*, the land of no return."

Samantha dressed the salads she'd prepared with balsamic vinegar, olive oil, oregano and a bit of fresh, minced garlic. "How did you end up in the bottle?"

Lugal's expression darkened. "It is not something I wish to speak of. Do I have your permission not to answer?"

Samantha's heart broke just a little bit as she watched this strong man struggle, believing he needed her consent to maintain his privacy. "Oh, Lugal, you don't need my permission. Of course you can refuse to answer."

"I am bound to obey my possessor and answer her questions." He bowed his head quickly. "You are benevolent to allow me this privilege of privacy, Samantha."

Once again, Samantha felt her heart twist. She was overcome with curiosity about this man and his strange past. Not quite sure what to say in response, she posed what she hoped was a less intrusive question, instead.

"Do you recall the last meal you ate, Lugal?"

Lugal's eyes softened. "Quite well. It was in the summer of 1859," he said, his deep, accented voice capturing her attention as he reminisced. "Abigail had prepared a picnic lunch for us to eat on the porch. We ate crackers, cold boiled ham, fried potatoes and tea out of tin plates and cups. My favorite part of the meal was blackberry cobbler, made with berries harvested from the bushes that grew wild and abundant behind the house."

"I have blackberry bushes here too," Samantha offered, setting the salads on the placemats and taking a seat opposite Lugal. "They grow wild all over the place here in Portland, even on the side of the road. Bet you'd love that cobbler à la mode, with a nice fat scoop of Häagen-Dazs vanilla bean ice cream plopped on top." Her eyes fluttered closed. "Mmmm."

"I do not know what this big fat scoop you speak of is, Samantha," Lugal said, stabbing a forkful of salad greens, "but I am familiar with the look of extreme pleasure on your face. After we eat, I will spend the entire night eliciting that dreamy expression from you if you will let me." He shoved the lettuce into his mouth and chewed with a satisfied murmur. "Good taste."

At the same moment her brain was registering the fact that this poor, deprived man had never tasted ice cream, the juncture between her thighs quivered.

"I can do amazing things with my tongue, Samantha," he promised with a cocky smile as he munched on romaine.

Oh...she just bet he could.

Her fork poised in midair, Samantha couldn't help wonder what that expressive mouth of his would feel like paying homage to her pussy. The thought surprised the hell out of her, because no man had ever bothered exploring her nether regions with his mouth. She didn't really have any idea what it would feel like, or if she'd even like it or not.

Until she'd focused on Lugal's sensuous lips, that is. She had a suspicion she'd like the sensation fine. Just fine.

"This isn't appropriate dinner conversation, Lugal," she informed him in a voice that came out sounding far too breathy, when she'd intended it to be more like a teacher's reprimand.

"My apologies. I hunger for more than just food, Samantha." He looked at her like she was a warm, inviting bowl of blackberry cobbler as he spoke. "It has been a very long time."

Getting all hot and bothered while she ate salad was a new experience for Samantha. As she crunched and chewed, she found her wanton thoughts drifting to *her* mouth, and what it might be like to use it on the impressive bulge in her genie's balloon pants.

She'd never thought much of the idea of sucking a cock and had only done it for one man, Tommy, her last boyfriend. It was an *eh* kind of experience for her, but since it made him howl and shudder with pleasure, she did it when he pressured her. After all, this was the guy she thought she'd end up marrying—until he decided to stick that pesky pecker of his into the bouncy little waitress at their favorite pizza joint.

It was in the restaurant's bathroom, while Samantha and Tommy were waiting for their deep-dish sausage, pepper, onion and mushroom pizza to bake.

As soon as she'd reached the restrooms, and before she even had a chance to knock on the locked door to the ladies facility, Samantha knew. She knew it was Tommy in there boffing the waitress when she heard his familiar *ooh, yeah, baby, yeah*, and the waitress' Betty Boop voice moaning, *oh, oh, Tommy* in response.

Samantha's gaze drifted over Lugal's torso. Even at six-feet, Tommy seemed like a puny adolescent compared with him. Lugal was all man, big, hard, solid and virtually oozing with testosterone.

And he wanted to pleasure her until she was boneless.

Once, just once in her life, she'd love to do something downright wild and risky with a man who could pass as a Greek god.

"The garden food was good," Lugal said, polishing off the last speck of onion from his plate. "I am eager to try the meal from the microwave machine that you have prepared."

"Oh!" She'd been so busy contemplating hot genie sex she'd completely forgotten her hostess duties. "Sorry, I forgot." Samantha popped over to the counter, plated the portions of lasagna and served them.

Lugal took his first forkful of lasagna, clearly forming a favorable verdict about its flavor. "This food you call lasagna is interesting." He shoveled in a few more forkfuls, practically inhaling the food. The man wasn't kidding when he said he was hungry.

"I'd give you some garlic bread to go with that, but I can't keep bread in the house anymore."

"Bread...*ninda*..." Lugal nodded. "The staff of life, Abigail called it. You do not like it?"

"Hah!" Samantha blurted in a fashion that was highly unattractive for a woman who was contemplating the possibility of hot genie sex with the man sitting across the table. "I love it. I'm a carb addict. One bite leads to another until I blow up like a beached whale." She puffed out her cheeks.

"Yes..." Lugal nodded. "I am familiar with addicts. These carbs you speak of, are they like opium?"

"Good analogy." Samantha rolled her eyes and laughed. "For me, yes."

"Can you not make your own bread the way Abigail did, so you can enjoy it without the addition of these addictive carbs? I remember the taste and smell of fresh bread from the oven. It is not something anyone should have to do without if they enjoy it."

"Tell me about it. All bread has carbs—carbohydrates," Samantha explained. "Unfortunately, it makes some of us fat because we can't stop eating it."

"Fat?" Lugal's eyebrow arched. "But you are close to scrawny, Samantha. I think perhaps you have made a mistake to stay away from bread. You need to fatten yourself up so that you do not lose your alluring womanly form."

Samantha was stunned. Gobsmailed. This God's-gift-to-women, this hot, sexy, magnificent specimen of manhood, thought she was just this side of scrawny?

She wanted to bookmark this moment. Record it on a CD so she could play it back over and over. Engrave it on her brain so she'd never forget it. Tattoo his words on her breast for all the world to see.

On the verge of pouncing on Lugal, smothering him with sloppy kisses and declaring her undying love, she had to bite her tongue and dig her fingers into the edge of the tabletop.

"That's very nice of you to say," she said demurely, instead. "But the time we live in doesn't appreciate full-figured women. Men prefer skinny women with prominent clavicles," she fingered her collarbone, "sharp hip bones and gaunt, sunken faces."

Lugal made a scoffing sound. "Then the men of your time are idiots," he stated flatly. "Fools. You have described what sounds like a starving street urchin."

"You won't get much of an argument from me on that subject." Samantha chuckled. "But even my boss told me I need to lose thirty pounds. I'm afraid full-figured just doesn't cut it in the twenty-first century, Lugal."

"Then your boss is an idiot too. Besides, the size of your body should be of no concern to your employer. It is improper for him to be focused on your womanly curves. Perhaps he harbors lewd thoughts about you."

"I sincerely doubt that. My boss is a she."

Lugal studied Samantha. "You are a governess? Or is it a maid or laundress?"

"I'm a weight-loss counselor. My job is to help keep people on their diet and exercise programs so they reach their weight goals and maintain them."

"This is difficult to fathom." Lugal's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "In every society I have known, and in every time period I have existed over the centuries, emphasis was placed on preventing people from becoming emaciated, not causing them to become so. This does not sound healthy. It makes no sense."

"Centuries?" Digesting the surreal information that Lugal had been in existence for far more than a lifetime, Samantha cleared the table and put the dishes in the sink. "How long have you been alive, Lugal?"

"Alive?" His gaze went cold as he made a harsh sound of disdain. "I was but in my third decade of life when I was placed in servitude. I would not call my existence since then living." Lugal's broad chest expanded as he drew in a deep breath. "I have lost count of the passage of time, Samantha. My incarceration in that bottle," he gestured toward the spun glass artifact with a jab of his jaw, "has spanned hundreds of centuries. I have walked the earth for brief periods more times than I can count during that time."

As Samantha sliced the pineapple for dessert, she wondered what in the world this man could have done to deserve such a cruel and unforgiving punishment. And who or what would have the power to imprison a man in a tiny bottle for centuries? She thought this kind of magical stuff was only in fantastical, fictional tales like Aladdin and his Magic Lamp.

Eyeing Lugal surreptitiously as she hacked off the pineapple's leafy crown, she decided he definitely looked strong and fierce enough to battle hoards of warriors. But he didn't strike her as the kind of man who was inherently criminal or evil.

Of course, she was no expert on criminology or murderous psychotics. There were always those cases on the news where some crazed psycho commits a heinous crime and, while the magnitude of the monstrous deed makes him sound like an ugly, evil-eyed, ogre of a brute, the photo shows someone who looks as handsome and charming as Ted Bundy.

For all Samantha knew, Lugal could casually lop off her head in the middle of their dessert course without so much of a blink of an eye.

But still...

"I'm sorry, Lugal. It sounds like you have some very painful memories. If you decide you want to talk about them I'd be happy to listen." She opened the refrigerator and grabbed the can of low fat whipped cream. "All that talk about forgetting diets and losing weight makes me wish this was regular, full-fat whipped cream." She was about to spurt a few fluffy circles of white onto the fruit, but stopped.

After setting the dessert plates on the table, Samantha flashed a smile at Lugal. "Open your mouth," she said, holding the aerosol can a few inches from his face.

One of his eyebrows dipped low. "Why?" he asked, his gaze dubious.

"Just do it," Samantha told him. "Trust me, you'll like it."

"I think I will not do this. Trusting women has only gotten me into trouble," Lugal said, folding his arms across his chest and clamping his lips tight.

"Oh, sorry...I didn't think the men of your time were such wimps," Samantha said, doing her best to look innocent.

"Wimps?"

"Babies. Sissies. Cowards," she elucidated. "Gutless, spineless —"

Lugal's mouth popped open and Samantha fought to swallow her rising laughter. Men were so damn easy, no matter how long they've been around.

She watched his eyes widen as she pressed the nozzle and squirted a huge tuft of whipped cream into his mouth. Then she turned the nozzle on herself and repeated the process, coating her own tongue with a ruffle of cream.

It was clear Lugal enjoyed the surprise treat.

"See? I told you. Delicious, hmm? And, look, you haven't turned into a horned toad or anything."

"How many cans of this do you have?" Lugal asked, taking it from her and experimenting with the nozzle.

"I have one more in the fridge."

"Good," he said, glancing up at her with glittering eyes and a wolfish grin. "I will use it later when I bed you, to decorate your tits and the soft, wet channel between your thighs before I feast on you."

Samantha's jaw dropped.

Chapter Four

Samantha tried to think of another course of action, as opposed to standing there opening and closing her mouth like a fish out of water, while she processed Lugal's lusty proposal. It wasn't all that easy, considering her trickling pussy, tight, swollen nipples and her raging hormones.

"You can just get that whole bedding me idea out of your mind, Lugal, because it's not going to happen."

"Yes it is."

"No," she insisted. "It isn't."

"You do not speak the truth." He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply through his nose. "I can smell your passion. Your desire for me." His eyes opened, narrowing between thick, dark lashes. Intense and determined, they raked over her.

Oh God. That was the most erotic thing anyone had ever said to her. No man had ever looked at her like that before. She wanted to drop to her knees and worship his cock. Tear off her clothes and lay spread eagle for him on the spot.

"I mean it," she warned, instead. "Damn. It wasn't easy being stern when your clit was clenching. "Don't make me have to pull rank on you, mister."

Still sprawled in the kitchen chair, looking confident and comfortable, Lugal spread his legs, smiling at her suggestively. "You can pull me, little one. I will not mind."

Her eyes flew to his crotch and the deliciously large bulge beneath the shimmery fabric. She swallowed hard as Lugal's hand skimmed his erection. "By *pull rank*, I meant me, owner who makes the rules – you, subordinate who follows my rules."

His smile deepened, highlighting straight white teeth and creases that fanned out from the corners of his mesmerizing eyes.

"I know what you meant," he confirmed with a husky chuckle. "Mark my words, Samantha, before the night is over, you will be begging me to drive my hard cock into your depths."

"I don't think so," she said with a nonchalant tone that belied her quivering insides. "I don't make a habit of sleeping with men I barely know, or genies who pop out of bottles in vaporous streams." She made a swirling-smoke gesture with her hand.

For chrissakes, being around as long as he claimed, Lugal had probably had sex with dozens of women. Beautiful women. Slender, lithe, willowy women. Maybe even princesses and queens. Even if Samantha wanted to have sex with him – and, oh boy, did she ever – she and her chunky body could never in a million years live up to his untold centuries of carnal memories.

Lugal rose to his feet and Samantha had to look up—way up—to meet the gaze of the finely honed mass of muscularity.

“Ah, but you do know me, Samantha. I am Lugal Damu-zid of Sumer.” He made a swift bow before taking her hand in his and brushing her knuckles with a kiss. The deep timbre of his voice alone was enough to send shivers up her spine.

“I am here for no other reason than to protect and pleasure you,” he told her. “I am your slave. All you need do is ask and I shall obey. Give me your permission to please you and, I swear to you, Samantha, you will not regret it. Let me prove it to you, little one.” This time he kissed the inside of her elbow and her knees went weak.

It was a damn good thing Samantha was wearing slacks, otherwise there’d be clear and embarrassing evidence of her amorous need trickling down her legs. She shifted in place, acutely aware of the tingling sensation at the sensitive flesh between her thighs.

So what if it *was* just his duty? What did it really matter if he wasn’t interested in her for herself? Why couldn’t she simply think of him as a delicious male prostitute, there to do her erotic bidding? She looked into his deep brown eyes and swallowed a sigh.

Why not? None of this was really happening, anyway. It couldn’t be. Samantha had to be hallucinating. Or dreaming. Or maybe she’d had a heart attack and was dead and this was heaven. But if it were heaven there’d be chocolate. And real whipped cream. And she wouldn’t be eating Lean Cuisines and salads.

She breathed in, filling her nostrils with his intoxicating male scent. What the hell, if she *was* in heaven, she could use one of her three wishes for chocolate, the second for being able to eat whatever she wanted without ever gaining an ounce and the third, to make Lugal fall madly in love with her and stay with her for eternity.

Yup. That sounded reasonable.

It would be so easy. She should do it. She should just forget about her stupid insecurities, her ridiculous reservations and her annoying conscience and let him sweep her off her feet. Make mad, passionate love to her.

“Did you have sex with Abigail Henley?” she blurted.

Clearly taken aback, Lugal’s eyebrow shot up. “An honorable man does not discuss his sexual history or conquests, Samantha. To do so could tarnish the reputation of the females a man has bedded.”

“It’s not like Abigail has anything to worry about,” Samantha pointed out as kindly as possible. “She’s been dead for well over a hundred years. I-I need to know, Lugal.”

She’d made her decision. If he’d slept with Abigail, then Samantha would turn him down. She wasn’t sure she could get over the *ick* factor, picturing him pleasuring a pruny, crinkled, naked old lady. Not that she had anything against seniors having active sex lives, in fact, she thought it was great, but...nope. Uh-uh.

On the other hand, if he *hadn’t* slept with Abigail, then Samantha would jump his bones.

Or order him to jump hers.

Pausing in thought for a moment, Lugal nodded. "I did not bed Abigail. It was not her wish. Although I would have gladly accommodated her in that respect if she so desired."

Samantha's eyes widened in surprise. "She didn't want to sleep with you?" Old or not, Samantha couldn't imagine any woman not wanting to have a beautiful, incomparably masculine creature like Lugal make love to her.

"We did sleep together at times. Just sleep, Samantha. It made Abigail feel safe. We did not have sex because she dearly loved another and felt it would be a betrayal to that love."

"I'm assuming it couldn't have been her husband," Samantha said with a coy smile, "because I sort of doubt he'd be all that thrilled to have you sleeping next to his wife."

"The one she loved was, indeed, her husband. He was killed during their long covered wagon trip over the Oregon Trail from the eastern side of America. It was 1843, they had been married only a few months. She was a widow."

"Oh. How sad. That means she was alone for..." she mentally calculated, "about sixteen years." Samantha reached for the faded photo, studying the kind-looking face of the old woman. "She must have already been elderly when they got married. She looks about eighty in this photograph."

"The day I came to Abigail was her birthday. She was fifty-one. She married Owen Henley when she was thirty-five."

Fifty-one? Focusing on the picture again, Samantha gasped. "My God..."

"She was a pioneer woman, making her way alone, in difficult, dangerous times. Life was very hard for her. Abigail was a good woman, Samantha. Kind, sweet and considerate of others."

Samantha was struck by Lugal's obvious compassion for the woman and the knowledge warmed her heart. While her swarthy genie may have bold, ferocious, warrior looks and a chauvinistic mindset, he apparently had a heart of gold.

"It was my pleasure, my honor, to serve her and grant her three wishes," Lugal finished.

"Can you tell me what they were?"

Lugal leaned in so close, Samantha thought sure he was going to kiss her. "Perhaps," he whispered against her ear, "after I make your body quiver and shudder beneath me, I will tell you."

Her breath caught. The man was a living, breathing aphrodisiac. Impossible to resist. "No *perhaps*. I want your word that you'll tell me."

His handsome face still nestled in her hair, Lugal gave a deep, husky chuckle. "You have my word, little one."

Well, if that was the only way she'd be able to find out what Abigail's three wishes were, Samantha figured she'd make the monumental sacrifice.

"Okay," she said so softly she barely heard the word as it left her lips. "Let's do it."

Lugal scooped Samantha up and into his arms so fast she barely knew what happened.

"Wait! We haven't eaten the pineapple yet." Good Lord, did she really just say that? Was she really that much of a foodie, a dork, a dweeb, to think of chowing down on pineapple when she was on the verge of mind-blowing sex with a fantasy man?

Oh brother. She was plainly in serious need of a good mind-clearing fuck.

Lugal picked up a chunk of the juicy fruit and slid it past her lips. Then he did the same for himself. "Good," he said, licking his lips. "Unlike anything I have eaten before. There, we have had our pineapple, Samantha. Now we will have sex."

Turning to gaze up at him, Samantha's face collided with Lugal's chest. She was met by hot male flesh, hard bone and perfectly sculpted muscle.

His pectorals flexed.

Samantha sighed.

It was one of those prolonged, melodic sighs heroines of old movies made when the hero gathered them up at the end and took them behind closed doors.

Now she knew why they made those sounds. Lord have mercy, the man was an orgasm waiting to happen!

"Where?" Lugal asked.

"My bedroom." Samantha pointed. "And leave the saber in the kitchen."

"A warrior is never without his weapon," Lugal countered. "I must keep it at my side to protect you."

Images of Lugal's handsome features taking on a fierce demeanor, his naked, sweaty chest heaving as he braved the unknown, slashing his sword this way and that to defend Samantha from the dreaded cell phone and refrigerator, made her feel like she was the heroine in one of those movies now.

"Wait a minute," she said, the logical side of her brain rudely interrupting her fantasies. "I don't suppose you have condoms. Because I don't." It was a sorry truth to have to reveal. The last condom she had was so old it had become brittle.

"Condoms?" Lugal asked, not breaking his stride. "What is that?"

"You know. Rubbers. Prophylactics." Lugal was silent. "Something to cover your penis so no sexually transmitted diseases are spread," she explained.

"Ah, so you have a sexual disease," Lugal noted, taking the information in stride.

"No! Of course not! I'm not the one who's slept with dozens of women."

"Hundreds," Lugal corrected, and Samantha groaned. "Which room is it?"

"There. The question is, do *you* have a disease? I mean, with all the places you and that busy appendage between your legs have been, your cock could be teeming with billions of nasty organisms and bacteria."

Lugal kicked the door of her bedroom fully open and threw Samantha on the bed. She landed with a surprised *oooph!*

"You have no need to worry about my cock being tainted. I am clean and healthy. I am unable to die, unable to transmit disease and unable to father children. These precautions were all written into the incantation when I was imprisoned."

Lugal removed his vest and Samantha got the full effect of his massive chest and all its muscles. It was beautiful, exquisite. There were also a number of long, ragged scars, which made her heart clench.

"Are all those scars from battles?" She asked, suddenly eager to run the tip of her tongue over each one of them.

"Yes. All of them before my incarceration. Any wounds I received since then have healed without any trace of the injury. Again, it was part of the incantation."

"So, you can be hurt but not killed."

"Exactly. No matter how close I come to death, I will always survive."

"That's good," Samantha said.

"It is a vile curse," Lugal spat. "You cannot imagine, Samantha, what it is like to be hacked to—" He stopped abruptly, sucking in a deep breath, straightening his broad shoulders and elevating his chin. "My apologies. I am not here to whine like a babe and bore you to tears with my trials and tribulations."

"I don't think it's boring at all, Lugal. Have you received many injuries since you were put in the bottle?"

Lugal gave a curt nod. "Many. I have come face to face with Ereshkigal more times than I can remember, each time to be jolted back to...life." Lugal's small laugh was humorless.

"Who or what is Ereshkigal?" Samantha asked.

"Goddess of the underworld. You must remove your trousers," he said without missing a beat. "I do not like to look at them. They are not womanly."

Scooting to the edge of the bed, Samantha complied, wishing she'd worn something other than her plain, white cotton bra and panties. As she kicked off her slacks, she heard Lugal's intake of breath.

"This is all you wear beneath your trousers?" he walked over to her, pushing her back against the bank of pillows and smoothing his big hand over her panties.

"Sure. What else would I wear under them?"

"In 1859, this would have been scandalous." He bent to plant a kiss on her cotton-covered mound and Samantha gasped. "I cannot tell you how happy I am that we are not in 1859, Samantha." His thumbs slid beneath the elastic leg bands, smoothing over her moist curls. Before he slipped his thumbs out, he toyed with the stretchy elastic, snapping it against her skin.

"I am most eager to find out what awaits me beneath the rest of your clothing. What is this garment called?" Lugal asked, fingering her sweater. "It feels like the soft fur of a rabbit."

"It's a sweater. Cashmere. I splurged on it."

"I am familiar with the Kashmir civilization," Lugal noted.

"You mean the goats?"

"Goats?" he asked.

Samantha laughed. "I have a feeling we're talking about two different things. The yarn for my sweater came from cashmere goats raised here in Oregon. What cashmere are you talking about?"

"The area around the country called India. I was there briefly, several hundred years ago."

"Did you see any goats?"

Lugal nodded. "If I recall, yes."

"Well, there you go." Samantha grinned.

He slanted her a baffled look. "Where do I go?"

Samantha blinked. It sometimes felt like she and Lugal were engaging in a round of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First?"

"You're not going anywhere. I believe you were about to take off my sweater," she said boldly.

Yanking her up and away from the pillows, Lugal stripped the sweater from her so fast her hair stood on end from the static.

"By gods, you are big."

Well, hell.

With a defeated gasp, Samantha's ego shriveled to the size of a raisin. Instinctively, she crossed her arms over her chest and crotch.

"Big blazing hair," he said, threading his hands through her just-below-the-shoulders auburn hair. "Big hips made for birthing, big, heavy tits... You have a body built to stop an army in its tracks."

Oh. Well, that didn't really sound all that bad. Her spirits lifted a bit. "Are...are you saying that's a good thing?"

"Good?" A low chuckle rumbled in Lugal's chest. He drew his saber from his side and Samantha felt the blood drain from her veins.

Oh Jesus, her body wasn't *that* much of a disappointment, was it?

As the metal approached her skin, she toyed with the idea of fighting back, but wasn't too crazy about the prospect of having her hands and arms slashed into tiny ribbons. Besides, all those bloodied bits of flesh would really mess up her ivory eyelet bedspread.

Instead, she whimpered, "I'm sorry I'm fat. Please don't kill me, Lugal." She sucked in a breath and held it as the cold blade touched her back, praying that he'd be quick and merciful. And that he wouldn't make too much of a mess. As she squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for her life to flash before her eyes, her bra fell from her shoulders.

Her eyes popped open to see Lugal replacing his saber.

"You cut off my bra," she said, dazed, amazed and happy to still be breathing.

"I need to see you naked. Now." Lugal peeled her underwear from her body so fast she felt like an ear of corn, badly in need of immediate shucking.

"Ahhhhh..."

That one, elongated, accented expression of approval, combined with that killer smile of his, elicited a sigh of relief from Samantha.

"I do not understand all this absurd talk about you being fat and wondering if you are good enough, Samantha." He cupped her breasts in his palms, curving his fingers over the spheres as if he were measuring the weight. "You are a well-built woman with the luxuriant arcs and slopes of a goddess."

As she opened her mouth to reply, Lugal flipped her over as if she weighed no more than one of the pillows.

"Let me see your ass," he said while she bounced, face-down on the mattress. "Yes...just as I had imagined. Big, plump and curvy." He gave one cheek a smack and Samantha yelped at the sudden pain. Then Lugal swatted the other cheek.

She wanted to protest the sheer audacity of his shocking actions. She wanted to object to his abuse of her butt. She wanted to balk at the unexpected sting from his spanking.

Instead, to her surprise, Samantha became even wetter, moaning as she was filled with pleasure so fresh and raw it made her pussy ache and her clit throb. His spansks weren't hard enough to cause the pain of punishment, but, rather, the brisk tingle of arousal.

"Such a rosy flush against the alabaster white of your flesh," Lugal said, smoothing his hand over her hot ass cheeks. Samantha could imagine the large, pink handprint marks he'd made there. "I have never seen skin as soft, smooth and pale as that of your pretty bottom." His fingers squeezed her cheeks hard, kneading and stroking. She gave a surprised gasp when his thumbs slipped into the crack, smoothing up and down.

Before Samantha could blink, Lugal had flipped her over again, pushing her shoulders until she fell back against the bank of pillows again. Almost dizzy from all the motion, she felt like a rag doll. But she didn't really mind. Not when he looked at her with that famished, appreciative look in his eyes.

"Your body is magnificent." His calloused fingers dug into her flesh, trailing a path over her breasts, down her belly, across her mons and down both legs. "Lush and extravagant, exactly the way a woman's body should be. My cock stands erect and hungry for you, Samantha, eager for hot, hard, lusty sex."

Lugal's deep penetrating voice sent a thrill to her clit as an urgent emptiness tingled deep in Samantha's pussy.

"If I ask you a question do you promise to tell me the truth?" she said.

"I am bound to do so," he assured her, cupping her breasts and pinching the rigid nipples.

Aroused to the bone and barely able to speak, Samantha did her best to finish her thought. "All those beautiful things you just said about me. You know, about looking like a goddess and all. Are they...I mean, are you...did you..."

"What is it, little one? Did I not make myself clear? Was there something you did not understand?" She sighed at the tender look he gave her. "According to the incantation, I am to have a basic understanding of the language of my possessors," he explained. "But I find that this does not necessarily extend to recently created words or fashionable phrases of the moment."

"You mean like slang or colloquialisms," Samantha offered, fully aware of his big, warm hands exploring her body.

"Yes." Lugal nodded. "I believe those are the terms. This usage of slang, as you call it, often makes it difficult for me to understand, or to explain myself clearly."

Lugal's precious words tiptoed through her memory. *The luxuriant arcs and slopes of a goddess...* "Oh, I think you did a fine job of making yourself understood, Lugal." Samantha's eyes lowered and she fingered the bedspread, absently drawing patterns on the fabric.

"I just want to know if you meant what you said. Or was it just the sort of stuff you're supposed to say to your possessors because of that spell they put on you?" Looking up at him through her lashes, she dragged her bottom lip through her teeth.

Cupping her chin, Lugal lifted Samantha's head, gifting her with a dazzling smile. His head lowered and he gave her a deep, scorching kiss that left her breathless.

"I spoke to you purely as a man, little one. Every word I uttered of my own accord."

Her heart started tap dancing. "So you didn't just tell me those things as part of your duty to pleasure me? You're telling me you...you actually meant them?" She could hardly believe it. Talk about being too good to be true!

"Exactly." His thick fingers raked down her thighs, over her knees and all the way to her ankles before he massaged her feet. "Although, I am glad my words gave you pleasure."

Pleasure? She was damn near ready to expire from an overdose of happiness. "Oh, they did." She felt a delicious stab of heat as his gaze traveled to her pussy, lingering there.

"See how wet you are for me already?" Lugal's hands left her feet, skimming up along the inside of her upper thighs. "Your juices slide down from your cunt, preparing for my entry." His deft fingers surveyed her wet slit. "So juicy and warm."

Sheer, fiery bliss overwhelmed Samantha when Lugal bent over her, replacing his fingers with his tongue and swooping a lavish lick. Her mind was infused with a splash of colors, hot, deep, pulsating in time to the insistent throb, deep in her core.

"Sweet and delicious," he told her after leisurely lapping his way up and down her slit until Samantha was so hot and turned on she practically ignited. "I have always enjoyed the smell and taste of cunt, Samantha, but supping from you is like drinking nectar from a goddess. Like dipping my tongue into a pot of the finest honey."

Whew! So much for wondering whether or not she'd like oral sex.

"I have to see you," she said, bunching the voluminous fabric of his balloon pants in her fist. "Take off your pants, Lugal."

Unfastening the saber from his side, Lugal placed the scabbard upright, leaning against one of the nightstands. Samantha licked her lips in anticipation as his fingers unwound the long band of fabric at his waist and, finally, removed his genie pants.

Standing tall and proud before her, Lugal's large, thick cock jutted from a bush of curly dark hair. It was just as bold and magnificent as he was.

"I see you are not displeased. I knew it would be so." He came to the edge of the bed. "Touch me, Samantha."

While she hadn't seen all that many cocks, Samantha noted Lugal's hadn't been circumcised. It was the first one she'd seen like that. She liked the way it looked. And she liked the way it felt even better as she closed her hand around his erection. Like warm flesh over forged steel.

Lugal's head fell back as he groaned. It was a long, tremulous, ravenous sound that rumbled up from deep within his chest.

"So very long," he whispered, "since I have felt a woman's touch at my cock."

"Me too," Samantha said. "Since I've had sex, I mean. It's been a few years."

"It's been more than a century for me," Lugal offered, sifting his fingers through her hair as she played with his cock, examining it thoroughly.

The more she handled it, the larger it grew. Samantha glanced up at his face. His gaze was so heated, so famished. And so obviously pleased at the rapt attention of her fingers.

"I am glad you are the woman to break my abstention, little one."

"I am too. While you're pleasuring me, I'll be pleasuring you right back," she said with a come-hither smile. She eased herself flat on her back and wiggled her fingers in invitation. "Come on, Aladdin." Her gaze zeroed in on Lugal's colossal cock. "Let me rub that big, magic lamp of yours between my thighs."

Samantha was nearly giddy with arousal. She'd never acted so incredibly bold, so brazen, so openly wanton before.

Of course, she'd never been on the verge of fucking a genie before, either.

"I am not sure what that means," Lugal said, climbing on the bed and grinning down at her. "But I like the way it sounds."

Lowering his head, Lugal's tongue lashed out. With one fierce, startling lick across her primed clitoris, Samantha Rutledge was a gonner.

Chapter Five

"You have good lungs," Lugal said, clasping Samantha to him as she shuddered in his arms. "I do not like weak, lilying flowers. I like my women big, bold and feisty."

"I can't believe I've come twice already since you popped out of that bottle. And both times in the blink of an eye. Believe it or not, Lugal, I'm usually not the kind of woman who..." She sighed. "Who just hops into bed with every good looking genie who comes along."

"I know that." His tongue darted out, licking across her lips like a cat lapping at cream. "I have been with enough women to know you are virtuous, Samantha. It is clear your carnal experience and knowledge are limited, quite unlike that of a concubine or common harlot."

"That's an understatement." Samantha thought of how little she really knew about sex. In the past it had usually consisted of a few passionate kisses and maybe a pluck or two of the nipples before the guy got to the penis in, penis out part. Then it was all done except for the snoring.

"You are ripe with orgasms and eager for the feel of my cock thrusting inside you because you find me irresistible," Lugal said, smoothing her hair from her face and kissing her temple. "It is understandable, even for the most virtuous of women."

"I guess self-esteem isn't an issue with you." Samantha gave a lazy, sated chuckle. "Are you always so confident?"

"I do not believe in false modesty."

Samantha found herself tossed flat on her back, thighs spread wide. Lugal gathered her wrists in his hands, raising them to his lips. He brushed a tender kiss across her knuckles and another on the sensitive skin of her inner wrists. Pressing her captured wrists over her head and against the pillows, he easily immobilized them with one strong hand.

Lugal hunched over her, clearly ready to thrust.

"Lugal, you really have to stop tossing me around like I was a—"

One mighty thrust of his cock into her depths shut Samantha right up.

"Holy shit." She clutched the pillowcase and panted. She had a bronzed sun god crouching over her. Holding her captive. Buried inside her. And just the thought of it, the sight of it, much less the exquisite feel of it, had her on the brink of yet another explosive orgasm.

God, she was easy.

"*Holy shit...* another odd saying," Lugal noted. "But I can see from the expression of rapture on your face that it is positive."

"In this case, yes. My God, I can't believe you just did that. You're so big I thought you'd never fit inside."

Lugal inched his cock a fraction deeper. "I am just beginning. There is more of me to come. But, I assure you, Samantha, I will fit every centimeter inside your hot, wet, silken cunt." Samantha moaned as she felt him sink deeper still.

Bliss. Being made love to by this great big, beautiful hunk of man was sheer, unadulterated bliss. She never wanted it to stop.

"Please, Lugal, let go of my wrists so I can touch you."

"Ahhh, but you look so appealing secured in my grasp. So vulnerable. Your alabaster tits are thrust high and they bob to and fro as I thrust, beseeching me to bite their little berries." Leaning in close, he gave her a tingling demonstration as his teeth teased one nipple and then the other. She writhed shamelessly beneath him, swimming in sweet, torturous sensations. "But, since I am but your slave, I shall obey your wishes."

Not quite certain whether she was glad or if she regretted making the request, once he freed her wrists, Samantha reached up, digging her fingers into the flesh of his pectorals.

God, he felt good. And looked amazing. He had the fully developed, perfectly sculpted chest that made women drool. Just the right amount of dark hair across his chest, tapering off into a long, thin line down his body, bisecting a ripped washboard stomach. Then there were biceps. She clutched one and squeezed. Mmmm...satin padding stretched over solid rock.

Add to that the long, inky black hair, dark jaw stubble, sexy mouth, powerfully developed long legs and broad shoulders. The man was pure sex by the pound.

His eyes fixed on hers, Lugal pushed himself deeper, eliciting yet another blissful moan from deep within her center. Samantha's thoughts were entirely focused on his magical cock now. She'd never been so filled. It was the first time she'd ever had a man's naked cock buried inside. Sex without a condom barrier elevated the entire experience. But then, even *with* a condom, sex with this big barbarian would be a scintillating, breath-stealing experience.

"You are so tight inside, Samantha. The way your muscles clasp me, hug me, suck me deep, stirs my hunger. It is difficult for me to keep from thrusting all the way inside. But..." his breath grew raspy as he spoke, "it is not my intention to hurt you. You need time to adjust to my size."

Fuck that, Samantha's passion-fogged brain screamed. The hell with adjusting. She needed him all the way inside. Now!

"Thrust away, Lugal. I'm ready."

Lugal's eyes lit up. She didn't have to tell him twice. Planting a hand on each of her breasts and squeezing, he buried himself to the hilt, balls deep.

They each cried out at once from the intensely pleasurable sensation. There was some initial discomfort as Samantha's channel accommodated his size, but any pain was acutely diminished by rapture.

Best of all, Lugal's cock was so big it easily managed to make contact with her G-spot, driving Samantha up the wall with untold ecstasy. He seemed to realize his cock abraded an especially sensitive area because Lugal lingered there, maneuvering his hips so that his cock shifted from side to side, with just enough movement to shred the barriers of her sanity.

"Holy cow..." she whispered, looking up at a man so exquisite, so supremely masculine, he'd make Hollywood casting directors drool.

Lugal's eyebrows furrowed. "How curious that it is a religious icon of the people of India you speak of as I pleasure you."

Samantha started to laugh at that until he withdrew and jack-hammered into her again.

Lost in a haze of bliss, she felt like the beautiful, hero-worthy heroine central to a magical fairytale, or a great romance novel, or maybe the all-time best romance movie.

"This can't be real," she breathed, finding it impossible to remain still. "It's too perfect, too incredible." Awash in the most exquisite, wondrous state of eroticism, her body had no choice but to squirm.

With each purposeful pummel of his hot flesh into hers, with each glint of his bittersweet chocolate eyes, with every tick of his muscle groups, every impassioned groan he offered, she did her best to imprint the moment on her brain so she'd never forget.

"I know it is real," Lugal said, "because every fiber of my being is alight with sensation. I am afire, Samantha. Burning with ardor for the passionate woman who thrashes beneath me." One hand roamed the curves and contours of her body while the other focused on a nipple, twisting and tugging it.

The man showed no mercy as he tortured her sensitive nipples, propelling her senses to a place of pure, primal ecstasy. As pleasure zinged from nipple to clit, Samantha luxuriated in a primitive, lengthy moan.

"I have under me a sensual creature whose juicy cunt is a perfect match for my big cock. A woman whose bountiful breasts swell and blush for me." Both of his skilled hands were busy at her breasts now. "Whose rigid, pink nipples beg for my mouth." Lugal thrust into her high and hard before lowering his head and fastening his mouth on one of her breasts.

Samantha shuddered at the insistent tugging of his lips as he half suckled, half nibbled her breast. Under the bite of his teeth and the rasp of his fingers, the small buds burned and throbbed until she thought, surely, she'd go out of her mind.

She looked up into Lugal's eyes, reaching out to touch his face. He leaned closer and she smoothed her fingers along his jaw. Damn, even the rough stubble there sent shivers down her spine.

"No man has ever made me feel this way before," she admitted to him, her nerve-endings alive with vibrant, pulsing sensations. "Oh, God, Lugal, I'm close to shattering again."

"As am I. You have eyes the color of lapis lazuli," he whispered to her. "Keep them open as I bring you to climax."

"What's a lapis lazuli?" Samantha managed to get out before her senses fled.

"An opulent gem, highly favored by the people of my time. The color is deep blue with golden points of light that shimmer like little stars."

"Oh. You say the nicest things, Lugal." Her eyelids intuitively fluttered shut as the first orgasmic waves took hold.

"Open your eyes. I want to see the ecstasy in their depths as your essence journeys on *lil* to *an*."

"Who are Lil and Ann?" Samantha panted, her eyes popping open wide.

"In my language, Sumerian, *lil* is the wind, the air. A breath, spirit, the atmosphere. *An* is what you would call heaven." Lugal's gaze intensified, darkened. "Now, Samantha. You will climax for me now," he commanded, shoving into her with a twist of his hips.

And like a good little genie possessor, she promptly obeyed.

Before the last word of his edict passed his lips, a quivering Samantha was already on her way, whisked off by a rapturous gust. Climbing high, higher... Claspng his strong arms tight, she called out Lugal's name and watched his face contort into a grimace of utmost pleasure. An instant before he roared out his satisfaction, she saw the fire in his eyes spark and she knew he had joined her on *lil* to *an*.

Feeling jet after pulsing jet of his hot cum fill *her* instead of a condom was the icing on the cake. A dreamy expression in his half-lidded eyes, he looked to be on the point of sated collapse and Samantha couldn't wait to feel his big body blanket hers, crushing her in the best way possible.

At the sound of the doorbell chiming, Lugal stiffened and Samantha's eyes grew wide.

The muscles in his jaw tensing, Lugal snapped to attention, hopping out of bed so fast Samantha could barely keep up with his movement. He grabbed the handle of his saber and she heard the screech of metal against metal as he drew it from its sheath.

"What is that noise, that strange music?"

"It's just the doorbell," Samantha explained. "Someone's at the door. Visitors," she clarified when he still looked uncertain. She glanced at the digital clock on her nightstand. Six-thirty. "Although I have no idea who on earth it could be at this time of the evening. Probably somebody selling magazines or —"

All of a sudden, Samantha gasped. Scrambling to her knees, she shouted, "Oh my God, the kids are here!"

Lugal looked dumfounded. "Baby goats? From Kashmir? They visit you?"

"No! It's Rosie and Charlie and the kids. Their children."

"I do not understand? Do you mean your friend Rosie is a talking goat?"

"What?" Samantha gaped at him. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "No. Things haven't changed *that* much, Lugal. I mean, this isn't Oz, you know. It's still Oregon."

"Oz?"

"Yeah, you know, Dorothy and the wizard," her hands flailed as she explained, "and the tin man and—" Lugal was giving her that clueless look again. "Oh...I forgot. Baum wrote those stories long after 1859." She sighed. "Kids are human children, Lugal. It's slang."

"How curious I do not recall another time or place where human babes were referred to as animals."

The term rug rats immediately skidded past Samantha's thoughts, but she decided not to go there. "Oh, shit, what am I going to do? I can't believe I forgot all about them coming."

"That is because you were in the hands of an expert lover, being pleased beyond your wildest expectations," Lugal offered with a confident smile.

Samantha was all set to argue with the self-assured genie, but, seriously, how could she refute what the guy said? He was spot on. She'd totally forgotten her responsibilities because she was too busy getting supremely, sublimely fucked by a character out of a fairytale.

She blinked at the realization.

The doorbell rang again and then came the sound of knocking and the voices of the twins calling out. "Auntie Sam, Auntie Sam!"

"Ohmigod." Samantha gulped, her mind racing as she looked at the gorgeous, naked barbarian next to her bed, saber securely in hand. He'd scare the bejeezus out of those poor kids, not to mention their mom and dad.

"You have to stay here while I answer the door, Lugal," Samantha instructed, snagging her bathrobe from the hook behind the bedroom closet door and shrugging it on, yanking the belt tight to cover her nakedness. "Do not make a sound, I mean it. I'll-I'll tell them I suddenly came down with the flu and can't baby-sit. Yeah...that's it."

Shoving her feet into her fluffy, pink bunny-head slippers, she called out, "Be right there!" punctuating her statement with a series of loud, faux coughs. She looked back at Lugal. "Put your clothes back on."

"But I thought we would—"

"That's an order." Samantha scurried out of the bedroom and into the living room to answer the door.

She pulled it open and, with one look at her, Rosie and Charlie's faces fell.

"Honey, are you okay?" Rosie asked. "Your face is all pink." She clapped her hand to Samantha's forehead. "You feel hot too." Then Rosie smiled. "You're either sick or you've been having some fun." She winked and nudged Samantha with her elbow.

Samantha rolled her eyes. If Rosie only knew.

"It's the flu. It came on all of a sudden. I-I was just going to call you, Rosie," Samantha said, coughing again. "I'm so sorry, but I can't watch the kids for you after all." She looked down to where the twins had each clamped themselves on one of her legs. Samantha yanked the robe tighter to avoid any surprises.

Patting little Mandy and Kevin on their heads, she looked up at Rosie and her husband again and smiled. "I feel so bad. I know how much you guys need a night out."

"Don't worry about it," Charlie said. "You just take care of yourself. We'll do it another time."

"Holy mackerel," Rosie said, her eyes wide and her jaw slack.

"Whoa," Charlie said, his eyes just as wide as he gawked.

"Aladdin, Aladdin!" Mandy and Kevin shouted with glee, releasing their hold on Samantha's legs.

Uh-oh.

Samantha knew damn well what she'd find when she turned around.

Sure enough, Lugal stood at the entrance to the living room, fully dressed with his saber sheathed at his side. Fists firmly planted at his hips, he looked fierce, foreboding and extremely lickable.

"Kids," Rosie called. "Come back here." Yanking on the sleeve of Samantha's robe, Rosie slanted her a look of disbelief. "Who *is* that?"

"Oh good, you see him too," Samantha said with a sigh of relief. She'd still had her doubts Lugal was real.

Rosie gave her a curious look. "Huh?"

"Um...he—" Samantha looked up at Charlie, whose gaze was fixed on Lugal. She decided it was probably best not to mention that the hunky guy in the balloon pants was her brand new lover, who claimed his mission was to keep her pleased. "He's a friend. Sort of." Samantha shrugged.

Rosie looked Lugal up and down. And then she smiled. Actually, it was more of a shit-eating grin. "Why, Samantha Jane Rutledge, have you been holding out on me?"

"No! Well..." She cleared her throat. "Not exactly." Samantha leaned over and whispered in Rosie's ear. "He came out of the old perfume bottle I got at the estate sale in a big blue puff of smoke."

"He *what*!?" Rosie screeched.

"What?" Charlie asked. "Is something wrong?"

Rosie gave Samantha an inquisitive glance. Samantha shook her head no, indicating all was well.

"No, Charlie," she and Rosie chorused.

"Ah, so you are Rosie's little goats," Lugal said, squatting to greet the twins eye-to-eye. "You must not touch," he cautioned Kevin when the little boy's curious fingers reached out to touch the saber's sheath. "It is not a toy," Lugal explained.

Samantha was surprised to see her big barbarian seemingly so at ease with children. Her heart warmed as she saw the genuine smile Lugal gave them and the tender, almost parental, way in which he treated the three-year-olds.

"Are you Aladdin?" Mandy asked, fingering the rubies glimmering on Lugal's vest.

"Who is this Aladdin? I have heard Samantha speak of him as well."

"A genie," Mandy and Kevin answered in unison, jumping up and down and clapping.

Lugal laughed. It was an authentic sound of mirth, rendered sexy by his rich, accented baritone.

"Do you like genies?"

"Yes!" The kids became animated all over again.

"Then, yes, I am a genie. My name is Lugal Damu-zid. I come from the ancient land called Sumer."

"Sumer?" Charlie said, frowning.

At the sound of the male voice, Lugal rose to his full height and walked to the door where Rosie and Charlie stood just inside.

"You are Samantha's friends," Lugal said.

Charlie straightened to his full five-feet nine-inches, elevating his chin and swallowing the lump that seemed to be in his throat as he looked up to make eye contact with Lugal. "The name's Charles Dudchowski," he said, extending his hand. "I'm Rosie's husband."

Lugal clasped Charlie's arm just beneath the elbow, heartily clapping his free hand against Charlie's other shoulder in way of greeting. "The name is Lugal Damu-zid," he said, mirroring Charlie's introduction. "I am husband to no one."

Samantha smiled. Well, there was one question she wouldn't have to ask.

Charlie cleared his throat and pushed the eyeglasses up his nose. "Did you say you come from Sumer?"

"I did."

"That's impossible. Sumer hasn't been in existence for thousands of years."

"That is so." Lugal nodded. "I am surprised you know of it. Most people I have met do not."

"Charlie's a professor of ancient history and classical archaeology," Samantha explained.

"He's a genius," Rosie added proudly, hugging her husband's arm.

"Professor..." Lugal cocked his head for a moment, as if organizing his thoughts. "This means a teacher, yes?" he asked, eyeing Charlie, who nodded. "Yes. I know this trade. It is a worthy one. Abigail Henley's husband, Owen, was a professor. She told me many stories of his experiences in the East of America before they began their journey across the Overland Trail passage."

Eyes widening, Charlie glanced from Lugal to Rosie to Samantha. "What's going on here? Who is this guy, Samantha? An actor or something?"

"Henley?" Rosie squeaked. "As in the house with the estate sale we went to today?"

"That would be the one," Samantha assured her. "Remember the old photo I bought?" Rosie nodded and Samantha thumbed at Lugal. "That was him and Abigail."

Eyes wide in sudden recognition, Rosie grabbed Samantha's arm. "Oh dear God. I have to sit down."

"Grab a seat on the couch, you two," Samantha told Rosie and Charlie. "Lugal, you can sit in that chair," she gestured to the large, overstuffed chair in one corner. "Hold on just a minute and I'll explain everything."

"Hold on to what?" Lugal asked, looking around him.

Her shoulders sagging, Samantha gave a melodic sigh. "Just sit there and be good until I get back." She turned to Mandy and Kevin. "Come on, kids, I have paper and crayons. Let's see which of you can draw the best picture of a genie. The winner gets a special prize!"

"Yippee!" The twins jumped for glee and followed Samantha to the kitchen where she set them up with glasses of apple juice and plenty of paper and crayons at the kitchen table—after she placed Lugal's bottle and the box it came in on the top shelf inside one of the cabinets.

Then she headed back to the living room, to explain to her best friend and her husband that they'd been entertaining a genie in her absence.

Chapter Six

"And that's it," Samantha told Rosie and Charlie after explaining how Lugal appeared in a puff of smoke. "That's the whole story." Flopping against the back of her chair, she sucked in a deep breath and expelled it.

Charlie turned to his wife, mumbling something too soft for Samantha to hear. She figured he was probably telling her that Samantha had lost her marbles and needed to see a shrink, pronto. She couldn't blame him a bit. Even after enjoying the best damn sex in all her life, she still had a hard time believing Lugal had popped out of a bottle. Or that he was sitting in her living room.

"I know what you're thinking, Charlie. I am *not* crazy. After all, you and Rosie see him too. And so do your kids!"

Sliding his glasses up the bridge of his nose, Charlie sat forward and gave her one of those calm, patronizing smiles Samantha imagined he gave his students. "Yes, but you're the only one who claims to have seen him shoot out of a bottle in a vaporous cloud," he pointed out.

Samantha tsked. "Trust me, Charlie, if I was crazy, I'd know it."

He arched an eyebrow in silent response.

"Nay, Samantha gives no symptoms of one who is mad," Lugal said.

"Thank you, Lugal." Samantha sat up straight, elevating her chin and directing a nod of thanks toward him.

"She does not foam at the mouth," Lugal continued, "tear out clumps of her hair or rend her garments. Her eyes are not wild and unfocused, and she does not spout gibberish. And she has already told me that she is free of sexually transmitted disease."

"Oh God," Samantha said, sinking down in her seat and covering her eyes with her hand.

Rosie eyed the big gorgeous male comfortably sprawled in the chair across the room from her and turned back to Samantha. After eyeing her terrycloth bathrobe, Rosie pinned her friend with a *you'd-better-come-clean* look.

"Why am I thinking that what you told us is not quite the whole story, Sam?" Her devilish smile told Samantha exactly what Rosie was thinking.

"Eh...I'll be right back." Samantha held her robe closed tight while she sped to her bedroom. She put on underwear and pulled on a pair of baggy jeans and her cashmere sweater. Gazing at herself in the full length mirror, she smoothed her hair and smiled. There. Now she looked more like a sane woman and less than a wild, wanton, lust-driven harlot.

"More cocoa?" she asked Rosie when she returned to the living room, after checking on Mandy and Kevin and their genie-drawing project. She encouraged the twins to draw pictures of an Arabian castle too, to keep them busy as long as possible. "More water, Charlie, Lugal?"

"Men's breeches again," Lugal scoffed with a look of disdain as he eyed Samantha's jeans. His gaze transferred to Rosie, who squirmed a bit in her seat under his scrutiny. "And your friend, Rosie, is no better. She is dressed like her husband. You would both look more like females simply draped with the cloth that hangs over the window."

Samantha and Rosie followed the movement of Lugal's hand as he gestured to the window, which was covered in airy, semi-sheer curtains. They exchanged glances, blushing.

"Excuse me," Charlie said, "but I don't appreciate you sitting there half-naked and making lewd suggestions about my wife and Sam."

"My apologies, Charlie." Lugal inclined his head. "It was not my intention to be provocative. I was only proposing that the women of your time should try to look more like women instead of their male counterparts. Would you tell me that you would not prefer to see your lovely wife draped in silks and satins rather than the mannish garb she now wears?"

All it took was one brief glance Rosie's way for the color to rise from Charlie's throat to his freckled cheeks.

"Maybe he's a magician of some sort," he said to his wife, ignoring Lugal's question. "He could have hypnotized Sam into believing he's a genie. Or slipped a drug into whatever she was drinking."

"Nay, I do not delve into the dark realms of magic. I did not tell Samantha I am a genie. She came upon that false conclusion of her own accord."

"Because he wears balloon pants and I get three wishes," Samantha explained with a shrug. "It's a natural assumption."

"There's nothing natural about this," Charlie countered.

"You get three wishes?" Rosie asked excitedly. "Did you make them already? What were they?"

"No. We didn't even get to the three wishes part yet. We've been...eh..." Samantha glanced at Lugal, who had one of those sexy we-share-a-special-secret looks on his handsome face. Samantha swallowed hard. "We've been busy talking," she said. "About other stuff."

"Talking..." Rosie looked from Samantha to Lugal and smiled. "Uh-huh."

"As for being drugged, all I had was a little diet cocoa...with a tiny shot of Baileys and Kahlua." Samantha watched Charlie give his wife a *what-did-I-tell-you* look. "But I finished it before the whooshing out of the bottle thing started."

"That explains it," Charlie said quietly. "He came in here and took advantage of Sam's inebriated state."

"I was *not* drunk!"

"I did nothing to Samantha...except what she wished of me," Lugal said. The hungry look, topped by a wicked smile, that he sent Samantha scorched her from the roots of her hair to her toes, which were still encased in bunny slippers.

"I knew it," Rosie said with a snicker. "Methinks the dry spell is over." She wagged her eyebrows.

"Rosie!" Samantha's cheeks burned and she could swear they must have gone from pink to crimson.

"If you're not a magician," Charlie said, undistracted by the women's conversation, "then how do you explain this ridiculous explanation of Samantha's? I've never heard her mention you before. How do I know you didn't force your way in here earlier and drug her or something?" He pulled his phone from his pocket, flipping it open. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't be calling the police to come haul you away right now."

"Charlie, don't!" Samantha cried, jumping up from her chair. "What I told you is the truth. I swear to God, Lugal came out of a bottle in a puff of smoke." On her way to the kitchen, she told him, "Wait, I'll get the bottle and box it came in so you can see for yourself."

As Samantha left the room, Lugal's lips curled into a slow smile. She heard him say, "I like you, Charlie. Clearly, you are a good man. While you may be slight of stature, without the imposing physique of a warrior, you possess the brave heart of a hero."

"This is it, Charlie," Samantha said, returning a moment later and depositing the stone box with the metal strappings on the coffee table in front of him. "That's just how I found it at the estate sale."

"It is good that you seek to protect the women from perceived harm, Charlie," Lugal continued. "However, I can assure you that I do not pose a threat to you, your family, or to Samantha. I am here to serve and protect only. You have my oath."

"He sounds sincere," Rosie offered. "Kind of like a cop."

"Yeah, so do most cunning criminals," Charlie replied, closing his phone and setting it on the table.

"Here's the old photo of Abigail Henley. See the guy standing behind her? Take a good look, Charlie."

He lifted the photo, studying it closely. While he examined it, his wife turned to Samantha, who had taken a seat next to her.

"Oh brother," Rosie whispered, folding her arms across her chest. "To think I believed all that holier-than-thou crap you fed me about you being the kind of girl who didn't even kiss on the first date. Sam, you are such a slut." She giggled.

Sneaking a surreptitious glance at Lugal, whose attention was on Charlie, Samantha sighed. "I know," she agreed, keeping her voice soft. "But, seriously...can you blame me? I mean, for chrissakes, look at him, Rosie!"

"I probably don't have to ask if he was any good."

"Ohmigod, Rosie." Samantha rolled her eyes skyward. "Un-fucking-believable," she breathed in her ear.

"Granted," Charlie said, looking from the sepia picture to Lugal and back again, "there's a strong resemblance...but it couldn't possibly be the same person. It's not logical."

Rosie sighed and gave her husband a kiss on the cheek. "I love you, Charlie, but you have absolutely no imagination." She turned toward Lugal. "He's a real academic. Purely a statistics and physical evidence kind of guy."

"I can understand that." Lugal nodded. "It is wise to be doubtful."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Charlie," Samantha said, leaning over and jabbing a finger at the photo. "It's more than just a resemblance. It's the same man. Admit it, already."

Clearly engrossed in his investigation, Charlie ignored Samantha and Rosie. A moment later, he set the photo on the table, then picked up the stone box. After scrutinizing every nook and cranny of the stone, the metal, the silk lining and the spun glass bottle inside, he looked up, an expression of amazement on his face.

"These are either the most clever reproductions I've ever seen," he said, "or extremely rare antiquities." He traced his finger over the hieroglyphic-like symbols. "Do you have any idea what this is?" he asked, not really directing the question to anyone in particular.

"Some sort of Greek or Egyptian writing, I figured," Samantha said.

"Maybe it's ancient Chinese," Rosie offered.

Charlie shook his head, the look of awe still in his eyes. "No, if I'm not mistaken it's—"

"Cuneiform," Lugal said.

Gazing up at Lugal in wonder, he said, "Yes. How did you know that?"

"My people, the Sumerians, invented it."

"No." Charlie shook his head. "That's impossible. Cuneiform is the world's first written language. The last known cuneiform inscription was about 75 AD."

Lugal rose from his chair and went to Charlie's side. "May I?" he asked, extending his hand toward the box. Charlie turned it over to him with some reluctance. "It is a lamentation," Lugal stated as he studied the pictograms. Tracing his finger along the metal strap, he read aloud, "'She made her fly like a swallow from the window. My life was consumed...' It appears to speak of, perhaps, a child being taken by Ereshkigal, goddess of the underworld."

Charlie fell back against the sofa cushions, aghast. "Incredible." He turned to Rosie and Samantha, simply repeating, "Incredible." After gathering his thoughts, he looked up at Lugal, who had set the box on the table. "And the bottle...you-you know what that is?"

Lugal nodded. "In my time, spun glass bottles such as this were owned only by the wealthy. Their purpose was to hold perfumed oil or for use as a tear vase. Because of the lamentation, I would imagine this vessel was used for tears."

"Well, I'll be damned," Charlie said.

"Charlie!" Rosie said. "He never swears," she told Samantha and Lugal.

Lugal smiled. Leaning over Charlie, he pressed a finger to the man's chest. "Ummia," he said. Then he touched his own chest. "Amelu," he said.

"My God...that sounds like..."

"Sumerian," Lugal said with a slow nod, maintaining direct eye contact with Charlie.

"What did he say, what did he say?" Rosie asked excitedly.

"As near as I can decipher," Charlie answered, "he called me teacher and himself soldier."

"It is close enough," Lugal said.

"How do you know Sumerian?" Samantha asked Charlie.

"One of the umpteen degrees he has is in ancient languages," Rosie offered when it was evident Charlie's mind was totally focused on the swell of new information. "You forget, I'm married to a walking encyclopedia."

"But the Sumerian language hasn't been spoken since before the time of Moses," Charlie pointed out to Lugal.

"Who?" Lugal asked in all sincerity.

Charlie narrowed his gaze. "Describe your family home."

"We lived in one of the small sun-dried brick homes clustered around the Ziggurat. Our house shared walls with other houses. There was a small courtyard where stairs led up to the second floor and then to the flat roof. When weather permitted, my family cooked and slept on the roof."

Charlie was quiet for a moment. "There was an ancient king of Uruk," he finally said, "who became quite well known. Can you tell me why?"

"Ah, yes." Lugal gave a knowing nod. "You speak of Gilgamesh, the son of Lugalbanda and father of Urlugal. He was said to be two-thirds god and one-third human. The Sumerian people wrote a great epic telling of his exploits."

Lugal smiled. "Is that enough information for you, Charlie?"

"Sonuvabitch. I think this guy's for real," Charlie muttered, looking white as a sheet. "I don't know how it's possible, it defies all logic, all science, but...I believe it."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!" Samantha said.

Charlie held the bottle gingerly in his hands. "I have to know more. How. When. Where. Why."

"You sound like a reporter," Rosie said.

"Don't tell me he has a degree in journalism too," Samantha joked.

"Sure he does." Rosie shrugged as Samantha gasped. "As long as it doesn't have something to do with sports or gymnastics, my Charlie probably has a degree in it." She beamed a proud smile as she patted her husband's arm.

It wasn't the first time that Samantha was struck by the obvious love Rosie had for her husband. Opposites in many ways, with Rosie being outgoing and gregarious, and Charlie more the quiet, bookish type, theirs seemed to be a soul mate match made in heaven.

Samantha only hoped she'd be half as lucky in love one day.

"Where was Sumer?" Rosie asked.

"South of Akkad, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers," Lugal answered.

Charlie nodded. "It was in what's now known as the Middle East," he said. "Sumer was part of Mesopotamia."

"All done, Auntie Sam!" Mandy said, running into the living room, waving her colored sheets of paper.

"Me too!" Kevin called, following on her heels with his drawings.

"Pick me, pick me!"

"No! Meeeeeeeeeee!" Kevin pleaded. "Mine is best."

The kids crawled up on the sofa and into Samantha's lap, competing for space.

"Okay," she said, "let's see what we have here." Samantha looked at their scrawled pictures, alive with color and bursting with the unrestrained creativity and unrealism of three-year-olds. "Oh, these are both wonderful. Just beautiful. I don't know how I can possibly choose a winner."

"Great job, kids," Rosie said, mussing the twins' hair. It was reddish-brown like their father's. "It's starting to get dark. Why don't you switch on the lamp so you can see better, Charlie."

"Wait!"

All eyes were on Samantha.

"I have to warn Lugal first." She turned to him, licking her lips nervously. "Okay, you're going to see some light, illumination, come on like magic when Charlie touches the lamp. It's perfectly natural. Please don't go nutso on me."

"I know not of nutso, but be assured I would not draw my saber in the presence of children, Samantha, unless it was to protect them from danger."

"Trust me, they don't need any protection from my lamp, which, by the way, used to be my grandma's, so I'd hate to see it end up hacked into bits."

"Ready?" Charlie asked, his hand on the lamp switch.

"Ready," Lugal said, his mouth in a grim line, as if the two of them were engaged in some possibly deadly experiment.

Charlie switched on the light and Lugal's eyes went wide as his muscles tensed.

"Such speed...such brightness. How?" he asked quietly. "Oil? Tallow?"

"Electricity. It's called an electric light," Charlie answered. "Light bulbs hadn't been invented in 1859," he told Rosie and Samantha. "If we have more time together I can explain it to you, Lugal."

"And microwaves and refrigerators and cell phones," Lugal said. "I must learn of all these things."

"Look, Daddy, look." Mandy waved her drawings under her father's nose.

"My questions must wait for another time," Lugal said with a smile. "The little goats await their father's praise."

A moment later, Charlie looked from the brightly scrawled drawings to his children. "You made your genies bigger than the castles," he noted, studying the crayon depictions as if he were surveying a college student's thesis. "And the sun is disproportionate to the foreground. The proper prospective would be—"

"What Daddy means is that he loves your beautiful, very imaginative drawings," Rosie cut in. "Isn't that right, honey?"

Charlie grinned, his cheeks taking on that familiar blush. "Mommy's right. That's exactly what I meant."

Lugal came to the side of the couch on which Samantha sat, squatting to peruse the children's drawings. "Ah, such wondrous artwork. Tell me, Mandy, which do you like better, the genie you drew or the castle?"

Mandy looked hard at her pictures. "I think the castle, because there's a princess inside. See her at the window?" She tapped a pink blotch on the paper and Lugal nodded. "And she's getting a fancy tea party ready for the genie and all of her dollies."

"And you, Kevin," Lugal urged. "Which of your drawings do you like best?"

"The genie," Kevin said without hesitation. "Because he has a sword and because he can do magic and because he can be the winner of everybody in the whole wide world!"

Lugal and the others chuckled. "I agree with both of you. It seems to me, Samantha, that we have two winners," he suggested. "One for the best castle and one for the best genie."

"Perfect!" Samantha said, amazed at Lugal's acumen concerning children. "And I've got a special prize for each of you. A brand new book from the special Auntie Sam collection!"

"Yay!" the kids cried in unison.

Samantha smiled as she moved the twins from her lap to the couch and got up. In this age of electronic games, videos and computers, it was rewarding to see their enthusiasm and love for books. Their parents were certainly doing something right.

"I'll be back in a minute with your prizes."

"Come," Lugal said, "while you wait for your aunt to return, I will give the winners an onager-back ride...with your parents' permission, of course." He looked to Rosie and Charlie.

"What's an onager-back ride?" Rosie asked.

"An onager is animal similar to a donkey or horse used by the ancient Sumerians to pull their carts and chariots," Charlie answered absently. "Sure, go ahead, Lugal."

Lugal removed the saber and its sheath from his hip, positioned it atop a tall bookshelf and then got down on all fours, close to the floor to allow the kids to climb on easily. "Climb on," he told them.

"Oh, like an old world version of a piggyback ride," Rosie said. She helped position Mandy and Kevin on his back.

Samantha arrived back in the living room a moment later, in time to hear Lugal tell the twins, "Hold on tight to my vest and I will tell you a story of the ancient land of Sumer as I take you for a magical ride."

Leaning against the doorjamb, she smiled at the sight of her big, bold warrior tranquilly playing with a couple of pint-sized kids. As he crawled around the room, he told them about how not everyone in Sumer was lucky enough to learn to read and write. Only certain children selected by the gods were called to be scribes. And most of them were male.

"What about the girls?" Mandy asked.

"They became wives, mothers and sometimes priestesses who served the gods in ziggurats."

"I don't like rats," Mandy said.

Lugal laughed. "Ziggurats were very tall buildings made of mud-brick, temples where the local people brought offerings and sacrifices to the gods."

"Amazing..." Charlie muttered.

Lugal told the twins that little boys began to study at the age of eight and finished when they were twenty. Using a reed, the scribes wrote on clay tablets. The picture marks they made symbolized the words of the Sumerian language.

Samantha found it all fascinating. In fact, everyone seemed captivated by the story, including the children, who were treated to side-to-side sways and up-and-down *onager* movements of Lugal's back as he gave them their entertaining, yet educational ride.

He finished by telling them how fortunate and privileged they were to be given the wonderful gift by their parents and their Aunt Samantha to be able to learn how to read and write.

Samantha could easily see Lugal as a father. He'd make a sensational dad. He seemed to love children, was gentle, wise, and full of patience. That's exactly the kind of father she wanted for her own children some day...if she was lucky enough to have any before her biological clock ran out, that is.

And, oh, what fun she and Lugal would have trying to conceive!

Of course, life with Lugal might be somewhat out of the norm...

"Hi, honey, how was your day?"

"Excellent! I granted a dozen wishes, slew four chariot drivers suffering from road rage, tamed two refrigerator beasts, annihilated one cell phone and got a big rip in my balloon pants for the trouble. Can you sew them up for me, sweetheart?"

"You know your ancient history as if you were there," Charlie said, snapping Samantha's thoughts back to the present as he plucked the kids from Lugal's back.

Getting to his feet and straightening to his full, imposing height, Lugal flashed a white-toothed grin. "Yes. I do, indeed."

"Were you a scribe?"

"Nay. A professional soldier. My father was a scribe. In secret, he and my mother taught me, as well as my brothers and sisters, to read and write."

"I wanna read and write so I can be big and strong like Lugal when I grow up," Kevin announced, making a muscle.

"Size does not matter," Lugal said.

Samantha had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. She didn't dare chance a glimpse at Rosie, because she knew damn well the two of them would erupt into fits of juvenile laughter.

Good Lord, here Samantha was lusting over her genie like a hormone-driven teenager, right in front of the kids. Not to mention all that wetness going on between her thighs every time she thought about his magical cock. This was terrible. Shameful! She really had to get a grip.

"It is what's up here that matters, Kevin." Lugal tapped his temple. "And here." He clapped his hand over his heart. "Many big, mighty giants have been deceived by men of smaller stature because those men used their brains instead of relying on their size to defeat their enemies. There is great power in intelligence."

"My daddy is very 'telligent," Kevin said.

"He is. And if you study very hard," Lugal replied, "one day you will be lucky enough to become a man of great intelligence just like your father."

Kevin ran his father, plastering himself to Charlie's leg like a koala bear to a tree trunk. Soon Mandy was at her dad's other leg, following suit.

Charlie looked up at Lugal, offering a smile and nod. "Thanks," he said softly, clearly relishing the loving attention from his children, and the new sense of pride he must have noted in Kevin's eyes.

"You have nothing to thank me for," Lugal said, returning the smile. "I merely spoke the truth."

"You must realize my mind is racing with dozens of questions for you," Charlie said. "How long will you be here?"

"For six lunar cycles, or as soon as Samantha makes her three wishes. Whichever comes first."

"Then what happens?" Rosie asked.

"Once I have completed my servitude to Samantha, I shall return to the bottle to await my next possessor."

It seemed the three adults were holding their breaths.

"Were you a criminal?" Charlie finally asked. "Did someone cast a spell on you because you broke a law?"

"Nay, I have never been a criminal. And it was not a spell. There was no witchcraft involved. It was an incantation to place me in eternal service to womankind, spoken by a priest and priestess. I was falsely interned, defending the honor of a young, virgin priestess."

"Who was the incantation was directed to, Lugal?"

"To the great Inanna," Lugal began. "The Queen of Heaven, goddess of —"

"Love and war," Charlie finished, shaking his head. "Wow, she was believed to be pretty powerful."

"Obviously," Lugal said simply, folding his muscular arms across his chest.

"What was happening in your time before you were imprisoned?" Charlie asked. "What battles did you fight in just before this happened?"

Lugal had a faraway look in his eyes. "On the banks of the Euphrates, with my troops I defended the walls of the Sumerian cities against the siege of Sargon of Akkad's army."

"Sargon...Akkad..." Charlie sat still and silent, apparently in deep thought. "Dear God," he said a few moments later. "That was the third millennium BC." He started up into Lugal's eyes. "You've been in captivity for —"

"Five thousand years," Samantha whispered, swiping at the fat set of tears streaming down her cheeks. She felt sure her heart would break right in two at the sad realization.

"You said eternal," Rosie said. "You mean there's no way for you to get out of this spell or incantation or whatever it is?"

Lugal shook his head. "I thought at one time there might have been a way. Sabit, the poor, foolish, lovesick priestess of Nanna, the Moon God of Ur, promised to find a way to free me but..." His words trailed off as his eyes narrowed and a scowl marred his handsome features.

"She was the one whose honor you defended?" Samantha asked.

"Yes."

"What happened?" Rosie asked.

Lugal looked at the two small children and back to the adults. "It is not an appropriate discussion to have in the presence of the little goats. I will tell you about it another time...if I see you again."

"Well, of course you're going to see us again. You'll be here for six months," Rosie said.

Charlie nudged her with his elbow. "Unless Samantha makes her wishes before that," he reminded his wife.

"Oh..."

"Don't worry," Samantha assured them. "You'll be seeing Lugal again. I guarantee it." She'd make damn sure she kept him here with her until the very last possible moment.

Mandy yawned and Kevin followed.

"I think we'd better get our little goats home," Rosie said, chuckling. "Are you coming in to work tomorrow, Sam? I'm working the morning shift. I hate Saturday mornings there. It's like a madhouse."

"I was switched to Monday morning, instead," Samantha answered.

"You speak of the job where you fight to make people gaunt?" Lugal asked Rosie. "The job that demands that Samantha loses more weight from her already slender frame?"

"That would be the one," Rosie answered. "You mean to tell me the men of your time didn't like their woman bony?"

Lugal looked as though he'd just swallowed curdled milk. "Of course not."

Rosie sighed. "Oh, he really is a keeper, Sam."

Samantha smiled in silent agreement. "That gives me time to take Lugal shopping to get him some clothes."

"Gee...I kind of like what he's wearing now," Rosie teased.

"Did I suddenly become invisible?" Charlie joked.

"Of course not, honey." Rosie hugged his arm. "I was just picturing you in a pair of sultan pants like Lugal's, that's all."

"Uh-huh. Rosie?"

"Hmmm?"

"Forget about it," Charlie warned. "Come on, kids, time to say goodbye to Auntie Sam and Lugal. We have to go home."

After all had said their goodbyes, including big sloppy kisses to Lugal's cheek from Mandy and Kevin, the Dudchowski family left.

Lugal watched out the window as they got in their car and Charlie backed out of the driveway. Clearly aghast, he asked Samantha, "What is this wondrous horseless chariot they travel in?"

"It's called a car. An automobile. It operates on a gas engine and—" She held her hand up as Lugal's mouth opened to speak. "That's all I really know about it, so just add it to the list of things you're going to be learning about over the next six months."

"I will not be here that long," Lugal said.

Samantha gasped. "What do you mean? Why not? I thought you said —"

"No woman has ever waited more than fourteen days to make her wishes, Samantha."

"Two weeks?" The tears started falling down her cheeks again. "You mean to tell me that you've never had an opportunity to walk around outside that bottle for more than two weeks at any given time?"

"Nay. But I have grown accustomed to it." He smoothed away her tears with his thumbs. "There is no reason to cry. It is simply my destiny. I hold no animosity toward any of my previous possessors for wanting to make their wishes quickly."

He paused to wrap Samantha in his strong arms and hold her close to her chest. "And I will cleave to no ill feeling about you, little one, when you make your third wish and I return to the bottle."

"Oh, Lugal," she whispered against his chest, "I wish I could—" With an audible gasp, Samantha pulled out of his embrace, holding Lugal at arm's length. "Oh my gosh. I have to be careful from now on. I don't want to squander my wishes on stupid mindless stuff because of a slip of the tongue."

"This is true."

Samantha thought for a moment. "Okay, here's how we'll work it. Just ignore anything I say using the words *I wish* unless you specifically hear me say it like this—for my first official wish, *I wish*—and so on, until the third wish is used up. That way there won't be any mistakes. Understand?"

Lugal nodded. "I understand. I shall await your official command before granting any wishes."

"The thought of accidentally returning you to that little bottle because I was stupid enough to say something like, *gee, I wish I had a candy bar*, is positively horrifying. So, no matter what I say about wishing I had some chocolate or French fries or anything else that I'm not supposed to have on my diet, just remember to ignore it, okay?"

Lugal chuckled. It was a pleasant sound that rumbled up from deep in his chest and came out with that same dreamy accent.

"You are a very special woman, Samantha." He drew her to him again and she rested her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. "I will enjoy my time with you, however long it may be."

When he scooped her into his arms, she gave a surprised little yelp. "What are you doing?"

One look into his heated gaze told her all she needed to know.

He tugged on her bottom lip with his teeth, drawing it into his mouth and suckling on it before exchanging it for her tongue. She moaned.

"I like your friends very much, Samantha, but I am glad they are gone."

"Why?" Now that was a monumentally stupid question.

"Because you make the blood in my veins boil, Samantha. It has been most difficult keeping my cock from making itself known in front of your guests. The strain is taking its toll on me."

"Oh really?" Samantha found she liked where this conversation was going. Very much. "And just what do you suggest we do about your problem?"

"First, we go to the kitchen to get the can of the cold, white fluffy cream. Then we go to your bedroom, where you will teach me to turn on all the lights. I want to see the way every succulent inch of your body reacts to my touch as I drive you wild with passion."

"Good answer," Samantha whispered.

Chapter Seven

"Are there no more lights to turn on?" Lugal asked excitedly. "I am loving this electricity and electric light bulbs. I must learn all about them and what makes them work."

Click.

On. Off. On. Off. On...

Samantha looked around her small bedroom as Lugal went from lamp to lamp, flicking the lights on and off a bazillion times. She'd never seen the bedroom lit up so bright at night before. Lugal had insisted she also turn on the lights from the master bathroom for additional illumination.

Thinking of him eyeing her naked way-less-than-perfect body highlighted in all that stark clarity had her knees knocking.

"Um, I have lots of candles. Pretty, scented ones. Wouldn't you prefer a dimmer, more subdued, romantic ambience?"

"Nay." His eyes flashed and Samantha thought she caught a glimpse of something that looked like dread. "Please. I like the light, Samantha. After spending an eternity in the cold darkness of that bottle, this glowing brightness is like a wealth of warm, golden treasure. Can we have all the electric lights on, as well as the candles?"

"Of course." She'd almost forgotten about the poor guy being bottled up for so long. Naturally he'd want to be surrounded by light now. Lighting a match and holding it against the first candlewick, Samantha sighed. She'd just have to bite the bullet and try not to cringe when Lugal zeroed in on her well-lit imperfections.

Once she'd lit the last of the dozen candles positioned on the silver tray atop her dresser, she smiled at him. "This is it, Lugal. All the lighting I have for this room. Well, except for a little flashlight I have in my nightstand drawer, in case the electricity goes out in the middle of the night."

"Help me to understand what you mean. This flash of light, what is it?"

"It's a battery-operated device, mostly for emergencies. It doesn't require a cord to be plugged into the wall."

"Show me." Lugal looked like a little boy hearing about dinosaurs for the first time. "I must see this fascinating object."

Unable to keep from chuckling at his unbridled enthusiasm, Samantha dug the flashlight out of her drawer, demonstrating how to turn it on and off. She was having a marvelous time rediscovering modern technology through Lugal's eyes. Everyday items she never gave a second thought to now seemed almost magical when she imagined what the world must have been like before their invention.

Mesmerized by the compact light source in his palm, Lugal tentatively touched the tiny square of glass, covering the concentrated beam. He smiled. "Magnificent. There is no fire, no burning or blistering of skin."

Testing it further, he pressed the lit flashlight to his arms, his chest, his abs, and then his face. Samantha made a note never to clean the surface of her flashlight again.

"Excellent! I will use this to explore your beautiful *mug*."

Samantha's face fell. "You want to examine my coffee cup?"

Lugal frowned. "Your words make little sense to me, Samantha."

"That makes two of us."

"I speak of your delicate *murub*," he explained. "Your hot. Wet. Pink. Cunt," he slowly clarified with a wicked gleam in his eye. "I wish to look at it thoroughly with the flash of light. You understand?"

Samantha didn't have the chance to gape in surprise because Lugal's hands were suddenly on her, stripping away her clothes.

"You will put your *tešlug* footwear back on," he said, handing Samantha her bunny slippers.

"*Tešlug*?"

"It means small young animal."

Samantha laughed. "So my bunny slippers turn you on, hmm?"

Lugal stilled, a clueless look on his gorgeous, chiseled puss as the gears turned inside his head. "Turn me on? You mean like your electric lights? Is such a thing truly possible?"

"No, I mean, make you hot," Samantha explained. "Well, not literally. If something is a turn-on, it makes you feel especially passionate, desirous. Lustful." As if illustrating her definition, a rivulet of pussy juice streamed down her thigh.

Lugal's lips eased into a grin. "Everything about you turns me on, Samantha. The furry little pink faces you wear on your feet amuse me. They make me smile. I have never seen anything quite so full of nonsense before."

Lugal motioned to the bed. "On your back," he instructed. "Place pillows beneath your ass so that I have a good, clear view of your most intimate flesh."

Samantha hesitated. "Why do I suddenly feel like I'm getting ready to be examined by my gynecologist?"

"Your guy who?"

"My doctor. You know, like a medicine man. The one who checks out my...most intimate flesh to make sure it's healthy."

Lugal threw his head back in laughter. "I have no thought of medicine when I look at you, Samantha. I am quite certain my touch, my gaze, my warm breath on your moist cunt, will in no way be similar to your visits to your guy doctor."

"Oh..." Samantha's pussy punctuated his statement with a fresh, warm surge of juice.

He motioned to the bed with more insistence. "Position yourself. My cock is as hard as dense sandstone and craves to be appeased."

"Yes, Master," Samantha teased, following his command.

Lugal's eyebrow arched and Samantha's pussy creamed again when she caught the look in his eye.

"*Master...* I like the sound of that. It conjures most pleasing images of your lush, pale body, chained and helpless as I torture it mercilessly with climax after thunderous climax." He eyed her four-poster bed and nodded. "Yes, these poles would do well for support." He glanced around the room, opened and closed her nightstand drawers, then looked under the bed.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Chains, leather straps, something with which to bind your soft, succulent flesh."

Oh dear God.

Lugal had just stumbled upon her most secret desires, Samantha's deepest, darkest fantasies of being bound and helpless while a big, bold Conan the Barbarian-type had his carnal way with her.

Her clit trembled, her breasts grew sore and swollen and her cunt clenched at the exceedingly naughty, perverted idea.

"Sorry, my bedroom isn't equipped for bondage. Maybe we can stop at Chains-R-Us when we go out to buy you some clothes tomorrow," she said, attempting to make the comment flippant and suspecting she'd failed miserably.

"Yes," Lugal said, apparently accepting her glib remark as truth. "We will go to the chain merchant. I will enjoy inspecting his wares." He stripped out of his genie garments and joined her on the bed, cock proud, primed and ready for action.

"Excuse me, but what makes you think I'd be interested in being bound?" Samantha asked, her nerve-endings blazing as his hands bent her knees up and spread her thighs. "I'm not into that sort of sex," she lied, afraid to admit her depraved, shameful desires to him.

He looked down at her with a bold, confident, knowing smile. "Yes you are, little one. I can see it in your eyes." His gaze dropped to her pussy. "I can see it in the way you seep wet for me." Lugal scooped two fingers through her lips, bringing them to his mouth to suck off her juices, murmuring his approval as his tongue swirled around his fingers.

Samantha's body quivered in response.

"I could see it when I slapped your alabaster ass earlier and when I pinned your arms over your head. Have you never experienced sex with a lover while being bound, little one?"

She swallowed hard. "Never. I'm not really all that sexually experienced, Lugal. Just mostly plain, ordinary, vanilla stuff. And not even all that much of that, to be honest."

"Then it will be my honor to be the first to introduce you to this stimulating method of profound pleasuring."

"I-I was just kidding about Chains-R-Us," she admitted. "There is no such store."

"Ahh...you were being humorous, taking advantage of my lack of knowledge of your time."

It sounded so nasty and juvenile when he put it like that. "Sorry."

"I do not mind." He chuckled, skimming his hands from her ankles to her pussy, his thumbs weaving through her moist curls. She felt his fingers brushing along the notch of her drenched vulva. Samantha's heartbeat skipped when his fingers slid, swordlike, into her vagina.

She moaned amid the wet, sucking sounds as he treated her to a thorough finger-fucking, loving the feel of his skilled hands at work. The deep earth of her center rippled with familiar sensations of pre-orgasmic bliss. A moment later, Lugal withdrew his dripping fingers, sticking them in her mouth.

Samantha's eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected deed. Her tongue moved instinctively around his fingers and she tasted herself on him. It was embarrassing, shocking, shameful and, for the love of God, it was such a turn-on, licking her essence from his flesh.

"The light, spicy sea flavor you taste is your desire for me. The juices your body creates to indicate your passion, your readiness to be taken by your lover." Lugal's eyes glittered as he gazed down at her. "Clearly, this is the first time you have ventured to sample your own cream, is it not?" She gave a tentative nod. "Ahhh, Samantha, I will greatly enjoy my time here with you. I look forward to acquainting you with many first time joys and sensations."

"I'm going to enjoy it too. As long as I don't expire from a severe case of ecstasy overdose first."

"As for the chains we spoke of, your world may be astoundingly different from mine, Samantha, but I find it hard to believe that the craving for sexual satisfaction has dimmed. Are there no markets offering such items designed for increasing intimate pleasure?"

"Well, we do have sex shops. Places that offer sex toys, weird outfits and fetish stuff. But I've never been in one."

"You will take me to one of these sex shops on our journey tomorrow."

Samantha felt her face heat crimson. "Oh, I could never go inside one of those stores, Lugal. What if someone I know sees me?"

"They would know that Samantha is a woman unafraid to explore her blossoming sexuality. A woman who has a lover at her side to make her insides throb with utmost pleasure."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of." She chuckled.

"It is time for me to make my flash of light inspection," Lugal announced, tugging and shifting Samantha into the ideal position.

His hot breath rustled across her sensitized flesh and she moaned, wanting more. Wanting everything he had to give.

"Many shades of pink and red, from the deepest to the most pale. I see your little pleasure button, Samantha." He thumbed her clitoris and she jerked. "It cries out for my kiss." As if in answer to her silent plea, Lugal pressed his mouth to her, kissing her clit, licking it, taking it between his teeth and torturing it.

"Oh Lord...oh God..." Samantha braced herself against a quaking shudder.

"Nay, it is no lord or god supping on your sweetness, it is your love slave, little one. It is I, Lugal, who makes the volcano of passion rise within you, erupting with a burst of honeyed musk into my waiting mouth."

Damn, his words alone were about enough to trigger an orgasm! The instant he stopped speaking, Lugal's talented mouth was at work again. Samantha moaned and writhed under the wicked assault. Oh, such sweet, tormenting swipes of his tongue on her needy, expectant flesh.

She gripped the bedspread, gasping, when he plunged his tongue in her pussy. Delving deeply into her moist channel, his slick, hot thrusts made her heart quicken, her skin burn until she thought she'd ignite.

She was on the brink, just this side of coming, of having her sanity ripped apart when Lugal's tongue left her hole and his teeth claimed her clit. He stopped for one agonizing moment, during which Samantha heard the distinct click of the flashlight.

He lifted his head just enough to grin up at her. "Ah, Samantha, you should see yourself now. Your intimate flesh is so beautiful. Your little button has swelled until it is ripe and ready to burst upon my tongue. Its color has changed from pink to passionate rose. I am going to eat you all the way to *an*."

"Oh, God, yes...eat me. Eat me, Lugal!" If Samantha wasn't so damned primed to detonate, she would have laughed at her brazen command. But Lugal's wonderful mouth at her cunt was no definitely laughing matter.

Good God, the man had oral sex down to a science.

Her nipples went hard and tight at the sound of his satisfied growl. Her insides pulled and twisted at the feel of his fingers digging into her ass cheeks, possessing her, claiming her as he lovingly, savagely fucked her with his mouth.

Magnificent tension coiled deep inside, winding tighter and tighter until Samantha's body stiffened, straining under the pleasurable assault. Releasing the bedspread, her fingers sought Lugal's head, weaving into the inky dark curtain of hair

spilling across his bare, bronzed shoulders. More needy than she'd ever been in her life, she gripped him closer...closer...

Yes...yes...she was almost there. Lugal knew exactly what he was doing with that amazing mouth of his. Just how to make her shatter.

Like a powerful spring, the coil inside her snapped, releasing, unwinding, thrashing Samantha's senses about. Her screams echoed around the room as she surrendered to the furious whirlwind of a climax unlike she'd ever known before.

"So arousing. The sight and sound of you, your special scent, your delicious taste," Lugal said. "I could feast on your feminine treasures for hours and still it would not be enough." At the feel of his tongue darting out to flick her clit, Samantha trembled.

"Trust me," she assured him, panting as her wits began a sluggish return. "I'd never survive that long." She didn't bother trying to chuckle. That part of her brain hadn't returned to functioning mode yet.

Her beleaguered brain was beating out a frantic SOS because Lugal's tongue was still busy at her tortured, swollen clit, tormenting her with lick after purposeful lick.

"Oh, no, you can't do that, Lugal. Really, I can't possibly take anymore."

"We shall see."

Shivers racked Samantha's body as her ultra-sensitive clit suffered through an ordeal so terribly, awfully, supremely enjoyable she feared her body would break. Literally. The raw, insistent feelings building inside her were so powerful they scared her.

"No! Lugal, I'm serious." Half-crazed, she dug her hands into his hair again and yanked. He didn't budge. "I'll have a stroke or something."

"You say you want another stroke?"

"Oooh, oh no...aaaaiiieee!"

Dear God, the fiendish man had the audacity to swipe his tongue over her clit with a fearsome, unforgiving stroke. Didn't he know what he was doing to her?

She was going to die. To expire straight away from too damned much bliss. She could just imagine the headlines. *Chunky Weight-Loss Counselor Found Dead from Fatal Dose of Orgasmic Ecstasy. Genie Sought for Questioning.*

Maybe Lugal didn't realize a woman's body wasn't designed to undergo intense multiple orgasms. That women couldn't handle the immediate onslaught of acute delight resulting from egregious manipulation of a totally spent clit.

Oh God, oh God, *Oh God...*

And then again, maybe her magnificent genie knew all sorts of things she didn't.

With a hot flush, every cell of Samantha's being shuddered in a turbulent meltdown. Sparking shocks of rapture arced through her while Lugal's unrelenting tongue persisted in delivering the most exquisite anguish to her clit.

Before she could form a cohesive thought, Lugal whispered, "Another way to taste yourself from me, little one." He captured her mouth in a scorching kiss, their tongues tangling.

The mixed tang of her juices and Lugal's sweet, warm mouth were heady, potent. Her hands letting go of his hair and falling limply to her sides, Samantha heard herself sigh in a dreamy, faraway, perfectly pleased tone that seemed to go on forever. She felt weightless, boneless, as if she were about to float right up out of her body.

If she was dead, it was definitely worth the trip.

"It appears you can take much more than you thought, little one," Lugal said, breaking the mind-numbing kiss.

Samantha cracked one eye open. Lugal, that tortuous, fabulous devil, gazed down at her, smoothing her hair from her face. "You almost killed me," she accused.

A husky chuckle rumbled up from his chest. "I have faced death many times. The final moment before body separates from soul is inexplicably exquisite, but not one for mortals to interfere with. We mortals have, instead, the gift of euphoric sex. The supreme, mysterious joy of climax."

"Speaking of which," Samantha said, dragging her sated, exhausted body off the pillows and resting on her side, head propped on Lugal's knee. "It's about time for somebody else to get the torture treatment, don't you think?" In a brisk, bold move, she gripped his cock like it was the handle of his saber, smiling with satisfaction when he shivered. His cock was rock hard, with pre-cum glistening at the tip.

"The feel of your hands on me is better than the most powerful magic." Lugal's eyes were dark with passion. "But I am not finished torturing you, my sweet." He stroked her cheek with his knuckle. "I am ready to fill your sweet cunt and ram into you so hard and fast that your thoughts will take flight."

"As delicious as that sounds," Samantha countered, "I had something a little different in mind.

Since her first glimpse of his magnificent cock, her mouth had watered with the desire to taste him. She licked her lips, then pursed them, blowing a gentle gust of air across the weeping tip of his jutting shaft. Then she swallowed as much as she could of him, until the salty head butted the back of her throat.

"Samantha..." Lugal whispered in a stunned tone.

She loved hearing his deep, feral groan, hoping she could bring him even a fraction of the pleasure he'd so unselfishly given her.

Along with an equal measure of the devilish torment.

Easing his cock back from her throat to give her tongue room to roll and slide, she went to work. She swirled her tongue around the hot, silky head before inching her way down the long column with a playful series of nips and bites.

Lugal grasped the bedspread so tightly his knuckles went white.

That made Samantha smile.

Allowing his cock to pop free and watching it bob in the air, wet and rigid, she picked up the flashlight from the mattress and flicked it on. "I've never seen an uncircumcised cock before. This deserves some in-depth study."

With one firm shove, Samantha flattened him against the mattress, getting up on her knees between his spread legs. Lugal let out a surprised *oooph*, giving her an astonished look.

She took her sweet time exploring every aspect of his cock, playing with the foreskin, watching the head peek in and out as she slid her fingers up and down his shaft.

He propped his head on a couple of pillows to get a better look at her diligent exploration.

The beam from her flashlight showcasing his beautiful erection, Samantha smiled. "I'd say the head is sort of mushroom shaped, wouldn't you?" She planted a kiss there. "With a rosy, almost purple color." Her tongue darted out, digging into the tiny hole at the tip. Tensing, Lugal sucked in a sharp breath.

"I like the blue veining decorating your shaft." Her tongue traced along one of the slender, pale blue paths. "The tender skin is soft like velvet." She brought her cheek to his cock, caressing it against his shaft. "Yet the firmness of your cock feels more like sculpted marble."

"Oh...what you're doing to me, Samantha," he groaned.

"Driving you a little bit crazy?"

"Yes...it's been so long, I can't remember when..."

"Good," she said, her lips against his cock, breathing hot air on his shaft. "I'm glad to be able to give you a little of your own medicine." She cupped his balls, massaging gently, ever-so-lightly scraping them with her nails, and then giving them a tender squeeze.

Lugal's words drifted into a tuneful groan. She chuckled, knowing damn well what it felt like to be so pleasantly tortured.

"My cock is near bursting. Fire rises within me, Samantha. Blood rages in my veins." He grabbed her hair, pushing her head down where he wanted her.

"Poor baby. Let me fuck it with my mouth." Taking his cock back into her mouth, her tongue undulated in an erotic rhythm while she sucked him.

"Fuck?" he gasped out.

She opened her mouth, sliding her lips from his cock.

"You don't know that word?"

"Nay."

Under her erotic oral spell, Lugal was clearly a man of few words.

"It's a coarse, rather crude word that means having sex. You fuck my pussy with your great big cock...I fuck your cock with my soft, wet mouth. Like this..."

She swallowed his cock, gliding her lips up and down. Holding it steady, she kissed the crown and sucked it. "Mmmm, you taste so good, Lugal. All musky and male and potent." With plenty of long, thick cock at her disposal, she wrapped her hand around the base and pumped while claiming the rest of his sizeable column with her mouth.

"Gods, Samantha!"

"Nay, it is no god supping on your sweetness, it is your possessor, my dear genie," she said, mimicking his earlier words. "It is I, Samantha, who makes the volcano of passion rise within you, erupting with a burst of honeyed musk into my waiting mouth."

"Ahhh, my sweet, Samantha." Lugal caressed her head and shoulders as she ate him. She sucked hard, milking him, urging him to spill his seed down her throat.

He murmured something, mindless—random, garbled bits of speech as she drove him closer to the edge with her tongue, her teeth and the firm sucking of her cheeks. Relaxing her throat muscles, she took in as much of him as she could, discarding the flashlight to grab a handful of fine, masculine ass with one hand, while massaging his testicles with the other.

His body rigid, Lugal's murmurs grew into howling grunts. He bucked mightily as he spasmed and soon Samantha felt the first hot streams of cum bathing her mouth and throat.

A raw, primal growl exploded from his throat as Lugal tensed and shuddered, the last ribbons of his creamy male essence shooting against the back of her throat.

Besieged by a rich, sweet bounty of feelings and sensations, tears sprang to Samantha's eyes. She drank from him, swallowing every last morsel of his cum, thoroughly loving his cock in a way that amazed her.

She'd never experienced the true joys of sexual union until Lugal came into her life. He made her feel like a beautiful, desirable woman. Like a goddess! Unlike Tommy, Lugal never once pinched her belly and made a crack about her being too fat.

Instead, Lugal made her insides thrum, her outsides shudder. He influenced her mind, her hormones, her feelings until Samantha felt cosseted in a perfect bubble of supreme satiation.

She'd known Lugal less than a day and already her heart ached at the thought of losing him forever. She was grateful to him for making her feel whole and alive.

"Spilling my seed into your soft, sweet mouth was the most pleasing, gratifying experience I can remember," Lugal told Samantha as she cuddled close. "So generous, considerate, so giving. I am at a loss for words to express my appreciation."

Samantha drew invisible patterns on his chest with her fingers, enjoying the vibration in his chest as he spoke. His odd words of gratitude surprised her. He almost made it sound as though no other woman had ever loved his cock with her mouth before. Of course, that was ridiculous. What woman could possibly resist the mouthwatering opportunity to taste Conan the Barbarian's gorgeous cock?

"It was my absolute pleasure," she assured him. "But it wasn't any more than you did for me, Lugal."

"Ah, but it was, little one. More than you can possibly know." He stroked her head gently, lazily curling strands of her hair around his fingers.

Splaying her fingers against his chest, Samantha rested her chin on her hand, gazing into his dark eyes. "I don't understand. You can't possibly mean this is the first time a woman has performed oral sex on you...can you?"

"The last time a woman's lips tasted my manhood was before I was made captive. It is so long ago I can barely remember."

"But why? Were they all lesbians or something?"

"Lesbians?"

"Gay women." Lugal looked even more confused. "Homosexual women," Samantha clarified. "Women who aren't sexually interested in men."

"Ah, I understand." Lugal chuckled. "Only a few of my possessors were lesbians. You fail to understand how very different you are from the women I have known these many centuries."

"Really? How?" She was pretty sure Lugal meant that in a good way. If he was just giving her a line, he was doing one hell of a job. But then, why would he have to? She'd already given herself to him, hadn't she? It certainly wasn't as if she'd played hard to get. She rolled her eyes at the thought of how pitifully easy she was.

Rosie was right. In less than a day's time, Samantha had morphed into a bona fide slut.

"You are like fresh air on a spring morning. In the short time I have known you I have already learned you are kind, caring, beautiful and you make me laugh. You are lively and full of life. Spirited and impudent as well as intelligent." Lugal held up his finger. "Before you ask, yes, I mean what I say to you. It is not said out of duty, Samantha."

If it was anatomically possible for a heart to do an actual flip-flop inside one's chest, it just happened to Samantha.

"Wow...that's the nicest bunch of compliments anyone has ever given me, Lugal. Thank you."

"You are also an excellent cock sucker." Lugal winked and Samantha breathed in a surprised gasp at his carnal levity.

"In the past, my possessors gave thought only to their own gratification, never to mine. I came to accept that truth long ago. Once they understood I was there to grant their wishes and pleasure them sexually, I was naught but a human contrivance to them. Merely a means to fulfill their desires."

Samantha looked up at him. "I find that so hard to believe. It sounds so cold. So selfish."

"I am still amazed you have not even asked me about your wishes. It is the first such occurrence."

"I have six months, right?"

"Yes, but are you not curious about this gift that has the power to alter your life?"

"I am, but we've got plenty of time for that." Smiling, Samantha patted his shoulder. She certainly wasn't eager to send Lugal back to that cursed bottle. Besides, it was hard to think of anything more perfect than having him for her lover. Her time with Lugal rivaled any riches that immediately came to mind.

"Getting back to your other possessors – did they just treat you like a wish-granting love slave instead of a person, a man with feelings?"

"Most did, but it is reasonable and understandable. After all, I am a slave with a duty to perform. That is why it moved me so to have you treat me like a lover. Like a man, Samantha, instead of one to grovel at your feet and carry out your commands."

Her eyes filled with tears that spilled on Lugal's chest. He lifted his head to look down at her, brushing the tears from her cheeks. "Why do you cry?"

How could Samantha find the words to explain how her heart was breaking for him? For the eons of inhumane treatment he'd suffered at the hands of callous, unfeeling ingrates?

Lord knows she couldn't tell him that after knowing him for just a few hours, she had this crazy notion bounding around inside her head and heart, insisting she was falling in love with him.

She'd scare her poor genie right back into his bottle if he had any inkling she was thinking along such needy, clingy lines.

"I just think it stinks, that's all," she said

"It smells like ass?" Lugal asked, a teasing gleam in his eye and a devilish grin across his sensuous lips.

Samantha smiled, surprised to hear him making a joke when what he'd just shared with her must be so painful. "Exactly. It smells like ass."

With a wicked expression, Lugal reached down and pinched her butt. "Before we part ways, Samantha, I will fuck that beautiful alabaster ass of yours."

Chapter Eight

"I can't believe we forgot to use this last night." Samantha tossed out the warm can of whipped cream.

Lugal stood behind her, nibbling on her nape as she selected a pair of mugs from the cabinet. After hours of sensational lovemaking, this was a hell of a nice way to start the day.

"The natural flavor of your skin and your secret places was delicious enough. The adornment of sweet white ruffles was not needed." After licking the outer shell of her ear, Lugal sniffed the air as the coffeemaker hissed. "I like this aroma."

"The coffee will be ready in a couple of minutes. I can't believe you've never tasted it. Didn't Abigail drink coffee?"

"Nay. She and Owen were from England. She said the English prefer tea. I grew to enjoy the taste with abundant cream and sugar."

"All I have in the house is artificial sweetener and a carton of nonfat milk. But we'll grab another mug while we're out shopping. You can load it up with cream and sugar."

She eyed Lugal and smiled, mindful not to give in to a rising giggle. Samantha figured the few remnants of fat clothes she'd saved would come in handy one day. The powder blue sweatshirt adorned with huge pink cabbage rose appliqués and the stretch-denim jeans with the elastic waist weren't exactly ideal adornment for a pillar of simmering testosterone. But it was either that or her splashy orange floral mumu.

She'd donated her favorite fat clothes to charity. The few she kept were examples of *this-is-what-you'll-look-like-if-you-ever-get-fat-again* outfits she kept in the back of her closet as hideous reminders of her highest weight. God, she never wanted to be forced to wear frumpy clothes like those again.

The sleeves of her sweatshirt came up to Lugal's elbows. The legs of the plus-sized jeans hugged just below his knees. Poor Lugal looked like a gargantuan drag queen gone terribly wrong. But she couldn't take him out of the house wearing his genie garb. It would attract too much attention.

Of course, a barbarian embellished with cabbage roses wouldn't exactly blend in either.

Samantha glanced at his big feet overhanging her flip-flops and winced. He came out of his bottle barefoot. The man needed some sort of shoes. Since she didn't have any gunboats handy, these would offer at least a little protection.

Once they got to the mall she'd just have to get him into some manly clothes and shoes pronto, that's all. Appraising his imposing stature again, she bit her lip, wondering if the average men's store carried triple-tall, extra-buff sizes.

The bell on her coffeemaker dinged, capturing Samantha's attention. "I'll start you off with it black to see if you like it that way first." She poured a cup for him and one for herself, doctoring hers with milk and sweetener.

Lugal sipped and winced. "It does not taste as good as it smells."

"Here," she ripped open a packet of sweetener, tossing in the powder, "try it now."

He sipped, making a face like a kid eating strained spinach. "This is worse yet."

Samantha added a splash of nonfat milk, gesturing for him to sample again. A leery look on his face, he sipped. Clearly the milk hadn't helped matters any.

"I am sorry, Samantha. I cannot ingest this strange, bitter liquid."

"No problem. See what you think about the cereal. It's made by Tuned by Turner, the company I work for." The high fiber, low-fat, sugar-free, whole-grain Yummy Nuggets with clusters of flax and bran was one of the few foods TBT offered that Samantha found halfway palatable. She poured a stream of thin, fat-purged milk into the small bowl, sprinkled sweetener on top and stirred.

Lugal outright shuddered at the taste. From the skewed look on his face, she thought he might spit the mouthful back into the bowl. But his table manners were far more refined. Managing to swallow with another small shudder, he took the box from the table, studying the images of lip-licking people happily hiking spoonfuls of cereal to their mouths.

"With all this amazing technology you have, Samantha, why do the people of your time choose to ingest twigs, chaff and wood shavings for their morning repast?"

Samantha laughed at that. "It does seem that way, doesn't it?"

"Truly, I do not mean to be ungrateful for the sustenance you provide, but..."

"You don't need to say another word." She cleared the table. "After we get you something to wear I'll take you out for a nice lunch." She grabbed her purse and keys. Lugal grabbed his saber, affixing it to his hip.

"Uh...no, that won't work, Lugal. The saber stays here. Strolling around with weapons strapped to the waist is definitely frowned upon in Portland."

He looked at her aghast. "You cannot mean it, Samantha. A warrior without his weapon is but a target inviting slaughter. How will I protect you should the need arise?"

Reaching up to stroke his rough jaw, she gave the cabbage rose-wearing genie a once-over and smiled. "My dear, adorable genie, you've got fists like ham hocks and the rest of you is muscle layered on muscle." She squeezed his biceps and he immediately curled his arm to make an impressive muscle.

"See?" She silently cursed herself for feeling that muscle. Damn. Now she'd have to walk around with damp panties while they shopped. "A definite case of overkill. You're stronger and more fearsome than any man deserves to be, Lugal, with or without a sword."

He grabbed her to his chest, crushing her breasts to him, nibbling her neck. "Your eyes darken with passion when you feel my strength, little one. Why go to the markets when we can stay here and fuck all day?"

"You really like that new word, don't you?"

"I love it." He ground his erection against her. "I love to fuck you. I love it when you fuck me. I love fucking."

Nearly limp with desire as he expounded on the virtues of his favorite new word, Samantha pressed her hands against his chest. Intending to push him away, she relished the feel of his hard pectorals beneath her fingers.

Great. Now she'd be walking around with a soaked pussy all damn day long.

She sucked in a deep breath and expelled it, reluctantly pushing herself away from his embrace. "We have to go. We need to get to the mall before it gets too crowded." The fewer people who saw him outfitted like a giant transvestite the better. "Ready for a ride in my horseless chariot?"

Lugal's eyes widened. "You have a gas engine automobile like that of Charlie's?"

"Mine's older and smaller, but it's pretty much the same." She yanked Lugal's hand and headed for the door leading to her garage.

"Yes! I will enjoy driving this great metal monster on wheels."

She stopped in her tracks. "Whoa, hold on a minute, macho man. You're not driving. You don't know how. You're job is to be the pretty passenger."

"You will teach me," Lugal stated. "Women should not be operating such vehicles. It is a man's responsibility."

Samantha opened her mouth and snapped it shut. No use arguing with her sexy chauvinist now, or else they'd never get to the mall. Rolling her eyes, she grabbed his sleeve, marching him to the garage.

The short drive to the mall was harrowing. Between Lugal's shocked gasps, cries of wonder and urgent demands for explanations, Samantha felt drained. She'd also made the mistake of turning on the radio without preparing Lugal first. He practically shot through the roof as music blared and singers sang.

Thank God he didn't have the saber with him.

Samantha showed him how to switch stations by pushing the buttons. Lugal zipped from rock to rap to classical to country to talk radio. When the news came on he listened intently, answering the newsmen wherever he deemed appropriate. And he argued with the meteorologist about weather conditions.

It was when Lugal asked the announcers questions, awaiting answers, that Samantha decided she deserved a gold medal for holding back her laughter. She did her best to explain what a radio was and how it worked, but realized technical explanations simply weren't her forte.

Big trucks, motorcycles, motor homes, and bicycles grabbed his attention, causing a flurry of new questions. The planes flying overhead had Lugal gasping and shoving his head out the window to watch the great white birds in the sky.

Hanging on to him by the elasticized waistband of her jeans as she drove, Samantha was scared to death Lugal was going to kill himself by jumping out of the car to explore all the amazing, magical aspects of his new world.

Or to wage war on other drivers.

Like when she explained the meaning of the insistent honking followed by a pissed off male driver giving her the finger as he sped past Samantha, who'd been driving slow for safety. Her heart about stopped when Lugal's warmonger genes kicked in. Focused on revenge, he demanded she catch up to the offending driver so he could teach the uncouth wrongdoer a lesson in how to properly treat a lady.

The most difficult part was trying to explain to Lugal how the term *fuck you* and all its variations could have such distinctly different meanings.

Things didn't improve once she parked in the mall's lot. They hadn't taken ten steps before she heard a wolf whistle followed by a *yoo-hoo!* Since Samantha rarely engendered that sort of response from men on the street, she suspected the whistle was meant for Lugal.

"Well hello there, precious," a man said in a singsong voice after he and two other guys approached from behind. It came as no surprise that he was addressing Lugal.

The flamboyant threesome—with touches of makeup, one wearing a fuzzy pink sweater, and another with skintight lime green pants—no doubt figured they were going to the same party as the cabbage-rosed Lugal.

"Isn't he just the most delicious thing?" mascara-guy asked his companions while skimming a finger along Lugal's chest. Visibly bristling, Lugal scowled at the familiarity. "Where have you been all my life, sweetheart?"

"Are you here for the gay film festival?" pink-sweater-guy asked. None of them seemed to notice Samantha.

"I do not know of this," Lugal answered. "I am here to shop for typical male garb and to find chains and restraints."

Samantha nearly expired on the spot.

"Ooh, now that sounds promising," lime-green-pants guy said. "But you won't find any sex toys in this place, handsome. Why don't you come over tonight and I'll show you my extensive personal collection?" He gave Samantha a fleeting appraisal. "Feel free to bring your fag hag. She can hang out with mine."

Mouth agape, she couldn't help growling her displeasure. "Excuse me. I am *not* his fag hag. I'm his..." Elevating her chin, she cleared her throat. "His girlfriend." The statement gave her the most delicious shivers.

"Of course you are, darling."

Samantha's ego deflated at his incredulous tone and disbelieving expression.

"Ahhh. You are a merchant of pleasure supplies," Lugal surmised. "Yes. I would very much like to see what you have."

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours," mascara-guy offered, fluttering his lashes.

"Oh Jesus." Samantha worried the guy might get the idea to whip out his dick for Lugal's inspection. "No, Lugal, they're not merchants." She turned to the men. "Look, it's not what you think, fellas. He's not gay."

Pink-sweater-guy looked Lugal up and down, smiling. "Mmm-hmm. Whatever you say, darling." He and his buddies snickered.

"Seriously," Samantha said. "He's just...he's foreign. You can tell from his accent. He just came over from, uh...Mongolia and," she swallowed hard, "this is how straight men dress over there. Right, Lugal?"

"Nay." Lugal gave her a curious look. "I told you, Samantha, I have not been in Mongolia since—"

"He understands very little English," Samantha tacked on, slapping her hand against Lugal's mouth. The stern, surprised look in his eyes was a no-nonsense signal that he sincerely disliked the idea of being muzzled.

While this was happening, a few other people passed by. Samantha watched Lugal checking out the jeans and khakis the men wore against the flamboyant clothing of the gay trio.

His hands splayed across his chest, Lugal looked down at himself, clearly horrified. He pinned Samantha with a none-too-happy glare. "These men think I am *assinnu*," Lugal accused, and Samantha didn't need an interpreter to figure out what he meant.

"Ass-in-you? Well of course. Is there any other way but in the ass, luscious?" lime-green-pants-guy said, squeezing Lugal's biceps.

"Be gone," Lugal said, disposing of the man's hand from his arm. "You assume incorrectly. I am not enamored of men."

"Well that's a pity," mascara-boy noted. Lugal narrowed his eyes. "Toodles," the man said, giving Lugal a wave of his fingers before looping arms with the other two and walking away.

Fists planted on hips, Lugal stared Samantha down. She could imagine from that one straightforward look how Lugal commanded battalions of bloodthirsty soldiers in his time. While it made her knees knock, it also had her clit quivering.

"Samantha..." His tone was menacing as one eyebrow arched in question. She felt like Lucy confronted by Ricky after he'd caught her at another of her shenanigans. "When I told you I felt like an ugly *munus* in this," Lugal plucked the sweatshirt, holding it away from his chest, "you assured me this is appropriate male costume for your time."

"Oh, it's a costume, all right," she said, cracking a nervous smile. When he didn't return her smile, hers disintegrated.

"*Munus*," she repeated. "Right. I remember that means *woman*." Her eyes roved over him. "I might have exaggerated the truth just a teensy bit when I told you that, but I didn't have any choice, Lugal. I had to get you here for some acceptable clothes. Since I don't have men's clothing in my closet, this was the next best thing."

As she spoke, Lugal eyed a handsome, buff guy strutting toward them wearing tight, black jeans, a body-hugging black T-shirt and a black leather jacket. Devastatingly masculine, the guy was hot. Like a vampire biker. Not as sexy as her genie, but a definite testosterone-oozing hottie. Thinking of how striking Lugal would look in those clothes had a new flood of juices bathing her pussy.

"I like the look of this man."

"You mean, in an *assinnu* sort of way?" Samantha's feeble attempt at levity was met with a warning scowl. "Sorry. I couldn't resist."

"You will garb me in that manner," Lugal stated. "Like a man who prefers to bed women instead of men." He crossed his arms over his big, cabbage rose covered chest.

Samantha watched as black-leather-biker-boy called out and ran to catch up with the three flamboyant guys who'd just left them, grabbing their asses as he wedged between two of the men.

Samantha giggled.

Lugal frowned.

"Come on, man who prefers to bed women. Let's go shopping." Samantha tugged on his hand. Lugal followed, grumbling as he scuffed along the pavement on her flip-flops.

"You told those men you were my girlfriend. What does that mean?"

"I just said that to let them know you aren't gay," Samantha explained. "A man's girlfriend means the woman he —"

"Ahhh, the woman he fucks," Lugal said as they strode through the big glass doors of the mall entrance. "You were letting them know you and I are fuckers." He gave a knowing smile.

"Shhh! Oh, for heaven's sake, no." Samantha did her best to keep her voice moderate in the echoing mall. "I'll explain later. And watch your language. You shouldn't be using that word in public, Lugal."

"Girlfriend?" he asked, seemingly quite serious.

Samantha gazed left and right at all the moms with little kids in tow. "No, the F-word." She pressed a finger to her lips in a quieting motion.

She noted the moms she'd spotted had more on their minds than just kids. Lugal was a veritable attraction. While he seemed fairly oblivious to the attention, Samantha discovered that having all the shapely young women making goo-goo eyes at Lugal while giving him blatant invitational looks, brought out her green-eyed monster.

Snagging Lugal's sleeve, Samantha whisked him into a department store where both males and female eyed her goofily garbed genie like he was a prime, juicy steak.

She never felt so invisible in all her life.

After outfitting him with underwear, shoes and an assortment of clothing, Samantha gazed at Lugal. He now wore a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved white shirt, open at the neck and rolled at the sleeves of his bronzed, muscular arms. He looked better than a hot fudge sundae and the mall was filled with women who wanted their turn licking the ice cream.

They walked to the store's checkout counter with Lugal's new black leather jacket. The female clerk checked out Lugal with clear, undisguised lust. The way she said, 'Is there anything...*else* I can do for you?' with a look conveying her longing in no uncertain terms, made Samantha want to smack that overactive hormonal smile right off her face.

"Do men and women always eyeball you like that?" she asked, a disgusted tone creeping into her voice as the clerk returned her credit card and they left the store.

"Eyeball?"

Samantha tsked out of frustration. "I mean do they always look at you like they want to...you know..."

"Fuck me?" Lugal gave a confident, nonchalant nod. "Always. I cannot fault them, Samantha. They are mesmerized by my perfect form."

He said it so matter-of-factly, so simply Samantha realized he wasn't being purposely arrogant. Lugal was merely stating fact. She'd never encountered anyone with such self-assurance. She'd love to have even a fraction of his confidence.

"In my time I became used to others seducing me, throwing themselves at me, because of my reputation as an exceptionally skilled lover, to which you can now attest. At times I believe it even exceeded my celebrated standing as a great leader and warrior."

Samantha's jaw dropped. Not because he was incorrect—Lord knew he was spot on concerning his phenomenal sexual expertise—but because of his astonishing lack of insecurity. "Do the words modesty or humility have any meaning to you?" she asked.

Lugal nodded. "Yes. But they are not relevant in regard to my prowess."

"Or your astounding good looks," Samantha said sarcastically as they neared the escalator.

"Correct."

"Oh brother." She rolled her eyes. "Come on, Ego Master, we're taking a ride. Just do what I do. Step on the moving stairs and put your hand on the handrail." She got on the escalator, turning back to catch Lugal's uneasy expression. He was focused and silent for the short floor-to-floor excursion.

"My rumored heritage as half-god has only added to my appeal," he said as they left the escalator and walked down the aisle.

Samantha laughed.

"What is it that you find humorous?"

She slid her gaze to him. "You were serious?"

"Of course. It is said that my father is Enlil, who guards the tablets of destiny."

"What are those?"

"The cuneiform tablets on which he writes the fate of everything on earth. Enlil is so powerful the other gods can't even look at him."

"If that's the case," Samantha noted with a snicker, "how did he and your mother manage to get together?"

"It was Enlil's will that she gaze upon his brilliant, fearsome beauty as they copulated."

"Oh...well, there you go."

"Where do we go?"

"Never mind."

"The individuals who lust after me cannot be held accountable. They cannot help themselves. Such was the case with Sabit, the young virgin priestess responsible for my captivity."

"So, you corrupted a sweet young virgin, hmm? Am I finally going to hear about that?"

Lugal frowned. "Not yet. It stirs too much emotion within me when I speak of it. I will tell you my story soon."

"Okay. Hungry?" she asked, breathing in a whiff of aromas drifting from the food court.

A wicked gleam sparkled in Lugal's eye. "I am always hungry for you, little one."

Samantha's pussy trickled.

If only he had any idea how uncomfortable it was to walk around the mall with soaked panties, pretending her clit and pussy were behaving instead of keeping her in a state of constant erotic awareness. She blamed it on having to inspect each pair of jeans he tried on, becoming more alert than ever to that fine, firm ass of his as the denim caressed it close.

"I meant for food, you giant walking column of testosterone. Come on, let's get these bags back to the car. There's a great little burger place at the other end of the mall."

"What is little burger?"

"Heaven. Sheer gastronomic heaven."

Ignoring her damp crotch to the best of her ability, as well as all the turning heads and lustful expressions, Samantha led her genie through the mall to get some good, non-diet grub.

"Stop!" Lugal commanded.

Her breath catching, Samantha came to an abrupt halt. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"We will shop here. For you, this time."

Samantha looked at the broad expanse of window with the skinny mannequins dressed in fancy bras and panties. Victoria's Secret. She swallowed hard. She'd never had the nerve to set foot in one of their stores. Not with her plentiful body.

"Oh, no, Lugal. I really don't think—"

"Come. We will find out what is this secret of Victoria's." Lugal grabbed her hand, striding inside.

"But you already made me buy new jeans and some skirts and dresses."

He'd clearly changed his mind about women wearing pants when he saw the difference between the way she looked in her baggy jeans versus the tight fit of the new ones. He insisted she buy a pair in black as well as blue. She could never wear them out of the house, of course, they revealed too much of her too-ample curves, but she'd be happy to wear them for him if it made him happy.

"Those are for others to see." Lugal's eyebrow lifted. "The secrets," he motioned to all the silky, satiny wisps of nothingness throughout the store, "are for my eyes only."

Samantha heard *may I help you?* chorusing around them as Lugal surveyed his surroundings.

"I am a man who knows what he likes. Your help will not be needed until it comes time to make payment." He dismissed the attentive clerks whose tongues were busy licking their lips as they appraised him.

A haunting smile taking hold, Lugal eyed a deep purple bra and matching panties on display. His smile grew wider when he spotted the matching floor-length semi-sheer robe.

"The color of a Sumerian sky on a late summer's night," he said as he fingered the dark fabric. "Your alabaster skin will look like the moon and stars against these garments. You will wear these for me, Samantha."

She almost moaned out loud right there in the middle of Victoria's Secret when she saw the hungry look in his eyes.

"At least, until I can peel them from your lush body."

Chapter Nine

Tucked in a dark booth at Burgers, Spuds 'n' Suds, Samantha heard her stomach growl. The last thing she should be thinking about, especially after purchasing a bagful of itsy-bitsy Victoria's Secret goodies, was chowing down on a greasy hamburger and fries. But the limited burger menu at BSS offered some of the best pub-style food in Portland and introducing Lugal to one of her favorite non-diet meals was a special occasion.

Of course, any good excuse to go off her diet was a special occasion.

While service was always good, this was the first time a server approached so quickly at the height of the lunchtime rush. In fact, two female servers stood there, drooling over Lugal and arguing whose table it was.

Such eager, dedicated employees. Samantha chuckled.

Once the table issue was resolved, Samantha ordered Lugal a bacon-cheddar burger with fries and a beer. She felt certain it would be the best damn meal he'd had in over a century.

"You can take off the sunglasses now," she told him. She couldn't resist adding them to the tab as they were shopping. He looked so deliciously dangerous in them. They were sort of the icing on the cake.

Lugal removed the dark glasses and Samantha swore she heard a collective sigh. The server who'd lost her claim to the table stopped by to refill their already brimming water glasses, gyrating her hips for Lugal as she moved.

"Are your shoes comfortable?" Samantha asked Lugal as the displaced server hovered with a dreamy smile.

"I am not used to such footwear, but I suppose they could be considered comfortable. I do like the way the fabric of my breeches hugs my cock."

The water pourer moaned, overfilling Samantha's glass.

"Thanks," Samantha said with a bright, dismissive smile, snatching a handful of paper napkins from the tabletop dispenser to blot up the water, since the server seemed unaware the accident had even happened. "I think we're okay on the water for now. We'll signal if we need more."

The server was too busy salivating to hear a word Samantha said.

"Your service is appreciated," Lugal said to the woman. "You may go now."

The young woman bowed, *she actually bowed*, and then she was off.

"Do you think you'll be okay here alone for a couple of minutes? I've got to go to the ladies room."

Lugal cocked an eyebrow. "What do the ladies do in this room?"

"It's the restroom. The bathroom. The toilet," she whispered, refraining from giggling as she remembered Lugal's utter fascination with the toilet in her bathroom, flushing it over and over after Samantha explained how to use it.

"Ah, I see. Yes, fear not, little one. I will come to no harm during your absence."

Lugal watched Samantha walk away from the table. He loved looking at her ass, the way it swayed back and forth with her steps, though he could barely see the gentle movement through the baggy, shapeless breeches she wore today. He would enjoy watching her retreat much more once she wore her new...what was it she called them? Jeans.

He was amazed a woman could look so enticing in men's costume. As she posed for him in the store, his gaze was lured to the indigo fabric hugging her curves. It caressed her belly and vulva, claspings the cheeks of her ass like possessive hands. The image kept his cock hard and adamant inside his breeches. Lugal's hand slipped beneath the table to cup himself through the sturdy material.

He groaned, longing to fist himself, squeezing and pulling his flesh in answer to the primeval call. His cock seemed habitually on the threshold of blasting hot torrents of cream all over himself. As a warrior trained in mastering the art of control, he found it extraordinary for his manhood to act in so unruly a fashion. It was as if Samantha had enchanted him, bewitched him to the point that he hardened at the merest thought of her ripe body.

His new possessor was an enigma. It was the first time he had encountered an owner so uninterested in hearing about her three wishes. This amazed him most of all. Why was she not eager to hear of the untold riches he could impart with a mere wave of his hand?

Most of his other possessors had all but tied him down and demanded he apprise them of the wish details as soon as he had told them of their gifts. Their eyes alight with greed, they first used his body to satisfy themselves. Then they scuttled from making one wish to another so quickly, Lugal barely had time to note where and when he stood upon the earth before he was whisked back into the bowels of the bottle for another small eternity.

Most women he had known were quite unlike the gentle, funny, intelligent and exceedingly desirable Samantha. Not only had she spent time teaching him about her world, feeding and clothing him and taking him for a magical ride in her gas engine chariot, she also treated him with great consideration as they engaged in numerous rounds of fucking. She had bestowed the precious gift of allowing him to feel like a real man once again.

He liked her womanly displays of jealousy too. She tried to hide her envy when other women made erotic overtures to him with their eyes and bodies, but Lugal had

made note of her discomfiture. It pleased him greatly to know Samantha was so covetous of him. Most likely it meant that she cared for him, at least to some extent.

Never had a possessor been so selfless, so thoughtful, so concerned about his needs, his likes and dislikes. Samantha Rutledge was truly one-of-a-kind. A woman he could envision making his own. Having her keep his house, warm his bed and give him rosy-cheeked children – like the wonderful, playful little goat kids of Charlie and Rosie.

His good temper soured as Lugal remembered it was not in his destiny to settle down with a good woman or be a father to her brood. He was not allowed to partake in such joys, such grand pleasures of life. He was doomed to wander and to sleep, not to live and experience love like a real man.

Samantha made him feel more alive than he had in eons. Perhaps that wasn't a good thing. After knowing her, after hearing the sweet ring of her laughter and seeing the warm gaze of what appeared to be genuine affection in her eyes, it would be so much harder to return to his half-dead existence in the bottle. But return he must.

A hen-like clucking of voices assailed his ears. Aware of the women lurking nearby, eager for him to favor them with an appreciative nod or promising smile, Lugal paid them no heed. It had far less to do with the fact that he was permitted to engage in carnal union only with his possessor than the fact that he had grown weary of self-seeking women interested in him only as a walking cock.

While their bodies were appealing, the idea of bedding them was of more interest to his cock than his head. Or his heart.

Funny...he hadn't thought of his heart in a long time. Why now?

"Because Samantha has touched it," he muttered aloud.

Too many couplings with shallow, selfish women had left a bitter taste in his mouth. None of them, from queens to princesses to the most breathtaking of consorts, could even begin to compare with his Samantha.

His Samantha.

He gave a humorless chuckle. She was not his...he was hers. To do with as she pleased. But she had made it seem otherwise for him and he would be eternally grateful for that. Even if she later became infused with greed as the others had when faced with a wealth of riches, he would keep with him the memory of her kind heart and generosity of spirit.

"I'll meet you at the table in a minute, girls. Well, hello there."

Lugal looked up at the sound of a female's seductive voice. An emaciated woman dressed all in pink and wearing too much paint on her face smiled down at him. He thought it odd that one so bony would have tits nearly as big as Samantha's.

"Mind if I join you for a moment?" She slid into the booth set opposite him without waiting for a reply.

"What do you want?" Lugal asked, finding he didn't care for this woman's aura or assuming attitude.

"Oh..." His purposefully brusque manner had clearly caught the woman off guard. "This will only take a minute. My name's Bunny Turner. You may have heard of me. I own Tuned by Turner, the weight-loss centers." She gave him a gleaming merchant's smile, fully expecting, no doubt, for him to be suitably impressed.

The name was, indeed, familiar to him. Samantha had spoken of the company and the Bunny woman who was her boss. The woman who insisted Samantha become gaunt or forfeit her employment. His eyes narrowed. Nay, he did not like this woman who had caused Samantha sorrow.

"You speak of the business that requires healthy, well-rounded people to starve until they become scrawny?"

A startled look came across the woman's face, then she broke into cool, guarded laughter.

"Oh, I see. You're joking," she said. "Anyway, we're always looking for new faces and..." her eyes licked him, "new bodies, to use in our magazine and TV ads. You'd be perfect. Do you model?"

"I do not understand."

"Have you posed? For photographers?"

Lugal frowned. "I have posed for sculptors who have immortalized my likeness for others to admire."

"Mmm, I can certainly see why they'd want to."

Her laugh was low and husky, but it did not reach her eyes as it did when Samantha laughed.

"Interested? The pay is good. And..." she gave him that distinct lustful look again, "there could be fringe benefits." One of her thin eyebrows arched. "If you know what I mean."

"Yes, I know. You wish for me to fuck you," Lugal said, not bothering to curb the sneer tainting his lips.

Her jaw dropped, but Bunny Turner regained her composure quickly. Unlike Samantha, she was no innocent.

"Well, I...now that you mention it," she focused her hungry brown eyes on his gaze, "we could each benefit from a mutually satisfying, discreet romp in the sheets."

"Nay. Such a romp would not be possible," Lugal advised her. "I belong to another woman."

The woman's fingers reached across the table and walked up his forearm. "I won't tell if you won't."

Lugal beamed a grin when he saw Samantha returning to the table. Bunny's back was to her and so she apparently mistook Lugal's smile as a positive answer to her suggestion.

"Oh, good. I see that we can come to terms," Bunny said.

"Bunny...what are you doing here?" Samantha asked when she reached the table and saw Bunny sitting in her place.

With a slow turn of her head, indicating her irritation at being interrupted, Bunny gave Samantha a disdainful perusal.

"Hello, Sam," she said with a bland, uninterested smile. "How nice to see you. I do hope you're not planning to eat anything but a salad here." Chuckling, Bunny wagged a chastising finger at Samantha. "You've got a good amount of weight to lose, missy." She puffed out her cheeks and patted her flat belly.

Lugal's saw Samantha's face turn crimson. He felt his blood simmer in response. For some reason this woman seemed to enjoy making Samantha feel unattractive.

"We'll talk another time, Sam," Bunny said, dismissing her. "As you can see I'm tied up right now." She reached across the table, covering Lugal's large hand with her small, bony, bejeweled one in a possessive gesture.

Samantha stood there, her mouth open as her gaze followed Bunny's hand. It was clear to Lugal that she felt intimidated by this bold boss of hers.

"Buh-bye, then," Bunny said, waving with the fingers of her free hand and turning her attention to Lugal.

"Um, actually," Samantha said, "you're sitting in my seat, Bunny."

Now it was time for Bunny's jaw to drop. "Excuse me?"

"My seat," Samantha repeated, gesturing to the booth with an apologetic smile. Lugal wondered why she felt the need to feel contrite when it was Bunny who had erred, and not her.

Bunny's cool manner slipped as incredulity took over. "You two know each other?"

Samantha nodded. "He's...Lugal is..."

"Samantha is my girlfriend," Lugal stated, his eyes on Samantha as he took her hand, caressing it, before bringing it to his lips and brushing a kiss across her knuckles. He was pleased to see the heated flush of humiliation dissipate from Samantha's cheeks. The pleased and grateful smile she gave him was worth more than gold.

"Sam?" Bunny said the name as if she'd been struck by a bolt of lightning. She looked at Samantha, aghast. "He's your boyfriend?"

"Yup. Lugal's my main squeeze." She gave him another beautiful smile, lifting his hand to her soft cheek for a brief touch. He didn't know what it meant to be a main squeeze, but it sounded good coming from Samantha.

"Did I not tell you I belonged to another woman?" he reminded Bunny.

The server, the official one as well as her competitor, brought their platters and beers to the table.

"I am *so* sorry about the wait," the woman said, addressing Lugal as if Samantha and Bunny weren't there. "There was a problem in the kitchen. Your beers are on me, big guy." She winked and left, whispering with the other server and giggling.

"I'm sorry, Bunny, but if you don't mind..." shrugging, Samantha gestured to her food on the table.

"Oh...yes...of course." After removing her hand from Lugal's and clearing her throat, Bunny slipped out of the booth and Samantha sat in her place.

"Before you depart," Lugal said, "know that Samantha will not be living a life without *ninda*."

"What?"

Lugal noticed that when Bunny frowned, only her lips moved. Her forehead was strangely smooth and still.

"Bread," he clarified. "And butter. And real ruffled cream and sugar. She will not do without these pleasures just to please the absurd directives of Tuned by Turner."

"I beg your pardon?" Bunny blustered.

"Lugal!" Samantha gasped. "Oh, he doesn't mean that, Bunny. Lugal has trouble with his English, that's all. Trust me, I'll get that thirty pounds off in time, don't worry."

Bunny eyed the table and smiled. It was the oily, false smile of a crafty snake. "Not eating like that, you won't. And beer too?" She tsked as she shook her head of stiff, oddly colored, blonde-ish hair. "Remember, you have six weeks, Sam."

"You would allow yourself to become like a frail, undernourished bird to appease this woman?"

Samantha gave a small, tentative smile. "She's my boss, Lugal," she said, just above a whisper. "I have no choice if I want to keep my job."

"Bingo," Bunny said with another unpleasant smile. "I have to be going. I have friends waiting. Unlike you, Sam, I'm having the BSS salad, sans dressing, in case you're interested." She shifted her gaze to Lugal. "And my offer still stands. *All* of it."

"Offer?" Samantha asked Lugal.

"Yes. Your employer has suggested that she and I engage in fornication," he explained. He didn't have any uncertainty in openly mentioning the fact. After all, this Bunny woman showed no hesitancy in bedding another woman's man.

"That's a lie." Bunny's face twitched as she gasped. "I did no such thing! I merely offered him an opportunity to model for TBT ads."

Lugal noted Samantha's lips curling into an amused smile.

"I'm sure you're mistaken, Lugal," she said with a wink. "You see, Bunny is married. She has a husband. I'm sure she would never proposition you, no matter how unbelievably sexy you are."

"Indeed," Lugal said, understanding at once the game Samantha played. "Then I must not have heard your boss correctly. And it is a good thing. I would hate to discomfit her by rejecting her proposition because she is too scrawny for my tastes. I won't have to tell her that I like my women full and lush like you, Samantha."

"Well, I...how rude!" Bunny said, huffing and puffing.

"By the gods!" Lugal gave Samantha a look of surprise and he could tell she was trying not to laugh. "I did not realize your boss was still here. I'm afraid have misspoken yet again." Inclining his head, Lugal said to Bunny, "My apologies. Good day to you, Bunny Turner. Our food grows cold."

"Oh my God," Samantha said once her boss marched off in a royal huff. "My ass is so fired."

"I like to talk about your beautiful ass," Lugal said. "You mean that it is hot?"

"I mean I'm going to lose my job. Be without employment. All because of you!" she accused, pointing at him.

Lugal noticed that her expressive hands were beautiful even without jewels such as those her boss wore in abundance. But it would certainly please him to adorn each kissable knuckle with a priceless bauble, just the same.

"You troublemaker, you." Laughter spilled from Samantha and her big blue eyes sparkled with amusement. "This is all your fault. You're not as dumb as you look, mister."

"Dumb?" Lugal smiled.

"You pretend to be clueless. Ignorant," she clarified. "But you're not."

"Is that so?" Offering her a devilish smile, Lugal sipped from the beverage Samantha called beer. "*Kash-gin!* Barley ale," he clarified. "I have not tasted this since I can remember. He downed the entire frosted mug in a matter of a few gulps.

"Whoa! Slow down. There's no way I can carry a drunken six-foot-whatever barbarian out of here on my own. Here." Samantha shoved his plate toward him. "Eat."

Lugal watched Samantha separate the bread that held the circular slab of meat. She applied red and yellow sauces, then layered all the garden offerings on top before covering it all with the upper portion of bread. He did the same with his food, then fisted it, bringing it to his mouth.

At the first bite, sparks of delight prickled the inside of his belly. The taste was incredible. Delicious! Better than any food he'd eaten before.

"This is so good it is almost holy," Lugal said. "Tell me what I am eating."

"Meat served between two pieces of bread is called a sandwich. This sandwich is known as a burger, or hamburger. The meat is beef, from cattle. It's ground up, patted into shape and grilled. The melty orange stuff on top is cheddar cheese and the crispy brown strips are bacon, meat that comes from a pig. Then there's ketchup, mustard," she gestured to the red and yellow bottles on the table, "pickles, onion, tomatoes and lettuce."

"Amazing fare."

"Wait until you taste the fries." She pointed to the golden strips resting at the side of the burger.

Lugal tossed one in his mouth and his eyes grew wide. "This is so very good!" He stuffed in more, smiling his appreciation when the server placed another beer before him.

"Those are potatoes, a starchy vegetable that grows under the ground," Samantha explained. "It's sliced and fried in hot oil, then sprinkled with salt." She lifted a bottle with white crystals.

"Why does Bunny Turner not want you to eat and drink such delicious food? This is as different from the twig food you gave me this morning as the sun is from the moon."

"Ha!" Samantha made an overstated roll of her eyes. "Tell me about it."

"I just did, did I not?"

Samantha laughed. "I'm not supposed to eat this because none of it's on my diet. It's fattening." She gave her hamburger a guilty gaze, then set it back on her plate. "I'm done," she said, pushing her food away.

"I do not like your boss. She does not have a good aura about her. And it is clear she does not like you."

"Well, duh," Samantha said, offering a silly expression.

"This means?"

"It means *well, that's obvious.*"

"Bunny Turner envies you."

"Yeah, because she thinks you're my boyfriend. Oh boy, would she ever like to get her claws into you."

"Indeed she would. But I meant that she envies you for your genuineness, for your warmth and kindness. It is clear she does not possess these qualities."

Samantha's face brightened with gladness. "That was a *very* nice thing to say. Thank you, Lugal." She touched his arm and he felt the insignificant gesture of affection right down to his cock. "But, trust me when I tell you that a woman that gorgeous is not envious of little old me in the least."

"Gorgeous?" Lugal spat a laugh. "I think not. The woman resembles a slithering snake who tries to disguise her true nature with face paint and pink garb. You are far more beautiful than she could ever hope to be, Samantha." He watched her eyes glisten at his words. Fascinating how his speaking such a simple truth made her glow.

"Thank you." She lowered her lashes. "I don't even know what else to say to such a lovely compliment." She lifted her gaze. "Misguided as it is," she added with a smile.

"Then say nothing. Busy yourself instead by eating your hamburger, fries and beer, Samantha. It is far too enjoyable to discard. It makes me happy to see the look of pleasure on your face as you eat. It is much like the look you have when we are fucking."

The sip of beer Samantha took almost flew out of her mouth. She swallowed it and then coughed, choking. "Shhh! Keep your voice down, Lugal. You can't talk about..." she looked out at the other diners, "about things like that when we're in a restaurant."

"Things like what?" he teased, loving the tinge of pink that crept up her neck to color her cheeks.

"You're playing dumb again, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Lugal hid his smile by sinking his teeth into his delicious burger and chewing. "Are we going to the chain store to shop for pleasure restraints when we have finished eating?" he asked, hoping for another embarrassed flush of color. As expected, Samantha did not disappoint.

Her mouth full of fries, her eyes grew unnaturally wide. Then she shushed him again. He was having more fun than he had in an age.

"Or will we be going to the food market to purchase cold ruffled cream to spray on our bodies when we lay naked in bed tonight?"

Her face nearly as red as the ketchup, Samantha swallowed her food and glared at him while shielding her face with her hand. "You're doing that on purpose, aren't you?"

"What?"

She leaned forward and whispered, "Trying to embarrass me."

"Well, duh," Lugal said. He laughed at Samantha's expression of surprise. "I cannot help it. It makes me smile to see you squirm, to become so ill at ease."

"Uh-huh. Well, you can just knock it off, buddy."

"I am not your buddy, Samantha. I am your lover. The man who delights in bringing you untold sexual pleasures."

Samantha gulped. Both hands shielded her eyes now. "Oh jeez...I wish you'd keep your voice down."

"But then you could not hear me as I tell you that when I see your cheeks turn pink I can only imagine how wet you must be getting for me. Tell me, my sweet, are you thinking about being tied to your bed while I sup on your juicy parts?"

Gasping at his carnal inquiry, she said, "Oh my God. Lugal, you have to stop. Really."

"Why must I cease, Samantha? Is it because I am right? Are you imagining all the unspeakably erotic things I will do to your body as you submit to my control?"

The expression on Samantha's face altered, shifting from discomfited to impassioned. The deep hue of her eyes intensified until they were dark as a midnight sky. After a long while, she leaned forward again, her breath coming in small jagged gusts.

"Yes, dammit...yes," she admitted. "Now cut it out or I swear I'll embarrass the both of us by having an orgasm right here in public."

Lugal's interest perked. This midday repast was fast becoming the most enjoyable and entertaining of his life. He shifted in his seat, sliding one of his shoes off beneath the table. "You mean right...here?" Samantha's body jerked and she gasped as his toe dug into her crotch. His leg was long enough to easily span the distance across their seats.

"Don't do that!" She squeezed her thighs together, inadvertently clasping his foot tight to her sex.

"I can just imagine how swollen and ripe your little pink pleasure button looks right now," Lugal said, quietly enough for only Samantha's ears. "How good it would feel to be able to release the tension you must feel there. Here, little one, let me help." He wiggled his toes hard against the notch between her thighs.

"Please...please Lugal, stop. I-I'm going to come," she whispered, her thighs relaxing. "I'll die of embarrassment."

Lugal had no intention of stopping until his beautiful Samantha erupted with the rosy glow of satisfaction right where she sat. He would teach her an exercise in control...at the same time praying that he would maintain command of his wild cock and keep it from shooting his seed while he pleased her. It would not be easy.

"How I wish it was my mouth pleasuring you instead of my foot." He kept twisting his toes against her, watching with rapt attention as she slipped down slowly in her seat. "My tongue would twirl around the engorged bud and then my teeth would capture it as I sucked you hard."

After a string of fervent mutterings, she focused on him. "Did anyone tell you that you don't play fair?" Her words were interrupted by shallow panting breaths.

"I never claimed to. You had better sit up straight, my naughty Samantha. Or else everyone here, including your boss, will know what we are doing. They'll know that you're about to shudder, and moan and cry out my name."

"Damn you, Lugal..." the words came out on a breathy sigh as she pulled herself up tall, with obvious effort.

He felt a scowl take hold. "Too late. I am already damned," he said, meaning it. But this wasn't the time for him to sink into melancholy thoughts of his eternal imprisonment. This was the time for driving his lovely Samantha wild with desire, and enjoying every moment of her pleased agony.

Quickly replacing his glower with a smile, Lugal urged, "Imagine yourself spread open wide for me, Samantha. Restrained so that you are unable to move." She bit her plump bottom lip, dragging it between her teeth as he spoke and continued to dig his toes where he knew she needed him.

"Now imagine my cock teasing your hot, wet sex instead of my toes. Imagine me biting your pretty pink nipples. They're hard and aching for my attention right now, aren't they, little one?"

"Yes..." Samantha moaned and slipped back down in her seat. She grabbed the napkin from her lap, partially covering her face as the two servers returned to the table. Then she clamped her thighs tight around his foot to still it.

She wasn't completely successful.

"Will there be anything else today?"

"Do you have ruffled cream?" Lugal asked the server.

She slanted him a questioning look. "You mean whipped cream? Sure. You want just that, nothing else?"

"What do you think, Samantha?" Lugal asked. "Would you like to have some cold whipped cream right now to cool you off?"

She moaned again and slipped further in her seat.

"Nay, I do not think we need the whipped cream after all. That will be all. Thank you."

The girl left a slip of paper, which Lugal assumed was the bill of fare. The food and experience with his sensuous Samantha was worth any price levied.

As soon as they left, Lugal went back to his agreeable mission. "Open for me, my sweet Samantha. Let yourself soar. You know you want to. You know you must climax for me." He worked his toes faster, harder. "Show me how much you want to please me. Let me see you erupt with bliss. Right here...right now."

"Please...I don't want everyone to see..."

"That's up to you, Samantha. You can control your orgasm or not. What will you choose, eh? Do you think you are capable of keeping your shudders to a minimum as your body ignites? Let us find out."

There was something especially delicious and satisfying pleasuring Samantha in public. He knew she was terrified of embarrassing herself, but not so much so as to stop to his actions. Nay, she didn't really want him to cease. The taboo adventure of exploding with climax in the midst of the other diners, with her self-important boss just a few tables away, clearly held an air of excitement for Samantha. The exotic thrill of the forbidden.

With each manipulation of her secret place with his toes, she grew more beautiful. The rapture on her face, the ecstasy in her eyes, the slow catlike, writhing movements she made as she tried to appear normal, all of it made her precious to him.

Elation. He could see it in her eyes and it made his cock throb. The instant before her spirit left to be carried on *lil* to *an*, Samantha gazed at him with a look so blissful, it touched his very soul.

"Such a sensuous, extraordinary creature," Lugal breathed. "So alluring. Watching you makes my cock so hard with longing I can barely stand the ache, Samantha."

Stiffening in her seat, Samantha began to tremble, her eyes wide and her radiant blue gaze affixed solely on him. Her face was transformed with the glow of ecstasy, her lips silently mouthing his name.

Lugal reached for one of her hands, grasping it tightly as her eyes fluttered closed and she sank her teeth into her lip, turning her head to the wall. She kept her utterances soft and minimal, when Lugal knew what she yearned to do was to scream out her joy.

He kept his foot busy at his most pleasurable task until he was certain the last rapturous shiver had been wrung from her being.

And for the first time since his long ago incarceration, Lugal sent up a prayer of thanks for the unlikely circumstances that had brought him to Samantha Rutledge.

Chapter Ten

"I can't believe you did that to me right in the middle of the restaurant," Samantha said once they'd deposited their bags in the trunk and entered her car.

"You loved it," Lugal said with that ever-present confidence of his.

He was right. Absolutely, completely, entirely right. She'd never been more scared or more thrilled in all her life. Her sexy genie had an uncanny way of connecting to her inner slut.

She wasn't sure if it was Lugal's amazingly skilled foot play that brought her to orgasm or his incredibly hot, perfect, ultra-erotic dialogue. In any case, she felt wicked and naughty and slutty and just so damned good that she still hadn't come down from the heady rush of it all.

"You keep forgetting," she pointed out, "that I'm the one who's supposed to be in charge here. I told you to stop and you didn't listen to me. Isn't that some sort of major violation of the sacred genie code?"

"I would have stopped immediately if you had really wanted me to."

"Oh, so now you're a mind reader too, hmm?"

Arms folded across his chest, he sent her a cocky smile. It was hard to concentrate on the conversation with him being so darned dazzling.

"I did not need to be a seer to know you did not wish for me to stop. Your words may have said *stop*, but your eyes, ah, your expressive blue eyes, Samantha...they begged, implored me to persist."

"Lugal, you're positively incorrigible."

"Do you know what else I am?"

"You mean besides disobedient and exceedingly egotistical?" *And delicious, and lickable, and hot and –*

"Perhaps." Lugal laughed and the rich, deep, sexy sound of it rippled clear to her nerve endings. "But I was referring to this." He brought Samantha's hand to his groin. "I am hard. Like the blade of my saber."

Samantha moaned. Good Lord, the man wasn't kidding. His cock felt like a column of iron beneath the denim. God, how she wanted to feel him inside her. High, deep and hard. She was tempted to turn on the ignition, shift the car into drive and burn rubber all the way back to her house where she could strip off Lugal's new blue jeans and fuck him until he was dry.

"The constant throbbing is making me wild, Samantha. You see what you do to me? How you torture me with lust because you are so exceptionally desirable?"

Oh, how she loved the sound of that. She, Samantha Rutledge, chunky weight-loss counselor extraordinaire, had been able to drive the hottest, sexiest man on the planet to distraction. All by her exceptionally desirable self.

Something foreign, something wild and wanton, spun around inside her brain. She surveyed her position in the parking lot, which was at the far end, because Lugal liked to walk as much as possible after being cooped up in that bottle.

A wicked, downright iniquitous idea took hold.

Oh, no...she couldn't. No way. Absolutely not.

Could she?

With a deep breath and a firm grip on Lugal's erection, Samantha gave him her best sultry smile.

"It would serve you right if I forced you to climax, right here in the middle of a public parking lot.

Lugal laughed, but not before Samantha caught the undeniable gleam of excitement in his dark-as-night eyes.

"You would not dare to do such a thing, little one." He patted her hand in a condescending manner.

"You're daring me?" Her heart thumped so hard she feared it would pop clear out of her chest. "You think I won't do it?"

"Someone with your sweet innocence most definitely does not have the nerve, or the nature, to engage in such a public display." Cupping her face, Lugal leaned over and kissed her, sweetly, gently. "The fear of getting caught would immobilize your hand before you could bring me to completion, Samantha. I would have to finish the job for you."

"Who's talking about my hand?" she countered with a purposeful lick of her lips.

"Samantha?" Lugal's voice nearly went up an octave and Samantha swallowed a laugh. "You cannot possibly mean—"

She effectively cut off his power of speech with the slow downward glide of his zipper. Her hand hovering just above his cock, she could feel the heat, sense the throbbing. She freed his glorious shaft from his jeans and brand new boxer briefs.

A heartbeat later, her mouth was on his warm flesh, sucking, nipping, licking.

Following an utterance of foreign words, the intense groan rumbling up from Lugal's chest was long, low and sexy as hell. The patent danger of getting caught red-handed—or maybe that would be red-cocked and pink-tongued—had Samantha's heartbeat galloping.

She'd morphed into a woman so sex-crazed, so hormonally overcharged, that she'd risk shame and embarrassment and, who knows, maybe even jail for indecent cock sucking in broad daylight.

The illicit thought made her giddy with excitement and she sucked Lugal harder.

"How you amaze me, Samantha," he said, burying his fingers in her hair and holding her close to his need.

Lifting her head, she allowed his cock to pop from her mouth, watching as the wet rod bobbed to and fro a few inches from her lips.

"I have to burn off that burger, fries and beer somehow," she said. "I figured this would be a good start. How's your cock feel, genie?"

I am not a —" He groaned when Samantha dug her tongue into the tiny opening at the dripping tip. "It feels like it's about to burst."

"Good, because I want to feel that silky hot cum bursting all over my tongue and cascading down the back of my throat."

"Gods, Samantha. Your words alone will have me coming."

"Now you know how it feels." Samantha's breath caught when she heard the sound of voices outside the car. Her pussy soaked as icy fear crept up her spine.

In a day's time she'd gone from being a lackluster, law-abiding, sex-deprived single, to an outrageous, madly depraved sex fiend!

"The gas engine chariot next to us fills with four old, silver headed people," Lugal said. "The driver just signaled me with a wave of the hand."

"Oh God," Samantha said around his cock, picturing the elderly foursome peering into the car, clutching their pacemakers in horror as they watched her suck off her big, handsome genie.

Why, they could...*gasp*...they could even be some of her TBT clients! What if they recognized the back of her head? Maybe they'd understand if she explained at the next weight-loss counseling session that semen contains minimal calories as well as some protein...

Oh God...

"I am waving back," Lugal said. "Do you suppose they can tell by the look of rapture on my face that I am about to spurt bands of hot cream into my girlfriend's pretty mouth?"

He called her his girlfriend. And it wasn't even in front of anyone else. Samantha sighed. And then her clit started quivering.

She heard the other car's motor engage and went back to some serious suckage on Lugal's velvety flesh.

"I come soon, Samantha. Your mouth is so remarkable. So bewitching."

One hand still in her hair, Lugal reached beneath her, cupping her breast, locating the nipple. She thought she'd split apart when he pinched it. He continued his merciless assault on her nipple as she did the same to his cock.

With the sound of the vehicle beside them pulling out of the parking space, both Lugal and Samantha erupted with climaxes so powerful she wondered if they'd be jettisoned clear through the car's roof.

As her senses returned, she licked the remainder of Lugal's creamy essence from his cock before returning the spent appendage to its zippered covering.

"There." She patted his groin. "Let that be a lesson to you, genie."

"I bow to your thorough and merciless rebuke, my sensuous little possessor. May I say that I look forward to additional penalties of this sort in the future." Lugal lifted Samantha's head, capturing her lips in an eye-jiggling romantic wallop of a kiss that seemed to go on forever.

Or, at least until another vehicle pulled in beside them.

"Okay then," Samantha said, straightening her hair and starting the car. "I think you've had enough scolding for now, mister."

"We are off to buy restraints?"

Her gaze never veering from the road, Samantha gave a quick nod. "Yup."

Why not? It seemed to make perfect sense that shopping for scandalous sex toys with her genie should be the next step in her downward spiral into sexual addiction.

In less than ten minutes they arrived at their destination. A lime-green neon sign flashing the name of the store was boldly emblazoned across the front of the stand-alone building. *You Know You Want To* it read. Samantha just shook her head and sighed. Oh yeah...she wanted to, all right.

Why hadn't she thought to bring a wig? A mask? Even a paper bag with cutout eyeholes to throw over her head?

She had this eerie feeling that something awful would happen the moment she stepped over the store's threshold. Like she'd be their millionth customer. Lights would flash, sirens would blare and the media would snap her horrified expression to slap across the features section of Sunday morning's Oregonian newspaper.

"You sit as still as a statue," Lugal noted.

She didn't even realize he'd gotten out of the car. His muscled magnificence stood hunched over the driver's side, looking down at her. She glanced up into his espresso eyes and the long, thick black lashes fringing them. Sheer overkill. How the hell did she ever get this lucky?

"Come, Samantha." His voice was a sensuous, soothing invitation as Lugal opened her car door, holding out his hand. "Are you not eager to explore the inside of this sexual pleasure market?"

"Eager's not the word," she muttered, taking his hand and exiting the vehicle, knees knocking and heart thumping.

A subdued *dingdong* heralded their arrival as they opened the door. Once she'd taken a few steps inside and all was quiet, Samantha let out the breath she'd been holding.

Then the bell went off and she let out a piercing yip.

"Samantha, are you ill?" Lugal clamped her shoulders in a caring gesture. All she could do was to shake her head *no* in response.

Primed for paparazzi, she stiffened. Then she heard the bell again.

Her shoulders slumped with relief when she realized it was just the damn phone in her purse making the racket.

It was Rosie. She answered, figuring Rosie was probably on a coffee break at work. Before she'd had a chance to get more than a word in edgewise, she was getting the third-degree from her best friend.

Is she okay? Has Lugal harmed her in any way? Did they make mad, passionate love all night long? Had she made her three wishes yet?

Samantha laughed, assuring Rosie that all was well.

"You're not in bed together right now, are you?" Rosie asked. Samantha could tell she was cupping her hand over the mouthpiece.

"Do you honestly think I'd be answering the phone if I was?"

"So what are you doing?"

"Uh...we're...uh, still shopping." Samantha swallowed hard. "Just, um, you know, shopping."

"You're in a sex toy shop, aren't you?"

Samantha gasped. "No, of course not." She cupped her hand over the phone. "How could you possibly know that?"

"Piece of cake. It's that inherent goody-two-shoes nervousness in your voice, sweetie. So whatcha getting?"

"None of your damn business." Samantha chuckled.

"Is this Rosie on the cell phone?" Lugal asked. "Would it be all right if I spoke to her?"

"Sure. Hold on a sec, Rosie, Lugal wants to say hi." She handed the phone to him. "You talk here and listen here," she explained.

"Hello, Rosie, wife of Charlie Dudchowski!" Lugal boomed and Samantha shushed him. "Yes, it is I, Lugal Damu-zid, speaking to your spirit on the cell phone," he said, failing to moderate his voice. He grinned at Samantha, looking just like a keyed-up, excited kid and she couldn't help giggling.

"Can you see me, Rosie? I cannot see you. You are invisible. I am completely unafraid to be speaking to your disembodied voice on the cell phone. Yes, okay. Buh-bye to you too, Rosie."

The mile-wide grin still affixed to his face, he handed the phone back to Samantha.

"You're going to bust a gut if you keep laughing like that," Samantha said quietly into the phone when she put it to her ear and heard Rosie dissolving into giggles. Gotta go. We'll talk later." She flipped the phone closed and stuffed it back into her purse.

"Did you see me fearlessly talking on the cell phone and using modern technology, Samantha?" Lugal asked.

"Yes I did." She patted his arm and smiled. "And you did a very good job. I'm proud of you, Lugal."

"Thank you."

"Hi there," a woman's voice called out from the rear of the store, startling Samantha. "My name's Dorothy. Just let me know if I can be of any help."

Spotting the source of the voice, Samantha's eyes widened. The smiling, sweet-looking woman had to be at least sixty. And she was dressed normal, thank God, in black slacks and a pearl-gray sweater twin-set. Topped by a double strand of pearls, no less. Samantha would have hightailed it out of there like a rocket if she'd come face-to-face with a whip-yielding, leather bustier-wearing granny.

Lugal strode into the store's depths, checking out all the kinky-looking stuff openly plastered everywhere. Samantha's eyes widened as she scanned the inventory. There were umpteen types of vibrators, dildos, anal plugs, cock rings, nipple clamps, whips, cuffs, blindfolds and strange-looking stuff that had Samantha scratching her head in wonder. Aside from plenty of basic black, bright fluorescent colors were bounteous throughout.

"What is this, Dorothy?" Samantha heard Lugal ask the nice old woman. She went to the area where Lugal stood and groaned when she saw what he was holding.

Sheesh, the poor woman was probably on a fixed retirement income, working here to help make ends meet. Maybe because no one else would hire her at her age. She'd probably be blushing from her roots to her toes trying to answer Lugal's question.

"Shhh, you'll embarrass her," Samantha whispered, elbowing him in the ribs.

"It's a latex female sex doll," Dorothy explained, coming down the aisle with a lively smile. "With human hair, glass eyes and a realistic vagina. The vaginal material is soft and smooth enough not to chafe a penis during copulation." She turned the doll upside down to give Lugal a bird's eye view of the doll's crotch. "They're quite popular and a vast improvement over the welded vinyl blow-up dolls, which often burst at the seams after just a few uses."

Samantha blinked.

"We get ours from France. They're top quality, with water-filled breasts and buttocks. This one comes with interchangeable openings for anus, vagina and mouth, complete with vibrating capabilities. Most of our customers who've purchased them think they're worth every penny, even though I must admit they're a bit of a pain to clean up. I recommend just taking her into the shower with you." Dorothy winked.

"So...you're not just an employee here?" Samantha asked, feeling as if she'd tumbled down the rabbit hole and ended up in the porn version of Wonderland.

"Nope," Dorothy said. "The original owner, for twenty-five years now."

"Why would I need this if I have Samantha?" Lugal asked with a frown as he scrutinized the doll and its various orifices. He clearly wasn't trying to be a smartass or argumentative. He was simply eager to learn.

"You wouldn't," Dorothy said, giving Samantha a bright grin. "Not if you have a ready and willing partner available."

Returning her smile, Samantha wanted to wither and die on the spot.

Lugal looked from the doll to Samantha. "I would like to see you in this garment." He gestured to the life-sized Barbie doll with the bright red puckered, ready-to-fuck lips.

Samantha eyed the skimpy getup, which basically consisted of a series of connecting black leather straps, decorated with shiny silver studs and chains. "What garment?" she managed. "Besides, I sincerely doubt they carry things like *that* in plus sizes."

"Oh, we carry a wide variety of sizes," Dorothy offered. "For both slave and Master."

"Oh...I'm not a slave," Samantha clarified.

"I am the slave," Lugal said, expression dejected and shoulders slumped.

Dorothy slanted them a curious look. "Oh...my mistake. I'm usually not wrong about those things."

Samantha gestured with her finger, motioning for Lugal to bend down. She whispered into his ear, explaining that Dorothy wasn't talking about the type of slave Lugal was. She was talking about a consensual sexual relationship between a man and a woman.

"Ahhhh." Lugal nodded, his smile returning. "I misunderstood. Samantha is the slave and I am her Master," he announced confidently.

"No!" Samantha protested. She turned to Dorothy. "He doesn't understand. Neither one of us are slaves."

"I understand very well," Lugal countered. He smiled at Dorothy. "You see, Samantha is most eager to be my pleasure slave, to be bound and naked as I bring her to orgasm, but she is too timid to openly divulge her secret innermost sexual desires."

Oh God.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

"Lugal!" Samantha gasped, mortified down to her bone marrow and feeling her face go tomato-soup-red. "For chrissakes, do you want a megaphone?"

"What is that?" he asked.

"Something to help you announce my private fantasies to the entire north side of town."

He gave her a strange look. "You would like me to do this for you?"

"Oh for heaven's sake, no!" Rolling her eyes, Samantha growled in frustration.

Dorothy gave a warm smile, gently patting Samantha's arm. "Bondage fantasies are nothing to be ashamed about, dear. My husband and I have been Master and slave for

many years. It can be immensely satisfying and pleasurable, whether it's a lifestyle or simply an occasional pursuit."

Imagining the woman all dolled up in Big Latex Barbie's leather gear and doing God-knows-what with the old guy she was married to, Samantha tried really hard not to gawk at Dorothy. She doubted she was being very successful when the woman chuckled.

"Yes, I know I look like the typical apple-pie-making sort of grandma next door, but, I can assure you, I know about every item we carry in the store." She arched an eyebrow. "Personally."

Clamping her mouth shut, Samantha clenched her teeth, determined not to let her jaw drop.

"Ralph and I test everything before we ever allow it to go on the floor for sale." She patted Samantha again in a motherly gesture. "Just keep that in mind if you have any questions. Believe me, nothing you could ask or tell me would make be blush or gasp in horror."

Humming a peppy tune, Dorothy hunted through the packaged BDSM costumes on the shelves, plucking one and handing it to Samantha. "I think an extra-large should be just right for you, dear." She went back to her work, leaving Samantha and Lugal alone in the aisle.

Samantha slapped his hand. "Will you please put that overgrown Barbie down?" she whispered, and Lugal readily complied, returning the fuck-me doll to the stand where he'd found it. "Let's just get whatever it is you think we need and get out of here. I'll just die if someone sees me in here with an armful of kinky stuff. And, please, don't ask Dorothy any more questions. If we can't figure it out ourselves, then we're not buying it, okay?"

"Okay." With a wink and a smile, Lugal gave her a thumbs-up sign, having become quite familiar with it from their trek in the mall.

Shopping basket looped over his arm, he made his way up and down the store aisles, plunking item after kinky item into the container. He had all the enthusiasm of a kid in a candy shop...which had Samantha thinking that Lugal had probably never even been inside a candy shop. She'd definitely have to remedy that.

"Find everything you were looking for?" Dorothy asked as they checked out.

"Yes," Samantha answered quickly, glancing left and right, on the lookout for anyone who might recognize her. She dug out her credit card, thinking she'd probably charged more today than she had in the last six months. "Could you please ring it up and bag everything as quickly as possible? We...uh, we have an appointment," she lied.

Dorothy gave her a knowing smile as she scanned the items. "Of course, dear." Her attention turned to Lugal. "Somebody's eager to try out all the new toys, I see." She engaged in a conspirator's wink.

As Dorothy slid the packages over the scanner, Samantha glimpsed a lot of fascinating playthings that made her squirm, mostly in a good kind of way.

"I thought we'd never get out of there," she said, adding the sizeable bag of adult goodies to other packages in her car's trunk.

"We will go home to make use of them now," Lugal stated.

"No, we will not," Samantha countered with a resounding tsk. "We're going grocery shopping. And we're having a talk. It's time we got to know each other." She got in the driver's side and slammed the door. "And I don't mean in a carnal way. I want to know who you are and how and why you ended up in a bottle before we do any more kissy-face stuff, got that, mister?"

Lugal gave her a devilish half-smile as he hunkered his huge frame to fit in the seat. "I thought we were long past the introduction phase of our relationship, Samantha."

She felt her cheeks flush. "Do you realize we've only known each other for one day?" It was hard to believe. She felt like they'd known each other forever.

"And one amazingly euphoric night," he reminded her in that ultra-sexy way of his. "You have such a beautiful kissy-face, little one."

Samantha cracked a smile. It was really difficult being focused and determined and all firm and logical-minded when he came out with sweet things like that. She felt warm and melty all over as she maneuvered the car onto the rode, her pussy drooling.

Lugal's eyes twinkled when he looked at her, his gaze slipping to her mouth and lingering there. She licked her lips in response, doing her best to keep her eyes on the road, but having a devil of a time.

"And you have a beautiful kissy-cunt too."

Her mouth fell open.

"And beautiful —"

"Just stop right there, Lugal. I'm warning you. Do not let me hear the words *kissy-tits* come out of your mouth."

"Ahhh, but they are. So beautiful. So luscious to lick and nibble."

That damned traitorous pussy of hers went wet and wild. Not a good thing when you're driving in traffic.

"You think you're irresistibly charming, don't you?" she accused.

"It's what *you* think that matters, little one. And we both know that you find me irresistible, do we not?" She opened her mouth to protest, but Lugal continued. "It is a good thing, because I find you to be just as irresistible." His big hand curled around her upper thigh.

Sonuvabitch.

He knew exactly how to get to her.

Ablaze with lust, Samantha resisted the overwhelming urge to pull off to the shoulder of the road, hop on Lugal's cock and ride the living fuck out of him right there on the freeway.

Gritting her teeth, she commanded, "Get talking, Lugal, or there'll be no fun and games with all our new sex toys later tonight."

By the time they'd pulled into the parking lot of the grocery store about twenty minutes later, Lugal had told her all about what happened to him so many centuries ago. Tears slid down Samantha's cheeks as his desperately sad story unfolded. Lugal thumbed away her tears, comforting her, telling her not to weep for him.

If she hadn't been concentrating on driving, she'd be a complete red-eyed, swollen-nosed, blotchy-faced basket case after hearing his heartrending tale. The man had virtually sacrificed himself to save the honor of a foolish young girl. Samantha was sitting right next to an honest-to-goodness hero, in the truest sense of the word. And that's just what she told him after putting the car in park and cutting the engine.

"I am no hero," Lugal scoffed, his expression darkening. "I am but a man who was caught in circumstances beyond his control. Heroes prevail. I did not."

"I think that's probably the first time I've ever heard a shred of modesty pass those sensuous lips of yours," Samantha said brushing a fingertip across his lips. "In my book, you're a hero of the finest magnitude. A man who bravely defended a woman's honor to the—" She stopped short before the word *death* popped out of her mouth.

"Had I been given the option, Samantha, I can assure you I would have chosen death, rather than to become naught but a shade," Lugal said, clearly anticipating the rest of her statement.

"Please don't say that, Lugal." She leaned over to cup his face in her hands, stroking his rough jaw with her thumbs. "If you had died, I never would have met you. You're the best thing to come into my life in a very long time," she admitted. She couldn't believe she was being so open with him. Somehow, after what he'd told her and after the intimacy they'd shared, it just seemed right.

Lugal pinned her with the intensity of his gaze, covering one of her hands with his. "You truly mean that, don't you, little one?"

Samantha nodded. "With all my heart."

"It is the same way I feel about you," he agreed. "You have restored vitality to my soul, Samantha. Brought light and laughter back into my life in ways you cannot imagine."

"Nothing could make me happier than to hear you say that, Lugal." Knowing she was responsible for giving this wonderful man a sliver of joy in his bleak, endless existence made her heart swell. If only she could do more.

"There's one thing that has me wondering. Why didn't Sabit keep her promise to find a way to free you from your servitude? She owed you so much after what you did for her."

Lugal's broad shoulders shrugged. "I have wondered the same for eons as I dwelt in the shadows. Perhaps Sabit feared for her life. Or perhaps she tried to petition, but the great goddess Inanna turned a deaf ear. It is also possible that Sabit herself met with an untimely death and was unable to plead to the priests or the gods on my behalf. In

any case, it matters not now. I have long given up hope that, by some wondrous marvel, I will be set free."

What on earth could Samantha possibly say in response to that? What words of comfort could possibly soothe the ache deep in the core of Lugal's ancient, heroic heart?

He must have seen the whirling mix of emotion in her eyes. "I want you to make me a promise, my sweet Samantha." His fingers smoothed through her hair.

"Yes?" At this point she was ready to promise him anything in her power if it would help.

"During this all too brief time we have together, let us enjoy it fully. Do not weep for me or feel pity for my circumstances."

"But —"

Lugal placed his finger against Samantha's lips.

"If you truly wish to make me happy, then promise to be happy yourself. Let me see you smile and laugh. Allow me to gaze upon your beautiful expression of wonder as I bring you to climax. Act as if we have all the time in the world to spend together, rather than six lunar cycles. Can you do that for me, Samantha? Can you give me those sweet memories to cherish, to lock away in my heart once I must return to the bottle?"

How could she agree to something like that when her heart was breaking? When she yearned to clutch onto him and never let go? How could she keep herself from dreading the moment that he'd pop out of her life as quickly as he came into it?

But she had to. It simply wasn't fair to Lugal for her to wear her emotions on her sleeve now. If he could be brave, then so could she. The least she could do for this wonderful, sexy, heroic man, was to agree to a pretense of carefree happiness.

"Promise me, Samantha..."

She sucked in a deep breath and exhaled. "I promise."

"Thank you, little one." He kissed her hand.

Plastering her brightest smile across her face and casting tears and trepidation aside, Samantha asked, "So, are you ready to experience your first grocery store experience?"

"The giant food market you spoke of? With cans of ruffled cream, cattle meat for burgers and potato fries?"

"Yup. And lots of other calorific goodies. To hell with the diet! Let's have some real fun!"

"Yes!" Lugal grinned. "It will be a wonderful adventure. I will enjoy watching the look of pleasure on your face as you allow yourself to eat real food instead of twigs and meager scrapings."

"Well then, get your *genie-licious* butt out of the car, Lugal. We're going to get ourselves some chocolate!"

Chapter Eleven

"Try a sample of the new Wine Valley Foods salami flavored with red wine and garlic? Stays fresh without refrigeration."

"Yes, thank you," Lugal answered the woman handing out samples at the grocery store.

Samantha watched him chew slowly, savoring his first taste of processed deli meat. His eyebrow arched in satisfaction.

"It needs no further preservation?" he asked like a seasoned food shopper. Smiling, the woman shook her head. "Amazing. I like this. It would marry well with barley ale. If I had had access to this stays-fresh sustenance when I led my armies across the endless hills and planes for days on end, my men would have thrived. You cook well," he told the woman. "If it were in my power, I would not hesitate to employ you to prepare food at my hearth."

A blush coloring her cheeks, the fifty-ish woman smiled. "Oh, he's a keeper," she said to Samantha. "Not only handsome, but a great sense of humor." She fluttered her eyelashes when she looked up at Lugal. It seemed women were incapable of resisting the urge to give in to that feminine wile, among others, when they found themselves within spitting distance of the big, sexy barbarian.

The man was a bona-fide babe magnet, for chrissakes.

Samantha almost wished she had a sturdy broom at her side to bat away all the drooling brazen hussies disguised in mom jeans.

Fortunately, Lugal seemed more captivated by the cavernous grocery store and its contents than its shoppers and staff.

"The people of my time would never believe this. It is like a miracle," he said, examining the produce and dairy sections. "Such bounty, such an infinite variety of foodstuffs. Hunger would be eliminated. Samantha, the yield here could feed an entire city for countless days."

Samantha gazed around, trying to see the grocery store through Lugal's eyes. It was true, a stranger to a modern supermarket could easily get the idea that this was a world and time free of hunger. She thought of the meager offerings so many people had to live on and felt the sting of glut guilt. Samantha and most people she knew took the availability of food for granted. They didn't stop to appreciate that they never had to worry where their next meal was coming from.

The only time real hunger became an issue was when they were on a diet.

She rolled her eyes at the ludicrous thought. This trek to the store had given her a better understanding why dieting, with its accompanying food deprivation, seemed like such an absurd concept to Lugal.

Times may have changed dramatically over a few thousand years, but not necessarily for the better in some cases. Samantha imagined that dieting and body image issues didn't even make the list of the top one hundred things a Sumerian worried about on a daily basis...

Oh, gods, blood is running in the streets, the enemy is fast approaching, but I dare not flee because my ass doth look gargantuan in this toga.

"There's still plenty of hunger in the world, Lugal. There are the *haves* and the *have nots*. Those with more than they could ever use, those with enough and those who are always in need."

Lugal gave a thoughtful nod. "I understand. It was much the same in my time. It is a pity that this inequality still exists after so many centuries. It appears that envy, greed and the thirst for power are forever present." Lugal sniffed the air. "I smell meat roasting over a fire," he said, without skipping a beat. "My mouth waters." Grabbing her hand, he yanked Samantha and her shopping cart alongside him and headed for the savory aroma.

"That's rotisserie chicken you smell," Samantha explained as they headed toward the meat department. "We can pick one up for dinner if you like."

"What is this?" Lugal picked up a giant economy-sized bag of tortilla chips and a jar of salsa from a featured display along the way. In fact, Samantha could barely roll the shopping cart a few feet without Lugal halting as he made another wondrous new discovery.

By the time they reached the checkout counter, the groaning cart was filled to overflowing with delectable, decidedly non-diet-approved goodies.

Except for the five Lean Cuisines Samantha guiltily heaped on at the last minute.

Gazing at the array of mouthwatering treats moving along the conveyor belt as the clerk scanned them, she felt a torrent of guilt wash over her. There was enough food going in those shopping bags to feed a family of four for a week.

She swallowed hard, making a mental note to give extra to her favorite charities, as well as the local food banks, from now on. Of course, if she kept spending money at the rate she had today, with the mall purchase, the kinky toy stuff and all the food, she'd be broke in no time.

"Now that I have told you about my past, little one," Lugal said as they loaded the bags into her already stuffed car trunk, "you will tell me all about yourself. After that, I will tell you about your three wishes."

Samantha huffed a little laugh. "There's really not much to tell. My life is about as boring as you can get." She glanced over at Lugal. Her genie. Her lover. "Well, at least it was until yesterday. Things have changed a bit since then."

"Why do you live alone? Do you not have family?"

"There isn't anyone else. My parents were older when they had me. They passed away a few years ago. I miss them a lot, they were great. I'll show you some photos when we get home. No brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles or cousins. Just me." She smiled. "And some good friends like Rosie and Charlie."

"I am sorry that your parents are no longer with you. But I like Rosie and Charlie and their little goats very much."

Samantha knew she should correct Lugal about the little goats thing, but it just made her smile each time he said it. He was so serious, so earnest. English and Grammar 101 could come later.

"Did you have children of your own...or a wife?"

"Nay. I had planned to pursue those pleasures after I retired from soldiering. Being in my third decade, I was already growing too old for the vigorous life of a warrior. The constant sea of bloodied body parts had lost its luster."

"Yeah," Samantha nodded, not even wanting to imagine something so heinous. "I can definitely see how that could happen." She couldn't help being glib about it. The stark reality of all that butchery was just too atrocious to comprehend.

"Worse yet were the suffering half-dead men at my command, many limbless or with their bellies split open like melons and their entrails spilling out on the ground."

A shudder vibrated through Samantha's body.

"I can still hear their distressed cries, pleading for merciful deaths at my hand." Lugal stiffened for a moment as he bent over the trunk, shopping bag in hand. "It was not a pleasant task."

It was painfully clear that he'd seen and experienced carnage and atrocities that Samantha couldn't even begin—or ever want—to imagine.

"I'm sorry, Lugal." She touched his arm, determined not to cry. "It sounds like you led a very difficult life, even before you got locked away in that bottle."

He seemed to shake off whatever memories lingered as he closed the trunk for her and placed the last of the bags in the car's back seat. Turning to Samantha, he smoothed the windblown hair from her face, stroking her cheek with his thumb as he gazed into her eyes. The troubled lines in his handsome face eased and she saw his expression change from grave to a bright, charming grin.

It was a picture-perfect moment and she took a mental snapshot to keep tucked away in her heart forever.

"Nay, my life was good, Samantha. As a warrior I had achieved a coveted rank of stature, as well as great respect, both in and outside of Sumer. Battle was harsh and grueling but with victory came great satisfaction and the knowledge that my actions had prevented untold violence by the Akkadians or other invading armies against my people."

"I bet your life would make a great miniseries." Lugal's mouth opened. Before he could ask what she meant, Samantha gave a dismissive wave. "Never mind. I'll explain later." They slipped inside the car and she started the engine.

"The only thing in life I regret is not having a family. A devoted wife in my bed and a passel of children at my knee. I was reminded of that with the visit of your friends yesterday. Do you desire to have children one day, Samantha?"

As she buckled herself in, Samantha smiled. "Yes. I love kids. Hopefully I'll get the chance to have them before my biological clock runs out." She held up her hand in anticipation of his question. "Which means, before I get too old."

"You would make a good mother. I could tell by the way you acted with little Mandy and Kevin. Why is it that you have no husband to give you babies?"

"Oh..."

Well that caught Samantha off guard. Nagging self-esteem issues bubbled to the surface and she did her best to squelch them, figuring it was best not to subject Lugal to a whiny pity party.

"I don't know, really. Things just never quite worked out that way for me. I thought the last guy I dated was just about to ask me to marry him when..." Damn, after all this time that humiliating incident still stung.

"When what, little one? Did you lose the man you loved to war?"

Samantha snickered at the thought. Tommy sooner would have fled the U.S. borders, maybe even going so far as to have a sex change operation, to avoid being in the military and fighting for his country.

"Hardly. I lost Tommy to a pizza waitress. Buckle your seatbelt." Once he had, she stepped on the gas and they were on their way.

Lugal frowned, clearly working to decipher what she'd said. "Your lover abandoned you for a woman who makes pizzas?"

Samantha laughed. "She didn't make them, she served them."

"This siren enticed your man away by appealing to his belly because he was tired of eating dry, tasteless diet food?"

While Samantha's initial, bristly reaction told her Lugal was trying to be funny, she realized that wasn't true when she looked over at him. He sat there looking intently at her with an expression that conveyed he was genuinely trying to understand. It was kind of amazing. She never remembered any other man actually listening to what she had to say with any sincere interest.

"There's a saying about the best way to catch a man being through his stomach," Samantha said. "But this wasn't a case of food lust. She was a younger, thinner woman. And what she offered Tommy had nothing whatsoever to do with satisfying a growling belly, believe me."

"What a fool." Lugal barked a laugh. "He was an idiot to give you up. You are far better off without this brainless Tommy."

That definitely warmed Samantha's heart. "Thank you."

"When first we met, you made a reference to your huge, monstrous husband and his deadly motorcycle gang that were to tear me limb from limb once they returned," Lugal reminded her.

"Oh...that..."

"It was clear to me then that this was an idle threat, born of fear."

"You didn't believe me, huh?"

"If I had, I would not have bedded you, Samantha. I do not bed women who are pledged or bound to others. It would not be honorable. A man without honor is not a man at all."

Samantha giggled, which had Lugal frowning. One of his eyebrows lifted in question, while the other angled down like an angry checkmark over his eye. Samantha imagined he could screw up his face any which-way and never look unappealing.

"You find my code of honor to be humorous?"

"Oh no, not at all. I'm sorry. I think your code of honor is wonderfully refreshing. Kind of a throwback to another, more chivalrous time. I giggled because I was thinking that you're like a cross between Superman and the Lone Ranger, except without the cape and mask."

"These are friends of yours? I would like to meet them."

A colorful image of hosting a cocktail party and serving up chocolate martinis to Lugal, Superman, the Lone Ranger, Rosie and Charlie snaked across her mind. "I'll introduce you to the TV when we get home. You can meet them there."

"TV? Explain this."

Samantha sighed. She'd explicitly kept him away from anyplace with TVs in the mall to avoid answering that question. "Trust me, Lugal, if I don't know how to explain how a microwave works, I definitely don't know how to explain a TV. You'll just have to wait and see for yourself. But when you do, the sword can't be anywhere in the vicinity. TVs are expensive. I can't afford to have my mine chopped in two if you get all hyper on me."

"Saber, not sword. You do not have to worry about not being able to afford things now, Samantha. With your three wishes, you can have wealth and riches beyond your wildest dreams."

"Chocolate..."

"What?"

"Oh, sorry," Samantha said dreamily. "You mentioned all that wealth and the first thing I thought about was being eternally surrounded by gobs and gobs of super-premium chocolate." She laughed.

"Would that be your wish? Because, if it is —"

"No! Please tell me you haven't forgotten what I told you about making my wishes."

"I have not. I shall wait for your official command. Do not fear."

"Good. I want to make sure I give this wish thing plenty of consideration before I get locked in to something I might regret later." The idea of getting wishes granted was mind-boggling. Really difficult to fathom. My God, how could she possibly make such a mega-important decision? Of all the things in the world to wish for, what would be the best or most important?

The end to hunger, poverty and homelessness. Yes, that was a biggie.

World peace. Oh yeah, definitely.

The obliteration of cancer and AIDS and childhood diseases and Alzheimer's and... What if she could just wish for everyone in the world to be healed and always remain robust and healthy? But then...if no one ever got sick and died, there'd be a monumental population explosion, so maybe that wasn't the greatest idea.

Maybe she could wish for the world to grow large enough to accommodate the extra throngs of healthy people.

No, that was a majorly stupid idea.

She'd like to figure a way to ask for enough money so she'd be financially secure for the rest of her life, but it would be too selfish to limit the wish to just that. Somehow she'd have to include wealth and riches for everyone she cared about, like Rosie and Charlie and their kids. Bunny Turner could fend for herself.

Ooh, she could wish for an end to obesity so everyone could just feel happy and comfortable and good about themselves.

Happy...oh, now that was something to consider. A wish to abolish depression and for everyone to be happy and joyful all the time.

But maybe that would be selfish. Maybe some people preferred to be cranky and crabby, especially before they had their morning coffee.

Whoa...this wish thing was almost like playing God...

"You look to be in deep thought, little one. What are you thinking of? Perhaps our night of sensual pleasure as we play with our new toys?"

"Not exactly." She shrugged. "Since you brought up the wishes again, I've been thinking about that. It's a really a huge responsibility when you think about it. I could radically change the world by uttering a few words. How do I make such a difficult decision, Lugal? How do I decide what would truly be the best for everyone?"

"Fascinating...that is a question no one has asked me before, Samantha."

"Really?" Oh, well that made her feel like a real dolt. Apparently all his other owners were sharp-minded and decisive. Although...she doubted any of them had ever wished for the things she'd been thinking about because, if they had, there'd be no more war, hunger, illness, unhappiness...

"What did most of the women wish for?"

Lugal didn't hesitate before answering. "Gold, wealth, expensive dwellings, majestic lifestyles, things of that nature."

"For the world?"

"Nay, for themselves. The wishes are conditional, Samantha. They must pertain to the possessor's self-interest and not be cause of harm or misfortune to others. That means you cannot make wishes that affect everyone else." He reached over to cup her chin.

"Knowing you, I imagine you have most likely been thinking of noble wishes like peace for mankind, the end to illness and suffering, righteous ideals of that nature."

She took her eyes off the road long enough to spare him a quick glance. The warm, tender smile he gave her warmed her insides better than a deep mug of Baileys and Kahlua-spiked hot cocoa.

"Pretty much," she admitted.

"These things are not within my power to grant. Your wishes must be for you and you alone, little one. You must decide on three things that would make you happy personally."

Samantha's eyes brightened. "My parents..."

"I'm truly sorry, my sweet." She felt Lugal's hand caressing her shoulder and massaging her neck. "I am unable to restore life to those who have passed on to *Kurnugi*. There is good reason why it is called the land of no return."

As Samantha pulled into her driveway, she gazed at Lugal for a long moment. "What about you, Lugal?"

"I do not understand. What about me?"

"Can I wish you out of that bottle forever? Can I wish that you could stay here with me?" She felt the color rise in her cheeks when she caught the expression on Lugal's face. The poor man would probably feel just as trapped staying with her as he did in that bottle.

"You wouldn't have to stay with me, necessarily," she clarified. "I mean, you could go wherever you wanted and be with...whoever you wanted, of course. But you'd be more than welcome to stay here with me until you found a place of your own...or someone else to live with." She swallowed the knot in her throat.

Lugal's broad chest expanded as he took in a deep, slow breath. His smile was wistful. "Nay, the incantation specified that this would not be possible. But I shall forever cherish your sweet, unselfish thought." He leaned over and captured her lips in a kiss.

While it still made her insides sizzle and her clit thump, this kiss was different from his others. This kiss spoke of feelings and emotions and caring and gratitude and, oh so much more.

At least, that's how it seemed to Samantha.

His hand cupping her breast, smoothing, kneading, rubbing back and forth over her nipple as he kissed her, spoke volumes too. She so hot her body temperature was in danger of radiating clear to the trunk and melting the ice cream.

The sudden awareness that she was acting like a hormonal teenager, making out in her car right in front of her house on a sunny Saturday afternoon, registered in the recesses of her brain. The last thing she needed was to become gossip fodder for the neighborhood.

Did you see what that chunky hussy was up to in her driveway with that man she's been shacking up with? Shocking. Shocking, I tell you!

Or to put on a peep show for the tricycle-riding tots proliferating the neighborhood.

Ooh, Mommy, guess what I saw Miss Sam and a naked stranger doing in her car!

As she reached up to the visor for the remote to open the garage, Samantha felt Lugal deepen the kiss.

If you could take sin and chocolate coat it, that would come close to the way he tasted as their tongues tangled.

She almost lost it when his other hand wedged between her thighs, commencing an exploratory carnal expedition.

"The ice cream," she muttered, pulling back from the kiss, which was damn hard. "It's going to melt."

"Let it," he said simply, clamping his big, strong hand over her pussy and digging his fingers into the fabric.

Oh God, God, God, that felt good. Her breaths became ragged. Her heart rhythm erratic.

"The neighbors...they're going to talk."

"Let them."

Lugal's fingers zigzagged beneath her sweater, tunneling into her bra and lifting one breast from its cotton confines. His hot, wet mouth found its way to her breast, and his teeth and tongue started to work their magic.

Nearly all rational thought fled her brain, to be replaced by lustful, wanton, naughty smatterings that said *fuck the neighborhood gossips and nosy kids...*

Amidst moans and groans of pleasure, Samantha sank down in the seat until she could just barely see over the dashboard. Careful not to confuse Lugal's cock with the gearshift, she shifted into drive and gave the car enough gas to creep into the garage...

And bang into the metal shelves full of junk just in front of the wall.

As car-related stuff mingled with treasured junkie finds from garage sales, cascading with tinks, clangs and thuds over the hood of her car, Samantha managed to turn off the engine and close the garage door.

"Your exquisite taste is more precious than honey, Samantha," Lugal said after letting her nipple pop free of his mouth. His already deep voice was huskier still. "It

intoxicates me. It stirs my loins and makes my cock rigid until I am consumed with lustful thoughts of plowing your warm, wet sheath."

Samantha melted into a puddle.

"Oh, hell. Fuck the damn ice cream," she said, dragging his head back to her naked breast as she tore at his jeans.

Chapter Twelve

"I am too big."

"Tell me about it. You're gigantic. But we managed to stuff you inside me before and we can do it again."

Lugal chuckled. "Nay, little one. I mean I am too big for this tiny chariot of yours. I am unable to maneuver myself in this confined space. My *gis* cannot reach your *gal-la*."

"Come again?" Samantha asked as she fumbled with both his jeans and hers.

"Now? But if I come, Samantha, it will not be while I am inside you."

It was Samantha's turn to chuckle now. "No, I meant what were those foreign words you just said?"

"In Sumerian, *gis* is cock and *gal-la* is vulva," Lugal grunted, his head thumping against the car's roof and his long legs clunking against the steering wheel and dashboard as he tried to turn. "By all that is holy, Samantha," he growled in frustration, "we need to depart this tiny vehicle *now* so that we can fuck."

Having tried their damndest to get it on in the front seat of Samantha's car, she and Lugal were a jumbled mass of limbs now. Her pussy throbbed with need. It wept with longing. But until they could get untangled and manage to extricate themselves from her little car, her empty pussy would just go right on yearning.

Finally, *finally*, they made their way out.

Before she could do much more than blink, Lugal grasped Samantha around the waist and lifted her, making a mad dash for the door leading into the house. Already undone, her jeans fell around her knees, and Lugal's were slipping south too.

The way he hauled her around, she felt like one of those featherweight beanbag dolls—practically weightless. Her muscle-bound genie's astounding strength was a definite turn-on. Her gaze fell to his biceps, straining against the material of his shirt. Then she looked up into his eyes, swallowing hard at what she saw simmering there...

Hunger. Passion. The need to ravage and pillage.

Her clit began a slow throb and she moaned.

After he kicked the door wide until it banged against the kitchen wall, Samantha had a pretty good inkling that Lugal had no intention of tiptoeing to the bedroom and turning down the sheets with a nice crease before they made love.

Breathing hard as he slammed her up against the kitchen wall just inside the garage, Lugal ripped Samantha's panties off with one quick swipe. Her legs dangled as he lifted her higher, bringing her dripping pussy in line with his impatient cock.

The tingle deep inside was almost too much to bear. Like an infernal, hellacious itch that only his cock could scratch.

For just the briefest moment he stared at her, as if trying to connect through her eyes to her very soul. She watched his broad chest heave beneath the button-down shirt, amazed that he was just as sexy, if not more, in regular street clothes than his flesh-baring genie outfit.

"Your vulva is wondrous to behold. And your dripping cunt..." he shoved into her, impaling her with one swift movement, "is even more wondrous to fuck."

Following an initial gasp, a lingering moan tore from Samantha's throat as her big barbarian pinned her in place and pillaged her needy pussy.

There was no gentle gliding. No controlled slipping or sliding. There was only pummeling, piercing, shoving, grunting... It was the rawest, rudest, crudest best damn sex she'd ever experienced.

"All the day long I have been waiting to do this. The lush sight and yielding feel of you excites me beyond all reason, Samantha."

"Oh God, Lugal...I feel like I'm going to combust."

"Violent fire *here*." He gave another powerful thrust. "Like a raging inferno. Yes...I feel it too."

Caught up in the wildness, the fevered pitch of lust and desire, Samantha did something rash, something she'd always wanted to do since she saw it done in the movies once. She grabbed onto either side of Lugal's shirt and ripped it open, sending buttons careening left and right.

The sight of the beautiful bronzed fleshscape highlighted by the white cloth sent a new gush of juices streaming, trickling down her legs as he assaulted her pussy. She dug her nails into his hard pecs, flicking her thumbs across his flat, taut nipples. And then she licked his battle scars, every one within tonguing distance.

"Ahhh, such fervor, such passion. I like the feel of your soft little hands digging into my chest, sweet Samantha." Lugal pressed his forehead against hers and licked her face like a thirsty panther. "And the sensation of your tongue exploring the badges of honor across my flesh renders my cock harder than my copper battle armor."

"Mmmm...I noticed." She squeezed her inner muscles against the thick, hard rod of flesh impaling her. "Like a great big copper bullet." He drove into her again and Samantha thought she'd expire from the sweet mix of pain and pleasure as his cock grazed her womb. "Or maybe more like a copper torpedo..."

"So much clothing you wear. You make it so difficult for me to access your alabaster *uburs*."

"Let me guess. My ass?"

"Nay, your pretty white tits." Fastening Samantha firm against the wall with nothing more than the strength of his cock and his pelvis, which shocked the hell out of her, Lugal tore the sweater up and over her head, flinging it aside. One breast was still

uncovered while the other rested inside its bra cup. "These you will all throw away," he told her, yanking hard on the center of her sturdy bra. "I do not like their annoying resilience."

When another tug failed to rip the undergarment from her body, with a grunt, Lugal fisted the cups and tore the damn thing right in half.

Torches ignited in the depths of his eyes as her breasts bobbed free. Pulsations clamored from Samantha's ready-to-detonate clit to her womb when she saw the way he looked at her. That dark voracious expression, like a predator closing in to make his claim.

His gaze still locked on her liberated breasts, Lugal held her steady so he could slide nearly all the way out before hammering into her again. Oh...so high, so hard... His amazing cock connected with places she didn't even know existed. Although the position afforded her little opportunity to rock her hips or move against him, the sensation of being taken standing up like this was so erotic, every fiber of her being quivered with pleasure.

In the next instant he was busy suckling, drawing her areola into his hot mouth and biting her nipple. Plucking it, scraping it with his teeth, driving her wild, mad with passion until she almost begged for mercy.

Never wanting this to end, Samantha wrapped one hand around his back, caressing bands of hard muscle. The fingers of her other hand dove into his long hair, smoothing his scalp, holding him close as he sweetly tortured her breast. She had no doubt that her orgasm would be dynamic. She could feel her body priming itself for a jubilant, over the moon event.

The heady scent of arousal wafted around them as they fucked. Shards of euphoria sparked within her as Lugal's mouth left her breast and he licked her from her wet, rigid nipple, up her chest and throat, finally capturing her lips in a torrid, demanding kiss.

God how she loved the taste of this man.

In her blissful state, Samantha noted there was a sense of urgency, of vital importance to Lugal's actions. It was as if he sought to fill every waking moment, every second outside that damned bottle, with passion, sensation...with life. She choked back a sob as the thought assailed her. How cruel that this vibrant, passionate man's life had been suspended, torn from him in his prime.

All because he'd tried to do the honorable thing by protecting a young woman from execution. It was so desperately unfair. Samantha vowed at that moment to ensure that whatever time they had together would be the best, the happiest, the most passionate she could possibly make it. If she couldn't give him his life back, then at least she'd make damn sure his dark hours were filled with sweet dreams of their time together.

She felt Lugal's fingers digging into her hair, fisting it, while his hips crashed against hers. He hammered into her hard and fast, each thrust sending her spiraling

closer to paradise. Their groans mingled as their skin grew warm and damp with perspiration.

"For this small moment in time, you are mine, Samantha," he growled against her mouth, nipping and tugging at her lips as he spoke. "You belong to me as much as I belong to you. Mine. You are mine alone, do you hear me?"

"Yes. Oh God, yes..." Samantha realized tears were trickling down her cheeks. For this all too brief instance, this infinitesimal blip in eternity as they were joined in ecstasy, she and her beautiful, magnificent genie belonged to each other only.

She bit her lip to keep from making an utter fool of herself by screaming out *I love you, Lugal!* The surprising words hovered so near, amazing her with their clarity, their sense of rightness. How could they seem so natural, so heartfelt when she'd known him such a short time?

She could see the intensity in Lugal's eyes when he approached climax. His body tightened, his powerful thighs slamming hard against her. His mighty chest heaved and the muscles in his arms bunched and corded. And all the while he was looking into her eyes. Gazing so deep it made her tremble.

She wondered if he could see straight into her heart. If he could somehow sense the depth of feeling she had for him. Feelings that had her frightened and elated at the same time.

As the words *I love you, Lugal* danced across her mind a second time, Samantha's body stiffened, then shuddered in his arms and she came hard. As she uttered a cry of elation, she heard the primal roar rumble up from Lugal's chest. He came as hard as she did, torrents of cum shooting hot and swift deep inside her.

Perfect.

It was the absolute perfect fuck. The ultimate in lovemaking. The grand, mystic high of all orgasms.

With a dreamy sigh of satisfaction, Samantha sagged against him, wrapping her arms around his neck and resting her head on his shoulder. She could feel the pulsing of his heart through his veins as she nuzzled him. The pounding percussion beat comforted her like a soothing lullaby. It would be easy to stay like that forever...just her and her genie, enjoying the afterglow of idyllic sex.

"I've never had sex standing up before," she said, depositing a trail of little kisses from his shoulder to his ear. "It was the most erotic experience of my life."

"Taking you like this was unforgettable, little one." Lugal nipped her ear with his teeth, then kissed her temple. "You were like a tigress, driving me wild with your unrestrained passion. I am a truly fortunate man."

Samantha lifted her head and looked into his eyes as he cupped her buttocks and brushed a tender kiss across her lips. "Mmmm...you say the nicest things, Lugal."

"I only speak the truth, Samantha." He slipped out of her and set her back on the floor. Her feet hadn't touched it since he'd first slammed into the house from the garage and her knees buckled at first. He supported her immediately with one strong arm.

She couldn't help giggling a little when his stomach grumbled and growled. "Seems like somebody's worked up an appetite, hmm?"

Clapping his hand over his abs, he flashed her that charming smile she'd come to adore. "Yes, my belly is in need of provisions. You will go to the room of the flushing water and —"

"Bathroom," she reminded him with a smile.

"Yes, bathroom. You will go there and refresh yourself while I unburden the trunk of your chariot."

"Sounds good." Mmm-hmm, she could definitely get used to having a big burly guy around to unburden her trunk. "I'll be back in a jiffy to put the frozen and refrigerated foods away and then I'll whip us up a nice dinner."

Samantha's spirits were so high she felt she could almost float on air to...the flushing room. Having this much happiness and contentment was kind of scary. When things got too perfect, the fear that the rug would suddenly be yanked out from under her pervaded her thoughts. And, in a way, that's exactly what would happen after Lugal returned to the bottle.

If she didn't protect her heart, Samantha feared it would be forever shattered once she lost him.

Blinking away the abrupt rise of tears, she shook the gloomy idea from her mind and went to freshen up.

"I rescued the frozen cream," Lugal announced proudly when she came back into the kitchen a few minutes later. "I deposited it in the metal box's ice chamber for safekeeping." He motioned toward the freezer.

"Thanks! Ice cream soup just isn't the same as the frozen stuff." Samantha glanced at the kitchen counter. "Wow, looks like you already put most of the cold things away. I'm impressed."

His shoulders lifting in a nonchalant shrug, he gave a smug smile. "I learn quickly."

Eyeing the open shirt stuffed in the waistband of his jeans, Samantha could barely believe she'd ripped it open a short while ago. "Sorry about your new shirt. I...I couldn't help myself."

"Never apologize to me for being a tigress, little one." He looked down at his chest, smoothing his hand down over his perfectly sculpted pecs and magnificent abs. Pecs and abs that had developed from years of training for battle, instead of a workout at the gym. Real man pecs, earned the old fashioned way.

"I like the feel of the open shirt," he continued, while Samantha attempted to unglue her eyes from the lip-licking sight. "I am not used to confining clothing. Besides,

you bought me several other shirts as well, so I have others for you to tear from my flesh in the midst of passion." He gave her a sexy grin.

Jesus, she'd just had a rip-roaring orgasm not more than ten minutes ago and already her clit was declaring its intention to blast off again. The last time she'd even approached this level of horniness was when she found a stack of bodybuilder magazines at a garage sale. Between those luscious color photos of close-to-naked hunks, bursting with oiled muscle, her trusty vibrator and a few glasses of wine, she'd given her clit a marathon workout.

Her gaze slid to the enormous bag of kinky objects from the sex shop and juices pooled at the crotch of the clean panties she'd put on. Oh good grief, she'd never escape this haze of lust as long as Lugal was anywhere in sight...or in her thoughts. She didn't even want to think about what might be going through her mind as she counseled weight-loss clients at work Monday morning.

Monday?

"Oh shit," Samantha said.

"Something is amiss?"

"What am I going to do with you when I have to go to work Monday?"

"To the place where you labor for Bunny Turner?"

Samantha nodded. "I can't leave you here alone, and I certainly can't take you with me." She could just imagine the commotion if she showed up at the offices of TBT with a walking wet dream in tow. Chaos would ensue. Of course, one glimpse of the luscious barbarian would get the dieters' minds off food. The thought brought a smile to her lips. No, there was no way she could risk bringing Lugal to work. She bit her bottom lip, dragging it through her teeth as she considered her options.

"You will stay here with me," Lugal stated. "We will fuck together all the day long."

"Believe me, I'd like nothing more," Samantha said, hating it when her logical side intruded. "But I don't want to give Bunny any more excuses to fire me. Especially since she's already green with envy because you're my boyfriend and you turned down her, *ahem, offer.*" She rolled her eyes. "Of course," she added hastily, "Bunny has no idea you're not *really* my boyfriend, that you only said that because—"

"It would please me very much to be your boyfriend, Samantha. And for you to be my girlfriend. After all, are we not lovers?"

Oh, the low, sexy timbre of his voice when he said that made Samantha shiver from head to toe. The very idea of being able to officially introduce Lugal, her outrageously handsome barbarian, as her boyfriend had her head and heart reeling.

"Yes. Thank you, Lugal. That would make me very happy."

Hell, it would make her fucking insane with delight!

"Good. Now we eat, yes?" His lips curled into a smile. "We will talk about Monday later."

Fortunately the rotisserie chicken was still warm enough not to need reheating. Samantha threw a couple of potatoes into the microwave and cooked up a bag of frozen sweet corn. She salivated as she slathered crusty bread with real butter and added beautiful, creamy-yellow slices of it to the baked potatoes and hot corn. A dollop of full-fat sour cream topped their potatoes.

A bottle of earthy pinot noir rounded out the meal, along with some light classical music from her CD collection for just the right ambiance. The sun was just beginning to set, so she lit a few candles and the gentle glow of the flickering candles enhanced the overall feeling.

She eyed the picture-perfect plates as she set them on the kitchen table. So much decadence in one day. She definitely wasn't used to this deliciously naughty excess of wickedness. Gobs of hot, tantalizing sex and a dinner of honest-to-goodness non-diet food. Heaven. Sheer nirvana.

She'd never really missed not having a dining room until now. It would have been extra special to serve Lugal in style, with her grandmother's good china, crystal and silver in a graceful setting. But those things were packed away until the day Samantha could afford a bigger house.

"I feel like a king," Lugal said as she joined him at the small table. "With a bounty of victuals at my table and my precious queen across from me."

Samantha smiled in response, gazing up at him through her lashes, noticing how the golden cast of the flames enhanced his bold, masculine beauty. An image formed slowly in her mind. With the candlelight flickering, she could imagine the way Lugal must have looked thousands of years ago, partaking in a meal amid the torchlight with his army comrades after a hard day at battle.

Each time she was reminded of the implausible reality that Lugal was from an entirely different time, one she knew almost nothing about, Samantha was filled with a new sense of wonder and awe. It was all so unreal, so unbelievable...and yet here he sat across from her, dining on chicken cooked on a grocery store spit, instead of goat roasted over a crackling flame beneath the stars of the ancient sky.

If it was this difficult for her to fathom, Samantha could only imagine how hard it was for Lugal to come face to face with random snippets of time over the centuries, each vastly different from the previous. And just when he was getting used to his surroundings, learning about the people, their culture, habits and the advances, he was wrenched out of his new life and catapulted back to that inert existence in the bottle.

Each time she'd seen Lugal eat, she noticed how quickly he consumed the food before him—almost as if he were afraid it would be snatched away before he had a chance to finish it. He didn't eat like an uncivilized man. His table manners were close to impeccable. Samantha wondered if Abigail Henley might have tutored him in that area. Still, the feeling of urgency was palpable.

"I like the flavor of these yellow beads called corn." Lugal polished off the sizeable pile she'd put on his plate. "Like bits of juicy, steeped grain. The fowl has a favorable

taste as well. And I am amazed that this potato is the same foodstuff as that of the fries I ate earlier. It is truly a versatile food fit for the gods."

"Wait until I make mashed potatoes swimming in fresh mushroom gravy," Samantha offered, trying to remember the last time she'd allowed herself to enjoy that simple but divine treat. Insipid mashed potatoes made with nonfat milk and topped with a quarter teaspoon of diet margarine just didn't measure up to the real thing.

Lugal sipped from his wine. "Ahh, surprising. It has a smooth taste. I would liken the wine I have imbibed in the past to vinegar. Most of it was stored in pouches of goatskin."

Heaping second helpings of chicken and corn onto his plate, Samantha wrinkled her nose. "That definitely could have affected the flavor." She refilled his wineglass as well as her own. Wow, she hadn't even measured out the allowed four-ounces before pouring. This wild, wanton dietary freedom nearly made her giddy. Now *this* is what a Saturday night dinner was supposed to be!

And sharing it in candlelight with the man of her dreams almost made dessert unnecessary.

Almost.

Thoughts of licking chocolate-drizzled dollops of ice cream from Lugal's warm flesh was one dessert Samantha didn't want to pass up.

"It is still difficult to understand," Lugal noted as he devoured a drumstick, "the ease and speed of meal preparation today, as well as the astonishing assortment of foods available. In my time, a meal of roast fowl would have taken far longer to ready. First it must be caught, then plucked of feathers before roasting. Fowl was strong-tasting meat, tough and stringy, not mild and tender like this."

"What would you usually eat with it?"

"A ration of barleycake with onion and perhaps some cucumber, all to be washed down with barley ale." He popped half a slice of bread in his mouth and chewed. "The bread we ate was nothing like this tender crumb with its pleasingly brittle crust," he told her once he'd swallowed. "And butter was not a principal at our tables. This modern food is a wonder."

"There are so many other wonders I want to show you, Lugal. Not just edibles, although those are high on my list." She chuckled. "But a vast world of things you have yet to discover. We're going to have so much fun while you're here."

Her last sentence had them locking gazes across the table in silence for a small eternity. Biting her bottom lip, Samantha dragged it through her teeth, wishing she hadn't added *while you're here* to her words. Neither of them needed a reminder of the brevity of their time together, or what would happen afterward.

"Yes," Lugal said, breaking the silence and offering a somewhat sad smile. "We will have fun together, little one."

Eager to change the subject, Samantha asked, "Did you enjoy being at Henley House? I just fell in love with that beautiful old house as soon as I saw it. All that period charm and character."

This time Lugal's smile reached his eyes, lighting his entire face. "It makes me glad to hear that you liked that handsome house, Samantha. I created it for Abigail."

Samantha's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

He nodded. "Having a grand house of her own was one of her wishes. When she first became my possessor, Abigail was living in poverty, uncertain where her next meal would come from. She carried a satchel with a pot, spoon, bowl, a few ragged garments and not much else. She had been forced to sell the rest of her belongings in exchange for food and shelter."

"Oh, that poor woman. No wonder she looked so old by the time she was fifty. How did she find you?"

"She was out scavenging for blackberries to keep from starving when she tripped over the stone box."

Samantha cleared the plates from the table to give them some room. "So the possessor you had before Abigail was in Oregon too?"

Lugal shook his head. "*Nein. Ich war in Deutschland.*" He grinned as Samantha returned to the table with a wide-eyed expression. "I was in Germany," he translated, "for a brief time in the early 1800s. How the box journeyed to Oregon, I do not know."

"Probably early settlers coming to America," she surmised. "Do you remember all the different languages you've learned over the centuries?"

"Some better than others. It depends on how long a time I spent in a location."

"You give the term multi-lingual a whole new meaning." She smiled at him, wondering what it must be like to carry bits and pieces of various time periods around inside your head.

"Tell me more about Abigail's house. How did you build it?" The old TV show, *I Dream of Jeannie* came to mind. "Was it done with a blink of the eyes and, *boing*, there it is, or did it take a long time?" She sipped from her wine, thoroughly enjoying the fascinating after dinner conversation with her mouthwatering guest.

"The house appeared instantly once she made the wish, if that is what you mean."

"So one minute there was a blank space on the road and another, *poof*, there was a huge Victorian standing there. That must have been pretty shocking to the neighbors."

"Blink, boing and poof." Lugal laughed. "I do not understand these words in regards to granting wishes, but there were no neighbors to shock. Abigail's house was the first one in that area. You must remember, Samantha, this was a time of vast wilderness. The city was not as it is today."

"But what if someone was riding around on their horse and all of a sudden that house just magically appears out of nowhere? How would that be explained?"

Lugal tossed up his hands with a shrug. "I do not understand the workings. I know only that the wishes are granted seamlessly, without causing undue curiosity or the need for explanation to others. What mechanism the gods use to achieve this, I cannot say."

"Maybe it's like a forgetfulness fog or something," Samantha mused. "Has there ever been a wish you couldn't grant?"

"Nay, as long as the wish is within the guidelines it can be granted, although some wishes require more preparation on my part than others. Again, I am uncertain as to why, it is just something I know when the time comes."

"So, how did you know how to create a Victorian house?"

"One of the things Abigail carried with her in her satchel was a detailed sketch of the house, with measurements, a list of materials and building instructions. She and her husband had planned to build it when they arrived here. Abigail asked me if I could erect such a house for her. I studied the papers in her possession over the next few days and went about building the house in my head. Once I could clearly envision every part of it, I processed the wish."

"Amazing."

"Even after all this time, I still find it so, yes," Lugal agreed.

"Can you tell me what Abigail's other two wishes were?"

"She asked to have all of her goods and possessions restored to her, including the belongings she was forced to sell to survive during her years alone here, the items lost along the Oregon Trail and things she had to leave behind in her home in Massachusetts, as well as in her ancestral home of England. She said that having things of great sentimental value surrounding her would keep her happy until that time that she would join her beloved husband in *Kurnugi*."

The sheer intricacy of the idea amazed Samantha. "And you were able to do that?"

"Yes, over a period of a few days."

"It must have caused some raised eyebrows when all of Abigail's stuff just started disappearing from all over and showing up in her house."

"Nay, it was not noticed. No doubt, due to the gods' skill and magic in these things."

"What about her third wish?"

"This was for ample wealth so she would never be hungry or homeless again and so she could live in the lifestyle she was accustomed to before journeying to Oregon. This wish was granted immediately."

"That certainly sounds like a reasonable wish to me, especially after all that poor woman had been through." Samantha found the story of Abigail's life-changing wishes mesmerizing. Trying to imagine how her life must have been transformed from abject scarcity to fruitful abundance with a mere snap of Lugal's fingers made her head swim.

Samantha reached across the table, covering Lugal's hand with her own and squeezing it.

"What did Abigail do after her wishes were granted?" she asked. She was getting excited just imagining the joy and elation that must have raced through Abigail's mind. Samantha wondered what she would spend money on first if she were in Abigail's place. A boatload of chocolate shipped from England, probably. She chuckled at the thought. "Did she throw a big get-together bash for all the neighboring pioneers? Buy a houseful of furniture? Get a whole new wardrobe?"

Clasping her hand and stroking his thumb across her knuckles, Lugal gave her a touching smile. "I do not know, little one. Once the final wish was successfully granted, I was immediately returned to the bottle and remained there until you found me."

Samantha felt that awful sting, the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach at the unpleasant reminder that Lugal's time with her was only temporary.

"We'll have to Google Abigail to find out what happened to her after that," she announced cheerfully, determined not to cast any melancholy on their conversation.

"If you say so, then we will Google." Lugal chuckled at the unusual word.

"I'm glad you told me about Abigail's three wishes, Lugal. I was fairly certain what I wanted for my first wish. Now I know for sure."

Chapter Thirteen

Lugal arched an eyebrow. "So, you have decided on your first wish. Are you ready to make it?"

"Can I just tell you what it is first and kind of talk about it before making the official wish?"

"Of course."

"When Rosie and I were at the Henley House estate sale, it was love at first sight for me." Samantha felt the color in her cheeks rise as she realized the same thing had happened when she caught her first glimpse of Lugal after he'd popped out of that bottle.

"Although the house was rundown, I was awestruck by the classic ornamentation on the big old place. It was so charming, with an almost enchanted feel to it. It's exactly the sort of house I've always wanted to live in. There was something about it that...I know this will probably sound silly, but it almost called to me. I felt I was meant to live there."

"It does not sound silly. It sounds like a secret knowing that comes from here." He clutched his belly, jiggling his fingers on the firm, lean surface. "Deep inside."

"A gut feeling. Exactly. When I learned the house is going on the market for sale next week, all I could think about was trying to find a way to buy it. But then I figured I may as well be trying to buy the Taj Mahal." She laughed.

Lugal nodded thoughtfully. "I know this place. I have seen it. The Taj Mahal was built by the emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife and queen, Mumtaz Mahal."

Lugal's knowledge of history put her to shame. "You mean you've seen it in photographs?"

"Nay, I was there. In India."

Samantha blinked. "Wow. How long ago?" She reached to the corner of the table and brought the plate of shortbread cookies to the center, offering them to Lugal and taking one for herself. Sinking her teeth into the sweet, buttery treat elicited a sigh from her as she chewed. She'd probably be twenty pounds heavier in the morning, but it was worth every damn calorific ounce.

"The building of the monument was nearly complete. It was in the 1600s. My possessor was the wife of one of the workers who built it. Ahh, Samantha, it was remarkable in its beauty. The white marble structures glowed in the light of the full moon." He bit into a cookie, indicating his pleasure and satisfaction as he chewed. "Another delectable food."

"Scottish shortbread," Samantha told him, waving another cookie in the air. "It's one of my favorites. Simple, but rich and decadent at the same time." She bit into the second cookie with a satisfied *mmmmm* as Lugal helped himself to another.

He studied her as he ate the cookie, a pondering smile on his face.

"What?" she asked, her cookie poised in midair. "Why are you looking at me like that?" The intensity of his gaze made her so edgy she gave a nervous laugh. It dawned on her that she'd been consuming her food with relish, even helping herself to seconds, which she never did in front of anyone but Rosie. That curious smile of Lugal's probably indicated amusement and bewilderment at how much she could pack away at one sitting.

"I was just thinking about how much happier you seem when you are eating real food instead of meager portions of unsavory diet food. It is clear that you enjoy eating good food."

Clapping her hands against her belly, Samantha laughed. "Exactly. Which is why I'm practically a professional dieter." She was mortified. She'd stupidly let her guard down in front of Lugal. She remembered Tommy's admonishing words and his look of disgust when she'd helped herself to a second slice of pizza. As she brought it to her mouth he'd curled his lip and asked her if she thought she really needed to eat that.

And she was about twenty pounds thinner then.

That was on the fateful night he and the waitress boinked each other in the pizzeria's restroom. After all this time it still stung—the admonishment, far more than the clandestine boinking.

"Sorry." She set the unfinished shortbread finger on her plate and sighed. "I didn't mean to make a pig of myself. I only allow myself to indulge like this on rare occasions. But I pay for it. I'll be a good five pounds heavier because of this meal." She shrugged. "A couple days of lettuce, grapefruit and mineral water should get it off."

Lugal reached across the table, plucking the cookie from her plate and bringing it to her lips. "Open, little one." She did. "Now eat. Food is a gift, a pleasure meant to be enjoyed. If you are worried about the addition of pounds, I will help you develop a more efficient body that builds muscle and burns fat."

"Exercise..." She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I know, I really should do more of that. But I hate it."

"We will do it together. It will be agreeable. Now eat your cookie and savor it, without guilt. The way you enjoy it pleases me."

She bit from the cookie Lugal held and smiled. Good God in heaven, this man was a gem. "Getting back to the Taj Mahal," she said once she'd swallowed, "I've only seen pictures of it, but I've always wished I could go there one day and see it for myself."

"This is your first wish then? To visit the Taj Mahal?"

"No!" She clapped her hand over his arm. "So don't go getting itchy-fingered on the wish-granting trigger, Lugal."

He laughed. "At times it is as if you do not speak English at all, little one. What does this itchy finger mean?" He splayed his fingers, examining them.

"It means don't get overly eager to blink, boing and poof." She winked at him.

"I understand." He winked back, and she wondered if he was familiar with the gesture.

"Since I can't make sweeping goodwill wishes for the world, I've decided to make wishes for myself that will ultimately be of help to others. That's okay, right?"

"Perhaps. Tell me what you have in mind."

"Owning and being able to afford the upkeep of Henley House would be my first wish. Aside from being beautiful, I think it's plenty big enough to have a weight-loss center on the first floor. I'd live upstairs. Since the area is already zoned commercial, I don't think it would be any problem."

Lugal nodded. "It is indeed a vast structure with many rooms, as well as a few secret passages."

"Ooh, that makes it even more appealing. I figured I could just wish for millions of dollars, but that wouldn't guarantee me Henley House if it had already sold to someone else, and that's what I really want. As for the millions," she gave a bright, confident grin, "I'll make those on my own once I open my business."

"It is your intention to leave Bunny Turner's employ and establish your own weight-loss center?"

"I'd love to do that. My second wish will be to own and operate an extremely successful, thriving weight-loss business, staffed with caring, compassionate people who've all struggled with being overweight in the past. I've even decided on the name. Beyond the Scale. BTS for short. Great name isn't it?" Voicing her intentions made Samantha tingle with excitement.

Lugal nodded. "It has a good sound. What does it imply?"

"That there's more to being healthy and happy than living your life ruled by that almighty number on the scale. It would be a kinder, gentler company than Tuned by Turner because we would truly care about the welfare, success and happiness of the clients. I'd want BTS to help people discover that there's far more to life than trying to fit into a size two. So what do you think so far? Are my wishes doable?"

Lugal reached across the table and cupped Samantha's chin with his hand, giving her a charming smile as he gazed at her. "Your beautiful lapis eyes sparkle with excitement, little one. Your wishes are as good and kind as they are splendid. I see no problem granting them, Samantha. Upon your official command, I shall make them so." He stroked his thumb along her jaw line before releasing her. "And what about your third wish?"

Samantha's shoulders hiked in a shrug. "I haven't decided yet. But there's no rush, right?" Whatever that final wish was, she wasn't going to make it until the last possible

moment. She was bound and determined to keep Lugal with her until the last second allowed.

As if reading her thoughts, he smiled warmly. "There is no rush. Are you ready to make the first two wishes?"

"Nope. I want to sleep on them first, just to make sure I don't want to do some tweaking before they're clinched." Lugal gave her a clueless look. "I mean, in the morning I'll see if I want to make any changes," she clarified and he nodded his understanding.

Pressing the tip of her finger into the cookie crumbs on the serving plate, she brought it to her lips and sucked, locking gazes with Lugal as she did. "So are we just going to sit here talking about wishes all night, or are we going to check out those kinky sex toys you picked out?"

The kitchen chair legs squealed on the tile as Lugal shoved back and got up. Heading for the shopping bags still in a pile on the floor, he grabbed the Victoria's Secret bag and the one from the sex shop. Two more strides brought him to Samantha. He stared at her with a dark, dangerous gleam in his eyes before hunching down and wrapping his arm around her hips.

She swallowed hard, excitement zinging through her veins.

Like a lusty caveman intent on making a conquest, Lugal lifted her like a sack of flour and tossed her over his shoulder.

"Wait!"

"What?" he asked, his tone impatient.

"The candles."

He stood still long enough to blow them out, then headed for the bedroom.

She bounced as he tossed her onto the mattress and focused on the bags he'd carried into the room.

"You will wear this," he commanded, drawing the deep purple, floor-length semi-sheer robe from the tissue encasing it in the bag. "There will be no need for the matching undergarments. I want your nakedness to be visible through the fine material." He held the robe, spreading it in his hands and looking through the gossamer fabric as he gazed at Samantha.

"Your delicate paleness will glow like a thousand stars against this night sky color. Disrobe for me and don it now, Samantha." He tossed the wispy garment at her and it pooled at her thighs. "Do not tarry. Make haste. My cock grows hard and impatient."

Piqued by his macho-man tactic, she looked up at him, but his attention was already on the bag of sex toys.

"You really get off on being all bossy and authoritative, don't you?" she asked, her pussy shamelessly throbbing because, much as she hated to admit it, his confident look and imposing attitude turned her on faster than a light switch. She couldn't help it. It was that whole Conan the Barbarian fantasy thing she'd always had.

The two distinct sides of Samantha Rutledge warred within.

The feminist side bristled at having a man boss her around, no doubt expecting her to obey without question. But the womanly side...the soft, needy, primed-to-be-pleasured side... Oh, that was a *very* different story.

"Have I offended?" Lugal looked surprised, but not at all insulted. "I am accustomed to being commanding, Samantha. It is my nature. Of course," he held out his hands, palms up, "since you are my possessor, should you wish to take charge instead, you need but ask and I shall obey."

"No," she answered without hesitation. "I like things just the way they are." She removed the tags from the sexy new robe and shrugged out of her clothes. The material felt like butterfly wings against her skin as it glided over her nipples. They immediately crinkled in response. In fact, her entire body crinkled in response. She felt like one big erogenous zone, anticipating what Conan had in store for her.

"So beautiful," Lugal said, capturing her attention. "You look like you should be spread out on the white marble steps of the Taj Mahal, bound between two great pillars beneath the glow of the full moon, waiting for your lover to fuck you without mercy."

Oh God...there was that deep tingly feeling in her clit starting up already.

"Yessss..." she hissed, her eyelids fluttering closed a moment as she envisioned the erotic scene Lugal had just painted with his words. "That's what I want. *You're* what I want, Lugal. Fucking me...without mercy."

"On your back," he said, peeling off his clothing. The presentation of his fully erect cock was just as bold and commanding as he was. "I want your arms and legs stretched wide."

She was spread out in a flash. Adjusting her sheer robe just so, Samantha did her best to strike a pose worthy of a Victoria's Secret model. Well, an abundantly curvy, shortbread-eating Victoria's Secret model.

There was a rustling and tearing of paper as Lugal retrieved items from the bag of sex paraphernalia. A moment later he tossed four faux leopard fur cuffs, purple with black spots, onto the bed between her legs.

Each cuff came with an ample length of furry, matching cord for fastening. He cuffed her wrist, securing it to one of the bed's four posters, then proceeded to do the same with her other wrist and her ankles.

While firm and pulled taut, the bonds were soft and comfortable enough not to cause any serious discomfort. Samantha had never been bound before, except for in her fantasies. This was definitely one secret fantasy she'd never imagined acting out with a flesh and blood man. She could tell already by the weeping of her cunt and prickles at her clit that the real life experience promised to elicit a much more stunning orgasm.

She tested her bonds, checking to see how much movement she had. There was very little give. She was all but helpless. She'd been bound well, just where Lugal wanted her, and just where she wanted to be.

"What's that?" she asked as Lugal knelt between her spread thighs, holding something that looked like delicate silver jewelry.

Lugal snagged the packaging and studied it. "These are called Clipples, by Fabolicious Pleasure Products. They are clips to affix on the nipples." He dangled them for her to see. Each was set with an amethyst stone. "This will keep your pretty tits raw with sensation as I busy myself elsewhere on your sweet body."

She definitely liked that idea. "Did they have things like this back in your time, Lugal?"

"There have always been articles specifically designed for sexual pleasuring, Samantha. Since man first made acquaintance with his cock. I recall similar items of a cruder nature involving threads torn from leaves and branches and tied into slipknots."

Samantha imagined an ancient lovemaking scenario, starring herself and Lugal, all decked out in his warrior gear, having just returned victorious from a bloody, battle. Her pussy heated, clenching at the delicious visualization.

"Centuries later, in Egypt, I remember clips of fine gold and precious gems," he said, making Samantha envision herself as Cleopatra and Lugal as Marc Antony, slipping golden nipple clips in place an instant before plunging his cock into her queenly depths.

She gasped for breath as Lugal affixed the first clamp, sliding it in place and adjusting it. She hadn't expected it to constrict her sensitive flesh so firmly.

"It hurts," she protested at the immediate sensation of palpable discomfort.

"It is a good hurt, yes?"

She was about to say no, but by the time Lugal had posed his question, the impression of pain had shifted. A blissful sensation sparked through her nipples, zinging clear down to her clit. If she could have writhed, Samantha would be slithering all over the bed.

"Yes...oh, it hurts so fucking good..."

Lugal tormented her other breast in the same manner. Again, immediate, sharp discomfort, followed by insanely good pleasure-pain.

Samantha gazed down at her breasts. Her nipples felt as though they were being pinched hard with no letup in pressure. No respite from the constant throb of pleasure-pain. Well damn, if she'd known things like this existed, she would have visited a sex shop long ago.

No she wouldn't have. She would have chickened out without Lugal there to encourage her to make her first foray into the land of packaged pleasure paraphernalia.

Glancing again at the reddening buds atop her breasts, she wondered what the fine chain attached between the clips was for, deciding it was probably in place to keep the tiny pair of silver nipple tormenters from getting lost.

Then Lugal tugged on the chain.

Oh. My. God.

Her back arched in sync with the gentle yanking motion. Her nipples tingled with a tumult of sensation while flagrant throbs pulsed through her clit.

"I knew you would like these," Lugal said, assaulting her engorged nipples with another tug. "Just as I knew you would find it exciting to be dominated."

Even on the brink of an earth-shattering orgasm, with her pussy creaming and her pleasure receptors shot full of one-hundred-proof pure ecstasy, Samantha bristled at his arrogant statement.

"I'm an intelligent, independent woman, Lugal. I'm definitely not into giving up control to a man. And I sure as hell am not a submissive." She decided to disregard the fact that she was spread eagle and bound in purple faux leopard with her nipples on tiny torture racks—and loving it—as she offered her valiant protest.

"Yes, I have experienced repeated evidence that supports your claim, little one. And I agree. You are a feisty, spirited woman, full of bravado and fortitude." Lifting the chain connecting her nipples to hold it taut, Lugal stabbed three fingers of his other hand deep into her cunt, swiping his thumb back and forth across her clit at the same time.

"Ohhhh you wicked, evil man..." Samantha's protest fizzled to a lingering moan. Lugal was not only a genie, he was a magician. A veritable wizard of rapture.

"In the bed, however, my sweet, you hunger to be dominated. If I am mistaken, Samantha, all you need do is to command me to stop and I shall immediately obey."

With a flurry of his thumbnail flicking over her clit, every muscle in her body tightened.

"Shall I stop now? Would you prefer to take charge and be in command now, my beautiful little *gème*?" Samantha lifted her eyebrows in question and Lugal clarified, "It means slave girl," he explained.

Slave girl... Her conquered cunt gushed at the notion.

"No...no...I..."

Drunk with pleasurable sensation, Samantha found her brain cells splintering, zapping urgent signals to the rest of her body to hang on for dear life and prepare for a head-on, derailing climax.

"I thought not." Releasing the chain at her breasts, Lugal lifted Samantha's hips from the bed and gave her a resounding spank on the ass.

Why, that savage! That barbarian! The audacity! The impudence! The—

The disapproving part of Samantha's brain shut down as her body jerked and shuddered in response to an overdose of erotic delight. An instant before she spiraled into bliss, her gaze locked on the hot, hunky genie with the passion-fogged eyes and triumphant smile who knelt between her thighs.

God how she treasured this man, her ancient, beloved traveler through time.

Before she'd even had a chance to bask in the afterglow of a perfect climax, she felt Lugal's hands gripping her buttocks and lifting her again. This time, instead of an ass

spank, there was a sensational cunt impaling. Piercing, profound, so deep and hard the entire bed shook.

She gazed at him over her breasts, the constricted nipples keeping her in a perpetual state of pre and post orgasmic bliss. His focus was on the junction of his cock and her pussy as he thrust in and out of the juicy channel. His fingers continued to dig into her ass cheeks as he held her aloft, enabling him to plunge deep with each magnificent thrust.

Samantha watched as Lugal's eyes lifted from the hot, slick link of their joining. His gaze intense, he graced her with a smile so wicked, so warm, so goddamn fucking sexy that it sent shivers from her head to her toes. He leaned over her as his cock hammered ruthlessly, his eyes glistening with the promise of erotic delights to come.

She watched as his mouth opened and he snagged the silver chain between her breasts in his teeth, tugging hard as he pummeled her cunt.

Samantha's eyes widened and her mouth fell open in silent bliss. Her world was saturated with golden beams of light while angels trumpeted Beethoven's Ode to Joy.

"Ahhh, yes, that's the look I love, little one," he told her, speaking around the fine chain in his teeth. "Your lapis eyes dazed with wonder, with desire, with the sweet, aching sting of ecstasy. Are you ready to come for me again, Samantha? Are you ready to shudder and quake around my cock?"

"Yes. Oh God, yes, Lugal. I'm almost there. Almost..." She could barely wait for the explosion, the detonation she knew she'd feel in every filament of her being.

She whimpered as Lugal withdrew his cock, leaving her pussy empty and abandoned. "No, wait, I need you there. I want you inside, Lugal. Please..."

"You will not surrender to climax yet," he said, untying her wrists and ankles. "I will tell you when to come."

Whimpering again, Samantha got to her knees as soon as she was free. "That's just downright cruel. I'm so ready. Come on, come back inside me." She clasped his engorged cock in her hands, double-fisting it. "Fuck me, Lugal. Please."

She knee-walked toward him until her pussy was flush with the plum crown of his juice-slickened cock. She opened her legs enough to bring him to her, to stroke her needy clit with the tip of his shaft. And when she tried to mount him, to push him back so she could ride her big, beautiful Conan to completion, he clasped her arms, keeping her still.

"I want you on your belly," he told her, a no-nonsense look in his eyes.

"But—"

"Now. I want to see that bare, alabaster bottom of yours beneath the veil of night-sky purple you wear. Show it to me."

Samantha turned to face the head of the bed, but she didn't recline. Something wicked, wanton and defiant inside her brought a giggle to the surface but she held it back.

"I said down on your belly," Lugal commanded again, pointing to the mattress. "Open yourself for me. Spread your limbs so that I may secure them."

"No, I don't think so. Not after you so callously deprived me of my orgasm. If you want me that way then you'll just have to do it yourself," she challenged with a teasing air. "Oooh!" she let out as Lugal proceeded to do just that, pushing her to the mattress and grabbing wrists and ankles, attaching them to the bedposts before she could wiggle free.

"Bad genie," she taunted, struggling against the restraints to no avail. "Brutal and domineering. I think I'm going to report you to the genie commission, mister."

"You are free to do so, naughty one. But not before I punish you for disobeying me." He lifted the material over her butt and smacked her ass cheek.

"Ooh!" As her pussy moistened anew, she did her best to look over her shoulder to see him, but it wasn't all that easy considering the way Lugal had her secured. "That wasn't very nice. I protest."

"Silence!" He smacked her other ass cheek.

The action made her body jolt, pressing her clamped nipples hard against the mattress. Maneuvering her chest in small circles, she rolled the tips of her breasts to and fro, wincing at the delicious prickles of pain with each pass. Her lingering moan was in direct contradiction to Lugal's command for quiet, but she couldn't help it. Crushed against the mattress, her nipples reminded her that she was a mere whisper away from coming.

She heard the sound of cellophane crackling. "What are you getting now?"

Her query was met with silence.

"Lugal? I said, what are —"

She felt his fingers parting her labia and exploring. Then she felt something, a smooth object, sliding onto her clit, constricting it.

"Oh good God in heaven!" she yelped, gasping at the new pleasure-pain sensation. It was a damn good thing she was secured to the bed, otherwise she'd probably spring so high she'd bounce off the ceiling. "What *is* that?" She heard the sound of cellophane again.

"It is called Clit-tastic, by Fabolicious Pleasure Products. It is a small metal clip that clamps onto the —"

"Yeah, I already figured out what it clamps onto. Holy cow, Lugal."

"Once again you reference the religious icon of the people of India. Why is that?"

"Oh Lord, please don't make me laugh now."

"I am not trying to be humorous," Lugal promised. "I am simply curious about your statement. Is the sensation you feel akin to a holy experience?"

"Definitely. I'd say it's halfway between heaven and hell," Samantha quipped, amazed she still had the power of speech with all that pleasure-pain coursing through her system.

"Does the Clit-tastic cause your delicate pink pleasure button too much discomfort?"

"Between that and the nipple clamps I'm about to go through the roof."

Lugal was silent for a moment. "Can you clarify?"

Teetering on the precipice of an orgasm like no other, Samantha found herself chuckling.

"I mean the intense combination of pain and pleasure is almost too much to bear."

"Shall I remove it then?"

"No! I said *almost*," Samantha made clear. "But you'd better stay close so you can revive me just in case I go into orgasmic shock or something."

Lugal trailed a path of kisses across her ass cheeks. "Worry not. I will stay close, little one. Always..." He smoothed his hands with a tender touch over her butt and down her legs. "Until the time that I am no longer able to remain at your side."

Well damn. First he torments me with bursts of pleasure-pain, then he makes me laugh, and now he's made me all weepy at the thought of losing him.

When her orgasm finally gripped her, it would be one hell of a mixed bag of emotions sweeping through her.

"Oh Lugal, I need to come. I really do. Please. My insides are going crazy. If you care about my sanity you'll jam your cock inside me and let me come all over it." She did her best to wiggle her butt as enticement.

"A sweeter invitation I cannot recall, but not yet, my eager, insolent beauty. I have something else for you first," he said. "Another new sensation. Are you ready?"

Samantha only hesitated for a moment. "If it's something you want for me, Lugal, then I'm ready."

"I'm glad you trust me, Samantha." He gently raked her flesh with his fingers as he spoke. She made a little gasp of surprise as his fingers slipped between her ass cheeks, caressing the length of the crack. "I would never betray that trust."

"I know." And she did too. She was that sure of her wonderful genie.

After a bit of rattling around in the sex toy bag, Lugal was back between her thighs. Her ears perked, Samantha heard the sound of a foil packet being opened.

"For this I am using a Passionate Purple Cloak condom, which is also by Fabolicious Pleasure Products."

"With my robe and its matching bra and panties, the amethyst stones at my nipples and your passionate purple condom, I think I've got a clue as to your favorite color," Samantha said.

"Blood red," Lugal informed her.

"Oh."

"But I like the way you look in purple."

"How come you're using a condom? I thought—" At the startling feel of something cold and wet between her ass cheeks, Samantha gasped. "What's that?"

"It is called Lickable Lube, by —"

"Don't tell me, Fabolicious Pleasure Products, right?"

"Yes. It is also purple. The package states that it tastes just like grape jelly. I have not heard of this food."

"Oh, well, it's usually paired with peanut butter and —"

Lugal's warm tongue swooped through the lube at her ass.

"Oh!" Samantha's ass cheeks instinctively squeezed tight.

"Relax, little one." Lugal spread her cheeks. His tongue drew a circle around the pucker of her anus before thrusting inside. Everything inside and out was aquiver and she sank into a wistful moan.

"Ohmigod. Permission to come, sir!" She would have saluted if she could. Anything to get him to let her come, to stop the maddening vibrations at her breasts and clit before they consumed her. "Pretty please with sugar on top."

"Nay." He gave her butt cheek a playful swat. "Be still. The taste of the Lickable Lube is not altogether undesirable. But I prefer the unadulterated taste of your flesh." Again, he spread her cheeks with his hands. "You must relax your bottom for me, Samantha, so that you will enjoy the new sensation more." His finger swirled around the puckered opening. The peculiar sensation and the idea of what he was up to back there made her nervous.

"Um...I'm not sure about this, Lugal. I've never had anybody play with my butt before. It's kind of...strange."

"I am pleased and privileged to be the first to introduce you to this erotic delight, little one." The tip of his finger slipped inside her hole. Moaning, Samantha squeezed her ass muscles tight in response. "A mere command from you is all that is needed to stop me, Samantha. Remember that. But I am hoping that you will not deprive us from this pleasurable new form of play. It can be quite agreeable, I assure you."

She was definitely getting that idea. Aware of a fine sheen of perspiration breaking out all over her skin, she felt hot and cold and edgy and impatient. And so fucking on the brink she could barely stand it. "I don't want you to stop, Lugal, but, oh Lord, I really need to come."

"Soon." His finger slipped in further, pushing against the barrier muscle. "Your little hole is so tight. My cock trembles in anticipation of burying itself in this taut new territory."

"Are you going to do that?"

"Not fully, little one. Not yet. But, yes, I will take you this way with great pleasure very soon. Firm, hard, swift. In the interim, I will prepare your virgin anal passage to accept the full length of my cock."

He dragged a couple of pillows from the head of her bed, pausing to kiss her on the temple, cheek and shoulder, nipping her there, before dragging the pillows to her hips. Lifting her, he stuffed them beneath her belly. A moment later she felt Lugal apply more lube, massaging it in and around her hole. His finger sank deeper, wiggling back and forth, stretching her rectum, before withdrawing.

The next thing she felt there was definitely bigger than a finger.

As he molded her ass with his hands, Lugal's sheathed length slid between the cheeks, nestling into the crack and making her muscles clench and tremble with anticipation.

"Ahhh, so beautiful. I wish you could see my purple-cloaked cock wedged between the milky white globes of your plump ass, Samantha. I can feel the uneasy trembling of your soft flesh as I press against your little pink pucker." His fingers sank into her cheeks, kneading the flesh and she felt him place a tender kiss at the base of her spine.

"Try to loosen your muscles as I penetrate you. It will feel unusual at first and there may be some discomfort. Let me know if it is too much for you and I will stop." Before Samantha could answer, the tip of Lugal's cock stretched her open, filling the entryway of her ass.

She gasped then moaned at the curious sensation as his thick cock penetrated the first taut ring of her anus. Her sphincter spasmed against the intrusion, eliciting a protracted groan from both her and Lugal.

He squeezed her ass cheeks. "Gods, you feel incredible. How I ache to feel myself fully buried deep in your snug, hot depths."

Samantha swallowed hard, exhausted from the need to climax. "Give me more. I want more, Lugal."

He slid a fraction deeper. "That is enough for now. Your canal must be prepared first to avoid injury."

She whimpered when she felt Lugal's fingers at her pussy and nearly screamed like a wild animal when he touched her tortured clit. "Please, Lugal...please..."

His cock still just inside her ass, he thrust his fingers into her cunt, robbing Samantha of her breath. The sampling of double penetration made her impatient for more. Oh yes, she was going to like anal sex. If she didn't die from lack-of-orgasm-stress beforehand.

"Samantha."

"Yes?"

"You will come for me now." It felt like he shoved his whole fist up her cunt as his cock claimed another small percentage of her ass.

The undulating waves, the bone-deep vibrations, the robust throbs that gripped her would have terrified the hell out of Samantha if she wasn't so entangled in ecstasy. She heard herself cry out. In fact, she screamed. Her restrained body bucked and shuddered as the most supreme soreness imaginable assailed her.

Her screams were so thunderous they nearly drowned out Lugal's primal roar as he came a moment later. Never. Never before in her existence had Samantha experienced anything as raw, wild and mind-bending as the orgasm that continued to assault her. Just when she thought the quakes and quivers were finished, they grew stronger.

It finally dawned on her that Lugal was manipulating the clit clamp. The wicked man was killing her with pleasure. "Oh, you have to stop," she warned, her voice breathless and quivery. "I can't stop coming, Lugal. I-I think I'm dying from a severe attack of postponed pleasure."

"Can you think of a better way to die, my sweet? I cannot." He slipped out of her ass, disposing of his purple condom.

"Yeah, but we've got six more months of this. I'll never make it at this rate. Every time we make love it gets worse," she said, unable to keep from laughing, even while her body still trembled with riotous aftershocks. "I swear, Lugal, you bring me closer and closer to the hereafter with each hard-hitting orgasm."

"Just be thankful I restrained myself from fully thrusting into the tight, hot depths of your sweet ass. I deserve a commendation for holding back." He unfastened her ankles from the bedposts and she groaned as her lower body sank flat against the mattress.

"You used the term *make love*. Is this the same meaning as fuck?" he asked as he freed her wrists from their cuffs, smoothing her skin with his fingers.

"Yes, except it's..." With her newfound feelings for Lugal so close to the surface, Samantha didn't want to make a fool of herself by going into the perceived distinctions of making love versus fucking. Technically, it was the same thing, except for the wording. But to her, *making love* had a sweeter, more heart-involved connotation than the cruder *fucking*.

Removing the pillows, Lugal turned her over so she was on her back, gazing up into his eyes. She watched as he removed the nipple clips, which had kept her nipples in a state of rapturous sensitivity. He kissed each liberated peak, then laved the sore buds with his warm, wet tongue.

"Except what, little one?" Now he was at her pussy, removing the clit clamp. Once he'd taken that off, he kissed her ultra-sensitive clitoris too, finishing with a gentle lick.

"Oh...nothing...basically, it's just another way of saying that you're having sex," Samantha answered simply as he enveloped her in his arms.

"Making love to you makes my heart soar, Samantha." He gazed down at her, his expression serious. Then he kissed her as if he'd never get the chance again.

Chapter Fourteen

The sound of birds chirping outside her window woke Samantha the next morning. She lay on her side, snuggled against Lugal's chest, her head resting on his arm. He was flat on his back, one hand on his belly and his other arm wrapped around her, holding her close. The steady rise and fall of his broad chest, even pattern of his breathing and rhythmic beat of his heart lulled her into a state of supreme contentment.

She couldn't imagine a more ideal way to wake up on a Sunday morning. Or any other morning. It was the closest she'd get to heaven while still alive.

Not wanting to disturb him, or the sweet perfection of the moment, Samantha didn't move a muscle, except for curling her lips into a smile of gratitude.

"You are awake," Lugal said, his eyes still closed.

"How did you know?" She smoothed her fingers over his pecs.

"I heard the change in your breathing."

"Wow. You're very observant."

"It is from years of training and preparation for battle." He opened his eyes and gazed at her, smiling. "Waking up with you at my side would make it difficult, indeed, to leave for battle."

She clutched him tight. "I'd never let you go."

They lay still like that together for a long while, as she stroked his chest and he caressed her arm from shoulder to fingertips. She easily pictured them together as a couple, as lovers...perhaps man and wife, all those centuries ago, wondering if he was picturing them the same way.

"You will teach me to make coffee," he said, breaking the silence. "After which you will prepare real food for our breakfast."

"Aye aye, sir," Samantha said, chuckling as she lifted her hand to salute. Apparently, Lugal's thoughts were on sustenance rather than romance.

"We will have no twigs or chaff to eat," he further decreed. "And no mock cream or bitter sweetener in our coffee."

"Your wish is my command, oh great one."

Lugal rolled onto his side, facing Samantha. Elbow bent, he propped his head in his hand and looked down at her. He studied her for a moment before gifting her with one of his charming smiles. "You are teasing me."

"I can't help it." She mirrored his position, smiling back at him. "You make it so hard to resist."

"You are hard to resist," he said, with a devilish gleam in his eye. Grabbing her, he pulled her atop him, seating her over his bold erection in one slick, smooth move. She slid down his length, closed her eyes and moaned her delight.

Breakfast was clearly going to be delayed.

An hour later they'd both cleaned up and dressed. Lugal wore one of the new black T-shirts she'd bought him, over a pair of black jeans that hugged his muscular thighs and exceedingly fine ass. One glance and she was turned on.

At his insistence, Samantha wore a pair of her new, figure-hugging jeans. Lugal seemed fascinated, watching and grabbing her ass and crotch at the most surprising times, like when she was in the middle of grinding coffee and he caught her from behind. The lid flew off the hand-held grinder, spewing coffee grounds all over the kitchen.

The vacuum cleaner held Lugal mesmerized as it sucked up the grounds. He insisted on operating the appliance, testing the hose on all manner of things, including her thin, vee-neck sweater, the kitchen curtains and the roll of paper towels, as well as the stack of mail on the kitchen counter.

Once she finally got him to relinquish the vacuum, promising to let him examine it further later on, Samantha showed Lugal the particulars of making a good, robust cup of coffee. He wanted her to explain what every damn little doohickey on the coffeemaker was, disappointed when she admitted she had no idea where the instruction manual was. He wanted to learn every aspect of this modern marvel, how it was made and put together as well as how it operated.

Lugal was so puffed with pride as he served them steaming cups of coffee, he reminded her of a rocket scientist who'd just discovered some previously undetected law of the universe.

As he wolfed down his eggs, bacon and buttered toast, Samantha said, "I have a very special treat in store for you after breakfast."

An expectant gleam in his eye, he paused, fork in midair. "Hot sex?" He grinned. "I will eat faster."

She laughed, thrilled to her toes that he'd had that reaction. "You are positively insatiable, Lugal."

"I can't help it," he told her. "You make it so hard to resist." He winked. It was just what she'd said to him earlier when he asked if she was teasing him.

"Sex later. First, you get introduced to TV. And after that, the computer. It's going to be a day filled with so much new technology, it'll make your head spin."

Lugal frowned, slanting her a cagey look. "You speak symbolically, I hope. I like my head just as it is."

"Don't worry," she chuckled, "we won't be recreating any scenes from *The Exorcist*."

"Exorcism?" Now Lugal looked mildly alarmed. "There are demons in this thing called TV?"

"Well, some critics think so." Oh, she was evil. She really shouldn't take advantage of Lugal's lack of knowledge about modern technology and tease him so much.

"We will be entering the demon realm?" Lugal sat straight, looking edgy and ready to pounce. "I must get my saber." He scooted his chair back from the table.

"Whoa! Hold it, Master of Destruction. You're not going to need that damn gigantic sword of yours." She gave him a wicked smile. "Don't worry. I'll protect you from harm."

One of his eyebrows arched while the other rode low, in a wary expression. Crossing his arms over his chest, he sat back in his chair. "Again you taunt me with your humor, eh?"

Samantha held her thumb and forefinger an inch apart. "Maybe just a little."

"I will punish you later."

"I look forward to it." Her pussy pulsed at the light sexual banter, wondering what he had in store for her. "Now be a good genie and finish your breakfast."

After they'd finished, Samantha led Lugal into the living room, instructing him to sit on the sofa, opposite the TV.

"Remember listening to the radio in my car?"

"Yes," Lugal nodded, "with the music and all of the people speaking to me of various topics."

"Right. Well, TV is a lot like that. Except with images too."

"Photographs, like the one of me and Abigail?"

"Sort of, except the images and people are moving instead of standing still. I just wanted to give you the basics before I turn on the set so you don't get too freaked out." Samantha sat next to him on the sofa, remote control in hand. "Ready?"

"Ready." He looked enthused, but she was glad his saber was safely tucked away in the bedroom, out of grabbing distance.

She pushed the power button on the remote, watching Lugal out of the corner of her eye as the screen came to life.

"*Lucy, you got some 'splainin' to do!*" was the first sound blip Lugal heard as an old episode of *I Love Lucy* came into view.

The muscle in Lugal's jaw clamped hard and his eyes bugged. His posture stiffened, but Samantha could tell he was doing his best not to appear alarmed.

"They are so small," he whispered in her ear, "and their world is devoid of color. Are they demons, or just tiny beings trapped in the demon realm?"

"No. It's just a TV show with real people that was filmed in black and white, before they had color."

His eyes widened. "There was a time when your world had no color? The gods must have been angry, indeed, to cast such a ghostly pall upon the earth." He looked at his hands, turning them to and fro, then looked at the TV just as Fred and Ethel entered the scene. "I cannot even begin to imagine being drained of all color."

"No, Lugal, what I mean is..." Nope, no way was she going to be able to explain this. "Never mind, just watch the show and I'll have Charlie explain it to you next time you see him."

"Aw, but, Ricky, it's such an adorable little hat. Can't I keep it?"

Lugal sat straight, his hands gripping his knees. "Hello?" he said tentatively to the TV. "I am Lugal Damu-zid."

Samantha bit her tongue to keep from laughing. "They can't hear you, Lugal."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaa." Lucy's face contorted as she dissolved into her fake crying.

"But they can!" He turned to Samantha. "You see? I have frightened the woman to tears."

She patted Lugal's knee. "No, it's okay. It's part of the...the play they're putting on. Did you ever see actors role playing in your time? Performing in a theater?"

"Yes." He nodded. "This is the same?"

"Very similar."

He eyed the TV, leaning forward in his seat. "Do Lucy, Ricky, Fred and Ethel live inside this box? Do you own them? Must you provide them with food and clothing?"

Samantha chuckled. "No. Not to confuse you further, but the actors you see there are all dead now. Their images are kept safe on film or videotape or something like that. The images you're watching actually took place more than fifty years ago."

His gaze glued to the TV, Lugal shook his head. "I cannot fathom this. Do you sit here and watch the tiny foursome perform their play very often?"

"It's just one of many shows I like to watch when I have the time. Okay, now don't get jumpy, Lugal. I'm going to change the channel."

"Change the —"

"That's right, it slices, dices and chops and yet the blades are safe enough to use right in the palm of your hand without injury! See?"

"What is this?" Lugal leaned forward, clearly fascinated by the exuberant man with the Australian accent hawking a handy-dandy kitchen gadget.

"It's an infomercial, people selling wares."

"Do you see how it cuts garden food and yet will not pierce human flesh, Samantha? I must see this wondrous cutting tool he speaks of. Do you have one in the kitchen?"

"No, and remind me never to explain what a credit card is." She laughed and flipped to another station.

"It's nobody's fault but my own. I was looking up. It was the nearest thing to heaven. You were there..."

"Oh..." Samantha sighed. "An Affair to Remember, I love that movie. This part makes me cry every time I see it." She sniffed.

"The color is oddly bright in their world," Lugal said, clearly unmoved by the heartfelt exchange between Cary and Deborah.

Samantha flipped to another channel.

"Yondah lies da castle of my faddah..."

Lugal watched and listened in wonder as a young tights-wearing Tony Curtis butchered the lines of the period movie with his heavy Bronx accent.

"People appear in this box from so many different eras. How many centuries old is this play?"

"I think it's from the 1950s. The actors were just wearing period costumes and working on sets created especially for the movie." She pressed the remote again.

"How do they all fit in there? Can they get out if they want to? Who put them in there? Do they —"

"have mustered two or fewer first downs on twenty-two of those twenty-four drives. The only exceptions were back-to-back second-quarter possessions that resulted in a touchdown and a field goal in Sunday's twenty-ten win over..."

"Battle..." Lugal said, clearly entranced, his eyes glittering with interest. Samantha aimed the remote and a second later the football game was history.

"Hey y'all, I'm Paula Deen! Today's show is all about romantical foods..."

"Oh boy, you'd love Paula's cooking, Lugal. Everything she makes is full of butter and —"

"Return to the men in conflict," Lugal said, sitting now at the edge of his seat.

"The what?"

"The men in strange armor battling to take possession of the oddly shaped ball. I wish to study their strategy."

Samantha's shoulders slumped. "Oh, you mean football." She flipped back to it and sighed. "Typical man."

"May I use this tool?" Lugal asked about two minutes later, holding his hand out for the remote.

"Sure. All you have to do is —"

Flip...flip...flip...

"All righty then." Samantha chuckled. In less than a minute's time, Lugal had managed to find every sports game currently being aired.

"I'll just leave you to this for a while so I can catch up on some things, okay?"

Silence.

"Lugal?"

"Hmmm?" He sat as if in a daze, his eyes glued to the set as he flipped from one channel to another.

"I said, I'll just –"

"Nay! What is the matter with you?" Lugal yelled at the TV. "Forty-two was there waiting. Why did you not pass the ball to him?" He gave Samantha a speedy half-glance. "This number fifty-three is an idiot."

"Mmm-hmm." She patted his shoulder. "Have fun, I'll be back later." Since she had cable, she figured eighty thousand or so channels should keep him out of trouble for a while.

Samantha went to the bedroom where she took all the purchases they'd made the day before out of the bags. She'd spent a small fortune on their shopping spree, but decided it was worth every cent. She couldn't remember when she'd had such fun.

Fingering the soft, luscious Victoria's Secret goodies, she removed the tags and slipped the skimpy little nothings in her lingerie drawer, where they sat alongside her dreary old cotton underpants and sturdy bras.

She cleared out another drawer for Lugal's new clothes. After stacking them neatly, she folded his genie outfit, closing her eyes and clutching it to her cheek for a moment, before adding it to the drawer.

Lastly was the bag of sex stuff. She'd been too embarrassed in the store to spend much time looking at the items as Lugal plucked them from hooks and shelves, adding them to the shopping basket. Her eyes widened as she turned over a package and saw the flogger encased inside.

"What the hell..."

Upon closer inspection, she saw that it was made of strips of black velvet and purple satin ribbons, with clusters of little knots at the tips. She smiled. An innocuous little whip, designed to titillate, rather than cut into the skin. Although she imagined that, wielded by an expert hand, the little flogger would probably add a series of pink stripes to her pale flesh.

An image of her bound to a gnarled old olive tree in ancient Sumer flashed through Samantha's mind...

She was helpless, powerless to free herself as Lugal Damu-zid, the dark, dangerous warrior of acclaim, approached, eyeing her as if she were a plump, honeyed fruit. Was he there to save her or to torture her? she wondered as the hot desert breeze licked at her. An instant later, he clutched what was left of her tattered, diaphanous gown, tearing it from her body in one pass, leaving her naked and trembling before him.

He walked around her slowly, drinking in her full, lush curves – and then she felt the sting of his whip as he flogged her bottom. After marking her as his and his alone, he further punished her by thrusting his hard cock into her dripping pussy as she stood tied and vulnerable, begging him for mercy. Ah, but he showed no mercy...no, he grabbed her tits, cruelly pinching and twisting her nipples as he rammed into her again and again and...

Samantha blinked.

Ooh, it was either getting mighty hot in her bedroom or her lust thermostat had just kicked up several notches.

She made room in the deep bottom drawer of her nightstand for all the kinky gear Lugal had selected. Once finished, she had a veritable arsenal of edible body paint, butt plugs—which had her more than a bit curious, vibrators, dildos, role-play costumes, and a host of other peculiar paraphernalia.

Never let it be said that her genie didn't have a thriving imagination to go along with his robust carnal appetite.

Samantha gazed around her, balling up the bags from the mall, with the telltale bag from the sex toy shop buried at the core. Her bedroom was in order, with all traces of debauchery safely tucked away in the event Rosie's kids came in the room on their next visit. Or if, in need of a cup of sugar, Mrs. Willoughby from next door toddled over with her walker.

The dear old woman had been known to take a wrong turn and end up in Samantha's bedroom instead of the kitchen. Samantha half cringed, half laughed at the thought...

Lucy, you got some 'splainin' to do!

With a final glance to ensure everything was in its place, Samantha headed for the small second bedroom where she kept her computer. As soon as it booted, she went online and Googled Sumer. Her cable connection was working at a fast clip today and she was able to zip from one website to another in an instant.

What she read about the ancient land, its people and the times was fascinating, mesmerizing. There were accounts of Sargon of Akkad's army battling and finally conquering all of Sumer. Samantha could imagine Lugal's soldiers losing their motivation and fortitude without his leadership. If Lugal hadn't been imprisoned, who knows, maybe the entire course of history would have been changed.

She frowned, wondering if Lugal was aware that the ancient cities he and his troops fought so bravely to defend had fallen to the Akkadians, their mortal enemies. She decided it wasn't something she'd tell him about anytime soon.

More searching turned up pages of information about Inanna, Queen of Heaven, goddess of love and war, who Lugal said the priest and young priestess had summoned during their incantation to imprison him so long ago.

Her head shook from side to side slowly. To think that a man from the third millennium BC was sitting in her living room right now, caught up in a modern game of football on the television. The same man who'd introduced her to the hottest, most scintillating sex of her entire life. The unfathomable truth sent chills zigzagging up and down her spine.

Samantha gasped as she happened upon a page pertaining to ancient glassmaking...

It is believed that the first glass bottles and jars were made in Sumer and other regions of Mesopotamia. The process was so lengthy and tedious, only kings, queens or people of vast

wealth could afford them. Thin threads of molten glass were dexterously wound around a mold of wet sand, which was later removed. Highly coveted, the jars served as containers for ointments, perfumes and cosmetics. Glass bottles were also used as tear vases. When a king or person of wealth or importance died, mourners shed their tears in the little bottles, which were then sealed in the tomb. It was believed the deceased would see these tokens of grief when they reached the next world...

"That sounds just like Lugal's bottle," Samantha breathed, wondering if there might be some mention of the bottles being used to imprison men who had fallen out of favor with priests or the gods. While there were dozens of pages about religion, the gods and people's habits and beliefs, she didn't come across any instances like Lugal's, where men had been turned into unwilling genies. She'd have to do more in depth search another time.

More than an hour had whisked by, when it seemed like she'd only been exploring for ten minutes or so. She wanted to search for Abigail Henley, but decided she'd better fix some lunch for herself and her football aficionado in the other room. After they ate, she'd introduce Lugal to the Internet.

"Ham and Swiss on rye with potato chips," Lugal said about twenty minutes later as he ate his sandwich. "This is very good, Samantha. Did you know that a one-ounce slice of Swiss cheese provides nearly two hundred seventy five milligrams of calcium? That's more than a quarter of the one thousand milligrams of calcium recommended for most adults." He grinned at her.

Somewhat taken aback, Samantha returned the smile. "I see that you're learning quickly from those TV commercials."

"I have learned many wondrous things. I will be able to coach you the next time we go to the market."

"Oh you will, huh?"

Lugal nodded. "For instance, did you know that you don't have to give up absorbency to get the thin pads you want if you wear pads with wings?"

Samantha burst out laughing, the diet soda nearly spewing out of her nose.

"Or that the brand of toothpaste you use is not the one most recommended by nine out of ten dentists because it does not fight germs and bacteria as well as Spark-o-White toothpaste?" He cocked his head. "What is a dentist?"

"A doctor who takes care of your teeth and keeps them healthy."

"And if you wear pads with wings, where do they transport you?"

"Not nearly far enough when it's that time of the month." She chuckled. "Boy, you've taken in a lot of information and retained it. Do you have a photographic memory or something?" she joked.

"I do not know. What is that?"

"It's very rare. Some people can look at or read something just once and remember it with extreme accuracy, without ever having to look at it again."

"Yes, I have that," Lugal said matter-of-factly as he took another big bite of his sandwich."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "No you don't."

"It's true." He swigged from his beer and smiled. "It is one of the reasons I was such a fine leader of men in my time. Among other things, I remembered every battle plan I had ever mapped out without looking at it twice."

Samantha's jaw dropped. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Go to the freezer."

Samantha scrunched her features. "Huh?"

"Do it. Take the container of Häagen-Dazs butter pecan ice cream out and look at the ingredients."

Shrugging, Samantha scooted her chair from the table and did as Lugal asked. "Okay, it's got—"

"Cream," Lugal cut in, "skim milk—lactose reduced. Sugar, pecans—roasted in coconut oil, butter, salt. Egg yolks, corn syrup, natural vanilla, salt."

"Oh my God." Her mouth agape, she looked from the carton to Lugal. "That's incredible."

One arm slung over the back of the chair, Lugal sat in a confident slouch, his smile broad and smug. "Yes, I know. I am a man of many talents."

Oh, she could attest to that!

Samantha came back to the table and sat down. "So, do you remember every single thing you read?"

"It is...how would I explain it..." Lugal pondered. "It is selective. I remember what I choose to remember and push the rest aside." He tapped his temple.

"A lot of men do that." She laughed. "Gosh, if you lived in this time, Lugal, you could be—"

He reached over and clasped her hand. "It matters not, little one. For I do not live in this time long enough to become any more than I already am."

Damn, she could have bit off her tongue for saying something so stupid, so unthinking. She rested her hand atop his and smiled as her thumb brushed across his knuckles. "You're perfect just the way you are, Lugal. That's why I love—"

Holy shit! She almost said it.

Samantha cleared her throat. "That's why I love spending time with you and learning everything about you," she amended, studying his face for any indication that he might have caught on to her feelings. He just gave her a tender smile in return, so she seemed safe. She was definitely in need of one of those seven-second delays the talk shows use so she could monitor what flew out of her big mouth.

"Ready to learn all about computers and the internet?" she asked with a cheery smile as she took their plates to the sink.

"But what about the football game? It resumes after halftime."

Samantha chuckled to herself as she rinsed the plates and put them in the dishwasher. Lugal had already become more like a modern man than he realized. She only hoped all she was exposing him to wouldn't make his dark, monotonous internment that much bleaker once he left her.

Shuddering at the disagreeable thought of losing him, she dropped her wet glass on the floor. It shattered and, uttering a surprised gasp, she squatted to pick up the pieces, slicing her finger in the process.

"Oh damn..."

Lugal raced to her side, taking her hand and examining the bleeding finger. "You have injured yourself." Acting on familiarity, he yanked the T-shirt from his jeans, grabbing the knife Samantha had used to cut the bread and poking through it. He tore off a strip of fabric, wrapping it around her finger.

"Let me tend to this mess, Samantha. When I am finished, I will clean your wound and protect it with the all new anti-bacterial liquid bandage that is far superior to the old fashioned plastic strips."

Samantha cried. She couldn't help it. He was just so damned sweet and caring and gallant and funny. Even if he did have an inflated ego and hugely chauvinistic tendencies.

She decided she'd wait to tell him he could have simply torn a paper towel from the holder instead of making a rag out of his brand new shirt. The last thing she wanted to do was make him feel foolish at this chivalrous moment.

Lugal cradled her hand. "Why do you cry, little one? Is the pain severe?"

"No...no, I just—" She hiccupped a sob. "I just think you're wonderful, that's all." Once the waterworks started she had a hard time turning them off. All the thoughts about losing Lugal and him having to be all cooped up until God knows when some other woman would find him and...

Some other woman.

She cried harder.

Samantha waved her hand. "Just don't pay any attention to me. I'm fine, really."

"Perhaps you are suffering from PMS, Samantha. Symptoms may include but are not limited to bloating, anxiety, tearfulness, mood swings and —"

Samantha's tears turned to laughter, just like that. "Come here, you great big wonderful genie, and give me a hug." God how she wanted to tell him that she loved him at that moment.

Lugal's eyebrow arched. "Mood swings, indeed," he noted, before grabbing her into a hug and squeezing. He kissed away her tears, smoothing wet strands of hair from her face. "Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, are helpful for PMS-associated discomfort," he whispered against her ear, causing Samantha to completely dissolve into laughter.

Then she started crying again.

And she wasn't anywhere close to getting her period.

"Don't mind me, Lugal," she said, drying her tears on his torn T-shirt. "It's probably just a case of being overtired and then dealing with all the stress of finding a genie in my kitchen two days ago. You know, everyday stuff like that." She chuckled.

"Yes, I have not been allowing you to get much sleep," Lugal agreed, guiding her back to the kitchen chair. "I am sorry, Samantha. After spending so much time half-dead in the bottle, I crave the waking hours and sleep only when absolutely necessary." He tore the remainder of his shirt from his body and spread it on the floor, picking up shards of glass and depositing them on the material.

She swallowed hard as she watched him. He was so fucking sexy without even realizing it.

"That's okay," Samantha said, thoroughly enjoying the exquisite play of muscles as Lugal worked. That bronzed body of his was beyond superb. She squirmed in her seat, realizing she'd gone from crying to laughing and back again, and now her pussy ached and wept with longing. Good grief, she was losing it.

"I've enjoyed every single minute of our waking hours together, Lugal. I've never had such fun as the time I've spent with you."

"It is the same for me, little one." He looked up from his task long enough to smile. "Being with you is like having the sun shine down upon me, warming me and making me glad and grateful to be...alive. For however short a time it is. It is the first time I have felt truly alive since I was locked away in that bottle."

Samantha started to cry again.

"Come," he said, extending his hand after cleaning the broken glass and setting it in the trash. "We will tend to your finger and then you will show me this computer you have told me about. We will Google together, yes?" He waggled his eyebrows and Samantha realized he'd made an attempt at a bawdy joke.

"That's very cute," she said, finally in charge of her emotions again—at least for the moment. "You're catching on quickly."

Lugal took great care with her finger, treating her small wound as if it were as serious as one received in battle. Of course, he lectured her about the lack of liquid bandages as he wound the beige plastic strip around her digit.

"You're going to see a lot of information on the computer, Lugal," Samantha told him a few minutes later as she pulled a second chair in front of the computer, signaling for Lugal to sit. "With that photographic memory, you won't be in danger of going into overload or something, will you?"

"If you refer to taking in too much knowledge at once, nay, you need not worry. I will be selective."

Samantha moved the mouse and the monitor's dark screen brightened. "This is a computer. Don't ask me how it works because I don't have a clue. All I can tell you is

that it's kind of like having a brain inside a box. Not a human brain, it's a man-made manufactured one. This little device I have my hand on is called a mouse. It guides the user."

"So it is a form of intelligence. Like an oracle, a seer," Lugal noted.

Samantha hedged. "Not exactly. It's more like a storehouse of knowledge gathered from people all over the world."

"What does it know?"

"Just about everything." She clicked the mouse, taking them online. "This is the Internet, sometimes called the information highway. It's like an entire library of books at your fingertips." She visited a few of her favorite websites as she spoke, watching Lugal's captivated reaction as she made brief explanations.

Lugal clasped his head. "You were right, Samantha. My head is spinning." He laughed.

"This is Google," Samantha said, pulling up Google's main website. "It's a search engine. We type in what we're searching for here, and —"

"Look! The letters appear on the screen as your fingers strike the buttons."

"Yup. This is my keyboard. It's used like a typewriter, except the words appear on the monitor's screen instead of on paper. Maybe Abigail had a typewriter...or maybe they weren't even invented by 1859."

"I do not recall such a device." His finger hovered over the keyboard and he looked to Samantha. "May I make some letters appear?"

"Sure. Go right ahead. You type something in and we'll Google it and see what kind of information we find."

"Yes. First, I think I will find out more about this entity you call me. How is this word *genie* spelled?"

After spelling it, Samantha watched as, using his index finger, Lugal typed the word in the search box.

Almost twenty-three million entries popped up in answer to his search, among them were pages about garage door openers, Halloween costumes, people named Genie and tons of other unrelated hits.

Samantha showed him how to refine the search and scroll through the listings, smiling when she happened on one in particular. She had Lugal click on the link, which took him to a website devoted to the old *I Dream of Jeannie* TV show from the 1960s. The familiar theme music played as the title flashed across a pink background.

"Click there," Samantha suggested. Lugal did and they were brought to a page offering video clips from various episodes. She chose one from the first episode, where, stranded on a desert island, astronaut Tony Nelson finds a genie in a bottle.

Lugal watched with rapt attention as Tony pulled the stopper from the bottle. When he rubbed it to brush away the sand, out fumed a female genie.

"It is like me!" Lugal said excitedly.

Within thirty minutes, hopping from site to site, they learned everything anyone ever wanted to know about genies, fact, fiction and speculation.

"There, you see?" Samantha said. "We learned that genies are not only born that way, regular people can also be transformed into them. So I was right all along. You *are* a genie!" She hugged his neck and kissed him. "My very own personal genie!"

Lugal nodded slowly. "It appears that I am. Like Aladdin, but without all his powers."

"Exactly," Samantha agreed. "Now we just have to find a way to undo the magic that got you into this mess and turn you back into a regular man."

Heaving a mighty sigh as his shoulders slumped, Lugal said, "I do not believe this is possible, little one. The priest and priestess who had me bottled up are long since dead. There is no one left who remembers me or my fate."

"Right, but what about Inanna, hmm? If she's a goddess, she must be immortal, right?"

"Yes, but I told you before, I have appealed to the great and fearsome Inanna many times. She turns a deaf ear to my pleas and lamentations, Samantha. A goddess of her stature will not hear the petition of a lowly mortal unless that mortal is a holy man or woman in her service."

"We'll see about that. We have six months to find a way to reach her and fix everything."

His arm around her shoulder, Lugal drew Samantha close. "I love your fierce, determined spirit, little one. And I love that you are so concerned about my welfare. I thank you, my sweet." He kissed her. It was just a gentle lip-brush of gratitude at first, but soon became a torrid lip-lock with dueling tongues and plenty of heavy breathing.

Once they came up for air, Samantha smiled as she gazed into his eyes and stroked his jaw. "I don't know if we'll succeed, Lugal, but I promise you I'm going to do everything humanly possible to free you from your unjust imprisonment."

With all this wealth of amazing, modern technology at her fingertips, there *had* to be a way to liberate Lugal.

And if there was, she'd damn well find it.

Chapter Fifteen

"It is amazing," Lugal said, sitting forward and squinting to read from the monitor. "Abigail lived to be one hundred fifteen. She died in 1923."

"And just look at all she accomplished in her lifetime," Samantha said. "She took in the homeless, fed them, taught them and helped them find jobs and shelter when they were ready. What a remarkable woman."

Lugal nodded, moving the mouse to the bottom of the page and highlighting a short paragraph. The man was a fast learner.

"The last owner of Henley House," he read, "Franklin Henley, was a direct descendant of her brother. He was a childless widower, the last living heir of the Henley estate."

"See all the good you did, Lugal?" Samantha smacked his cheek with a big kiss.

He looked at her, genuine surprise in his expression. "Me? I did nothing. It was all Abigail's doing."

"That's not true. If you hadn't been there for Abigail when she needed rescuing, she wouldn't have been able to help all those poor people, Lugal. By granting those three wishes, you ended up helping hundreds, maybe thousands, of people—and the foundation established in her name continues to help those in need."

Lugal smiled. "This makes me glad. It helps me to believe that my years of incarceration have not rendered me completely impotent as a man."

"Oh, my dear Lugal," Samantha winked, snaking her hand down to clutch the bulge at his groin, "impotence is one thing you definitely don't have to worry about." An erection bloomed immediately at her touch.

Lugal laughed. "I do not mean impotent in that way, little one. I mean—"

Samantha silenced him with a kiss. "I know exactly what you meant." She smoothed his long locks from his shoulders. "Ineffective, powerless, helpless...but you're not any of those either. You're more of a man than any man I've ever met or known of, Lugal. Just think of all the frightening things you've had to face each time you've popped out of that bottle. You never had any idea what to expect. But you faced each event with courage, valor and admirable bravery."

A smile took hold, lighting his eyes. "You truly think so?"

"I do." She trailed a path of kisses along his jaw. "After all, you conquered the fearsome cell phone and refrigerator beast, didn't you?" She laughed. "Seriously, you're an amazing man, Lugal, and I'm proud to know you."

He nodded, a look of seriousness across his features. "Thank you, Samantha. Your earnest words hold great meaning for me. In this time without end in the bottle, so

many centuries since I led the armies of Sumer, it has been difficult to remember that I was once a man of worth."

His words broke her heart. He said them as a simple statement of fact, without an ounce of self-pity. Not only had his life been cruelly ripped from him, his sense of importance, of counting for something, had become lost as well.

"You're *still* a man of worth, Lugal. You don't have to be leading men into battle to have value as a human being. You're a fine man. A good man with a good heart. No one can ever take that away from you."

Lugal took a deep breath and sat straight in his chair. "Thank you," he said simply.

Oh damn. Samantha felt those tears rising again. She really had to get a grip.

"I've been looking at that computer monitor for so long my eyes are beginning to cross," she said, changing the subject before she started blubbering again. "I could use a break. How about you?"

He rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yes, my eyes ache from reading all the little words and my head spins from all that I have learned. What shall we do now, little one?" He wagged his eyebrows, shifting his demeanor from solemn to playful in a heartbeat. "I have something in mind in the event you cannot think of anything." He reached over and nipped her bottom lip, dragging it through his teeth.

Samantha breathed a desirous sigh. "Mmmm, very tempting." She licked her lip, relishing the lingering taste of him there. "But first I want to introduce you to my best friend."

"Rosie?" Lugal's head canted to the left. "I have already met her. Besides, this is not a time for friends, Samantha." His voice was deep and husky as he palmed one of her breasts, giving it a firm squeeze. "This is a time for —"

"Rosie comes in a very close second," she interrupted, feeling her heartbeat thump out a rumba as she spoke. "To chocolate," Samantha explained. "And she's very understanding about that. Probably because chocolate is her best friend too." She grinned, recalling their last chocolate binge together, involving chocolate martinis, fudge brownies, a box of chocolate truffles and a jar of chocolate fudge ice cream topping with a pair of butter knives. It took them a week of intense aerobics and ingesting nothing but rabbit food to make up for that heavenly but hugely calorific spree.

"Food as a best friend?" Lugal gave her a peculiar look. "Most intriguing. It is a concept I do not understand." He grabbed Samantha around the waist and dragged her onto his lap, snuggling against her neck and kissing her nape. "You have mentioned chocolate many times since we first met and each time your expression grows wistful and covetous. Yes, I think it is time you introduced me to this wonder food so that I too may experience its exultant qualities."

"Okay." She started to hop off his lap, but Lugal held her tight.

"A bit later, perhaps," he said, trailing his fingers up and down along her inner thighs, sending an urgent tickle to her clit. "I hunger for something more than chocolate

right now." With one hand firmly seizing her crotch, his other hand snaked up inside her sweater.

Samantha stilled his exploring fingers. "You're a very bad boy. A terrible influence. How am I supposed to concentrate on anything but sex with you around?"

Lugal arched an eyebrow. "You are not." He tweaked her nipple, which went rigid at the first whisper of his touch. A little moan escaped her lips and she squirmed in his lap. Lugal stared at her with a particularly wicked gleam in his eye. "Your loins are aquiver, Samantha," he said. "You desire to fuck me."

"Yes, my loins are aquiver. My pussy's dripping and my clit's pulsing," she confirmed. "You better believe I desire to fuck you."

Growling his pleasure at her words, Lugal's teeth flashed white as he busied his fingers at the snap and zipper of her jeans.

"But first," she insisted, pushing against his chest and making firm eye contact, "we're having chocolate." She was determined to keep her raging libido under control and establish something more between her and Lugal than just sensational, steamy, hot sex.

Samantha Rutledge, are you insane?

As the intrusive question skirted across her mind, she ignored it.

"I could be making you quake right now, little one," Lugal murmured against her mouth, his voice husky and full of erotic promise. "As you sit here in my arms, I could bring you to a screaming orgasm. Nay, more than one...and you know I speak the truth." He licked and nibbled his way from her neck to her jaw to her mouth, where his tongue outlined a scorching path around her parted lips.

A needy whimper slipped past her lips. As he lowered the zipper of her jeans, Samantha clapped Lugal's hand, then removed it.

"Normally I prefer my chocolate plain or with nuts or caramel," she said, doggedly trying to maintain control as she fought her traitorous hormones. "But when we were at the store yesterday I bought some chocolate covered cherries because most of my male clients at TBT say those are their favorite."

"Is that so?" He was nibbling her ear lobe, his tongue meandering inside her ear, licking and exploring. "Something tells me I will find this treat most entrancing. I am eager to sample it and learn more about your best food friend. The sooner I do, the sooner we will fuck again, yes?"

"Yes." And, wanton, sex-obsessed plaything that she'd become, she could barely wait. "I know you've never had chocolate, Lugal, have you ever had cherries?"

"Nay."

"Good." Samantha peeled his arms from around her, immediately feeling deprived at the loss of his touch. She hopped off his lap. "Come on, genie," she enticed, crooking her finger and flouncing out of the room. "We're heading for the kitchen."

Once there she slipped into the pantry, returning with a box of chocolate-covered brandied cherries. She opened the package, plucking one plump confection from its fluted paper cup. "Open," she said, holding the candy to his mouth.

She placed it on his tongue and Lugal's eyes widened as he chewed. "Remarkable. So sweet. The chocolate is hard, yet smooth like butter. The fruit plump and juicy. As I bit into the morsel, my mouth was bathed with a honeyed liquid tasting of spirits."

"That's the brandy. You'd make an excellent food critic," Samantha noted, popping one of the chocolate-robed cordials into her own mouth and experiencing the sweet gush of syrupy goodness as she bit into it.

"The taste is one I enjoy, although I believe it is lacking."

"Oh? What don't you like about it?"

"The temperature. It is too cool." Lugal grabbed her hips and yanked her close, sandwiching his stiff cock between them and letting Samantha know in no uncertain terms how much he desired her. "I believe I would prefer it warm...mixed with spicy, musky cream." He licked his sensuous lips, a look of savage pleasure in his eyes. "Your cream."

Stepping back to hold her at arm's length, his gaze dropped to her crotch before meeting her eyes. "Yes, I would appreciate the taste much more that way."

He dragged her close again and she undulated against him, sensing a glow of heat rise, flushing her skin. She glanced at the stovetop, then the microwave and finally at Lugal. "I have a feeling you're not referring to traditional methods of heating." The oh-so-sweet event she believed Lugal suggested had a languorous coil of desire unfurling at her core.

"Nay, I am not." His chuckle was husky, evocative of wicked, wild delight. "There is a volcano thundering inside me, Samantha." He pressed against her so tight, she felt the beat of his pulse hammer through her. "With great, fiery flames building and lava mounting. You and your good friend chocolate are responsible." He pointed at her, gently poking her chest and giving a sinful look of promise—a silent oath of the ecstasy to come.

"Well now you've gone and done it," she accused in response. "You've blown my resolve to spend quality non-sexual time with you clear to smithereens." She yanked at the v-neck of her sweater, pulling it down to her flushed breast. "See what you've done? I'm so hot, Lugal. Blistering. Searing."

"I understand." Driving her mad with a slow, rhythmic grind of cock to belly, he dipped his fingers into the stretched vee of her sweater, making her knees weak as he flicked across the hard points of her nipples. "For my own insides sizzle, Samantha. I am straining toward an explosion that I fear may blow me apart completely."

His thumb under her chin brought her face up and the intensity of his concentrated gaze made her tremble.

"Let me sup from you, my sweet." His fingers cupped her intimately between her thighs, stroking back and forth along the seam of her jeans. "Let me experience the taste of chocolate as I tongue it from your warm, silken depths."

Her eyelids fluttered closed at the idea. Her pussy weeping with anticipation, she clasped his impressive erection through his jeans and squeezed. "I am your love slave, Lugal. State your desires and I shall obey."

A ravenous gleam in his eye, Lugal quickly divested the kitchen table of its toppings. Testing the sturdy pine top for stability, he lifted Samantha into the air and brought her butt down to the wood.

She gave a surprised yip. "You mean here? On the kitchen table?"

With a flash-quick movement, he'd whipped off her sweater and had pushed her to her back. "What better place to eat you, my sweet?" He grabbed the box of chocolate-covered cherries and settled it on her belly.

Why...it was scandalous, outrageous. Downright indecent. What if someone came to the door? What if they peeked in the window? What if...

She moaned, her pussy flooding at the mere thought of all those disgraceful what ifs.

"I like your pretty new blue bra," he told her, thumbing the rigid peaks through the satin.

"Thank you, I—"

"Take it off or I will tear it from your body. I want to see your pink-crowned tits harden under my gaze."

Well, damn if that didn't have her clit pulsing. She unfastened the front clasp, letting the bra cups fall to her sides, revealing her breasts. The nipples crinkled as he eyed them, just as she knew they would. Lugal's ravenous smile of delight as his gaze fastened on the pebbling buds made her heart skip a beat.

"Spread your legs wide and bend them at the knee, then unfasten your jeans," he commanded, eyeing her as if he was about to devour her, which, in fact, he was. "Unzip them slowly."

She did just as he asked. Grasping her tight jeans, he shimmied them off her hips as fast as he could, dragging the clinging denim over her bent knees and letting them tumble to the floor with a soft thump.

"I like your pretty new blue panties too," he told her, catching the elastic with his thumbs and snapping it against her lower belly.

"I know. You want those off too," she said, sliding her hands inside the satin and lace as vibrations of awareness danced through her veins.

"Nay, I will see to these myself," Lugal told her. Rather than yank at them, he captured the elastic of the low-riding waistband in his teeth, tugging them with agonizing slowness down her hips until her hot, wet pussy was free and unencumbered.

He selected a candy from one of the pleated cups, holding it aloft, as if bringing a fine, faceted gem to the light to inspect it. His lips quirked into a smile and he shifted the morsel to his mouth, closing his eyes and swirling his tongue around its base. Samantha licked her lips in response, salivating at the delicious image.

"I want you to stow this chocolate covered cherry deep in your pussy," he said, presenting the chocolate to her.

The erotic thrill of Lugal's culinary carnality tickled her libido, infusing her core with an itch only his talented tongue could scratch. "Your wish is my command," Samantha assured him, watching his hungry expression as she slipped the candy inside, tucking it high.

He plucked another one from the box, locking gazes with her as he thrust it into her depths to join the first morsel. She moaned in response, barely able to believe she was spread on her kitchen table, urging her hunky genie to ravage her.

"I am like a starving man," he told her, his voice deep and throaty. "Ravenous. Famished."

Reaching into the box, Samantha presented him with a third chocolate, which he proceeded to jam high into her cunt. He clamped Samantha's thighs closed with his hands, gifting her with a most lascivious, greedy smile.

"Squeeze your inner muscles until you feel those plump chocolates crush inside your cunt. I cannot wait to taste your musky, honeyed juices combined with the rich sweetness of the chocolate and cherries." His tongue darted out across his lips and she licked hers in automatic response. Then he removed the box from Samantha's grip, setting it on the far end of the table.

The sensation of having those chocolates stuffed up her pussy was strange, and the anticipation of Lugal getting them out again was sheer bliss. The task of squishing the candies ranked as probably the oddest Samantha had ever tackled before, but she attempted it with relish as Lugal gazed down at her pussy with another anticipatory lick of his lips.

"Make haste, little one. I find that all that Googling we did has made me exceptionally hungry and exceedingly impatient."

He grabbed her hips and turned her to the side for a moment, giving her ass cheek a spank to punctuate his directive. She responded with a gasp as she felt the walls of her cunt crush tighter against the candies. A moan followed as Samantha became aware of the candies' brandied syrup releasing and trickling down from deep inside.

Good God this was erotic, and fun and...well, it was just all so unlike anything she'd ever done before. She was astounded at how brazen, how utterly shameless she'd become in the course of just a few days, but then, what red-blooded woman wouldn't, with a gorgeous, adoring hunk like Lugal at her side...and at her pussy?

He pushed at her knees, spreading her thighs wide, and then he descended on her chocolate-bathed pussy, spearing her with his tongue. Her delighted moan matched the

prolonged groan rumbling from deep in his chest as he indulged in her sweet, liquid center. Licking, lapping, nibbling and slurping, he gorged himself.

A few moments later, his head popped up. His mouth and chin coated with a mixture of her juices and the candy's liquid center, he grinned at her, a cherry captured between his teeth. In the next instant the fruit disappeared into his mouth. He chewed, smiled and smacked his lips.

"I believe I am developing more of an understanding about this friendly relationship you have with chocolate, little one. I find this food to be quite likeable." She watched his tongue peek out to capture a dab of chocolate from the corner of his lips. And then his head sank again. "So inviting and delicious," he murmured against her pussy.

Samantha's hips bucked and she let out a gasp when he sucked her clit into his mouth, milking it until she thought he'd rob her of her sanity. Just as she was about to break apart, his mouth left her clitoris as his tongue busied itself inside her cunt. At least two of fingers joined it, spreading her labia, stretching her pussy walls. Searching, digging, fishing for those last two elusive cherries.

As he explored, Lugal's thumbs flicked back and forth across her clit. The swollen, ready-to-detonate little bud was treated to a series of swirls, flicks and pinches, eliciting a moan from Samantha that fast grew into a rapturous growl.

Her eyes closed and she rolled her head from side to side, bliss saturating her being, delight zinging clear to every nerve ending.

Ahhh, yessss...

Apparently this is what she'd been missing her entire adult life – creative sex with a five thousand year-old warrior. Modern guys simply didn't have the knack, the skill, the patience or willingness to build a slow fire and stoke it, fan the flames, make it smolder and keep those embers glowing until the final bit of ecstasy enveloped them in a smoky haze of bliss.

A frenzy whipped inside her. Samantha's body tightened, bracing for a potent orgasm. Her fingers dug into Lugal's dark mane, holding him close as orgasmic waves of pleasure engulfed her.

In the middle of her jolting throes of climax, Samantha suddenly thought about the kitchen table, hopping and banging against the floor tile beneath her. The damn thing would probably collapse under their bouncing weight, splatting them both flat on the floor in a lusty, sweaty, candy-coated heap. Of course, then she'd be able to say she'd experienced an earth-shattering orgasm in its truest sense.

A throaty chuckle escaped her lips as she corkscrewed along the last spiral of her climax, filled with such happiness, such contentment that it barely even registered when the table did, indeed, come crashing down to the floor. She didn't even have the time or presence of mind to scream.

Lugal, chivalrous and multi-skilled genie that he was, somehow managed to roll them in midair so that when they landed he was on his back and she was sprawled atop him. The man was a genius. A genuine genie genius.

Dazed, to say the least, Samantha propped her chin on his chest and looked at him, hoping she didn't spot any gashes or pools of blood seeping all over the floor.

His arms still around her, Lugal lay silent beneath her, his eyes closed.

Oh my God, she'd crushed him! Maybe even killed him!

"Lugal?" There was no response. "Lugal?" Her voice faltered this time. "Speak to me. Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Her fingers felt for evidence of a pulse at his neck and relief overtook her as she felt him breathing. That's when it dawned on her that, since she'd probably managed to collapse all of the man's internal organs, she should probably roll off him to save him from any further agony. When she tried, he gripped her tight, holding her in place.

Then he opened his eyes and grinned up at her, two cherries between his teeth.

Samantha gasped, her eyes widening. "How did you do that?" Then she frowned and slapped his chest. "Lugal! You had me scared to death. I thought you were dead."

He plucked the cherries from his teeth. "I cannot die, remember?" Lugal dropped one of the cherries back into his mouth and nestled the other against Samantha's lips. "Taste," he told her as he chewed his morsel of fruit. "Experience the flavor that has made me drunk with passion."

She hesitated, not really sure she wanted to put something in her mouth that had just been sliding around in her pussy. Lugal nudged it more firmly against her mouth when she didn't open for him.

Her lips parted and she accepted the cherry, rolling it on her tongue before biting into it.

How odd...how very unusual to taste herself along with the brandied sweetness of the fruit. It was strange and yet, thoroughly erotic. So this is what Lugal tasted. And he apparently liked it. Samantha smiled and swallowed.

"How am I ever going to explain what happened to this table?" she asked, smoothing the hair from Lugal's eyes.

"I have found it is best and simplest to tell the truth," he advised.

"Right." Samantha laughed. "*Gee, Sam, Rosie will say, what happened to your sturdy pine table?* Oh, that old thing? I'd answer. Lugal and I splintered it and it came crashing to the floor while we were in the middle of oral sex."

"Yes." Lugal smiled. "You see? Simple."

"Don't you dare tell Rosie that." Samantha waved a chastising finger at him. "I'd die of embarrassment."

"What will you tell her instead?"

"I'll tell her that you got over exuberant and hacked it with your saber." She smiled.

Lugal shook his head from side to side. "That would not explain why all four legs collapsed."

"Well, we'll just get rid of the evidence before Rosie or anyone else sees it." She pulled herself into a sitting position, astride Lugal. "But not until we finish what we started." With a sultry smile, designed to beguile, she tiptoed her fingers to the closure on his jeans. Scooting back to his thighs, she pulled the zipper down, click by leisurely click.

His big, bold warrior cock, fully erect and raring to go, sprang free at the juncture of her thighs.

"Going commando, I see," she noted, swirling her fingers through the dark, curly thatch of pubic hair. "How deliciously convenient."

"What is commando?"

"No underwear."

"I find it encumbering."

Samantha rimmed the crown of his erection with her finger and it jerked. A pearl of pre-cum beaded at the tip and she licked it, dragging a low primitive groan from Lugal.

Shifting position, she tugged the jeans down Lugal's hips with his help. Breathing a dreamy sigh, she aimed her pussy over his saluting cock and slid down its length, seating herself. Mmm, yes, she couldn't think of any other place she'd rather be.

Happily riding her genie, she sighed, she moaned, she relished a husky laugh as she ground her pussy into him, rocking from side to side, front to back.

"I cannot think of a worthier way to make final use of your broken table, Samantha." His eyes closed as she squeezed her inner muscles against his cock. "Ahhh, what you do to me."

"Tell me, what is it that I do to you, Lugal?" Her fingers zigzagged from his pecs, across his abs and traveled down to his groin, circling the broad base of his cock.

"You make me prickles all over. Like a thousand pins nipping at my flesh, my mind, my gut."

Samantha's fingers stilled. She imagined her expression probably mirrored her chagrin. "Oh dear...well that doesn't sound at all pleasant."

"I am sorry. I have not expressed my thoughts correctly." Lugal frowned. "I mean that I am always aware of your presence, Samantha. I feel your presence with me, in me, on me. It is a part of me. Unforgettable. I mean to say that you make me wild in such a way that I yearn to consume you." His hands snaked up her belly, tracing her rib cage and settling on her breasts. "To draw your essence into mine, to keep it with me always...forever..."

Forever. Tears sprang to Samantha's eyes. "Oh, Lugal..."

"Do not cry, little one." His gaze was full of concern as one hand left her breast and he wiped away the single fat tear coursing down her cheek. "I did not mean for my words to make you forlorn. I meant for them to make you smile."

"They make me very happy. I wish I could keep you with me forever too."

"Your words make me happy too." Planting his hands on the floor, alongside the broken tabletop, Lugal braced himself, lifting his body in sort of a backward pushup and bucking his hips against Samantha's pussy.

"How did you ever get to be so strong?" Samantha asked, amazed at his prowess as she was lifted along with him. Her gaze locked on his flexing muscles as he boosted them repeatedly and red-hot desire scorched through her.

"Many years of strength and stamina training," he grunted, doing another few of the backward pushups. "Pluck those berries for me as you ride me, Samantha."

"Berries?"

"The reddened berries that crown your pink tits. Take them in your fingers and pinch them. Show me how you like to pleasure yourself when you are alone."

Samantha gave a righteous gasp of indignation. "I never do that when I'm by myself," she lied.

The chuckle Lugal emitted was smug and telling. "Before I came out of the bottle, you spoke to Rosie of my photograph, saying that, although I was long dead, you would use your imagination and your vibrator. Remember?"

Oh, she remembered all right. Samantha felt her cheeks flush hot. "I don't remember anything of the kind."

"Remind me to spank you later for telling such an untruth," Lugal said, his tone husky and teasing. "I have been to the sex market, remember, Samantha? I now know what a vibrator is. The ones we purchased are in addition to the ones already stored in your bedside table drawer."

She sucked in an audible gasp. "You weren't supposed to see those."

"Now show me, my sweet." His hands ghosted her breasts, his palms making the most maddening, briefest contact with her aching nipples. "Show me how you would touch yourself when you are thinking of me." He smiled. "It would please me greatly." With a focused grunt, he made his magical cock jerk inside her.

Samantha closed her eyes, bringing her fingers to her breasts with some hesitation. "I would picture myself in Sumer, waiting for you to come back from a lengthy battle." She caught her nipples between her fingers, softly at first, and then applying more pressure.

"I would think about your strong, hard, muscled body and how I love to feel it crush me." She moaned now, pinching the rigid peaks harder. Opening her eyes to gaze down at Lugal, she continued. "I would imagine your fingers and your mouth at my breasts, torturing them sweetly as I writhe beneath you. You would be pinching and plucking like this." She played with herself, just the way she would if he was absent.

"Now show me with one hand still at your breast how you would touch your pretty, silken *murub*. Your cunt," he clarified. "And how you would make yourself come by pleasuring the little pink button between your sweet cunt lips."

Goose bumps broke out over Samantha's body as she slid one hand to her pussy. She couldn't believe she was about to masturbate in front of Lugal. Her fingers fluttered a moment before she finally slid them between the base of Lugal's cock and her lips, making direct contact with her clitoris.

"Yes, that's it," Lugal said, hiking himself up on his elbows to get a good view. "You like doing this for me, Samantha. I can feel your passion juices coursing down my cock." He molded her curves with his hands, treating her as if she were a delicate porcelain vase. "How my loins ache for you."

"That's probably because I fell on top of you and then you showed off by doing those impossible backward pushups with me still on top," Samantha pointed out.

"You are such a bad girl." Lugal grasped her arms, pulled her to his chest and then smacked her bottom with one hand.

"Oh!" Her ass stung, her pussy gushed and her clit entered countdown mode. "Oh yeah? Well this bad girl is going to make you pay for spanking her, mister."

One of Lugal's eyebrows shot up in amusement. "Is that so?"

"Yup. I'm going to make those loins of yours ache so bad that you'll scream out my name when I finally allow you to come."

"I see. And how do you propose to do this, my brazen little temptress?"

Determined to make this as hot and as much fun as possible, Samantha shoved down any remaining shyness or embarrassment and went to work. She wiggled her finger between her pussy and his cock, slid it around inside, then slipped it out—and brought it to her mouth.

She parted her lips, doing her damndest to look provocative and alluring. Placing her finger on her tongue, she closed her mouth and her eyes and gave a deep, exaggerated moan.

"Mmmm," she cooed, drawing her finger through her pursed lips and swirling a lick at the tip. "I can taste my cream mixed with those little salty drops of pre-cum from your great big cock. But you know what?"

Lugal grinned. "What, little one?"

"Now that I've taken my finger away from my little pink clit, it's all achy and lonely. Maybe I'd better get back to slipping and sliding my fingertip over the silky pearl while you watch me, hmm?"

Without waiting for his response, Samantha swirled her finger around and down her flesh from her throat, over her breasts and belly, and back to her pussy, where she tucked it into the warm, wet recesses of her center.

"Oooh, yes...that's much better." She let her head fall back and moaned, making sure to use enough movement so that it would be crystal clear to Lugal as to exactly what she was doing. Just for good measure, she thrust out her chest, shimmying her breasts, certain he would enjoy watching them sway. His gawking expression confirmed her suspicions.

"Gods..." he groaned, straining now to keep his head aloft to watch her pleasure herself.

"Of course, my very best, very strongest orgasms happen when I make sure to mix plenty of clit and nipple action. I especially love the feel of your teeth on my nipples, Lugal. Tugging, biting. And the feel of your mouth sucking me there. Just thinking about it brings me closer to orgasm."

"I am more than happy to gratify your desire, Samantha," he said in a sinfully tempting voice. "Come. Dangle your tit over my mouth. I will claim it in my teeth and make you wild with pleasure."

"Hmmm, as tempting as that sounds, no...I don't think so."

"No?" he repeated, clearly surprised.

"I'm going to bite my own nipple. Maybe even suck it. What do you think, Lugal?" She heard his sharp intake of breath and watched his eyes widened so big she almost laughed.

"I have never seen it done."

"In that case I'll just have to be the first, won't I?" The fingers of one hand still busy swirling at her clit, Samantha brought an ample breast to her mouth, shifting this way and that until she was able to claim the stiff nipple between her teeth.

She made sure to whimper, groan and writhe and do everything else possible to drive Lugal crazy. Watching him, his attention rapt as she suckled her own breast, was an experience she'd never forget. His eyes about popped out of his head and he kept making these needy, lusty, longing noises deep in his throat.

She let her breast pop free of her mouth and blew on the wet flesh, watching it crinkle and watching Lugal's expression grow solemn. Oh yeah, the man had serious, primal fucking on his mind.

Samantha swirled her hips and then slid up and down his thick, long column, careful not to slide clear off him. "I'll bet you're probably just about ready to come now, aren't you, Lugal?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't. I haven't finished fucking you yet, my handsome genie."

"I must," he said in a strangled voice. "My balls burn with the need for release."

"Too bad." In a flash, she lifted her hips high and his cock popped free, wet, gleaming and bobbing before her. Sliding his pliable foreskin over the sensitive crown, she gently pressed the top inch or so of his shaft dragging a purely primitive hiss from his throat.

"You're going to hold it," she instructed. "Until I give you permission to come. But I, on the other hand, can come any time I damn well please."

"Vixen," he accused. "Witch."

"Genie," she countered, slipping her finger from her pussy. Samantha knew all it would take was another quick swipe or two and she'd go right over the edge. But she

had more to accomplish before satisfying herself. Leaning forward, she sandwiched his cock with her breasts and started a slow glide.

"Mmm, doesn't that bold, dark, swarthy skin of yours look handsome nestled between my soft, dove-white breasts?"

"A finer sight I have never seen," he answered. "A more beautiful and giving woman I have never known."

Although his words made her heart soar, Samantha remained in character as the one in charge. "Pretty words, mighty warrior, but I'm still not going to let you come until I'm ready."

"She-demon," he charged.

She almost laughed at that. "When you come, I want you to spray your creamy white genie seed all over my breasts," she whispered as their gazes locked. "And then you know what I'm going to do, Lugal?"

"What?" he asked, his voice a deep croak, his dark eyes turbulent with passion.

"I'm going to lick every little tasty drop of your male essence from my pale flesh with the tip of my little pink tongue." She licked her lips to make a point.

As he half-drooled, half-panted, she bent her head and dug her tongue into the tiny hole at the tip of his cock.

"Now you may come," she said softly, fisting him with both hands and pumping him hard. "All over my pretty white breasts."

She observed the marked change in his expression as Lugal's muscles tightened. His jaw clamped tight, his hands clasped her arms like steel cuffs. As he yelled out her name through clenched teeth, like a wild savage cry, she watched his hard shower of seed branding her. She aimed his shooting cum at each breast, bathing her nipples as he watched and shuddered in the throes of ecstasy.

Once his cock was spent, Samantha lifted her breasts to her mouth, swirling her tongue amid Lugal's creamy essence and lapping every drop of it up. Then she held her hands aloft, examining them and sucking any existing semen from her fingers, one by one.

"Gods, how I love you, my sweet, beautiful Samantha," Lugal murmured, slipping his fingers inside her labia and pinching her clit.

Samantha whimpered. The countdown to ecstasy resumed and a second definitive squeeze was all it took for her primed body to quake and tremble with pleasure. Stiffening at first, her senses whirled, floating back and forth between fantasy and reality.

As she fell against his chest, she wondered if she'd heard Lugal correctly.

She could have sworn he'd just told her he loved her.

Chapter Sixteen

"I have a feeling you're going to be very sore," Samantha said as they rose from the fractured pine table on the kitchen floor."

Lugal shrugged. "It is of no consequence. I heal quickly."

She wanted to ask him about what he said. About loving her. Did he mean it or was it just fanciful sex talk that fled from his thoughts as soon as he'd uttered it? *Gods, how I love you*, he'd said. Did that mean he loved her like a friend? Well, a friend with benefits. Or did he mean he was *in love* with her?

Was it possible that he could actually have such strong feelings for her after only knowing her a few days? Well, why not? After all, *she* was in love with *him*, wasn't she? Yeah, but the man was like an Adonis. And she was average at best. Maybe he was simply lulled into thinking he loved her because she was the only woman around. Or because he could only have sex with his possessor. Or because —

"Samantha?" Lugal snapped his fingers.

She blinked. "Hmm?"

"You have not heard anything I said. Is something wrong? Your expression looks..." he cocked his head, "oddly pinched. Do you feel ill?"

She gazed into Lugal's eyes as he waited for her answer. They looked the same as usual, she noted, espresso brown, alert and full of life. There was no indication he'd suddenly realized she was the woman who completed him. That she was the other half of his soul. The key to his heart. The salsa atop his enchilada.

He wasn't looking at her all gooey and doe-eyed, like he yearned to drop to one knee and propose marriage. If he really meant what he said, if he was really in love with her, then wouldn't the look in his eyes be all foggy and romantic? No, those words just tumbled out of his mouth without him even realizing it, that's all. They were simply words uttered in a moment of —

"Samantha!"

Her eyes widened when he shook her and she focused on his face. The look she saw there was one of concern, not deep, abiding, *I-want-to-spend-every-waking-moment-of-my-life-with-you* love.

"Huh?"

"I asked where I should dispose of the pieces of wood. Is it the table, little one? Is that why you seem overcome? Are you distressed because we broke it?"

His question snapped her back to reality and she laughed. "Oh...yeah, that must be it. Sorry. I guess I was more attached to the old chunk of pine than I thought."

"I will build another table for you. I will make certain it is sturdy and well-built."

Samantha clasped his biceps and smiled as she gave them a squeeze. "Like you, you mean?"

He drew her into a quick hug and kissed the tip of her nose. "Yes, like me." He studied her face. "I fear for your wellbeing, little one. You are overtired and still in shock from the episode of my coming out of the bottle, I think. Tonight you must have plenty of undisturbed rest. Be assured that I will hold you in my arms as you sleep, without demanding that my cock be appeased."

His sweet offer elicited a chuckle from her. "Don't you want to jump my bones?" she asked with a coy smile, finger-walking across the substantial width of his shoulders.

"If this means to fuck you, then, yes. I wish to fuck you every time I look at you. But I am a man of honor and propriety, Samantha. Such a man does not force himself upon the woman he loves when she is clearly in dire need of a full night's sleep."

Samantha sucked in an audible gasp and flailed a finger at him. "There! You said it again. I heard you." She choked on a joyful scream, swallowing it as she did her best to avoid imitating a jumping bean.

He gaped at her as if she'd sprouted goat horns.

"Heard me say what?"

"That you love me." He still had that strange look on his face, which had her doubting whether she'd heard him correctly. "That's what you said, isn't it?"

"Yes. So?" Lugal shrugged, looking all hunky and handsome and blasé as hell. "It pleases you, does it not?"

She was careful not to take too deep a breath for fear her heart might come leaping from her chest right out her mouth and bounce off his perfectly sculpted pecs. "Before I answer you, let me make sure we're on the absolute same wavelength here, okay?"

He narrowed one eye. "You speak gibberish I do not understand."

"I want to make sure," she began slowly, "that when you say you love me, you're talking about the forever man-woman kind of love that makes people want to get married. That kind of love. Is that what you mean? Or do you mean you love me like a sister?"

Lugal's lip curled in a disgusted sneer. "What kind of man would bed his own sister?"

"Lugal!"

"And you know I cannot marry you, Samantha."

"Oh for heaven's sake. Let's not quibble over semantics. I know you can't marry me and you wouldn't sleep with your sister. I just want to know if you would if you could, that's all."

"Sleep with my sister?" He looked horrified.

Her frustrated *tsk* practically echoed off the walls. "No! Marry me!"

"Of course." He gave another nonchalant shrug. "Did I not tell you I loved you?"

"What do you mean, *of course*?!" she screeched. "How can you just stand there looking all cool, calm and collected and saying *of course* like that after you just told me you're in love with me? Don't you even want to know if I love you back?"

He chuckled – actually chuckled at this single most important moment of her entire life.

"But of course you love me, little one." Lugal wrapped his arms around her, smoothing his hand through her hair. "Only a fool would not realize it." He trailed kisses from her temple to her throat and back up to her mouth, where he claimed her lips in a possessive kiss. "And I am no fool," he said when their lips parted.

"I have never encountered a woman like you, in all my thousands of years of existence. Did I not already tell you that? Have I not already said that you are kind and beautiful and sweet and giving? Is it not clear when I gaze into your eyes while we make love together that I cherish you with the whole of my heart?"

Samantha started to cry.

Lugal responded with a frustrated sigh. "Now I am confused. Why do you cry each time I try to say something to make you smile?"

"Because you're wonderful and I love you and I can't believe how lucky I am," she sobbed, yanking him so close that their bodies were nearly fused. "Tell me again, Lugal. Tell me you love me." She clutched onto him, reassuring herself that he was real, that he wasn't a muscle-bound, hunky figment of her overactive imagination.

"I love you," he whispered against her ear and she sucked in a breath. "You are my moon, my stars, my sun. You are my everything, sweet Samantha. *Ze ki angu*."

"What does that mean," she asked in a small voice.

"It means *you are my beloved*. In Sumerian, it is comparable to the words, *I love you*."

"Oh...that's nice. Very nice."

"If it were in my power, I would ask you to be my wife, to share my life, to bear my babes – our little goats. I love you, Samantha. I love you today, tomorrow and always." He rocked her back and forth gently as he spoke.

"Just one little question," she said, trying not to expire on the spot from an extreme overdose of happiness until she was sure, *really* sure.

"Hmm? What is it, little one?"

"How can you be sure it's really love when we've known each other for just three days? Maybe it's just a potent case of lust."

"I will answer your question with one of my own. "How can you be sure that what you feel for me is really love after the same amount of time?"

"Oh Lugal..." she sighed. "I love you so much it hurts."

"Yes, I know." He patted her back as she snuggled against him.

Samantha's tears turned to laughter. "We have to work on that ego of yours."

"I think not. You love me the way I am. I am the perfect man for you."

"What are we going to do?" she asked, just above a whisper. "I mean, when you have to..."

"Shhh," he coaxed, smoothing her hair again. "We will not focus on the time when we must part. Instead, we will focus on filling each moment of our time together, however short, with as much life and love as possible." He held her at arm's length and smiled down at her. "We will create happy memories to last dozens of lifetimes. Now no more tears. We will have dinner, then you will go to sleep and rest while I watch over you."

Samantha yawned, feeling safe, protected, loved and utterly, supremely happy. "That sounds heavenly. I do need to get some sleep because I have to be at work at eight tomorrow morning." She groaned. "Oh hell, I forgot all about that." She studied Lugal's face as her thoughts raced. "If I leave you here alone tomorrow, will you promise me you'll be careful not to get into any trouble?"

"You disparage me with your unfounded fears." Lugal scoffed. "I am a grown man, Samantha. A leader of armies. I think you can be assured that I can manage to care for myself without incident."

Samantha didn't even want to contemplate what could conceivably happen. But she sure as hell couldn't take Lugal with her to TBT. "You can't leave the house. You have to stay here. You can watch TV and use the computer until I get home. I'm just working until twelve, so I'll only be gone a few hours. There's plenty of food in the house, so that's no problem. Oh, and absolutely no saber usage, got that?" She poked his chest.

"You have my word that I shall be prudent, Samantha. What I do not understand is why you must go to this job. Once your wishes are granted, you will not need Bunny Turner or her business. You will own Henley House and your own successful business."

"I need to go through my office and gather all the special materials I created so I can take them home. Otherwise, Bunny will confiscate them and use them as her own."

"What kind of materials? Do you speak of fabrics you have sewn? Garments to wear at work?"

"Hah! I'm lucky if I can stitch on a button. Class materials I designed for my own use because I never felt comfortable with the hard sell corporate stuff TBT provided. All they care about is selling their foods, supplements, CDs and pricey contract extensions. That attitude is reflected in all the company materials. I need to get my notebooks, posters and audio-visual stuff out of there before anyone finds out I'm quitting."

"I understand."

"I really want to have a chance to say goodbye to all my clients too. They're all very special to me, Lugal. Dear, wonderful people. They depend on me. I don't want to just disappear from their lives without an explanation." She frowned at the painful twinge deep inside. "Damn, it's going to be hard to leave them—and I know it'll be hard for them too. Like I'm abandoning them."

"Can you not explain to them about your three wishes and tell them to become clients at your own business, Beyond the Scale?"

Samantha smiled as the name of her future company spilled from his lips. "You remembered."

"I would never forget something of such great importance to you, Samantha."

"Oh lordy," she sighed, "you certainly are a keeper, Lugal. One in a million."

He nodded in agreement. "Indeed I am."

"And don't forget modest." Samantha tugged his head down to plant a kiss on his chin. "I'll explain to my clients that I'm leaving to open my own business, but I have to be careful. I don't want anyone at TBT thinking I'm trying to harvest their clients. That wouldn't be right."

"TBT will be losing an honorable, caring weight-loss counselor."

"Thanks. After I talk to them, I'll turn in my resignation. I'll give a two-week notice, but from past experience when others left the company, they'll probably tell me to leave right away. Then they'll have someone watch over me to make sure I don't take any company property with me."

"They are mistrustful." Lugal nodded. "Yes, it is a good plan to take your materials out of there before you resign."

"You're absolutely positive that my wishes will come true once I make them, right? There won't be any glitches?"

"There is no doubt whatsoever. Put your trust in me, Samantha. I would not lead you astray."

"How can I not trust the man I love? The man who loves me?" She beamed a bright grin, feeling so giddy it was as if she'd downed an entire bottle of champagne. "Okay, after I get home tomorrow I'll make the first two of my wishes. Once everything is in place I'll tell Rosie I want her to come to work for me. She'll be top dog, right under me." She thumbed her chest and grinned. "I'm the head honcho."

She laughed when she caught the perplexed look on Lugal's face. "I'm definitely going to have to clue you in on current vernacular."

"I would appreciate that." He smoothed his thumb along her bottom lip before pressing a sweet kiss there. "It would save me from Googling all the gibberish you speak." His warm smile was charming and appealing, just like the rest of him.

Samantha's cell phone rang. Reluctantly, she broke away from Lugal's embrace and walked to the counter, newly aware that she was standing stark naked in her kitchen. Rosie's number appeared on the readout.

As soon as she answered, it was déjà vu. Just as she'd done when she talked to Samantha in the sex shop, Rosie chattered in her ear, asking if she was okay, if Lugal was still there, if she'd made her wishes yet, etcetera.

After assuring Rosie that all was well, Samantha told her she'd see her at work in the morning. They were working the same eight-to-twelve shift. On a wickedly devilish

whim, right before they hung up, Samantha dangled the tidbit that she had a big surprise to tell her about. In the middle of Rosie's excited third-degree, Samantha said *buh-bye*, and flipped the phone closed, ending the call.

* * * * *

Monday at work was tougher than Samantha had expected. The day had started on a high note as she woke to the alluring aromas of fresh coffee, bacon, eggs and toast. Lugal had prepared breakfast all by himself, which tickled her heart. So what if the coffee was full of grounds because he'd forgotten to put in the filter? Who cared if the bacon was black, the eggs like rubber and the toast charred beyond recognition?

It was the warm, sweet, caring gesture of the man who loved her and she cherished it as she ate from the coffee table in the living room.

While giving her notice following her shift at TBT had been liberating, bidding farewell to her beloved clients had her, and them, in tears. Then, in a totally unexpected move, Rosie surprised Samantha by tendering her resignation as well.

"Charlie's never had a good feeling about Bunny and TBT anyway," she told Samantha as they walked to their cars with their closely staff-inspected boxes of personal belongings. "And with you gone, there's no way I'm going to stay here and be the oldest, chunkiest counselor on the block." She laughed and Samantha joined her. "Besides, since you're making me second-in-command at Beyond the Scale..." She paused to giggle. "Have I told you how completely beyond excited I am about that?"

"Only fifty times in the last five minutes," Samantha teased.

"Can you blame me, Sam? Anyway, I want to give BTS my full attention."

"But what if it doesn't work out? What if there's a glitch in the wishing mechanism? You'll be left without a job and I'll feel terrible."

Rosie shrugged. "I don't think we have to worry about that, but if anything happens, we'll find other jobs. No problem, kiddo." She clapped Samantha on the back. "So let's hear about you and Mr. Non-Stop-Muscle. What's the scoop?"

Now it was Samantha's turn to giggle. Hugging herself, she twirled around in the parking lot. "Oh, Rosie, I'm in love."

"Uh-huh. Now tell me something I don't know." Rosie laughed. "It's written all over your face, Sam."

"He told me he's in love with me too."

Rosie's smile shifted into a concerned frown. "Aw, honey, that's great news but...but what's going to happen once Lugal gets zapped back inside that bottle? Your little heart will be as good as mincemeat."

"I know. Losing him is the second worst thing I can think of."

"And the first?"

Samantha gazed into Rosie's eyes, blinking back the sudden rise of tears. "Thinking about Lugal being held captive in that damned bottle for eternity. That's the absolute worst thing I can possibly imagine – even worse than never seeing him again."

"Charlie's been doing some archaeological detective work," Rosie confided, her arm clasped tight around Samantha's shoulder. "He's trying to find a way to get Lugal out of this infernal mess."

Samantha's heart leapt. "Any luck so far?"

Rosie shook her head. "So far it's all been dead ends, but he'll keep trying. You know how determined Charlie gets once he has his mind set on something." She gave Samantha a sturdy buddy squeeze. "Okay, now let's get back to your place."

"Don't you have to pick up the kids?"

"Nope. Charlie's working from home today. No classes. That means you can cordially invite me to watch as you make your first two wishes." Samantha opened her mouth to respond. "And if you don't invite me," Rosie added before she could speak, "I'm coming anyway."

Samantha chuckled. "Of course you're invited. I just hope my little house is still standing once we get there. I've been biting my nails over leaving Lugal alone there all morning."

"No big deal. If your house has been hacked into toothpicks during your absence, you'll have Henley House anyway, right?"

"Now that's a positive spin if I ever heard one," Samantha answered with a wink. "Let's go."

A short while later both cars pulled into Samantha's driveway. She carried her box of the items she'd created to help her clients, while Rosie scooped up Samantha's other box packed under the watchful eyes of TBT staff.

"Well, I don't see any fire trucks or ambulances," Rosie quipped. "And I don't smell smoke."

Samantha nodded. "Looks like the place is intact." She chuckled softly. "Honestly, I don't know why I was worried. After all, he *is* an adult. What could happen?" She put her key in the door and opened it.

Samantha and Rosie stepped into the living room just in time to see Lugal fly across the room backward, howling out a noise that Samantha couldn't mimic if she tried. It looked like his hair was standing on end, kind of like an ebony halo all around his head.

"Holy shit! Lugal!" Gaping, Samantha dropped her box, letting it crash to the floor.

"Son of a bitch!" Rosie shouted, letting go of the box she carried too.

Before either of them even finished their astounded shrieks, Lugal's body flew past them, crashing through the living room's picture window behind the couch.

"Shit! Jesus! Oh my God!" Samantha screamed as she scrambled back out the front door to find Lugal sprawled out on the grass, spread eagle, bug-eyed, mouth open in a silent scream and huge shards of glass surrounding him. "Lugal!"

"Is he dead?" Rosie asked, squatting alongside Samantha. "Oh, Sam, look at him. I think he is. His eyes are wide open but they're just staring. And...oh, fuck, Sam, I think his body's smoking!"

"No! He said he can't die," Samantha cried, grabbing Lugal's wrist to feel for a pulse. "Lugal, look at me. Speak to me!"

"I don't think he's breathing," Rosie said.

Sucking in a sharp breath, Samantha said, "I don't think he is either. Oh God, Rosie, what are we going to do?"

"Call an ambulance, I guess. What the fuck happened? How could he just fly across the room like that?"

"Well, how the hell would I know? I was with you. Lugal, listen to me." Samantha held his hand in hers, slapping it. She was afraid to jostle any other part of him in case she made his injuries worse. "This is the voice of your possessor, Lugal. I am your mistress, your owner and I command you to breathe. Breathe, dammit! That's a direct order!"

Just as Rosie was about to dial 911, Lugal's chest expanded with a mighty whoosh and it seemed his lungs filled with air.

A warm gush of tears flowed down Samantha's cheeks. "He's alive. Oh, Lugal, you're alive!"

"He might be alive but it sure as hell looks like he's not feeling too keen," Rosie noted.

"Say something, Lugal," Samantha urged. "Tell me what happened. Are you terribly hurt?" Lugal mumbled something. "Did you hear what he said, Rosie?"

"No. He sounds like the tin guy in the Wizard of Oz when he was trying to say *oil can*." She slanted Samantha a questioning look. "Hey, do you think he's trying to ask for an oil can?"

"No." Samantha tsked. "Why would he ask for that? He's a genie, not a tin man. Come on, Lugal. Talk. Tell me what I should do."

Lugal blinked, but his eyeballs didn't move. Well, they sort of jiggled a little, but he just kept staring straight up.

"Electricity," he said just loud enough for them to hear.

"Holy shit, that's it," Rosie said. "That's why his hair was sticking straight out when he sailed past us. He electrocuted himself."

"I suppose a powerful enough electrical shock could propel him through the air like that," Samantha said. "I saw it on one of those science shows once. Lugal, is that what happened? Did you get an elec—"

"Silver paper." He turned his head ever so slowly and looked at the two women kneeling at his side. "Foil. I make experiment."

For the first time, Samantha noticed the two-inch wide cuffs of aluminum foil coiled around each of his bare arms above the elbow and at the wrist.

"What on earth did you do?"

"Examination of electrical outlet to see how it works. Metal foil made big shock."

"Typical man," Rosie said, shaking her head. "They're all just a bunch of overgrown kids."

Samantha growled in frustration. "Didn't I tell you not to get into any trouble while I was gone? Dammit, Lugal, you could have killed yourself." She was trembling from combined fear, relief and anger.

He uttered a whisper of a chuckle, then winced. "Nay. Cannot die. Only feels like dying."

"Are you in a lot of pain?" Rosie asked.

"Plenty."

The damn fool chuckled again and pain etched itself across his features.

"Now I understand meaning of conducting electricity," he said, his power of speech still not quite back to normal. "I Googled to learn about it."

Rosie gave Samantha a cockeyed look. "Did he say he Googled?"

"Yeah." Samantha sighed. "I showed him how." She shrugged. "How was I supposed to know he'd go and do something stupid and practically fry himself?" She narrowed her eyes at Lugal. "I'm very angry with you right now, Lugal. The only thing keeping me from wringing your neck is the fact that you're in so much pain. I hope you learned a lesson from this."

"I learned you are pretty when you are angry." He gave her a loopy smile.

She couldn't help but smile in return. Then she leaned over him and kissed the corner of his mouth.

"Ow." He winced.

"Oh..." Her fingers flew to her lips. "I'm sorry."

"Not to worry, little one. I heal very soon."

"What's all the ruckus?"

Samantha looked up to see Mrs. Willoughby inching her way up the sidewalk with her walker.

"Ooh, Lord a'mighty. Is that poor boy okay?"

"Yes, Mrs. Willoughby," Samantha answered. "He's...uh, he's the electrician I hired to fix uh...an electrical problem. There was an accident, but he's just fine now."

"Electrician, hmm? Guess they're workin' bare-chested and sleepin' over to get the job done nowadays." Her wrinkled old face cracked a smile and she winked. "I may be old but I've still got eyes."

Samantha could have died.

"Wow, you just turned twelve shades of red, Sam," a giggling Rosie helpfully observed.

"Poor guy seems accident prone," Mrs. Willoughby noted. "Least that's the way it seemed when he was playing Tarzan and fell out of that tree out back a while earlier."

"What!" Samantha gasped and her gaze flew back to Lugal. "You fell out of a tree?"

"Yup, him and his sword. Right on to the roof and then down to the grass. Boom!" Mrs. Willoughby explained with a sharp thwack of her walker against the concrete walk. "I was out back watering my azaleas and saw the whole thing. Thought he killed himself for sure. I was about to dial an ambulance when he suddenly hopped back to his feet."

"Too heavy for branch," Lugal explained.

"What in the hell were you doing up in the tree in the first place?" Samantha demanded.

"Gathering wood to make new table for kitchen." The corner of Lugal's mouth curved up.

"Oh for chrissakes." Samantha breathed a weighty sigh.

"What happened to the old table?" Rosie asked.

"It broke when we—" Lugal began.

"Nothing!" Samantha blurted, giving Lugal a warning glare. If he hadn't been in agony she would have slapped her hand over his mouth as a precaution. "It...it just got old and it cracked, that's all."

"Anything I can do for the poor boy?" Mrs. Willoughby asked, her eyes roving over Lugal's large, spread, half-naked body. "Like maybe some mouth-to-mouth?" She snickered. "It's been a while, but I think I could get the hang of it again."

Clearing her throat, Samantha smiled and said, "No thank you, Mrs. Willoughby. Everything's under control."

"Electrician. Hah!" the old woman noted as she toddled off with a *clack-thump, clack thump* as her walker connected with the ground. "Electricians never looked like that in my day."

"You never told me that Mrs. Willoughby is a dirty old lady," Rosie said, laughing.

Samantha grinned as she watched the old woman hobble back to her house, her step a bit more spry than she'd seen it before. "I never knew."

Lugal suddenly sat up. "I am better now."

Samantha looked at his back. "You're bleeding!" She carefully plucked small jagged shards of glass from his skin. "There's glass embedded all over your back."

"It will go away. Did you know there are more ways than just a simple switch to turn on your coffeemaker?"

"Oh Lord...what are you talking about, Lugal?"

"By touching the correct wires together—"

Rosie laughed. "He probably blew up your coffeepot."

"Nay. I only took it apart to learn how it works."

Samantha's shoulders slumped. "Oh dear. I'm afraid to ask what else you did."

"Nothing as amazing as my electrical outlet experiment. But there have been some excellent modifications. I have improved many household things for you, Samantha." Lugal beamed a grin and Samantha groaned.

"Holy shit. Look, Sam," an astonished Rosie said. "The cuts on his back are healing. They're just disappearing. He's not bleeding anymore."

Lugal jumped to his feet and stretched. Watching all those muscles in his chest and arms ripple, flex and roll was a magnificent sight. If Mrs. Willoughby was peeking through her curtains, she was probably getting some unexpected rapid heartbeat activity – along with a hot flash or two.

"Come, let me show you all the excellent ways I have improved your dwelling," he said, his arms wrapped around Samantha's and Rosie's shoulders as he led them into the house.

Rosie looked over at Samantha and snickered. "Be afraid," she said out the side of her mouth. "Be very, very afraid."

Chapter Seventeen

"Whoa!" Rosie said as the threesome stepped into Samantha's kitchen. "All you need is a disco light ball and you'll be all set."

"Magnificent, is it not?" Lugal said with a proud, puffed-up grin.

"My God..." Samantha gazed at the walls, entirely papered with aluminum foil. Upon close inspection she found that the foil had been stapled on in some places and seemingly glued in others. "Why did you do this, Lugal?"

"To increase light and make insulation from both heat and cold. This metal foil is among the greatest inventions I have ever encountered. You see?" He held his arms out for inspection. "It is not only for household purposes, it also makes lightweight cuff adornments for the arms and wrists. Did you know you can cut your roasting time almost in half for turkey by covering the fowl with a metal foil tent? And that the meat will be juicier? And that drinks will remain colder if the glasses are wrapped in foil?"

Lugal stepped to one of the kitchen cabinets and opened it. Like a game show hostess, he gestured to the drinking glasses with a smile, each of which had been cuffed with foil.

"You've been a busy boy," Rosie noted. She leaned her face toward the wall and sniffed. "Um...what did you use to glue on the foil?"

"Mud did not work well. The foil loosened when it dried," Lugal explained, and Samantha wondered where he'd been digging for the dirt. "Then I discovered multiple uses for simple, everyday items around the house by using Google," he proudly announced. "I used toothpaste in some places and when I ran out of that, I made a mixture of flour and water and used that."

Samantha groaned and Rosie laughed. "I can't believe you did that, Lugal," Samantha said on a sigh.

"I knew you would be surprised and pleased," he said, looking quite happy with himself. "Peanut butter also makes good mortar and is very delicious. I ran out because I ate it from knife."

Rosie snickered and elbowed Samantha. "That's the same thing we do."

"Did you know," Lugal went on, "toothpaste makes an excellent substitute for plaster compound when covering up nail holes? You will find no more unsightly nail holes in your walls, Samantha."

"Well, I'm just...tickled pink, Lugal," Samantha said with a deadpan expression. "I hardly know what to say."

"Such ingenious times you live in," he noted. "I have learned so much today. My favorite part was gaining knowledge of electricity. Your coffeemaker now operates by

this wall switch," he said, "as well as the button on the pot. Here, let me show you." He reached for the wall switch and Samantha grabbed his hand, stilling it.

"Uh...no, that's okay," she said, moving his hand away, terrified that he'd flip the switch, get zapped and go sailing through another window. "We can check it later."

"I have also adjusted the wiring mechanisms on your other appliances to make them operate with greater ease."

"Oh, well, that's great. Really great. Thank you."

"In other words," Rosie offered, "he booby-trapped the place. You'll never know when you might get jolted from here to eternity at the mere touch of a switch."

Samantha whapped her arm as Rosie snickered.

"I would be happy to come to your abode, Rosie, and show Charlie how to make the same modifications," Lugal suggested.

"Yeah, that sounds like a great idea," Samantha said with an evil grin.

"Charlie's lucky if he can flip on a light switch, much less modify one." Rosie laughed.

"Then I will be glad to do the work for him," Lugal offered.

"Thanks, Handy Andy." Rosie gave Lugal a pat on the back. "I'll let Charlie know."

"You have not noticed the new table I constructed, Samantha. Do you like it?"

With the glitz of the aluminum foil-papered walls reflecting both sunlight and electric lights surrounding her, Samantha's attention had definitely been hijacked. Her eyes fell on a table structure made of tightly wound twigs, with crisscrossed branches for legs. It was attractive and unique enough to be offered for sale in one of those artsy boutiques.

"Wow, I'm impressed. That's wonderful, Lugal. You're very handy, as well as artistic."

"Yeah, who knew genies could be so multifunctional?" Rosie quipped.

"How did you manage to do all this in such a short time?" Samantha noted that he'd set the table with plates, silverware, foil-wrapped placemats and foil-cuffed water glasses.

"I have always been a fast worker," he explained. "Now, with the element of limited time being a factor, I work even faster." He placed his hand on the tabletop and shook it. "You see? It is well-built and functional. I have braced it well underneath."

"This is nice, but I'm surprised that your old kitchen table fell apart," Rosie said. "It seemed really sturdy to me."

"Yes, well, as I said before, it just—" Samantha began.

"It broke under our weight as we made love atop it," Lugal blurted.

"Damn," Rosie said, barking laughter as her eyes widened. "You two are a couple of regular snuggle bunnies, huh?"

"Yes, we really like to fuck, if that is what you mean," Lugal agreed with a broad grin.

"Oh good grief," Samantha said. "Not another word, Lugal. And that goes for you too, Rosie," she said as Rosie's mouth opened with a no-doubt smart-ass comment. "Just zip it." She made a zipping motion across her lips.

In hopes of changing the subject, Samantha studied the construction of the table. "What kind of fiber did you use to bind the branches? Are the trees still standing, or did you cut them down?"

"They remain. These branches were sorely in need of trimming because they overhung the roof."

"So you just scooted up the tree trunks with your trusty saber and hacked away, huh?" Rosie asked.

"Yes, exactly." Lugal nodded. "And when I could not find any rope or twine for binding, I used the amazing stretching material I found in your bedroom, Samantha. It is another miracle substance, to be sure."

"Stretching material?" She got down close to the table, inspected the thin wrappings and gasped. "My pantyhose! You cut up my pantyhose!"

"When twisted, the pliable fiber becomes very strong," Lugal said. "I can imagine many uses for pantyhose, as you call them. They would make perfect bindings for wrists and ankles when we are—"

"Lugal!" Samantha shouted. "Can we please keep some things private?"

"Oh, Sam, you're such a *bad* girl," Rosie teased. "I never suspected."

"Just shut up, Rosie, or I'll boot your butt out of here before I make my wishes."

Sporting a mischievous smirk, Rosie pulled an invisible zipper across her lips.

"You are ready to make your wishes?" Lugal asked.

Samantha sucked in a deep breath. "Yes. But let's do it in the living room, okay?" She had this eerie feeling that something weird might happen if she made her wishes surrounded by all that foil and adapted electrical wiring Lugal had fiddled with. It wouldn't be good if her wishes came true and she wasn't around to enjoy them because she'd been fried to a crisp during a lollapalooza of an electrical arc bouncing off her walls during the wishing process.

"Yes, the living room will be good," Lugal said as they left the kitchen. "As a word of caution, perhaps you might want to avoid turning on the TV until I have finished my electrical modifications. That's what I was working on when I was suddenly transported through the air and out the window."

Samantha looked at the ragged gash in the glass behind her and sighed. "I forgot about the window." She gazed around the room. "Careful not to touch anything electrical," she advised Rosie. "Okay, is everybody ready?" Samantha briskly rubbed her hands together.

"Ready," Lugal and Rosie chorused.

"This is it, Lugal. I'm going to say the official words." She beamed a smile at him and he nodded. "For my first official wish, I wish to own and be able to afford the upkeep of Henley House."

She waited for Lugal to clap his hands over his arms in a genie-esque gesture or wiggle his nose or maybe blink and nod, but he simply smiled.

"When does he go into his genie act," Rosie whispered, clearly with the same images in mind.

Samantha shrugged. "Aren't you going to do anything, Lugal? You know, go *boing*, or something?"

"It is already done," he told her. "The wish has been granted. Henley House is yours, little one."

"That's it? No boom or kabang or bolts of lightning or anything?" Rosie asked, sounding disappointed.

Lugal laughed. "I am not like *I Dream of Jeannie* or other genies of fictional tales. The wish is voiced, channeled through me and granted. The process is that simple."

"So, you mean if we go over to Henley House right now," Samantha asked Lugal, "I could just walk right in and nobody would question it?"

"I have no idea of the working mechanisms of the wishes, Samantha. I can only tell you that I am certain your wish was granted."

"All we have to do is hop in the car and take a drive over there to make sure," Rosie suggested.

"I can't wait!" Samantha said. "Let's go,"

"We will also take your car," Lugal said to Samantha. "Because we will be spending the night in your new home."

"You're that confident, huh?" Rosie asked, and Lugal gave a definite nod. "Okay, but, as much as I enjoy feasting my eyes on those aluminum foil-cuffed muscles of yours, Lugal, you might want to put on a shirt first." She winked.

"Did you want to make your second wish before we go?" Lugal asked, heading for the bedroom to get a shirt.

"No, let's see how this one turned out first," Samantha said. "If it worked, then I can make wish number two from my very own nineteenth-century mansion." The thought tickled her insides. Even though she had the greatest faith in Lugal, she couldn't begin to fathom being the mistress of Henley House.

When Lugal returned to the room he held the large bag in his hands. It appeared to be stuffed.

"What's that?" Samantha asked.

Lugal turned the bag around, revealing the sex shop's logo. "Just a few things we might need," he told her, his charming smile a flash of white.

Feeling her cheeks color as Rosie snickered away, Samantha wordlessly turned on her heels and marched toward her car. "We'll have to call someone to board up that picture window," she said along the way.

In less than fifteen minutes they pulled up in front of the ornate Victorian mansion. A high-end real estate company's for sale sign was mounted in the grass.

"Wow," Rosie said, gaping. "I forgot about how huge this place is. I can't believe you're actually going to be living here."

"That makes two of us." Her heart beating a rapid tattoo, Samantha started up the long concrete walk and stone steps, Rosie and Lugal at her heels. "Oh my God, I'm so nervous. I can't help having this feeling that I'm going to get there and the real estate agent will take one look at me and laugh in my face when I tell her I'm the owner."

"For all we know," Rosie noted, "nobody's even there. Maybe we should drive over to the real estate office instead."

"Nope. There are cars here," Samantha said. "I'm sure someone's inside." With a voluminous breath, she said, "Let's do it," and marched up to the front door, ringing the bell.

A chic, sophisticated, designer-label type answered. Samantha felt the effects of the woman's icy once-over as she appraised Samantha, expecting her worst fears were about to come true.

"Yes? May I help you with something?" The model-thin woman's gaze floated to Rosie, who got the ice treatment as well, before the woman's eyes settled on Lugal. Heat radiated and her demeanor changed as she glimpsed the unabashedly handsome man.

And then she gasped.

"Oh good God, he has a weapon!"

Cocking her head, Samantha wondered for a moment how the woman could possibly know about the size of Lugal's lethally lusty cock. Maybe he'd forgotten to zip up the fly on his jeans. Her gaze flew to his groin and then her eyes widened as she spied the scabbard affixed to his hip.

With a roll of the eyes, she groaned. "For heaven's sake, Lugal, I told you to leave that thing in the car."

Lugal's hand went to the handle of his saber. "I prefer to keep my saber at my side in the event of trouble," he explained, addressing his comment to Samantha before giving the woman at the door a purposeful look.

The woman visibly shuddered, color draining from her face, as she uttered an unintelligible declaration of distress and slammed the door.

"Now see what you've done?" Rosie chastised Lugal. "Take that thing off and stow it in the car before you get us all hauled off to jail."

"But—" Lugal began.

"Do it!" Samantha and Rosie chorused in no-nonsense tones.

"Honestly," Rosie said with a tsk as brooding Lugal marched back to the car. "Men and their toys..."

Once Lugal had returned, frowning, weaponless and arms folded defiantly across his broad chest, Samantha rang the bell again.

"Go away or I'll call the police," the woman said through the door.

"It's okay," Samantha assured. "He took the sword off and put it in the car. Actually," she chuckled, "it wasn't a real sword," she lied. "Just a toy. Lugal is...um...he's an exotic dancer and that was just part of his costume." She figured it was a believable fib because Lugal, with his magnificent fuck-me body, certainly did look the part of a male stripper.

The door cracked open a few inches. "Perhaps you've somehow mistaken Henley House for a strip club," the woman suggested acerbically as her gaze searched below Lugal's waist. The tip of her tongue darted out to lick her lips. "Or is he here to deliver a strip-o-gram?" Her features smoothed into the veneer of a smile. "It's not my birthday," she cooed, "but..."

Oh, this wasn't going well. This wasn't going well at all.

"No, it's nothing like that. We're here because I'm, um..." Samantha swallowed hard. "I'm Samantha Rutledge. The new owner of Henley House." It was sheer murder getting those words out while the urbane woman telegraphed an expression of downright incredulity.

The door opened wide and the woman's eyebrow shot up while her mouth pinched. "Clearly you're mistaken," she said, as if speaking to an imbecile. "This is Henley House." Her shoulders straightened and chin elevated as she spoke. "I'm the agent for this property. An offer by my buyers," she gestured toward a well-dressed middle-aged couple browsing the through the rooms, "was accepted by the Henley Foundation this morning. "Now, if you'll excuse me..."

After dismissing them, she gave Lugal a final longing once-over before closing the door.

Her shoulders slumped, Samantha turned to Rosie and Lugal. "The wish didn't work," she said, determined not to cry.

Lugal banged his fist on the door.

"Lugal, don't," Samantha said, tugging him away. "She'll only humiliate us even more. It's okay, really." She smoothed her hand along his back. "I love my little house—and all the special modifications you made to it," she lied. "I don't want you to feel bad that the wish didn't work."

Lugal pounded on the door again and Samantha cringed when the real estate agent opened it, looking none too pleased.

"Is there something else?" she said, her words freezing in midair as they left her lips.

"You have made an error," Lugal stated. "Samantha now owns Henley House."

The woman's expression was caustic at best. "As I've already explained—" She raised her finger, indicating they should wait. "Monica Sharp," she said, looking past them. Samantha turned but saw no one there. "What do you mean? What kind of problem?" the woman said, and that's when Samantha realized she had one of those wireless cell phone clips attached to her ear.

"What?!" The real estate agent flinched at whatever the person on the other line said, then turned to look at her clients. "If you'll excuse me," she said to Lugal, closing the door. This time Lugal caught it and pushed it open, following her into the house and gesturing for Samantha and Rosie to do the same.

"I'm sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Stephenson," the agent said to her clients. "It seems your earnest money funds failed to transfer. The purchase contract for Henley House has been voided."

"That's preposterous. Impossible," Mr. Stephenson blustered. "It was done by electronic transfer this morning at my attorney's office."

"Monica Sh—" the agent said again, clearly answering a new call. Her face blanched. "You're absolutely certain?" Her gaze shot to Samantha. "Positive?" She sucked in a deep breath. "All right, yes, I'll take care of it."

She turned toward Samantha. "What did you say your name was again?"

"Samantha Rutledge."

The agent swallowed hard. "May I see some identification, please?"

Samantha whipped out her wallet and displayed license, credit cards and her library card.

"Your offer to purchase has been accepted by the Henley Foundation, Ms. Rutledge," she said, looking dazed and bewildered. "Congratulations."

Leaping nearly a foot off the floor, Rosie gasped. "Sam, you got it!"

Samantha bit her tongue to keep from giving a rowdy *whoopie!* while Lugal's arm snaked around her in a congratulatory hug.

"You can't do that," Mr. Stephenson said. "My offer was accepted before theirs. I'll sue."

"John..." his wife cautioned, touching his arm.

"I rather doubt you'll be doing that, Mr. Stephenson," the agent said, sneering at the man as if he were a fat maggot.

There was a rap at the front door and two men in business suits entered the house. They flipped open their wallets, displaying badges. "Mr. Stephenson?" Monica immediately pointed to the couple. "You'll need to come with us to the station for questioning, sir," one of the detectives said.

Stephenson's face drained of color. "You're arresting me?"

"Not at this time. But I'd suggest you have your attorney meet you down at headquarters. There's a little matter of drug money that needs to be resolved."

Monica turned her icy gaze, the one she'd used to greet Samantha earlier, on her client. "It seems your assets in Grand Cayman have been frozen due to suspicion of illegal activity," she said, her lip curling in disdain.

"Oh, John, I knew this would happen," Mrs. Stephenson said softly.

"Keep quiet," her husband warned.

A moment later, after Monica had plucked the keys to Henley House from Mr. Stephenson's fingers, he, his wife and the detectives were gone.

The real estate agent turned to Samantha and smiled. It wasn't one of those condescending, patronizing smiles she'd given her earlier, it was more like a sparkling, gracious, let's-do-lunch-and-be-best-friends-now-that-I-know-you-have-big-bucks sort of smile.

"Ms. Rutledge," she extended her hand, "I'm Monica Sharp, the listing agent for this home. I do hope you'll forgive me for the unfortunate mix-up earlier." She shook Samantha's hand and then held out the house keys, dropping them into Samantha's open palm. "I understand all the paperwork is already in order, so you're ready to move right in." Another million-dollar-smile beamed from her features.

"You mean all the mortgage papers have already been signed?" Samantha asked, closing her fingers around the keys and clutching them hard. "Are they going to send me something telling me how much my monthly payments are and where to send them?"

Monica blinked. "Since you paid cash-in-full for the house and its entire contents, naturally there's no mortgage," she said. "Oh," she tittered a chuckle, "I see...you're teasing me to get back at me for my momentary display of ignorance earlier." She laughed. "That's all right, I deserve it."

"Yes, you do," Rosie said. "Your exceedingly rude treatment of Ms. Rutledge was inexcusable."

Monica blanched and Samantha couldn't help feeling sorry for her. "That's okay, Rosie. She didn't know."

"No, it is *not* okay. Believe me, Sam, if it weren't for those dollar signs she sees when she looks at you now," Rosie insisted, "she'd be treating you in the same shabby manner. Maybe Ms. Sharp will learn not to be so judgmental when it comes to appearances in the future, hmm?" Rosie directed her question to the agent.

"You're right. There's no excuse for my behavior," Monica agreed with an angelic, heartrending expression. She almost looked like she wanted to cry. The woman could give lessons in groveling. "I do hope you'll accept my profuse apology and allow me to give you a tour of your new home."

"That will not be necessary," Lugal said. "You may go now. I will give Samantha a tour."

"But you're not familiar with the property," Monica objected. "It's a vast structure with hidden passageways and secret rooms and I—"

"Lugal knows this house like the back of his hand," Samantha said. "He used to live here."

Monica's eyes widened. "Really? Oh...well then..."

"Tah-tah, Ms. Sharp," Rosie said, making a sweeping gesture toward the front door. "Don't let the door hit your butt on the way out."

Nonplussed, Monica gathered her gear, slipped Samantha one of her business cards and left the premises.

Once they were alone, Samantha punched the air, letting out a gleeful whoop.

"It has been more than a hundred years since I walked here," Lugal said, a sense of wonder in his voice. "It is almost like a step back in time."

"I can imagine. It was 1859, right?" Samantha asked.

Lugal nodded. "The year Oregon became a state, on Valentine's Day. James Buchanan was president—he was the fifteenth. There were no light bulbs yet. They did have railroads and there was photography. There were no cars yet. They first appeared in the 1890s but the Model T was not until 1908."

"Jeez, that photographic memory of yours is crazy!" Samantha said.

"The house seems to have held up well," Lugal went on as he looked about. "I will inspect it for you and make any needed modifications." He smiled proudly.

"Oh...Lugal..." Samantha started, uncertain of how to say what she needed, for fear of hurting Lugal's feelings.

"Yes, little one?"

"Um...maybe we can just leave everything the way it is for now, hmm?"

"After all," Rosie added, "the house has managed to last all these years without foiling the walls. It might be a good idea to leave it natural, don't you think?"

Lugal looked dejected. Samantha thought she saw his shoulders slump. "You did not like the improvements I made on your little house," he said.

"What you did there was amazing, Lugal," Samantha assured him with a hug. "And I'm sure that after you spend more time online learning about home improvement, you'll be the envy of the block because of your enviable handyman skills. But for now..." She finished her sentence with a hopeful smile.

Lugal smiled. "It is all right. Do not look so sad, Samantha. You have not trampled on my feelings. Come, I will show you everything about your new house."

Unable to hold back any longer, Samantha let out a squeal that echoed off the walls of the cavernous foyer. "Sorry, I can't help it. I'm just *so* excited!" She wrapped her arms around Lugal and squeezed hard. "Thank you for making my wish come true, Lugal. Thank you."

"Although I cannot directly take credit for your wish being granted, I can tell you that it makes my heart swell with joy to see you so happy, little one." He kissed the top of Samantha's head before leading her and Rosie through the house.

More than an hour later, after exploring almost every nook and cranny of the enormous mansion, the three headed for the kitchen, the final room on the tour. Immense, grand and updated with state-of-the-art appliances, granite counter tops and custom cabinets, it was everything Samantha had ever dreamed of having for her very own.

"Now there's a kitchen table that looks plenty sturdy," Rosie said, nodding toward the massive wood structure. "Yup, I'd say that table could withstand a lot of weight. And plenty of activity." After catching the warning look in Samantha's eye, Rosie snickered. "Sorry, I couldn't resist."

Samantha opened the huge top-of-the-line refrigerator, sucking in a gasp when she spotted a row of champagne bottles in a special wine rack on one of the shelves. "It's the good stuff!" she said. "French." She closed the door.

"What the hell are you closing the door for?" Rosie asked "Let's break out the champagne and celebrate, girl!"

"I can't just take their champagne," Samantha scoffed. "That wouldn't be right."

Rosie rapped her knuckles on Samantha's head. "Hello?" she said in a singsong voice. "It's not *their* champagne, you ninny, it's *your* champagne. Right along with all those rows and rows of bottles of expensive vintage wines downstairs in the fully stocked wine cellar. Apparently you bought everything inside as well as out, lock, stock and barrel. The whole shebang is yours, Sam, bought and paid for."

"Jesus..." Samantha felt another joyful squeal taking hold, but suppressed it. She was afraid if she started yelling gleeful sounds now she wouldn't be able to stop. "It's all so hard to believe." She opened the refrigerator again and retrieved a bottle of bubbly. "We'll sup on fine champagne as I make my second wish. Ever had champagne, Lugal?"

"The name is not familiar. Once I sample it I will know for sure."

"He has a photographic memory," Samantha told Rosie. "But it's selective." She grinned.

"Charlie's got a selective memory too. Don't all men?" Rosie chuckled. "Wait until I tell Charlie all about this. His eyes will bug at the way all of this so neatly fell into place after you made your wish."

"Just imagine...I beat out a drug lord for this place." Samantha laughed. "I can't wait to have you, Charlie and the kids over to dinner so you can dine at my opulent marble-topped dining room table. You know, the one with the three crystal candelabras. The one that's so long we'll have to shout from one end to the other just to be heard."

She giggled as she looked around her, seeing something new with each turn of her head. "Oh my God, I feel like I died and went to heaven. It really is all mine, isn't it?"

"All yours," Lugal assured. "I think Abigail would be very pleased to know that you are the owner of this house now, Samantha. She would have liked you very much. I am sure of it."

"Thank you, that really makes me feel good," Samantha said, unwrapping the wire on the bottle and twisting the cork. It popped with a satisfying celebratory noise and she poured the champagne into the weighty crystal glasses Rosie found in one of the cupboards.

They sat at the kitchen table and Samantha held her glass aloft. "Okay, Lugal." She looked over at him and grinned. "I'm ready. Listen, maybe this time you could do something a little flashy, okay?" she suggested.

"Flashy?"

"Yeah, something dramatic, like a fictional genie," she explained. "To give it more oomph."

Lugal smiled, tossing her a wink. "I understand."

"For my second official wish," Samantha began, "I wish to establish Beyond the Scale, an extremely successful, thriving weight-loss center, staffed with caring, compassionate people who have all struggled with being overweight in the past."

Lugal rose to his feet, his arms outstretched to the heavens, his palms up in a beckoning motion. "Oh hear me, great gods and goddesses," he roared, sending a chill up and down Samantha's spine. She and Rosie exchanged wide-eyed gapes. "I beseech you to grant this worthy wish of the good, kind, fair and beautiful Samantha Rutledge."

Crossing his arms over his massive chest, he clapped his hands over his arms, blinked and wiggled his nose. "As per your command, your wish has been granted, oh Master," Lugal said. He completed his convincing act by calling out an extended *boing* as he gave a resolute nod.

Falling into laughter, Samantha and Rosie clapped as Lugal took a bow.

"Better?" he asked.

"Perfect," Samantha answered. "So what happens now?"

"I do not know. We shall see," Lugal said.

"In the meantime, let's drink this big-buck champagne before it goes flat," Rosie suggested.

"To love, laughter, good health and happiness," Samantha said, clinking glasses with Rosie and Lugal. "May we never be without them." She took a sip, amazed at the soft, velvety bubbles, so unlike the harsh carbonation of the cheaper sparkling wines she was used to. "A girl could definitely get used to this," she said.

"Tell me about it," Rosie agreed. "I'm loving this stuff. I'm just damned glad I'm your best friend because, Lord knows, somebody's got to help you drink up all this pricey wine." She laughed.

"Champagne...it is most unique," Lugal noted after sipping. "I have not supped it before. It has some of the same properties as barley ale, yet it is not as bitter in taste."

"Barley ale?" Rosie asked.

"Beer," Samantha clarified.

"I would enjoy this with a roast leg of mutton," Lugal offered. "Or perhaps a grilled goat's head."

"Well forget about it because that's not going to happen," Samantha said, chuckling through a shudder. "Something tells me you won't mind the substitution of a nice prime rib or filet mignon instead."

The doorbell rang. It was a grand, gracious, melodious tune, unlike any doorbell Samantha had ever heard before.

And it was all hers.

"Someone's at the door," Samantha said absently.

"Well don't look at me to slip into a maid's uniform and answer it," Rosie teased.

"My first official visitor. Maybe it's someone from the neighborhood with a plate of fresh-baked brownies," Samantha said, rising from her chair and heading for the door.

"Yeah," Rosie called after her. "Or it could be Mr. Stephenson's drug cartel with a *welcome to the neighborhood* basket of hallucinogens." She laughed.

"I'm here about the signage, ma'am," the man at the door said.

"Signage?"

The man stepped aside and gestured to his truck and the two men standing in front of it holding a huge sign.

Samantha took one look at it and burst into tears.

Chapter Eighteen

"Honey, what is it? What's wrong?" Rosie asked, scrambling to Samantha's side.

Lugal was right there, his strong, protective arm wrapped around her. "What happened? Has this man made you cry? I will tear out his liver and feed it to him."

The poor man at her doorstep looked like he was going to pass out as Lugal glared and snarled.

"No. Look!" was all Samantha was able to manage through her sobs as she pointed to the two men at the truck.

Rosie and Lugal turned to look at the elegant, beautifully crafted sign they held, which read *Beyond the Scale*.

"It's my company. Isn't it beautiful? It worked! My wish was granted!"

"Uh...I'm really glad you like the sign so much, ma'am," the man at the door said. "All I need is your signature here, accepting delivery, and we'll install it according to the specs on the order." He handed a pen to Samantha.

As soon as she finished signing, Samantha noticed a smaller truck pull to the curb in front. And then another. And another...

During the next forty minutes, Samantha had met her new general contractor, the representative of the exercise equipment manufacturer, computer specialists, a team of decorators and a host of others, all there to make *Beyond the Scale* a reality.

It was a dream team of experts committed to fulfill her every whim.

The last person at her door was Mr. Schmoll, one of the vice presidents from her bank. Handing her a slim portfolio, he introduced himself as the financial administrator for her newly established business and personal accounts. He advised that, as per instructions, he'd taken care of the down payments for all of the professionals involved in completing *Beyond the Scale*, and would manage the bill paying until all the work was finished to her satisfaction.

Samantha could do little more than blink and gape.

"Your benefactor has sufficiently funded the account for purposes of the establishment and operation of your company," Mr. Schmoll said. "A second account has been established for all of your personal and household needs, Ms. Rutledge."

"My benefactor?" Samantha asked, still shell shocked.

"Yes." He selected a business card from his jacket's inner pocket and held it out to her. "Inanna of Sumer."

"Oh my God..."

"Holy shit," Rosie added. "Isn't she the one who bottled Lugal up?"

Samantha silently nodded her affirmation.

"Bottled what up?" the banker asked.

Dead silent, Lugal looked as stunned as Samantha felt. When she clasped his arm she felt a tremor shimmer through him, or maybe the trembling sensation emanated from her.

Noticing the card was blank except for the name, Samantha asked, "Is there any contact information?"

"I'm afraid not," Mr. Schmoll said. "Your benefactor stipulated strict confidentiality in regards to the release of any such information."

"Have you actually talked to her?" Rosie asked. "Inanna, I mean?"

The banker shook his head. "All correspondence, which has been minimal, has been through electronic means."

"Can you at least tell me if she has a phone number or an email address or something?" Samantha pleaded.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Rutledge..."

After Mr. Schmoll left, Samantha turned to Lugal, smiling as she rubbed her hands up and down his arms. "You know what this means, don't you? She's still out there, Lugal. Inanna is still reachable. Once we find her we'll get her to free you, I know we will."

"Oh boy, wait until I tell Charlie," Rosie said excitedly, gathering her purse and car keys. "Now that we know Inanna still exists, he'll track her down. With all the university's resources and technology at his fingertips, it'll be a snap."

Lugal's solemn expression telegraphed a distinct lack of enthusiasm. "Of course Inanna still exists. She is a goddess. Immortal. But she is elusive. Charlie will not locate her, Rosie. Even if he does, she will not lower herself to answer the pleas of mere mortals."

"That's because she hasn't encountered *these* mere mortals yet," Rosie assured, thumbing herself and Samantha.

"Rosie's right." Samantha squeezed Lugal's arm. "We won't take no for an answer."

"Nay, my love." Lugal drew Samantha close to his chest, smoothing his hand over her back. "You must not risk incensing Inanna. I glimpsed her furious visage briefly before I became a vapor and transferred to the bottle the first time. She is fierce. Powerful enough to smite you with a single breath. I could not bear to live with that memory for all eternity."

He wrapped one arm around Rosie's shoulder. "You and Charlie must not put yourselves in harm's way for me. I must ask for your solemn oath that you and Samantha will refrain from such foolish behavior."

After a momentary pause, Rosie looked up into his dark gaze and sighed. "Okay, sure, you convinced me. You have my solemn oath, Lugal." As she spoke she crossed

her fingers, holding them behind Lugal's back and wiggling them for Samantha to see. "Right, Sam?" She winked.

Samantha smiled at her friend's childlike action. With one arm wrapped around Lugal, she crossed the fingers of that hand, waving them at Rosie. "Absolutely. Solemn oath." She returned the wink.

"Toodles." Rosie opened the door and stepped onto the porch. "I've got to get back to Charlie and the kids," she said, galloping down the stairs and heading for her car.

Samantha knew Rosie would be flipping open her phone to call Charlie as soon as she was out of Lugal's earshot. Hopefully the professor would be able to make progress with the new information.

"Plagued by people," Lugal grumbled as Samantha waved to Rosie.

"Hmm? What was that?"

"I feared we would never be alone again. I have gone an ungodly length of time without feeling your hot cunt sheathing my cock. Come," Lugal yanked her hand, "let us make haste to your new bedroom where we can busy ourselves with fucking."

"Wow." Samantha chuckled as she tripped along after him. "Nothing like a snap-of-the-fingers transition in mood."

"I cannot help it. It is difficult being a man of honor and propriety when what I long to do is thrust into you, Samantha. As I watched over you while you slept last night, I burned with want. My mouth, my loins, they raged with the desire to partake in your sweet fruits. My insides have been consumed with the crushing need to fuck you."

His deep commanding voice sent a warm, liquid thrill down to her pussy and her body came alive with wet hot lust.

"Sheesh...how do you do that?" she asked, hurrying to keep up with Lugal's long strides as he climbed the staircase.

"What, little one?"

"Manage to make my clit pulse and tremble with just the mere utterance of a few words—while I'm running up stairs."

"My words help you to focus on what's most important—the furious desire you have for my big, strong body." He stopped on a stair and Samantha crashed into him. It was like slamming into a boulder.

Flashing a confident smile, he added, "You love my muscles." And then he pounded his chest.

Samantha's gaze was immediately transfixed on his superb muscled torso. As he stood angled toward her on the step above, the well-defined muscles of his chest and arms stood out in oh-so-touchable relief. Her genie was one supercharged mass of muscularity, and he had her pegged all right. Her lusty libido was rapidly approaching overdrive.

After a few more steps they hit the long hallway, sprinting. Entering the master bedroom, Lugal scooped Samantha off her feet. She had just enough time to admire his

mile-wide shoulders and trail her fingers down the stubble of his cheeks to his sculpted jaw before he threw her on top of the bed from several yards away.

"Oh!" she squealed as she sailed through the air, watching Lugal leap through the air to meet her. "The bed!" She landed with a solid plop, with Lugal thudding hard at her side. "We haven't even broken it in yet and we're going to have it come crashing down around us, just like the kitchen table."

"This house has many bedrooms with many beds. If they break, you will buy more beds." His hands were busy peeling her clothes off as he spoke. "I must see your naked flesh, must touch it."

In what seemed the blink of an eye, Samantha found herself stark naked.

"A fucking celebration," he said, rolling atop Samantha and staring down at her with dark eyes that gleamed with carnal intentions.

"A what?"

He treated her to that drop-dead-gorgeous grin of his. "We will celebrate the first night in your grand new dwelling with a bounty of sex. Plenty of fucking."

Samantha wrapped her arms around the delectable piece of body candy hovering over her and sighed. "I can't think of a better way to celebrate my good fortune."

"Yes, tonight will be special..." Lugal's hands roved over her flesh in a soothing, erotic massage. "I will take you bound this eve," he whispered. Reaching beneath her and grasping the fleshy globes of her buttocks, he indulged in a laughing groan. "After I stripe your alabaster ass with my lash."

Samantha remembered the satin and velvet flogger he'd purchased and her clit pulsed with excitement at the idea of Lugal mastering her body—of her wearing his marks.

He turned her to her side and gave one cheek a stinging spank, then hopped off the bed. She responded with a surprised little yelp.

Lugal emptied the bag from the sex shop, dumping the contents on the dresser. A moment later he was at Samantha's side, whisking her off the satin bedspread and pulling her to her feet. Without a word, he positioned her with her back toward him, so that she faced one of the bed's four massive, ornately carved posts.

"I wish to tie you. To treat you as my *geme*, my slave girl. Do you object?"

Samantha moaned at the delicious thought. "No." At the sensation of her cunt swelling, she pressed her thighs together. The agonized anticipation was almost too much to bear. "When I first saw the flogger I fantasized of being bound to a gnarled old olive tree in ancient Sumer as you had your way with me."

The hint of a smile curled Lugal's lips. "Yes...I can envision it..." Using strips of pantyhose, obviously left over from making the replacement table, he deftly secured Samantha's wrists to the post, tying them high above her head. Finding herself immobile had a thrill jetting to her clit, where it radiated white-hot and intense.

"Do you know why you had been bound in your fantasy?" Lugal asked, stroking Samantha's skin from her shoulder to her tailbone, making her shiver. He ended the soft erotic touches with a spank to her bottom.

Samantha ass cheeks squeezed together. "Because I'd been a naughty, disobedient slave," she said, getting into the feel of the fantasy-come-to-life.

"Ahhh, and what is it you did that caused me to take my lash to you?"

Samantha thought for a moment. "I'd been causing trouble with all the other women in your harem."

Lugal gave a low chuckle.

"What's so funny?"

"Sumerians did not have harems. But I like your fantasy very much. Tell me," he gently stroked her flesh with his fingers as he spoke, "what kind of trouble did you make?"

"I was very possessive of you. The other girls didn't like it. They got jealous because you preferred to fuck me instead of them."

"Yes, because you have the sweetest, juiciest cunt," Lugal agreed. "It is understandable."

Braced tight against Samantha, his cock nestled firmly at the small of her back, Lugal slipped his arms around her. He raked gentle patterns on her abdomen, making her stomach muscles clench and her pussy weep with anticipation. He stroked her inner thighs, sliding his fingertips inward until they brushed the damp crease of her vulva. Her entire body shuddered and her juices flowed around his fingers.

"So then what happened, my little slave?" he asked, licking her taste from his fingers.

Enveloped in a thick fog of passion, Samantha's thoughts whirled. She concocted a sensuous scenario she hoped would have Lugal hot and hard enough to drill into her for hours.

"Those cruel, jealous bitches dragged me to the olive tree and tied me there, leaving me at the mercy of any passing soldier as well as the buzzards flying overhead."

She felt Lugal's body tighten and his fingers digging into her arms.

"And did any soldiers stop and force themselves upon you?" His breath was hot against her neck.

Undulating her ass against him, she yearned for the moment when she'd feel his cock piercing her. "Several tried." Lugal's grip around her arms tightened. "But I was able to warn them off before their cocks penetrated my flesh."

"How did you manage that?" he whispered into her hair. "What did you do to keep from being taken by those men?"

"At first I was frightened, terrified by the wild look in their eyes as they pinched my nipples and ran their hands beneath my gown and over my soft, white flesh." Samantha felt Lugal's grip constrict again.

"They touched you..." Lugal's cock pressed against Samantha possessively, grinding against the dip just above her ass.

"Oh yes. And then, as each man prepared to force himself upon me, I told them that Lugal Damu-zid was my beloved Master and that you would surely hunt them down and slay them for daring to harm your favorite slave."

"That I would surely do," Lugal growled. "I would destroy any man who caused you to suffer." His hands caressed her belly, her breasts, kneading her flesh, pinching her nipples. "I would tear his limbs from his sockets and feed them to the dogs."

Lingering on a moan, Samantha said, "And now that you have found me bound here like this, Master, what will you do with me?" Writhing with the sensation of moisture gathering between her thighs, she licked her lips. "Will you punish me?"

"For what?" Lugal grasped her hair, pulling it toward him. With her head back, he trailed playful bites along the flesh of her neck and deposited a kiss at the soft, pulsing hollow at the base of her throat.

"Because I am a tease, Master. You see, I can think of nothing but having your bold cock buried deep inside me. Because of that, my body emitted potent pheromones that enticed the soldiers to my side and made them hot and hard with lust."

She turned her head and gazed up into Lugal's eyes, projecting a look of angelic innocence. "And I liked it, Master." He growled deep in his throat at her words. "I liked having those men look at me and notice how wet I was for you...how I burned with passion for you."

Softly biting the flesh of his chest, she nibbled his flat, brown nipple and moaned. She'd managed to turn herself on and hoped that Lugal felt even half as desirous. The feel of his fingers digging into her hips as a heated groan rumbled up from his chest was delicious confirmation.

What felt like a cluster of narrow ribbons smoothed across Samantha's back, down over her ass cheeks and across each thigh. She shivered at the erotic sensation of the little strips of satin and velvet stroking her flesh. Then she felt the snap of their tiny knots on her buttocks.

"You belong to me," Lugal said, wielding another stroke of the flogger. While there was no real pain involved, Samantha experienced an almost tickly, smarting sensation. "Your curves, your pink-white flesh, are for my eyes only, slave girl." Another swat across her ass.

"This," Lugal said, bending and forcing her thighs apart before thrusting his hand up into her cunt, "is mine." Samantha's breath felt as though it had been stolen. "Do you understand, slave girl?"

The power of speech seemed to have fled because all Samantha could do was writhe and moan. As her channel squeezed around his invading hand, her nipples tingled, her breasts ached and her pussy flowed with warm juice that trickled down her legs.

Lugal's arm wrapped around her and, his free hand still clutching the flogger's handle, he pinched Samantha's nipple with thumb and forefinger. "I said, do you understand? Answer me, slave."

Yes, she longed to scream. Oh God, yes, I do understand that I belong to you, Lugal. Only you, for all eternity. But Samantha had other ideas...

"No," she braved, jutting her chin high. "I don't understand. Why don't you show me, Master? Show me exactly what you mean. I need a good, solid lesson I'll never forget."

"Insolent slave girl," he breathed at her nape while his fist twisted in her cunt. She gasped at the wildly erotic sensation. "You leave me no choice but to punish you further." Withdrawing his hand from her dripping pussy, he swatted her ass three times, hard. The pleasantly stinging sensation served as an aphrodisiac, priming her cells, readying them for the erotic plunder to come.

"Your ass now bears the mark of my whip as well as my hand, slave girl," Lugal said, rubbing her bottom. "Raised pink stripes across the color of rich cream." He yanked her hair back again. "You see? Your cunt flows hot with the musky juice of desire. It weeps for me, longs to be filled by me." His tongue swooped up his arm, gathering her juices.

"Yes...yes, I burn, Master. I ache for you."

He held the back of his arm to her mouth. "Lick your honey from me," Lugal commanded. "Then spread your legs."

Samantha complied, expecting, hoping to have him take her then, to thrust hard into her pussy. Instead, she felt the stroke of the flogger again. This time it was across the tops of her thighs, just beneath her ass.

"I wish I could dig my nails into your flesh right now," Samantha said. "Massage that big, muscular, scarred chest of yours. Show you how wild you make me...how much I crave you, Lugal."

She felt the sting of the flogger across her ass.

"You will address me only as Master. You do not have permission to use my given name, slave."

"Yes, Master."

God, this was so good, so fucking arousing. Samantha decided she'd have to work on other delicious fantasy scenarios for the two of them to enjoy. "Master," she pleaded, "I need you inside me now. I'm on the verge of coming. Please..."

"Nay. I warn you, impudent little slave, if you come before I give my permission, there will be dire consequences." Lugal smoothed his hands over her curves, massaging with his thumbs, before smacking a sharp slap on the soft skin of her ass. Her buttocks clenched and she gasped. He gave her another swat, this one making her clit throb with need. "Yes, I like this rosy shade," he told her, rubbing her heated skin. "It becomes your alabaster flesh."

He proceeded to paddle her ass until both cheeks stung like mad. Passion trembling within her, Samantha squirmed and moaned at the sweet torment, wondering how long she could hold out before she exploded with a monumental orgasm.

A week ago if anyone had told her she'd enjoy being spanked by a brawny barbarian, she would have laughed. She'd never thought of herself as the submissive type—she still didn't. But, oh, the sweet mixture of pain and pleasure combined with playfulness that her loving genie doled out was more of an aphrodisiac than Samantha could have ever imagined.

It was as if he could read her mind and know exactly where and how she wanted, *needed*, to be touched. The perfect lover...her ideal man.

The spanking subsided and she watched as he came around to face her. Flashing a charming smile, Lugal leapt up onto the bed. As he grasped the thick bed post just above her bound wrists, Samantha couldn't help but notice that his magnificent cock jutted out at optimum sucking level. Pearly drops of pre-cum glistened at the tip. She licked her lips and smiled up at him.

"Mmmm, I'm feeling particularly greedy," she told him. "Permission to eat you, Master."

"Permission granted."

She kissed the swollen cap and Lugal groaned. Opening her mouth, she wrapped her lips around his girth, sucking the hot, silky head like a lollipop. His cock jerked as her tongue teased and twirled and he shoved deeper into her mouth.

"I wish I could touch you...hold you," she said, letting his cock pop free. "Wrap my fingers around the base of that big, beautiful cock of yours, Master." She blew on the wet rod and lapped the tip.

"You are doing just fine with your witchy little tongue, slave," Lugal said, his voice husky now. "Continue." He made his cock jerk for her.

Leaning forward, Samantha worked her tongue between his thighs until she connected with his sac. Her teeth nipped delicately there before she tongued her way across his balls. With her nose nestled into the crisp curls, she breathed in his musky scent.

"The liquid stroke of your tongue stirs the fires deep within, little slave," Lugal said as Samantha captured his cock in her mouth again with a deep, drawing suckle. His body bucked and he drove his cock harder into her mouth. She felt a tremor move through him just before he said, "Enough," and pulled back, out of her mouth. A quick leap had him on the floor again.

Lugal held Samantha under her arms and spun her around, until she faced him. His face inches from hers, she heard his breath catch.

"Gods, little one, the things you do to me. Unlike anything I have felt before." Yanking her head back by the hair, he thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, kissing her with passion so intense, so possessive, it brought tears to her eyes.

Before she could blink, Lugal had lifted her, impaling her on his cock. Her wrists still bound above her head, Samantha's breasts bounced as he drove into her.

"So much to entice me," Lugal said, capturing one rigid nipple in his teeth. Such a magnificent body. Such a glorious woman." He screwed himself higher, deeper, harder. "My woman."

"Your slave," Samantha breathed. "Forever."

His gaze fixed on hers, Lugal drew his index finger through his mouth, wetting it thoroughly. That same hand disappeared behind her back and while he thrust his cock deep into her cunt, she felt his moist finger journey to her anus, piercing her tight hole.

Samantha moaned as the thick digit stretched her. Filling her from both front and back, Lugal dipped his head and paid homage to her stone-hard nipples with his teeth and tongue, sweetly torturing her primed, sensitive flesh. Her knees would have buckled if he hadn't had her perfectly positioned, optimally balanced and poised for a lusty round of vertical fucking. She was clearly in the hands of an expert lover, a connoisseur of all things erotic and sublime.

Lugal looked as ready to come as she was. His chest glowed with a sheen of sweat and his breathing was labored.

"Please, Master," she whispered, at the very brink of shattering, "let me come now."

His mouth left her breast and he slid it in a lavish swoop up her breasts and throat to her lips. "Yes," he hissed, nipping at her bottom lip. "You have my permission to quake and shudder in my arms."

He held her tighter, trailing a damp line of kisses along her neck and shoulder, ending with a sensuous bite in her soft flesh. "Come for me, little slave. Let me feel your cunt clutching my cock as you spasm around me. Now, Samantha. Now."

Her torso arcing in taut ecstasy, Samantha gazed into Lugal's eyes as her trembling body joyfully obeyed his directive.

As waves of boundless pleasure rocked through her, she wondered how it was possible that each orgasm was more compelling, hotter, stronger than the last. How could her body possibly be taken to such astonishing new heights each time they made love?

Just when Samantha thought herself physically and emotionally incapable of another increment of pleasure, Lugal spanked her right buttock, whisking her to another level of bliss. To a realm where nothing existed but the purest, most decadent form of pleasure and satisfaction imaginable.

A wild, ragged growl tore loose from Lugal's throat as he shuddered, pressing Samantha hard against the bedpost. Spurt after spurt of creamy, hot cum jetted inside her spasming pussy as his weight crushed against hers.

His flesh and hers connected from head to toe, the final tremors of orgasm rippled through their bodies. Lugal carefully cut the ties that bound Samantha. Lifting her from the floor, he drew her close, kissing her sweetly as her arms wrapped around his neck.

“It was a good celebration, yes? Welcome to your new abode, little one,” he said against her ear, depositing a gentle kiss on her lobe.

At Lugal’s words, Samantha’s insides came alive with love and laughter and a deep abiding gratitude for the wonderful man who had become the other half of her soul.

Chapter Nineteen

Time passed quickly as workers toiled, transforming the first floor of Henley House into Beyond the Scale. Happily, the charm and ambience of the Victorian structure was preserved, while successfully pairing it with a modern, contemporary feel.

It was a mere three months after she'd taken possession of the house that the work was completed. The rapidity in which it was finished was astounding. Quality, custom conversions of this magnitude could easily take more than a year before they were finalized.

Of course, most construction projects weren't set in motion by a genie's magic.

After the final day of hammer banging, sawing and drilling, all of the suppliers delivered and installed their equipment, from the exercise machines to the computers, to fully outfitted office suites.

Samantha was thrilled with the makeover, from the quality of workmanship to the unambiguous eye appeal of the conversion. Beyond the Scale was warm and welcoming while conveying an air of professionalism.

All the weight-loss counselors had been trained, printed material and sets of audio-visual media featuring Samantha were ready for dissemination to clients, nutritionists were onboard and there was a yard-long waiting list of excited clients.

Perfect. Everything was absolutely, positively perfect.

With one exception.

In less than three months she would lose Lugal. Forever.

Their relationship had developed into an ideal coupling of mind, body and spirit. So much so that Samantha couldn't begin to imagine life without her beloved genie. Though Lugal had sustained his alpha male persona, he was also loving, full of laughter, supportive and tireless in his efforts to keep Samantha deliciously, deliriously happy, both in bed and out.

Each time she allowed her thoughts to drift to the end of their sixth month together, a pain tore through her chest, ripping her heart, stabbing at her soul. Thinking of Lugal returning to the shadowy deadness of that bottle was utterly unthinkable.

Much to her delight, Lugal had become an enthusiastic and integral part of Beyond the Scale. Rosie's husband Charlie, who hadn't been able to unearth any information about Inanna as yet, had suggested that Lugal conduct exercise classes, offering *Warrior Fitness* sessions.

Charlie thought the techniques Lugal had mastered while soldiering and leading the Sumerian armies would offer an entirely new form of exercise routine to Samantha's weight-loss clients. Having instructed thousands of soldiers in the art of self-defense

and methods to keep their bodies lean, fit and toned, Lugal was eager to take on the task.

It was clear to Samantha that he thrived on the idea of having something of value to contribute. Determined to provide the finest fitness training to Samantha's clients, Lugal gave the development of Warrior Fitness classes his utmost attention and dedication. She'd never seen him so alive, so animated.

It warmed Samantha's heart to see that Lugal's sense of worth, of purpose, had returned.

Charlie volunteered to be Lugal's official guinea pig, offering up his soft scholar's physique to test the new exercise routines. In less than three months, his body had transformed from marshmallowy to solid and defined.

To say Rosie was pleased at her husband's physical transformation would be an understatement. While she adored Charlie whether his belly was cushy or sported a six pack, muscularity definitely had the edge. She couldn't seem to keep her hands off her renovated husband.

On the day before Beyond the Scale's grand opening, Samantha was riding high on an energized wave of excitement. She'd never been happier or more elated.

Until the arrival of an unexpected visitor...

"Bunny!" she said, startled when she opened the front door. The last person she expected to see on her doorstep was the owner of Tuned by Turner, especially after Bunny's parting words when Samantha had turned in her resignation.

"I knew from the beginning that you wouldn't be able to cut it as a weight-loss counselor," she'd told Samantha with a smug smile that day. "Your driving need to consume chocolate clearly supersedes any drive to succeed. I have no doubt you wouldn't have met the mandatory thirty pounds in six weeks deadline TBT issued to you anyway. Perhaps you'd be happier as a clerk behind a Godiva's chocolate counter."

With a final, uppity sneer, she turned her back to Samantha, returning to her work.

Samantha wasn't surprised. Bunny Turner's stinging remarks were telling of her petty personality. Bunny knew she was losing her most popular counselor and clearly took pleasure in striking out by getting in a final jab, purposely designed to wound.

And now here she was, standing across the threshold from Samantha.

"Hello Sam." The air chilled considerably as the starchy woman entered the room, uninvited. "I understand congratulations are in order." She surreptitiously craned her neck, scrutinizing Beyond the Scale's décor and character.

"Thank you. It's nice of you to come to wish me well," Samantha said, well aware Bunny hadn't actually offered her congratulations.

Any pretense of warmth was abandoned when Bunny turned sharply on her stiletto heel to face Samantha.

"I thought it was only fair to pay you a personal visit to advise you that if your company exploits any of Tuned by Turner's ideas, methods or materials, you'll find

yourself slapped with a lawsuit and your brand new little business shuttered before you can blink.”

Samantha smiled as she gathered her thoughts. “How kind of you to express your concern, Bunny, but I can assure you that Beyond the Scale is as far removed from Tuned by Turner as possible. It’s an entirely different concept. We focus on overall health, fitness and wellbeing rather than merely weight loss...hence, the name.”

“I’m sure.” Bunny gave her an icy once-over. “However, there’s still the matter of your employment contract, Sam. Opening a competing business within three years of leaving TBT’s employ is expressly prohibited, if you’ll recall.”

Samantha broke into a genuine smile. “Oh yes, I recall, Bunny. It seems you’ve forgotten what happened the day you hired me though.”

“Hey, Sam,” Rosie said as she came into the room. Her head was down, looking over some paperwork, so she didn’t see Bunny at first. “What should I do about the —”

“We have company, Rosie,” Samantha interrupted, and Rosie’s head popped up, a look of surprise etched across her features. Bunny had treated Rosie to a similar, cutting farewell upon her resignation.

“Bunny...shit, what are you doing here?”

“Warmth and people skills have never been your forte, Rosie,” Bunny noted. “Which makes me immeasurably pleased that you’re working for Sam’s company instead of mine. Although your term of employment here will be painfully short.”

“Bunny’s here to put the fear of God into me about opening a competing business,” Samantha explained. “Something about a clause in my contract when I signed on.” She chuckled.

“I don’t see what’s so funny.” Bunny bristled with haughtiness. “I doubt you’ll be laughing when my team of attorneys —”

“Hold that thought, Bunny,” Rosie said, hurrying out of the lobby. “I’ll be back in a jiff.”

Bunny made use of the few minutes Rosie was gone by studying her surroundings. Samantha could tell she was impressed. Who wouldn’t be? Beyond the Scale was a state-of-the-art masterpiece of functionality, organization and ambience. The inviting BTS looked like an upscale designer boutique, while the TBT facilities looked like discount stores in comparison.

“For someone who drove a ragtag little tin can of a car and lived in a ramshackle cracker box of a house,” Bunny sniffed, “I must say I’m surprised to see such an ambitious undertaking. The mortgage and debt you’ve incurred must be mind-boggling.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, Bunny, but I own BTS free and clear.”

That got a raised eyebrow from Bunny. “Pity you’ll have to let it all go after you’re shut down. However...perhaps I can see about helping you out by purchasing the

facility to convert it into a TBT location, dear.” She glanced around, as if eyeing rotting sewage. “Although it would take a great deal of work to convert this to TBT standards.”

“You can say that again,” Samantha agreed, swallowing the urge to guffaw. “Always thinking of others, aren’t you, Bunny?” While she’d never been very good at bitchery, being in Bunny’s callous presence somehow made it *much* easier. “But your help won’t be necessary...dear.”

Rosie bounced back into the room, Lugal at her side. Bunny’s posture turned fluid as she gazed at the big hunk of Sumerian male before her. He was clothed in his Warrior Fitness garb, which had been designed to Lugal’s precise specifications. The outfit was a bare-fleshed replica of the soldier’s uniform he wore as leader of his army.

Copper cuffs banded his wrists and arms just above his biceps, highlighting exquisitely defined muscles. In lieu of the traditional flax material worn, Lugal’s short linen skirt-like garment was also adorned with copper embellishments. No man taking a Warrior Fitness class would leave without dreaming of developing a body as toned and defined as the class instructor’s.

And no woman would exit the class without dreaming of designing a body fit and flab-free enough to appeal to the Adonis-like Lugal.

The brief outfit of ancient design was definitely having the desired effect on Bunny.

“Hello, Rabbit,” Lugal said without a trace of humor.

“Bunny,” she cooed in correction.

“Ah yes, my apologies. English is not my native tongue. Sometimes I confuse animal names,” Lugal offered, straight-faced, while Samantha couldn’t help chuckling a bit. “So you have come to offer your congratulations on the eve of the opening of Samantha’s weight-loss center.”

“Actually, I’ve come on a matter of legal concern,” Bunny said. “You see, regrettably—”

“Regrettably,” Rosie said, effectively cutting her off, “you neglected to reference Samantha’s customized TBT employment contract before showing up on her doorstep, threatening her with the dissolution of her new business.” She held a paper out to Bunny.

Bunny narrowed her eyes, glancing at the paper as if it were contaminated with cooties.

“You’ll note,” Rosie continued, “that the clause in question was struck from the contract...and initialed by both you and Sam.”

Bunny’s expression turned ugly. “Let me see that.” Setting her purse on the long, narrow hall table, she snatched the contract from Rosie’s grasp. Her eyes widened as she looked at the crossed out section. “This is ludicrous. Scratching that clause out and forging my initials, isn’t going to save you from financial and personal ruin, Sam. You’ve made a critical error in judgment, why not just own up to it before you embarrass yourself by opening shop tomorrow?”

"Put on your thinking cap, Bunny," Samantha suggested. "Let's travel back to the day you hired me. TBT was still a fledgling company, hungry for growth and eager to sign on personable counselors with valid people skills and a solid knowledge of TBT's diet program. When I saw the no-compete clause in the contract, I changed my mind and decided not to sign on with TBT, remember?"

Bunny's face was blank, noncommittal. But Samantha caught a substantial eye twitch going on.

"I told you then," Samantha continued, "that it was my goal, my dream to open my own weight-loss center one day. You laughed when I confessed that to you, Bunny. You said every fat girl yearns to open her own diet center, but once they sign with TBT, they realize they're affiliated with the best in the business. You assured me I'd forget my dream once I worked for you. In fact, you were so doggone certain, you crossed out that clause and initialed it. Does that ring a bell, Bunny?"

As realization dawned, Bunny's face drained of color. Samantha couldn't help relishing the moment.

A defiant glare evident across her surgically enhanced features, Bunny tore the contract into narrow strips.

"I guess you neglected to notice that was a photocopy," Rosie pointed out. "When you get back to the office you may as well have a peek at my TBT employment contract too. Same strikeout." Rosie gave a triumphant smile. "You've got the originals and we have the carbon copies."

Bunny's cheeks pinked to match the color of her designer suit. "My people will be watching you and your business with an eagle eye," she threatened, wagging a chastising finger under Samantha's nose. "If there's even the slightest indication that you've stolen any of TBT's ideas, believe me, you'll rue the day you left my employ to start up this ridiculous little company of yours."

"You are not a nice woman," Lugal stated. "Your wicked presence casts a pall on Samantha's home and business. You will leave now." He took Bunny by the arm, escorting her to the door.

"He must be gay," Bunny groused to Samantha as he ushered her out. She didn't object to Lugal's firm grip on her arm, in fact she seemed to lean in closer to him as they walked across the room. "Or a gigolo," she added. "That's the only feasible explanation why a man with his looks would be the least bit interested in you."

As the last few words left her mouth, Lugal slammed the door in Bunny's face.

"Whew!" Rosie said, shivering. "What a mega-bitch."

"I am not familiar with this word," Lugal said, "but it somehow sounds appropriate."

"Something tells me we haven't heard the last from her," Samantha said. "I just hope she doesn't do anything to harm the success of Beyond the Scale."

"That would not be possible," Lugal assured. "You wished for your company to be successful." He smiled. "Therefore, it cannot be otherwise, no matter what Bunny may attempt."

"That's right...I forgot about that." A relieved smile stretched across her features. "That makes me feel a whole lot better."

Lugal patted his six-pack abs. "My stomach speaks to me. I need food."

Samantha laughed. "You're always hungry."

Rosie nodded. "Charlie's like that too, now that he's been working out."

"There's plenty of stuff in the refrigerator to make a nice picnic lunch for the three of us," Samantha said. "We can eat it outside on the back porch. We need a break after that nasty visit from the wicked witch."

The trio walked back to the kitchen.

Damn. Half way to her car, Bunny realized she'd left her purse in the BTS lobby. The last thing she wanted was to go back in there and face that smug Sam and her self-satisfied cohorts. Well...except for that glorious specimen of manhood, Lugal. Mmm, he could manhandle her any day. What she wouldn't give for just one glorious night fucking that huge, handsome hunk.

Expelling a sigh as the warmth of desire spread low in her belly, she retraced her steps until she stood facing the facility's front door. Her hand poised to ring the bell, she realized the door was slightly ajar. Maybe she could sneak in and retrieve her purse without them even knowing. She felt a migraine coming on and really needed to avoid another unsavory confrontation.

Easing the door open, Bunny tiptoed to the lobby's hall table. As she lifted her purse, voices from another room distracted her.

Well son of a bitch...they were talking about her!

Bunny looked around. There was no one in sight. She scooted down the hall a bit to hear better...

"Did you see the way Bunny was looking at Lugal?" Rosie asked. "Jesus, she wanted to hump him right there in the lobby."

Sam laughed. "She's hot for my man, all right."

"I do not blame her for this," Lugal said. Bunny had to stifle a moan at the delicious sound of that deep, sexy, accented voice of his. "Most females have a strong, lusty response to me," Lugal continued. "This is what happens when you have a perfectly honed physique like mine."

"He's really far too modest," Rosie joked.

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "The poor guy's in serious need of a shot of self-esteem." She laughed.

"Thank God he's your genie and not Bunny's," Rosie said. "Can you imagine how insufferable she'd be if she was Lugal's owner? She'd probably keep Lugal strapped to the bed twenty-four-seven to, um, service her needs."

Bunny's ears perked.

"Many of my possessors have done this," Lugal said. "I remained chained that way until they made their third wish and I returned to the bottle."

Bunny's pussy soaked.

"Charlie's been working tirelessly to find information about Inanna," Rosie said. "He thinks he may have discovered some leads. He said it might be helpful if he could borrow the box and bottle Lugal was trapped in to examine them for clues."

"Nay," Lugal said. "I told you and Samantha not to place yourselves in harm's way on my account. Charlie must not proceed further."

"Oh, yeah...I forgot," Rosie said.

"Um...Lugal," Sam said, "why don't you go wait on the porch? We'll bring lunch out in a few minutes. There's beer in the fridge if you want one."

Bunny heard the sound of the refrigerator opening, followed by the cap being opened on the beer bottle. Then it sounded like a door opened and closed.

"So where'd you hide his bottle?" Rosie said.

"I stuck it downstairs in the wine cellar," Sam answered. "It's sitting on top of the old cabinet with the wine inventory book. Looks like it belongs there. Like an accent piece designed to look really old. Nobody would ever expect it's the real deal."

"Of course not." Rosie laughed. "I mean, who would ever dream that genies really exist? I'll scoot down there and put it in my purse before I go home later so Charlie can examine it."

"Great. Oh, Rosie, I hate talking about the bottle. It's just a reminder that I've got less than three months left before I lose Lugal forever. He'll be imprisoned in that tiny bottle and I'll never get to see or hear him ever again...much less touch him. What am I going to do, Rosie?"

"Well crying's definitely not a good thing. You know how concerned Lugal gets when you cry. Just don't give up hope, Sam. I'm sure Charlie can find a way to save Lugal."

"I just thought of something terrible, Rosie. What if Bunny was the next person to find the bottle? Then she'd be Lugal's owner. That's almost a fate worse than him remaining captive."

"Don't be ridiculous, Sam. That's not going to happen. I mean, whaddya think, that Bunny's going to break in here one night, creep downstairs to the wine cellar and snatch the box?" Rosie erupted in laughter. "Gee, I don't think so. Come on, lighten up."

"You're right," Sam said. "I was just getting carried away. You grab your plate and open the door. I'll get mine and Lugal's."

After the sound of a door opening and closing, there was silence.

It took a good amount of time for Bunny to fully digest all that she'd heard. Surely it couldn't be possible...the man couldn't possibly be a genie...

Ludicrous. Preposterous.

And yet...

It would explain that magnificent man's questionable attachment to Sam, wouldn't it?

Of course. The only reason Lugal had refused to sleep with Bunny when she propositioned him at the restaurant was because the poor man had no choice—because Sam was his owner, his...what was it Lugal called it? His possessor. And Sam wouldn't allow him to fuck any other woman.

Almost three months, they'd said. If Bunny had that bottle in her possession when Sam's time with Lugal was up, she could have that god-like hunk of muscle in her bed, thrusting into her. Fuck her mealy-mouthed, limp-dicked, poor excuse for a husband. Bunny had been planning to get him out of her life anyway.

And what was that she'd heard about three wishes? Jesus Fucking Christ, what she could do with those! The power, the wealth...the delicious satisfaction of revenge...

Bunny's hand flew to her throat as a wild burst of exultant laughter threatened to explode from her mouth.

Now all she had to do was to find the wine cellar...

Chapter Twenty

"Hey, lazybones, why are you calling me on your cell phone when you're right downstairs?" Samantha asked, chuckling.

"Where did you say Lugal's box was again?" Rosie asked.

"On the cabinet with the ledger book."

"That's where I'm looking. It's not here."

"Of course it is. You're probably looking at the wrong cabinet. It's the one with the worn dark green paint, not the newer oak one. It's against the narrow wall just inside the entrance."

"Yup, that's where I'm standing."

Samantha sighed. "Okay, I'll be right down." She flipped her phone closed and headed down the stairs.

"See? I told you," Rosie said, gesturing to the cabinet. "It's not here."

Samantha felt a trickle of panic snake up her spine. "That's impossible. This is where I left it."

"Are you positive?"

"Absolutely." Samantha looked inside the cabinet and behind it before she and Rosie scoured the entire wine cellar. "What the hell could have happened to it?"

"Beats me. There have been lots of people through here the last couple of months, Sam. Maybe somebody got sticky fingers and swiped it. When's the last time you saw it?"

Samantha nibbled on her bottom lip as she thought. "Yesterday morning. I came down to get a bottle of pinot for dinner. It was right there, I'm sure of it. Come on, let's check with the staff. Maybe they saw someone come down here."

"Yes, I ran into your wine supplier as she was heading for the wine cellar," Charlene, the head of finance said ten minutes later.

"What wine supplier?" Samantha and Rosie chorused.

"What did she say?" Samantha asked. "What did she look like?"

"When I asked if I could help her, she told me she was your wine supplier and was on her way downstairs to check the inventory. As for what she looked like, very chic, very haute couture. She was wearing —"

"A pink suit," Rosie ventured.

"Yes, exactly," Charlene said. "And she had beige hair done up in a twist."

Samantha and Rosie exchanged horrified looks. "Bunny!" they cried in unison.

"Oh dear God," Samantha said. "How did she find out?"

"Did I do something wrong?" Charlene asked.

Samantha sucked in a calming breath. "No." She patted Charlene's arm. "It's okay, you didn't know." She turned to Rosie. "Looks like we need to put locks on the interior doors."

"Fuck the locks," Rosie said, yanking Samantha to the door. "We need to go hunting for a dirty low-down skank."

* * * * *

"It is unfortunate, little one, but it is nothing to grieve over."

"How can you say that, Lugal?" Samantha paced the bedroom, flailing her arms as she spoke. "The woman stole your box and bottle! Oh sure, she tried to deny it when Rosie and I confronted her, but instead of being outraged at the accusation, she just gave this sort of smug *heh-heh-heh* laugh. She had guilt written all over her."

"Interesting...why would she write the word on herself?" Lugal asked.

Upset beyond the point of patience, Samantha tsked and rolled her eyes. "It's just a saying, Lugal. If it weren't for that big bruiser bodyguard-butler of hers—I swear to God the guy must have been seven-feet tall—we would have pushed past Bunny and searched the house. That bitch is setting herself up to be your next possessor."

"If it were not her, then it would be someone else," Lugal said.

Samantha growled in frustration. "Oh for chrissakes, Lugal, don't you understand? Bunny wants to fuck you! Do you have any idea how I'll feel in a couple of months knowing you're in her bed doing God knows what every time she crooks her little finger?"

Lugal's features contorted, morphing into a scowl. "I'm sorry, Samantha. I hadn't thought of that. It will be difficult for both of us. The only advantage to having Bunny as my possessor is that I know I will not be with her for long. A woman like that will make use of her wishes quickly, I have no doubt."

"Oh this is terrible. Awful. We have to get that box back, Lugal."

Lugal wrapped his arms around Samantha's tense body, soothing her, smoothing one hand through her hair and the other along her spine.

"Shhh, little one. Do not upset yourself so. Let us not think about what might happen in the future. Tonight is very special. It is the eve of your grand opening celebration. You must—"

"I don't care about tomorrow, Lugal. All I care about is you." Tears flowed down her cheeks. "Please don't leave me, Lugal. I'll die without you." She clutched him tight, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him close with all of her strength.

"You mustn't say such a thing, my sweet." He kissed the top of her head. "I promise I will be here with you as long as I possibly can. Each moment of our time

together will be filled with heartfelt love. That is something Bunny can never take from you, Samantha. My love. It is eternally yours. No matter who owns my body, you will always be the owner of my heart...my very soul."

"Oh God...I don't deserve you." Samantha cried harder. "All I've been doing is selfishly whining and complaining – thinking about no one but myself – when here you are, on the verge of having to return to that bottle. Oh, Lugal," she cried with a hiccupping sob, "you shouldn't be comforting me, I should be comforting you!"

Lugal smoothed his thumbs over her cheeks, catching new tears. "Nay, you are not selfish, Samantha," he said softly. "You are my sweet, sweet love."

"You've worked so hard, done so much for me since you've been here, Lugal. It just isn't fair that you can't stay here with me and enjoy the little slice of heaven we've created for ourselves. You'd be a perfect match for this time. You love the computer and all the modern technology you've learned about. You belong here, Lugal. With me."

"Indeed, that would be heaven. However, we have no *zisura* to make it so." He rocked Samantha in his arms.

"*Zisura*?"

Lugal nodded. "Magical powers. As for the fairness you speak of, it has little to do with my circumstance, Samantha. Whether just or not, I am fated to serve womankind until the end of time. I will forever be grateful that I was able to spend this small measure of time with the woman of my heart. The memories we have made together will nourish my soul and lighten the path of my dark journey ahead."

"Because of you, Lugal, I've achieved my most important goals. I've had my deepest desires fulfilled. I've become so satisfied and impossibly happy that sometimes I have to pinch myself just to make sure this hasn't all been a glorious dream." She looked up into his eyes, sniffing. "Oh Lugal, I love you so much I can barely stand it."

"Yes, I know. I am a real keeper." He winked.

Laughing through her tears, she gave Lugal a good smack on his arm. He gifted her with an eye-twinkling smile in return.

"You are positively incorrigible."

"And you are positively fuckable." He had an unmistakably carnal look in his eye.

"I can't make love now," Samantha protested, taking a few steps back. "Look at me, I'm a mess. My nose is probably all red and swollen and my –"

Lugal yanked her hard against him, almost wringing the wind out of Samantha, and kissed her like never before.

Her bones went rubbery, her stiff joints loosened, her cold sense of fear and indignation about the rotten, sneaky bitch Bunny dissolved until Samantha was nothing but a melty liquid puddle.

"You are beautiful to me always, Samantha," Lugal said, looking down into her eyes after breaking their kiss. "When I look at you, I see past the redness, the swelling from tears. Instead, I glimpse into the farthest reaches of your soul. For it, my dearest

love, is the most perfect, most beautiful soul I have ever, or will ever encounter, no matter how many centuries I live."

Samantha sucked in a sharp breath. "Okay, you win," she said, kicking off her shoes and shimmying out of her clothes. "You've succeeded in turning me on. Big time. Take me. Fuck me, Lugal. Fuck me senseless. Fuck me until I can no longer see straight."

"With greatest pleasure. Your wish is my command." Lugal bowed, a conquering smile enhancing his features.

"But no tying up tonight," Samantha added, leaping onto the bed. "I want to get my hands all over that beautiful, beefy body of yours tonight. I want to rake and squeeze and probe and pinch and suck every luscious inch of you."

Lugal unzipped his jeans. "If my cock grows any bigger or harder I fear it will bend and break in these cumbersome jeans you make me wear."

"Come here, genie. Let me remedy that for you," Samantha suggested, pulling the denim over his lean hips until his poor tortured cock sprang free. "Oh boy, it's happy tonight."

"It's always happy when it gets to fuck you, little one." He gazed down at his cock, twisting his head to the side, as if listening to it. Then his cock jerked. Twice. "Hmm? What is that you say, Mr. *Gar-Du Gis*?" he asked his sizeable appendage, taking it into his hands and double fisting it.

"Mr. Who?" Samantha's eyes were glued to the mouthwatering sight before her.

"It means Mr. Warrior Cock," Lugal explained. "Shhh, he still speaks..." He leaned his head again. "You say thrusting hard and deep into Samantha's tight little ass will make you even happier? Yes, I think that can be arranged." He gazed up at Samantha, his lips curling into a lopsided smile.

Samantha gave him a curious look. "You've been watching the porn channel again, haven't you?"

"I find the sexual encounter movies quite interesting and educational."

"I can't believe you actually named your penis."

"It is what modern men do," Lugal said with confidence. "I learned this from watching cable." He glanced down at his cock again, then shifted his gaze back up to Samantha. "Mr. *Gar-Du Gis* says enough talk. He desires action now. On all fours, woman. Present your ass to me for inspection."

It only took an instant for Samantha's nipples to tighten and for her pussy to weep in eager anticipation. She positioned herself in the center of the bed as he'd commanded and shook her butt at him.

"So, does my ass pass your scrutiny, genie?"

Samantha felt the clap of his broad hand on one cheek and she gave a little yip of surprise.

"This is just the way I like it," he assured her, rubbing the spot he'd spanked. "Rounded alabaster cheeks angled high in the air, begging for my cock to breech your hole." Lugal's fingers slipped into the crevice between her cheeks, smoothing up and down before dipping to her pussy and plunging inside. "So hot...so wet for me."

The moan he'd elicited from her lingered. Desire heating her veins, Samantha watched Lugal sniff his fingers before licking each one thoroughly.

A low growl rumbled in his chest. "Your aromatic scent intoxicates me, Samantha. And your taste, ahhh...it is like nectar."

His actions and words fired her arousal until Samantha filled with liquid heat.

He headed for his nightstand drawer, where he drew out a package of condoms and tube of cinnamon-flavored lube. Her clit fluttered, impatient to have her masterful lover send her spiraling on another ecstatic wave of rapture.

"What's that?" she asked as he drew a large red object enclosed in bubble-plastic packaging from the drawer.

"A new toy I purchased online. It is..." he paused to read from the package, "guaranteed to increase every woman's pleasure quotient to the max." Once he freed the item from its packaging, he pressed a button and the thing came alive with vibration. He gazed up at her, grinning as his eyebrows bounced.

Samantha laughed. "But we already have a small arsenal of vibrators, Lugal."

"Ah, but not like this one. This one is extra thick and powerful," Lugal explained. "Like my cock."

"Except that your cock isn't fire-engine red and it doesn't vibrate."

Lugal tore open the foil packet with his teeth, grinning as he held a shiny red condom aloft. "It is fascinating what one can find online."

"Well I'll be damned," Samantha never ceased to be amazed by the interesting sex paraphernalia Lugal brought to their bed.

"Damned? I think not. But you *will* be fucked. Thoroughly. As for vibrating, once I bury my red-cloaked cock in that tight pink hole of yours, I have no doubt it will vibrate plenty before I am finished with you. In the meantime, I will fuck your juicy cunt with the..." he looked down at the vibrator in his hand, "the Red Hot Master Blaster 8000."

He walked toward her, a predatory gleam in his eye. Samantha's body slid into preparation mode. Juices ran down her thighs, her nipples hardened into needy pinpoints, her ass quivered and her mind...oh, her mind conjured up the most salacious, delicious scenarios.

"Do it to me," she said, wiggling her backside again. "Don't make me wait...please."

"I like it when you beg. That is as it should be." Lugal mounted the bed. Then his big hands were on her, warming the cool skin of her buttocks, parting the twin globes of her ass.

She waited in agonized anticipation until, at the feel of a lubed finger probing her hole, stretching her sphincter muscle, Samantha clawed at the bedspread, gasping for breath.

"Such a tight, puckered, pretty little bud." He pushed deeper, drilling his finger fully into her taut opening. "How I love this fine ass of yours." He played there a while, twisting and turning, and then withdrew. "How I enjoy this most intimate joining of ours, little one."

"And I love when you love me there," Samantha replied. Lugal had taken her to euphoric new heights over the last months as he patiently prepared her for full anal intercourse. She'd come to enjoy ass fucking as much as pussy fucking. Each was blissful in its own way. But nothing was as wholly satisfying as being profoundly filled in both holes at once, whether Lugal was using his hand, a dildo or a vibrator in one hole as his cock thrust hard into the other.

She shuddered when his tongue swirled around her hole, lapping up the cinnamon lube. That dexterous tongue of his licked slow and languorous, from her opening clear down to her primed, swollen clit. On the return trip, he speared her ass with his tongue and she writhed at the deliciously forbidden sensation.

All too quickly, his warm, wet tongue left her.

Grasping her hips, Lugal dragged her closer. She licked her lips and purred when he fit his cock snugly against her anus, eager beyond measure to feel him pierce her tight channel.

He pushed the head of his cock through the barrier muscle and her moans turned to pants as she bucked against him, needing to feel him deeper. When he finally surged into her, God, it was such a good hurt, such a sweet burn.

Lugal's hot fingers dug into the cool flesh of her cheeks. "Already I feel your hot chamber pulsing around my cock. You are eager to be pleased tonight, my love."

Lugal was right. As the days crept by, closer to the time that she'd lose him forever, Samantha had become increasingly needy, more ravenous for their passionate couplings. It was almost as if, by joining sexually, she could mark him, brand him with her love so that he'd somehow *have* to stay with her.

Foolish, yes. Illogical, definitely. But the idea of losing her beloved Lugal was intolerable and driving her to such irrational thoughts.

"I'm always eager to feel you inside me," she told him, determined not to cry. "Your cock, your mouth, your hands...all of you, Lugal, is like magic. You are my fairytale prince come to life."

"And you are my erotic queen." His balls slapped against her as he thrust. "The only woman capable of owning my heart." He bit into her side, sucking her flesh, marking her as his and his alone.

While his cock pierced her ass, he plunged the big red vibrator into her pussy and turned it on. Samantha lost the thread of her thought.

Exquisite pressure built in her anus and cunt as Lugal tortured them sweetly. His body heat was palpable, matching hers in intensity as he held himself close, flush with her body. The musky scent of lovemaking perfumed the air as their heat mingled.

She clenched tight, loving the hard, full, dual intrusions. Such sensational, tormented bliss. Lugal slid the vibrator partially out of her pussy and pressed the base to her clit, sliding it left and right until he nearly splintered her hold on sanity.

“Give me the wand,” she said, reaching her hand behind and wiggling her fingers for the vibrator. She was determined to ensure that Lugal’s climax was as spectacular as she knew hers was about to be.

Her entire body shuddered as he pulled it from her cunt with agonizing slowness. As soon as she had a firm grasp on it, she worked it between her legs, searching for the base of Lugal’s cock. Once she connected with it she held the vibrator against their joined flesh, trailing it down to his balls and back again.

His body stiffened. The deep, guttural cry escaping his chest told Samantha Lugal was well on his way to ecstasy. She could clearly feel spurts of hot cum surging powerfully, captured by the bright red condom cloaking Lugal’s cock.

Spasms rippled through both her pussy and anus. On a high, fractured cry, Samantha’s body erupted with jolts of red-hot pleasure that gripped her entire being, whisking her along with her beloved to a private paradise of deeply satisfied bliss.

Samantha’s pleasure only increased as, until the wee hours of the morning, she and her lover transported each other to rapturous heights. They worked Lugal’s new Red Hot Master Blaster 8000 vibrator so relentlessly, the poor plastic toy petered out.

It wasn’t a problem. While their cache of sex toys added to their enjoyment, Samantha and Lugal were more than adept at bringing each other to orgasm the old fashioned, organic way, with teeth, tongues, hands and flesh on – and in – flesh.

Keeping true to her word, Samantha raked, squeezed, probed, pinched and sucked every luscious inch of the man she loved until they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Chapter Twenty-One

"You are cruel and heartless, Samantha," Lugal accused. "If you truly love me as much as you profess, you would allow me this privilege."

Samantha stood at the driver's side of her car, door open and ready to scoot in. She opened her mouth to protest, but when she looked up at him, her heart turned to jelly. In the nearly six months they'd been together, Lugal had asked only one thing of her. And she hadn't done it for him. After all he'd done for her, after making her life happy and complete beyond her wildest dreams, she'd still refused him.

Dammit, Lugal was right. She *was* cruel and heartless.

"Oh, okay. But, I warn you, Lugal, you'd better do everything I tell you. I don't want you being obstinate and trying any fancy stuff, otherwise you'll land us both in jail."

"Incarceration? Why?"

Slapping the roof of the car, Samantha rolled her eyes. "One," she counted off on her fingers, "you don't have a driver's license. Two, you don't even have a birth certificate. And wouldn't *that* be a sticky situation to try to explain our way out of? Three, if they don't deport you to...wherever, they'll probably keep you locked up in the psycho ward once they find out you think you're a genie."

A wounded look across his features, Lugal clapped his chest. "But I *am* a genie. I do not tell false tales."

"With that *I am bound to tell the truth* rule they gave you when they bottled you up, you'll just get yourself—and me—in hot water. Trust me when I tell you we need to avoid catching the attention of any cops, okay?"

"Okay." The grin on his face was so jovial it was infectious.

Samantha looked left and right. The grocery store's parking was still fairly empty at the early hour. She sucked in a deep breath, expelling it with a whoosh. "Go ahead, get in. And make sure to put on your seatbelt."

Lugal complied. It was a good thing Samantha had purchased a bigger car. Watching Lugal attempt to fold his massive frame into her tiny old car was almost painful to watch. He was so big his knees had practically come up to his chin.

"Pay attention while I explain what everything is," Samantha said. "The pedal on your right is the gas. That makes the car go. The pedal on the left is the brake. That makes it stop. This is the gear shift, it—"

Lugal shifted the car into drive, put his foot on the gas and took off.

"Whoa! Oh my God. What do you think you're doing? Didn't you hear a word I said?"

"There is nothing to worry about," Lugal assured her. "I have watched you maneuver this motorized chariot numerous times. I have read detailed driving instructions online, complete with diagrams and photographs. If a woman can operate this vehicle, then a man such as myself surely can without any problem." He gave her a patronizing smile. "Just relax, Samantha. All will be well."

"Famous last words. You told me the same thing when I left you in my little house all alone and you nearly blew it up with your electrical experiments, remember?"

"You exaggerate, Samantha. I blew myself up, not the house."

Still not used to her improved financial status, she replied, "Replacing that living room picture window you sailed through cost me almost a month's salary."

Lugal smiled. "Yes, but you are wealthy now so it matters not. Do not be such a worry mort. I have learned much since I first arrived here. I am in control."

"It's *worrywart*," she corrected, fidgeting nervously in her seat. "Watch where you're going. Stay in the parking lot. Don't go into the street. Keep your speed under ten miles an hour."

"I will drive us home," Lugal responded. "It is not far."

"No, you most certainly will not."

Lugal pulled out of the parking lot onto the side street and Samantha gasped.

"Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod. Stop the car, Lugal. Stop it this instant."

He patted her knee. "Your man is at the wheel," he reassured, stepping on the accelerator and picking up speed. "There is no need for angst, little one."

"There's a stop sign." Samantha gestured frantically. "You have to stop there."

"Yes, I know." After giving her a smug smile, Lugal mashed his foot on the brake, nearly jettisoning the two of them out the windshield.

"Jesus! Are you trying to kill us?" Samantha screeched. "I'm going to be black and blue from the seatbelt cutting into me."

"I-I am truly sorry, Samantha. I did not intend to hurt you. I do not understand why the car did not stop as smoothly as when you drive it."

"You have to ease the brake down, Lugal, not slam it to the floorboards. You see? This is why I haven't let you drive before. Not only are you inexperienced, you're also pigheaded and stubborn and —"

"When I am back in the bottle all alone and without means of transportation, I will never forget that you let me drive this day, Samantha." He gave her a doe-eyed look that melted her insides. "It has given me great happiness."

Oh, poor Lugal...he was right, he had such little time left here and —

Suddenly it hit her. Samantha's eyes bugged and she gathered her wits. The man was playing on her sympathies. Hitting her with the guilt hammer! She crossed her arms over her breasts, glaring at him. "That was totally unfair. Shame on you."

"Curious." Lugal frowned. "According to the online article, "Managing Your Woman", the guilt trip method was supposed to work quite effectively."

"Get out of the car."

"But—"

"Your driving lesson is over, Lugal. Get out." Samantha unbuckled her seatbelt. Just as she was about to open the door, the car lurched, rolled across the small intersection before she could do anything about it, jumped the curb and rammed into a big blue and red United States Postal Service mailbox.

"What happened?" Lugal's face was aghast. "I was about to get out of the car and it drove itself like magic."

"That's because you didn't shift into park before you let your foot off the brake, Mr. I Am The Man And Can Do No Wrong."

Lugal put the car in park. "Yes, I remember now. But you made me anxious, Samantha. Your angry words and harsh tone distracted me."

"Oh, so now it's my fault you screwed up. You could have killed someone, Lugal. What if that was a child instead of a mailbox? Honestly, I could just wring your neck right now. Look at us. Now what are we supposed to do, hmm?"

She got out of the car to survey the damages, groaning when she eyed the sizeable dent in the property of the U.S.P.S.

Damn.

Lugal got out and stood next to her. "The metal box and your car have both been damaged," he said, stating the obvious.

She just glared at him.

"Perhaps we should get back in the car and you should drive us home," Lugal suggested, his big old macho persona taken down a peg or two.

"We can't just leave the scene of an accident." Samantha wondered if running down a mailbox was in the same category as running into another car. No, of course not. Maybe they *could* leave. Sure, she'd just call the police department, explain what happened and —"

Whoop-whoop-flash-flash...

"Aw shit," Samantha muttered as the police cruiser pulled up behind her car.

* * * * *

"Yes, absolutely, Officer Hartinger," Rosie's husband Charlie assured after hearing out the cop at the police station. "I can vouch for both of them."

"I don't know, Professor Dudchowski." The cop eyed Lugal and Samantha skeptically. "There's something fishy going on. First she tells me *she* was driving and that he's her cousin visiting from Greece. She says he can't speak English. I ask him if

that's right and the guy tells me, *in English*, no—he was at the wheel and he's a genie from someplace called Sooner."

"Sumer," Lugal corrected and the cop, Samantha and Charlie all glared at him.

"So what's going on?" the officer asked. "Is this guy an illegal alien?"

"Nay, I do not come from another planet," Lugal stated. "Merely another time. I told you, I am a genie."

Samantha groaned. Charlie's eyebrow raised and he shot Lugal a warning look.

"I told you to keep quiet, Lugal," Samantha said. "Charlie and I will handle this."

The cop narrowed his gaze. "If I hadn't administered a breathalyzer test myself I'd swear this guy was drunk." His gaze fixed on Lugal. "Is he retarded or something?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"Yes. Aside from having a difficult time with English, Mr. Damu-zid is a bit...slow," Charlie offered. "I give you my word that I'll keep my eye on him until he goes back to, uh, Greece in a few days."

"I don't know. I think it might be better if I hold him for —"

"It seems your son's been having a bit of a problem in his classes," Charlie broke in. "I understand he needs a passing grade in my class to keep from flunking out."

Hartinger's eyes widened. "Yes, that's right."

"While you're seeing to Mr. Damu-zid and Ms. Rutledge's release, I'd be glad to check my calendar to see if I can fit in some time to give your son some personal tutoring," Charlie offered. "Free of charge."

"Hey, that would be great, professor. Ronnie's a good kid. He just needs to get his priorities straight."

"I feel terrible that we've put you through such a difficult time, officer," Samantha said. "By the way, your wife wouldn't be Olivia Hartinger by any chance, would she?"

"Yes." Hartinger's eyes grew wider. "You know my wife?"

Bingo!

"She's one of my clients at the company I own, Beyond the Scale. Lovely woman."

"Aw, yeah, she loves that place. It's made a big difference in her life the past few months." He rubbed his jaw. "You're the owner, huh?"

Smiling, Samantha dug through her purse and drew out a card. She wrote something on it and handed it to the cop. "Here's a guest pass. The next three months are on me."

Hartinger accepted the card with a smile, which quickly morphed into a frown when he eyed Lugal again.

"I don't want to see or hear anything about you getting behind the wheel without a driver's license, mister, you got that? I'll be keeping my eye on you."

"I understand," Lugal said with a confident smile. "You do not have to worry because I will be returning to my bottle—" Lugal *oophed* when Samantha elbowed him in the gut.

"No problem, officer," she said. "You have my word that my, um...cousin will stay out of trouble for the rest of his stay here."

Once Samantha, Lugal and Charlie got back to Beyond the Scale, Rosie hauled them into her office and interrogated them.

"I told him not to say anything." Samantha thumped Lugal's chest. "But did the big know-it-all numbskull listen? No! He just kept going on and on," she made a jabbering mouth gesture with her thumb and fingers, "burying himself deeper with each word. We were damn lucky that cop didn't throw us both in the slammer and throw away the key! I swear to God, I was ready to leave the big dope at the station, walk away and never look back."

"Holy shit, Sam," Rosie said. "I haven't seen you this pissed off since...well, ever. What's going on?"

"Can you blame me? Do you have any idea what it's like to have a big stubborn, macho barbarian underfoot constantly? I've had it. I can't deal with this anymore." In a huff, Samantha opened the door to leave Rosie's office, but Lugal caught it, closing it again.

"Stay," he commanded. "You are too upset to leave now. It would not be good for your clients to see you in such a state, Samantha."

Damn...he was right. As usual. That made her even angrier.

Samantha turned away from everyone, folding her arms across her chest and scowling. She knew she was being unreasonable—childish, even—but couldn't help it for some reason. Lately everything Lugal did seemed to get under her skin.

"This isn't like you, Sam," Charlie said.

"Sam didn't mean what she said," Rosie told Lugal. "She's just a little angry right now, that's all."

"A little?" Samantha hmphed.

"I know." Lugal offered a sad smile. "Samantha is having a difficult time. I believe she is suffering from referred anger. That is why she has been so...I believe the word is *bitchy*, lately."

"Well thank you, Doctor Freud," Samantha quipped acerbically.

"He's right," Rosie said. "You have been awfully cranky lately."

"Thanks so much for your unsolicited opinion, Rosie," Samantha chided. "Don't you have some paperwork to attend to? You're getting paid to work, not criticize your boss, you know."

"Whoa." Rosie held her fingers up to make a cross sign, as if fending off a vampire. "Somebody's *very* B.I.T.C.H.Y.," she spelled aloud.

"Pay her no heed, Rosie," Lugal advised. "Samantha lashes out in anger because the pain of losing me in a few days is too great for her conscious mind to cope with."

A dead-cold shiver snaked up Samantha's spine. She did *not* want to hear this!

"I'm leaving. Unlike some of you, *I* have work to do." She moved to the door again, only to have Charlie block it this time, his newly strapping arms braced across his beefed-up chest.

"I think you should listen to the man," Charlie said in a no-nonsense tone.

"I liked you better when you were a ninety pound weakling," Samantha snarled.

"Using anger is a protective mechanism," Lugal said. "It is far easier for Samantha to ignore her deep seated fears by resorting to anger, instead. A part of her brain believes this will make our inevitable parting easier."

"Stupid pop psychology," Samantha grumbled. Why didn't Lugal just go away and leave her alone? Why didn't they *all* just leave her alone!?

Rosie and Charlie exchanged sympathetic looks and Charlie wrapped his arm around his wife. "Sounds like you've hit the nail on the head, Lugal," he said. "Where did you learn all that?"

"Online, from psychology websites. I have been doing research in hopes of helping Samantha cope better through our approaching separation."

"I wish to hell I'd never shown you and your stupid photographic memory that damn computer," Samantha snapped. "You've turned into an annoying egghead."

"Hey, I thought that was my title," Charlie joked, clapping his chest.

"See how she tries to engage me in a battle of hurtful words?" Lugal asked. "Her subconscious is hoping I will berate her. That way her anger can fester until she believes she does not want me to stay after all. But I will not cooperate. I am determined to leave Samantha with only good memories of our time together."

Samantha held her hands over her ears. She felt like singing *la-la-la-la-la* to drown all of them out. If they'd just buzz off she could get some work done, then maybe go to bed early. Yeah, that's what she needed, some extra sleep. She'd been pushing herself too hard lately, burning the candle at both ends to make BTS the best weight-loss center on the planet.

That's all it was...she was overtired and cranky. Why couldn't they understand that and stop badgering her?

"Aw, honey," Rosie said, drawing Samantha's stiff, unyielding body into a hug, whether Samantha liked it or not. "Lugal's right. I should have realized that's what's been going on with you. Talk to us, Sam," she encouraged. "We're here for you, hon."

"There's nothing to talk about." Shrugging out of Rosie's grasp, Samantha blasted the trio with a caustic glare.

"I'm sick to death of listening to all of Lugal's psychobabble," she barked. "He doesn't know what he's talking about. None of you do. Can't I simply be pissed off with Lugal because he acted like a horse's ass? Why does it have to have anything to do with

the fact that...that..." she sucked in a shuddering breath. "That he's leaving me in a few...a few..."

Two fat tears escaped her eyes, coursing down her cheeks. Then her entire body shook with a series of violent trembles.

"Oh God," she sobbed. "What am I going to do?" She dropped to her knees, burying her face in her hands, weeping.

Lugal knelt at her side, wrapping her in his arms, soothing her as she cried.

"I can't lose you, Lugal," she sobbed into his chest. "Without you life is meaningless. And, good God in heaven, I can't bear the thought of you being trapped in that awful bottle again. Oh God, Lugal, what are we going to do?"

"It will be hard for us," Lugal said. "But you are bold and strong. You have the support of Rosie and Charlie and you have the daily operations of Beyond the Scale to fill your thoughts while you grieve. You will survive this loss, my love, and you will go on to live a productive, happy life."

"No...no, not without you, Lugal. I can't." She clutched onto him for dear life. She would have crawled inside him if she could.

"If I had it in my power to make a wish for myself," Lugal said gently, "it would be that you find yourself a good, caring man who will give you a houseful of adorable little goats and take care of you until you are old...the way I wish I could do for you. In fact, Samantha, I would ask that you consider making that your third and final wish before I must depart."

By this time, Rosie was crying and Charlie snorted in a big manly snuffle.

"How could I ever think of being with another man after I've had you in my life?" Samantha asked through her sobs. "No man could begin to compare to you, Lugal. I could never feel for anyone else what I feel for you."

"The phrase, *time heals all wounds*, is a worthy one, Samantha," Lugal said. "You will see...with the passage of time, the ache in your heart will ease and you will find enough room in that big heart of yours for another man to share your life."

"I don't really think you're a horse's ass, Lugal. Or a numbskull. Or a dodo, or any of those other awful things I said."

"What about macho and stubborn?" Lugal asked.

"Definitely." Samantha laughed a little. "But those traits are part of what makes you the dear, wonderful man I love—with all my heart, Lugal. I'm sorry for all those terrible things I said."

"It is all right. I understand." Lugal brought Samantha's hand to his mouth, brushing his lips across her knuckles.

"Jeez, I hate like hell to have to bring this up now," Rosie said, "but it's almost time for your next Warrior Fitness class, Lugal. Think you'll be able to teach it—or should we cancel it?"

Lugal rose to his feet, bringing Samantha up with him. After kissing her forehead, nose and lips, he straightened, giving Rosie a half-hearted smile.

"I am ready. I have only a few more classes to lead before I leave and Charlie takes over. Charlie, you will come with me so that I may introduce you to the class members as their new instructor, yes?"

Charlie took in a deep breath and shook his head. "I keep telling you, they're never going to accept me, Lugal. Those women love you, adore you. You're like a rock star to them. You could do classes every hour around the clock and still never be able to meet the demand.

"And the men," Charlie huffed a humorless chuckle, "well they envision themselves looking like you and having all your charisma and magnetism once they get in shape. They'll take one look at me—a carrot-topped professor of ancient history and classical archaeology—and never come back."

"Nay, you speak foolishness. You are a man of great *galanzu* and *nam-silis*. Knowledge and strength," Lugal clarified. "Physically you may have been a *henzer*, a weakling, in the past, but no more, Charlie. Today you have a warrior's body. You must work on your confidence, my friend." Lugal slapped Charlie on the back, a gesture that sent him flying before he got in shape. "So, we go now?"

"Sure," Charlie said, boasting a smile of renewed confidence. "Thanks, Lugal. Hey, Rosie, can you stay with Sam for a while?"

"Absolutely. It's time to lock my office door and dig into my desk drawer."

Samantha sniffled. "For what?"

"My chocolate cache," Rosie confessed, her eyebrows bouncing. "A good chocolate binge will make us both feel better, you'll see." She winked.

Samantha couldn't help but chuckle a bit.

"You are a very wise woman, Rosie," Lugal said as he and Charlie left her office.

Rosie checked her appointment book. "I've got just over an hour before my next client appointment. That should give us ample time to chow down on chocolate and talk."

"I'm free for about forty-five minutes," Samantha said. "Good God..." She licked her lips as she watched Rosie draw a bag of chocolate decadence from her drawer. "I can't believe we're about to feed our faces with chocolate, right here in the offices of BTS!" She laughed.

"You know our motto," Rosie reminded her. "All things in moderation."

"That," Samantha pointed to the chocolate stash, "is not moderation."

"The way I see it," Rosie gave a nonchalant shrug, "we haven't indulged in chocolate for far too long, which makes us more than eligible for stretching the definition of moderation."

"Well, when you put it that way..." As she sank her teeth into the square of Belgian chocolate, Samantha moaned in bliss. "Mmm, perfect. Thanks, Rosie. I-I'm really sorry

about before. I made such an ass of myself," she confessed. "I hope you know I didn't mean any of those awful things I said to you. Forgive me?"

"Of course. With all you've got going on, Sam, you're entitled to a bit of bitchery."

Samantha's eyes welled with tears. "I don't know what I'd ever do without you, Rosie. Not only are you my best friend, you're the sister I never had."

"Back atcha, sweetie." Rosie winked and pointed her finger at Samantha. "But it's time to stop blubbering, Sam. Salty tears don't mix well with chocolate." She bit into a chunk of chocolate, rolling her eyes in heavenly satisfaction.

"I'll do my best to turn off the waterworks." Samantha snatched a tissue from the box on Rosie's desk and dabbed her eyes.

"Charlie found another incantation in some old handwritten manuscript full of spells and such."

"That's wonderful!" Samantha scooted to the edge of her seat. "Can we try it tonight?"

Rosie nodded. "Lugal will be occupied with another class an hour before the center closes tonight. We can do it then."

"Perfect. Maybe this will be the one, Rosie. Maybe we'll actually be able to conjure Inanna."

"I hope to hell we do. Time's getting short." As soon as the words flew out of Rosie's mouth, Samantha's eyes glistened with tears. "Oh crap. I didn't mean to bring that up again."

"That's okay." Samantha shook her head and sighed. "There's no escaping it, Rosie. And no use pretending it's not going to happen. It's a fact. Three days from now, *poof*, back into that damn bottle he goes."

"Unless we can prevent it. Charlie's made it an extra credit project for his students, so they're all busy looking for ways to contact Inanna. He's got a brainy bunch, they've already come up with plenty of good leads."

"Charlie is an angel," Samantha said. "I'm so thankful to have you for my friends."

"Hey!" Rosie jabbed her finger in the air. "Nip those emerging tears in the bud, lady. Enough with the crying already. Eat!" She pushed another foil wrapped chocolate truffle toward Samantha.

"You really enjoy being at Beyond the Scale, don't you, Rosie"

Rosie gave her an incredulous look. "Are you kidding? I've never been happier in my life. If you're thinking about getting rid of me, you can just forget it because I won't go. This place has changed my life, Sam. In three short months you've built a —"

"We've built," Samantha corrected with a warm smile.

Rosie grinned. "Thanks, I'm glad you feel that way. We've built the most popular weight-loss center in Portland and it looks like there's no end in sight. Every day new requests for interviews are coming in, we've got a waiting list a mile long, our BTS

website is getting so many hits Charlie says it's insane and we can barely keep up with the sales of your videos and audios, Sam."

"We've got a bona fide hit on our hands," Samantha said, "don't we?"

"That's an understatement. Sam, you're the beloved new icon of overweight, out-of-shape, sick-of-dieting people everywhere. I swear to God, I half-expect to see Oprah and her best friend Gail popping in to sign up any day. How much you wanna make a bet her people call you to come on the show?"

Samantha laughed. "That's just a wee bit grandiose, don't you think?"

"With the way BTS has taken Portland by storm? Nope. You mark my words, missy. One day when that phone rings—"

Rosie's office phone rang and they jumped.

While her friend tended to the call, which, from the calm expression on Rosie's face clearly wasn't from Oprah, Samantha's thoughts whirled. Time was running out. She had little hope they'd be successful in contacting the goddess instrumental in imprisoning Lugal. That meant she needed to start putting her plan into action.

As soon as Rosie disconnected, Samantha said, "Rosie, I've had my attorney work up some documents. I'm making you a full partner, half-owner of Beyond the Scale."

Rosie choked on her candy. "Are you serious?" she asked, still coughing. Samantha nodded, but Rosie's face fell. "Oh, honey, that's a great offer, and I wish to hell I could take you up on it, but, even though you pay me way an extremely generous wage, there's no way I can afford to buy half an interest in this place. Charlie and I have only got a little socked away and it's all earmarked the for twins' college educations."

"Who said anything about money?" Samantha smiled and Rosie's eyes bugged. "I want to *give* this partnership to you, Rosie—at no cost. If anything ever happens to me I'd want to make certain that Beyond the Scale continues to flourish so it can keep helping all of those wonderful people who've put their faith and trust in us. Having you as my partner, the woman who shares my vision, the one person I fully trust to carry on my dream, I know that will happen."

"Well, shit, Sam, I'd be a damned fool to turn you down." She rose from her chair and gave her best friend a hug. "Thank you. But, you don't have to worry about anything happening to you because when I'm old and feeble and trying to read those itty-bitty numbers on the scale, you'll be right there with me, struggling to see through a thick pair of bifocals."

"Right. And when we get totally frustrated and pissed off because we're nothing but couple of useless old bats," Samantha offered, "we'll toddle in here to your office to binge on chocolate to soothe our aging psyches."

They laughed together and each ate another piece of chocolate before Rosie stuffed the candy back into the bowels of her desk drawer.

"Time for breath mints," Rosie said, handing them each one. You know those clients can smell chocolate on someone's breath from across the room."

"I'm the same way." Samantha admitted. "Getting back to the partnership thing, Rosie. Realistically, who knows what might happen." She savored the last remnants of chocolate on her tongue before the strong peppermint all but obliterated the taste. "I mean, I could get hit by a bus on the way to my Oprah taping." She smiled. "But seriously, I've arranged it so that if something *does* happen, this house and all of my personal and business assets will be yours. You're the closet thing to family I have, so you're the logical beneficiary."

Rosie eyed Samantha skeptically. "That's all fine and good and I'm thankful as hell, hon, but why all the maudlin talk all of a sudden? That's not like you. Did you have some sort of premonition or something? Oh Jesus, Sam, you're not seriously ill, are you? You wouldn't keep something like that from me, would you?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I just...well, now that I have a thriving business, I thought it would be wise to...get things in order. Just in case."

"Listen, you know I get really eeky talking about wills and dying and stuff like that, Sam, so let's end this conversation by me saying thanks for your generous gesture and you complete dropping this ghastly subject, okay?"

"Okay."

"So have you decided on your third wish yet?" Rosie asked.

Samantha sucked in a deep breath. "Yes...it took me a long time and I went through dozens of possibilities but...after today..."

Samantha's mind skirted over the day's events and the single bright shining spot in it all. Lugal. No matter what she'd dished out, he not only put up with her, he nurtured her, put her concerns above his own. He gave of his heart and soul so completely it put her to shame.

"After today, I'm one hundred percent certain. There's no longer any doubt about what I'll wish for."

"So?" Rosie perched on the edge of her seat. "Come on already, the suspense is killing me."

"Samantha shook her head. "Sorry, Rosie, I'm going to keep this one private. You'll find out what it is once my wish comes true."

"Well damn! Not only are you being downright mysterious," Rosie chided, "you're utterly cruel too. Come on, give me a hint. Does it involve money?"

"Nope, I've got all the money I need now."

Rosie's eyes widened. "Are you going to wish for another man like Lugal suggested? Is that it, sweetie? I know it would be hard, but you have to admit he had a good point there."

"No." Samantha huffed a humorless laugh. "Absolutely not."

As Rosie nibbled on a fingernail, Samantha could imagine the gears turning inside her friend's head as she tried to come up with a valid idea.

But Samantha knew Rosie would never guess.

“Travel? Does it have something to do with going somewhere?”
Samantha gave a wistful smile. “I guess you could say that...yes.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bunny Turner sat on the edge of her bed, wearing a silk negligee. Slipping her hand between her breasts she withdrew a small key suspended from a fine gold chain. She bent to unlock the gilt-edged door of her nightstand and brought out the ancient stone box containing the spun glass bottle.

She patted her hair, taking a deep breath before opening the box and setting the small bottle in the palm of her hand.

"Genie, come forth," she commanded, pulling the stopper from the neck of the bottle. "It is I," she elevated her chin, "Bunny Turner, your new owner. Come forth and do my bidding, genie."

It was the same regime she'd gone through every evening since appropriating the genie's bottle from the BTS wine cellar three months earlier. She didn't like to think of it as stealing. Not when that fat bitch Sam Rutledge had robbed her of her prestige, her fame, her standing in the weight-loss community.

In three months, the annoyingly buoyant woman had somehow catapulted her copycat business to astounding heights. Bunny had lost most of her clients to BTS. Hell, she'd even lost her best counselors.

No, it wasn't stealing when someone owed you something. And Sam Rutledge owed her. Big time.

Bunny stared at the bottle for a long moment, waiting to see if Lugal would waft out in a puff of smoke, but nothing happened.

"I'm getting impatient, my handsome genie," Bunny said. "But I can wait. The time has to be getting close now. As long as I have your bottle, you're mine—just as soon as you leave that fat bitch. Then you'll see what a *real* woman is all about."

Leaving the bottle open, in invitation as she liked to think of it, Bunny placed it back in its box atop her nightstand, where it would remain until she locked it up again in the morning.

* * * * *

It was almost over. Samantha's life-changing love affair, her beloved heart of hearts, her brave, wonderful, handsome genie...all of it was about to come to a dreadful end.

She glanced at the clock for the umpteenth time in the last five minutes. There were less than two hours left before the clock struck midnight. Before she would lose the man she so dearly loved in a cruel puff of smoke.

Samantha wasn't sure why she was still breathing. The pain in her heart was almost too great to bear. Charlie and his class had found several other incantations, which he, Rosie and Samantha had solemnly recited to no avail. Inanna could not or would not be summoned.

No matter how great her grief, Samantha was determined to make their remaining time together as happy and beautiful as possible. She'd ordered the two foods Lugal had mentioned as favorites from a Middle Eastern restaurant. While they didn't have grilled goat's head, they did have roasted lamb's head, a Greek specialty. Instead of the leg of mutton, they provided a roasted leg of lamb.

Samantha did her best not to shudder through dinner as the damn lamb's head kept eyeballing her – literally. If that weren't bad enough, the thing smiled at her during the entire meal. Who the hell ate roasted faces with eyeballs and a mouth full of teeth?

Lugal, obviously, by the way he waxed poetic over the meal and picked that skull clean from brains to eyeballs to tongue. Ugh!

But she could endure anything that night to make Lugal happy. She even ate the cheek, which Lugal assured her was the prized treat of the lamb's head. She couldn't very well shun his generous gesture, so she ate the bit of well-seasoned, roasted meat, amazed that it tasted as good as it did.

She served Lugal's favorite champagne and finished the meal with Häagen-Dazs vanilla bean ice cream topped with honeyed dates, figs and walnuts. The ice cream certainly wasn't traditional in Sumerian kitchens, but Samantha reasoned that some things simply cried out to be updated. Besides, Lugal had developed a passion for ice cream.

While the time limitation hung like a dense, grim fog over them, neither Samantha nor Lugal mentioned his impending departure. Their conversation was kept light through the main course, turning to words rich, sweet, decadent and full of delicious promise by the time they ate dessert.

"My balls tingle deep inside when I look at you," Lugal said as she stripped naked in their bedroom after dinner. "I crave to fuck you, my lovely Samantha. And if I know my insatiable little vixen, you are hot and wet right now, just from thinking about fucking me."

He scooped her panties from the floor and held them to his nose. "You see? Wet and fragrant with the unmistakable musk of desire." He crumbled the panties in his hand and rubbed them over his chest, breathing deeply. "Intoxicating. Your womanly scent tells me that your channel has readied itself for my invasion. It hungers for my flesh."

Samantha felt the first telltale flutters deep in her belly and she squeezed her legs together tight. "Lugal, if you don't stop, you're going to have me coming right here on the spot before you've even touched me."

"I enjoy touching you. I wish nothing more than to claim your sweet, juicy cunt with my cock." He held his engorged, naked cock, as if offering it to her on a platter.

"See how it throbs, Samantha? How my swelling cock yearns to bury itself high in your drenched pussy?"

Samantha gazed at the magnificent veined shaft and walked toward him, dropping to her knees before him and taking his offering in her mouth. Encouraged by his pleased groans, she sucked and licked just long enough to warm him up, then she let the beautiful beast pop from her moist lips.

"Let's make use of that triple showerhead you like so much," she suggested, rising again and holding her hand out to Lugal. "I think we can probably find some pleasurable new uses for those nozzles, how about you?"

Lugal grasped her hand. "I would follow you anywhere, my love."

They walked across the bedroom to the large master bath, which had been sumptuously renovated to Lugal's specifications.

Warm, creamy tan marble, veined with white and traces of aqua made up the large, state-of-the-art space. Rich gold fixtures and accessories glinted in the soft light of the chandelier. Complete with step-down spa with tiered marble seating, the room was exquisite. One of Samantha's favorite places to relax and luxuriate—made all the more appealing when Lugal shared the experience with her.

The man had definitely come a long way since his days of foiling kitchen walls.

She turned on the water and they stepped inside the spacious shower with its built-in benches.

"Come here, handsome. Let me wash all your big, hard, manly parts." Pouring lavender-scented liquid soap on the washcloth, Samantha faced him. She smoothed the soapy cloth over his chest, down his abs and over each thigh. Skirting around his cock, she dragged the cloth to his back, wedging it between his fine ass cheeks.

He poured shampoo on her hair as she bathed his crevice. "I love the feel of your big, strong body when it's slick and wet," she told him, cradling his balls as she brought the cloth around to soap his erect cock.

Rude thoughts warning this would be the last time they enjoyed this together threatened to intrude, but Samantha pushed them to the farthest recesses of her mind, determined not to cry. Not now. Not yet. There'd be plenty of time for crying later.

"And you, sweet love," Lugal said, gently massaging her scalp, "you are a feast for my eyes as well as my body. Droplets of water pelt your skin everywhere I want my mouth to be." He caught one drip with his tongue just before it fell from her nipple. Then he feasted on her nipple itself, making her squirm.

"You're going to make me lose focus, Lugal."

"And what is your focus, little one?"

"To make you convulse like a live wire as I make you come in the shower."

"Experience has taught me that water and electricity are a dangerous combination," Lugal noted with a smile. "But I am always eager for adventure." His smile broadened. "You have my permission to electrocute me with your sizzling passion."

He took one of the showerheads from the wall and aimed it at her breasts. As the pulsing stream zeroed in on her nipples, they spiked. "As you make me sizzle," he said, pausing to blow cool air on her wet skin, causing it to pucker more, "I will set your clit afire. Open yourself for me."

Samantha spread her legs and moaned as Lugal's fingers spread her labia. He aimed the warm spurts of water at her clitoris. God...whoever invented removable shower heads with pulsating streams and nice long cables to reach every bodily nook and cranny should receive some sort of humanitarian award.

Her hands tightened around his cock. "That feels so good, Lugal."

"Sit there," Lugal directed, gesturing to one of the marble benches. "First I will rinse your hair."

"Oh, now that's just plain cruel, making me wait for the good stuff."

His eyebrows bounced and he smiled. "Yes, I know. I am prolonging the sexual tension. Do you like it?"

"No. I want to feel you deep – ooh!" She'd been so busy complaining that Samantha hadn't even realized Lugal had zeroed in on her pussy and thrust deep. "Mmmm...yes, like that...just like that."

"And like this?" He spread her lips again, aiming the pulsing water at her clit while he shoved higher inside.

Samantha was ready to go through the roof with pleasure, feeling the drag of him leaving her and the slam of his re-entry, combined with the sweet torment at her sensitive bud.

"And like this?" His talented mouth was at her breast now, nibbling at her aching nipple.

"Oh yeah...God, yes..."

"As wet as the shower makes you," Lugal said, nibbling her ear, "I am still able to smell the sweet musk of your cunt. Your scent calls to my veins, even above the perfume of the lavender." He braced her against the dripping wall and shoved in harder. "I could make love to you for all eternity and never tire of it."

Eternity. *Eternity...*

"Oh Lugal..." A sob caught in Samantha's throat as she wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face in the hollow of his shoulder. The reminder that their time together was so fleeting, that he'd be facing an eternity in a nether existence, tore at her soul.

"Shhh, shhh, we will have none of that now, my sweet." Lifting her head, he smoothed her hair and kissed the tears from her eyes. "We will focus on the joy, the immense pleasure we give to each other. And we will keep those memories with us for all eternity."

Lugal returned the pulsing stream to her clit, adjusting the power so it came in forceful spurts against her swollen clitoris. He screwed his hips, abrading her G-spot.

"I want to hear the echo of your scream bouncing off these walls as I take you on *lil* to *an*. I want to see your rapture. To see those incredible lapis lazuli eyes of yours wide with wonder, then fogged with passion as you are seized in the grip of climax."

A hot flush of pleasure coursed deep in Samantha's belly, expanding outward, inward, until she found herself in the throes of a spiraling orgasm. Clutching his wet chest, she screamed out Lugal's name and he thrust into her, harder, faster, growling and grunting as he picked up speed.

The spurting water was sheer torture at her clit...and she didn't want it to stop. He knew her so well. Even through his own roaring climax, he kept the showerhead affixed a mere few inches from her clitoris.

Using the water, he coaxed Samantha through another orgasm, and then another until her being was spent and she slumped, limp and sated into his arms.

"You were the one who was supposed to scream," she reminded him.

"But I did, little one. You did not hear because your own scream was deafening. Listen." He cupped his hand to his ear. "You can still hear it echoing."

She almost followed his lead until she realized he was teasing.

"That look in your eyes a moment ago, it is the one I spoke of. The one I love. Wondrous, curious, trusting." He leaned, planting a kiss on Samantha's cheek. "Only one of the many reasons why *ze ki angu*."

"Mmmm, I remember that one." Samantha gave a throaty chuckle. "It means you are my beloved and I love you. *Ze ki angu* to you too."

"I think it is time for us to talk, little one."

"No." Samantha clutched Lugal's wet limbs, wishing she could melt into his flesh and become one with him.

"You still have a third wish to make."

"Not until the very last minute. I don't want to lose a single precious second with you, Lugal. There's no way I'm sending you back to that bottle early."

"Rosie tells me that you have made your wish decision, but you would not share it with her. It must be very personal."

"It is."

"Tell me about it."

"No...I can't. Not until it's time for me to make my official wish. Until then I just want to pretend like that time will never have to come and that we can just go on like this forever."

"I understand." Lugal kissed her tenderly, then rose to place the showerhead back in place. Instead of returning to the bench, he slipped to the floor of the shower. "Let me taste you once more," he said. "Spread your pale limbs for me and show me the deep, silken rose between your lips."

He nudged Samantha's thighs apart and she spread for him. "I can't. I'm still quaking from my last orgasm, Lugal. It's too soon."

His laugh was slow and husky. "You forget, Samantha, I know your body almost as well as I know my own. I know what you need, when you need it and what you're capable of." He inched his face closer to her pussy and sniffed. "You crave my mouth, my teeth, my tongue, on your most sensitive flesh. Your body yearns to tremble with the molten shock of orgasm after orgasm after..."

He buried his head between her thighs. Then his wonderful, talented mouth was on her, performing a variety of sinfully delicious tasks. At the moment his tongue pierced her cunt, his finger pierced her ass. Both wiggled within her, making her squirm. She lingered on a moan as lightning speared through her senses at the dual sensations.

Threading her fingers through his long hair, Samantha strived to commit every nuance of the passionate moment to memory. Everything from the way the water dribbled down the marble, to the sound of Lugal's breathing, to the sight of his big barbarian's body curved before her, to the battle scars on his back and shoulders, to the deeply erotic sensations rippling through her...everything.

She had to, because it would never happen again. Ever.

"You're right, Lugal, you do know me. Better than anyone ever has...or ever will. There's a special magic in your hands, in that lush mouth of yours. You know just what to do to make me—"

He bit her clitoris, hard enough to make her shudder and yet gentle enough to make her sigh. Samantha thought her senses would escape her as he nipped and nibbled.

"Ahhhhh...yes...that's exactly what I mean, Lugal."

He finger-fucked her tight little hole, twisting and turning. That in combination with the savage swoop of his tongue, up and down the length of her slit had her sucking in a sharp breath. Her head fell back against the wet marble while her hands fisted around his damp locks, urging him on. "Magic, pure, unadulterated genie magic."

She bit her lip hard as the torrent of ecstasy tore through her. Her clit was ultra-sensitive now, so much so that she almost feared it would detonate with just one more wicked ripple of pleasure.

"Oh, Lugal...Lugal!"

He held her firmly, whispering sweet words of love in Sumerian, as her body bucked and quaked. No matter what tongue he used, his sentiments came through loud and clear. Sentiments her heart echoed.

Samantha felt a warm soapy cloth skimming her body. Lugal was washing her as she recovered from her stunning orgasm. His big, strong hands could be so gentle and caring, so soft and precise when he wanted them to be.

He slicked the cloth over her body, digging his fingers into her flesh, kneading here and there like a tender all-over body massage.

Her leg was in his lap as he smoothed the lavender-scented cloth across her skin. Lugal kissed her foot, from one toe to the next. "Every part of your body, every tiny fragment of your being. I love all of it. I worship and adore you, my sweet *dod*."

"What does *dod* mean?"

"Lover...in the truest sense of the word." He lifted Samantha from the marble seat and they stood together beneath the warm showers of water. "After we towel dry we will retire to our bed and share another bottle of champagne. We will say to each other all the heart-true words that are necessary before I must leave you."

Yes...time was running out...

It was time to face their destinies...together.

Her heart heavy with acceptance and understanding, Samantha nodded and sighed. She suspected that Lugal hoped the champagne might help to soothe her anxiety, to cloud and soften her thinking about his impending departure. But nothing could accomplish that. She'd be aware, focused and alert until that final tortuous second.

"Yes...yes, we'll do that," she agreed. "I want to spend the last moments we have together in each other's arms."

"To the last second," Lugal assured her, stepping out of the shower and holding out his hand for Samantha.

Taking one of the big, thick Turkish towels from the warming rack, Lugal wrapped it around her, patting and rubbing, tending to the just-dried places with soft kisses.

When he finished, Samantha returned the favor, drying his wet body and hair with the other warm towel, fully aware it was the last time she'd have the privilege.

They lit all the candles throughout the bedroom and Samantha lit sticks of sandalwood and patchouli incense, the two fragrances she first connected with Lugal when he poured forth from the bottle. She breathed in the wafting, aromatic smoke and sighed. They'd forever be her favorite scents.

Lugal opened the bottle of champagne, the finest, costliest vintage from their wine cellar. They'd saved the rare selection for just this moment, to savor the superb bubbly together as they savored the wonderful memories they'd created together. To make their final repast as perfect as possible, Samantha added a small box of Belgian chocolates.

Slipping into her deep purple bra, panties and the matching floor-length semi-sheer robe, she remembered when Lugal had personally selected them at Victoria's Secret. She'd never forget the look of longing in his eyes as he lifted the wispy items and noted, 'The color of a Sumerian sky on a late summer's night. Your alabaster skin will look like the moon and stars against these garments. You will wear these for me, Samantha.'

Her breath caught when Lugal went to the dresser and drew out his genie garb, the turquoise balloon pants, golden-yellow belt sash and the short black embroidered vest, embedded with rubies. And there was his mighty saber and its sheath.

Samantha's heart ached as she watched him set out his clothing, seeing the muscle twitch in his jaw as he eyed the garments. They were more comfortable than jeans, he had explained to her, and better suited to the confinement of the bottle.

Once fully dressed, he stood before her. The grim, solemn line of his lips could in no way be mistaken for a smile. It was a look she hadn't seen on his handsome features before. It broke her heart to see it there.

"Come, my love," Lugal said, extending his hand and attempting a smile. "Let us toast to our six months of happiness together."

Samantha slipped her hand into his and they sat in the middle of the bed with its diaphanous cream-color curtains around them. Samantha loved their bedroom. Just stepping into it made her think of Lugal. The lushness of the space, with its abundance of embroidered pillows, satins and touches of gold, brought a sultan's palace to mind. Or, rather, a *genie's* palace...

Lugal handed her a flute of champagne. "My heart desires to speak to you," he said. "I will make a special toast to you." Taking a deep breath, Samantha nodded.

Looping arms with her, so that they'd drink from their glasses continental style, Lugal gazed deeply into her eyes.

"O Samantha, my *ki-aga*, my beloved of the fair-spoken mouth, of the ever kind lapis eyes, of the vulva so wondrous to behold. *Munus*, woman, sweet as the date. Your precious caress is more savory than honey. Your interior is the place where the sun rises, endowed with abundance. Just as the light of the rising moon, my sweet beloved too, is clothed in enchantment. *Ze ki angu*, Samantha...*ze ki angu*."

Lugal sipped from his glass as did she.

His heartfelt words and the intense, sincere look in his dark eyes moved Samantha to tears. "That was beautiful, Lugal, like a lyrical poem."

"It is an ode that my heart sings," Lugal explained, clapping his hand on his chest and nodding. "Expressed in the way of my people, in the manner of my time. It is my way of telling you how dearly beloved you are to me."

"You're going to have me bawling like a baby in a second," she said, swiping tears from her cheeks.

Lugal cupped her chin, giving her a loving look of warmth she'd never forget. "It is important to me that you know the depth of my love. The six months I spent with you are the most fulfilling in my long existence. Never in my life, Samantha, have I cared for another more than I care for my own life. Until now."

He leaned close and kissed her, tenderly at first, then with more passion. "I am a changed man because of your unselfish love. The gift you have given me of yourself is more precious than gold. I will value it, treasure it, for the rest of my days."

"I've never had a man speak to me from his heart like that, Lugal. If you only knew how much your words meant to me. But even if you hadn't said them, I would have known. Your every deed, your every gesture, the way you look at me and the way you treat me—all of that shows me how much you love me. I feel so very, very blessed."

In between kisses and loving caresses, they spent the next moments sipping champagne, nibbling chocolates and reminiscing about their wondrous time together.

Samantha caught Lugal giving the clock on the nightstand a surreptitious glance. Her blood ran cold when she followed his gaze and noted the time. They had eight minutes left before midnight.

Dear God! Eight minutes!

"It is time, my beloved," Lugal said, his expression bleak. "You must make your final wish now. It would break my heart if you did not make a third wish for yourself before I leave you. I-I hope you have considered my suggestion, Samantha. It would give me great relief to know that you will find happiness with a good man who will love you and treat you as you deserve."

Samantha wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him close for another kiss. "Let me feel you inside me one last time," she said, tears running down her cheeks. "I want to be as close as we can possibly be until we have to part."

"I would not have it any other way," Lugal agreed.

Mindful of the saber at his side, Lugal parted the billowy fabric at his groin, revealing his cock. Samantha dragged her panties down far enough to open her thighs for Lugal.

They chorused an extended *ahhhhhh* as their intimate flesh joined one last time.

"Now it's my turn to tell you what my heart needs to say, Lugal," she said, holding him close as they lay on their sides, facing each other. "You are such a remarkable man. The man every woman dreams of having in her life, in her bed. A man who's strong, decisive and masterful, yet loving and romantic when the time is right."

"Your words warm my heart, Samantha."

"Shhh," she pressed her fingertip to his lips. "There's so little time and I have so much to say. You've given of yourself more than anyone else I've ever known. You're the least selfish person I know—even to the point of wanting me to wish for another man for myself. You've gladly romped with Charlie and Rosie's kids each time they've pestered you to play *genie*—even when you wanted to escape and romp with me between the sheets." They both smiled at the recollection.

"You've taught yourself amazing new skills and abilities and have used them tirelessly to help me and others. You've worked your fingers to the bone, pouring your heart and soul into Beyond the Scale—making yourself indispensable to the business in the process. Good Lord how those women love you, Lugal." She chuckled through her trickling tears.

Samantha glanced at the clock and shivered. Lugal held her closer.

"Before I make this final wish, Lugal, you need to know that you have changed my life forever. I was merely existing before you came into my life. In these six months with you, I've lived an entire lifetime. I love you with every fiber of my being, my darling. I love you more than life itself. Promise me you'll always remember that." Her tears flowed now.

"I will, my sweet." Lugal kissed away her tears. "And I feel the same for you."

"I know." She smiled. "The wish I make tonight comes from the depths of my heart and soul. Know that I've thought it out well, Lugal. You must never, ever blame yourself for what I have chosen to do."

"Blame?" He gave her a curious look. "Samantha...what is this you speak of? I do not understand."

"You so richly deserve life, my love." She smoothed her hand over his cheek. "You must go on living in this world and this new time and find yourself another woman. A woman who will love you as much as I do and who will bear your children." She smiled. "Your own little goats."

Clearly alarmed and confused, Lugal shook her. "Samantha, what—"

She held her finger to his lips again. "Goodbye my dearest heart, my sweet, beloved genie." With a shuddering breath, Samantha kissed his lips softly, tasting him for the last time. "For my third and final official wish, I wish to take Lugal's place in servitude so he can be free forever more."

Lugal's eyes widened. "Samantha, no!" he roared.

But it was too late.

As soon as the words left her lips, Samantha was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Pain such as he'd never known tore through Lugal as he clutched at empty air, the bedspread, sheets and the bed curtains.

"Samantha! Come back." He rifled through the pillows, hurling them to the floor as he looked beneath them. "You do not understand the fate you have chosen. I cannot bear to think of you existing in the dark realm of nothingness."

He got to his feet and paced, raking his fingers through his hair, growling Sumerian oaths.

"Gods and goddesses," he cried out, looking to the heavens, "I beseech you, I implore you, let me take Samantha's place. She has committed no wrong. It is I," he pounded his chest, "I who should be incarcerated, not her! Return me to the bottle and set Samantha free!"

The room was deadly silent.

"Hear me, Inanna. Hear my worthy plea! Imprison me, torture me, kill me, do whatever with me that pleases your cold, fearsome soul, but return Samantha's life to her. Set her free, O great Inanna!"

Silence.

Lugal's anguished cries had gone unheeded, and for the first time since he could remember, tears flowed down his cheeks.

"Damn you, Samantha!" he bellowed, his hands balled into fists. "Damn you for doing this to yourself—to me!"

Crazed and tortured with grief, Lugal felt entirely powerless. "Didn't you realize, my love, that my life here would have no meaning without you?" His voice caught on a sob and he snorted with anger. "There, you see what has become of me? You see how I weep like a babe?" He continued his wild pacing.

"This pain, Samantha," he shouted upward, shaking his fist, "this pain far exceeds any gash from a foe's saber. My insides are dying. My heart is bleeding. My soul is crushed. See what you have done!"

Lugal stood still and his shoulders slumped. "She cannot hear me," he muttered. "She exists in a void where there is no sound, no sight, no sensation—except eternal heart pain and grief." Remembering the utter desolation of the bottle, he held his hands to his eyes and howled out his rage.

He couldn't bear thinking of Samantha trapped in that bleak, forbidding existence.

His chest heaved. His beloved had made the ultimate sacrifice for him. It was so like Samantha to put his needs first. Why didn't he realize what she was about to do

and stop her? He should have known. *He should have known!* He would have done something, *anything*, to keep her from making this lethal choice.

Lugal glanced around the room, feeling at a total loss. "Look at me," he said, catching his reflection in the full length mirror. "Warrior. Leader of armies. Hah! I am as helpless as a newborn babe." He plowed his hand through his hair, growling. "What do I do? Where do I go? Who is there to help —"

He spotted Samantha's purse on one of the chairs and ran for it, retrieving her cell phone. He hit the speed dial and a moment later heard Rosie's voice.

"Sam! Oh honey, we've been waiting for your call. Are you all right? No, of course you're not. Do you want us to come over? Oh, for heaven's sake, of course you do. We'll be there in —"

"Rosie, it is I, Lugal."

"Lugal!?" She made an audible gasp. "Oh my God, it's after midnight and you're still here. What happened, did you manage to break the curse? Oh this is so exciting! Let me talk to Sam."

"She is not here."

"What do you mean she's not there? Oh, she must be downstairs getting ice cream and chocolate to celebrate, huh?" Rosie laughed.

"Rosie, please, you must stop babbling and listen to me. Samantha is gone. Her final wish was to take my place in servitude so I could be free. As soon as the wish left her lips she disappeared."

There was dead stillness on the other end of the line.

"Rosie? Rosie, did you hear me?"

"My God...oh my God...that's what the whole partnership thing was about... Oh no...no..."

Lugal heard the wrenching sounds of Rosie sobbing, then Charlie came on the line.

"Lugal, what's going on?"

Lugal repeated what he'd told Rosie.

"I do not know what to do, Charlie. Can you help me? I must somehow find a way to contact Inanna."

"We'll be right over. Samantha told Rosie we'd be needed after she made her final wish, so we left the kids with their grandparents overnight. Jesus, I had no idea she meant *you'd* be the one needing us. I'll bring the latest set of incantations with me."

"Latest set?"

Charlie gave a little chuckle. "Ah yes, I forgot, you don't know about that. Samantha, my wife and I have been doing our best to conjure Inanna behind your back for the last three months."

Lugal smiled. "That is just like my Samantha." Saying her name ripped a new tear in his shredded heart. "Come quickly, my friend."

* * * * *

Bunny Turner yawned and set down her romance novel. She glanced at the clock. Just after midnight. As she reached over to turn off her bedside lamp, she thought she saw something out of the corner of her eye.

Sitting up in her bed, she blinked and then her jaw dropped as she watched a faintly lavender-hued vapor waft across the room. She would have been scared witless if she hadn't overheard the conversation about Lugal being a genie.

Her gaze followed the vapor to the mouth of the ancient bottle and, as if being sucked inside, it quickly disappeared into its depths. The bottle's stopper rose from the box unaided, seating itself.

"Sonuvabitch, this is it," Bunny breathed. "I have my genie!"

She grabbed the bottle, ready to pull out the stopper, then paused. Setting it down again, she zipped to the mirror, checking her hair and makeup. She'd been wearing makeup every night, in case Lugal came to her. She wanted to look her most alluring when she welcomed her hunky new love slave into her bed.

Thanks to plastic surgery, she didn't have to rely on her old pushup bras to enhance her breasts. No, the girls stood out at attention, even better than they had when she'd been twenty. The heart-shaped neckline of her petal-pink silk negligee showed her firm nipples to their best advantage.

"I'll have him forgetting Sam Rutledge's name in less than thirty seconds," she cooed at her reflection. "In fact, I'll demand he forget everything about that fat little bitch." She laughed at that. The anticipated power was already making her heady.

She still wasn't sure about the wishes. How could she decide? She'd been trying to word the wishes to be more universal, with each wish encompassing numerous wants.

For instance, *I wish to be the richest, most powerful woman in the world with more jewels and furs and palatial property, fancy cars and yachts – including a stable of gorgeous, muscled young men to be at my beck and call – than anyone else has ever had or ever will have.*

Wish number two could be used to get revenge on every rotten bitch or bastard who'd ever done her wrong. Bunny hadn't concocted the appropriate wording for that one yet. It was going to take some time to decide on some significantly harsh comeuppance for those who deserved it. Of course, Sam Rutledge would have her very own, unique little place in Hell for what she'd done to Bunny and TBT.

As for wish number three, eternally perfect health, eternal youth and beauty, accompanied by eternal life ought to do the trick.

Not one prone to giddiness, Bunny was surprised when the desire to giggle wildly gripped her. Of course, she couldn't do anything so buffoonish, especially since Lugal might be able to hear her through that bottle of his. No, girlish buffoonery was Sam's specialty.

Just thinking about Lugal made her pussy heat. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been with a man who made her cunt spasm just from looking at him. Jesus Fucking Christ, that man was hot!

She didn't know what excited her more, making that first wish or commanding him to fuck her senseless.

Slipping into her high-heeled, poof-topped satin slippers, Bunny returned to her bed, picked up the bottle and pulled out the stopper.

"Genie, come forth," she commanded. "It is I, Bunny Turner, your new owner. Come forth and do my bidding, genie."

Before the last words were out of her mouth, the lavender-hued vapor rose from the bottle. Bunny suppressed another wild urge to giggle as she watched the smoky mist journey to the plush carpet where it stood...a lot shorter than she would have thought.

Slowly the vapor took form. Eyes wide, Bunny watched it morph into the shape of...

"Sam!" she screeched, taking a few steps back. "What the fuck are you doing here? Where's Lugal? Goddammit, where's my genie?"

"Oh God, it was awful in there." Sam shuddered, rubbing the goose bumps from her arms. "Cold. Total blackness, such loneliness..."

Bunny noted with irritation that Sam seemed to be talking more to herself than to Bunny.

"I was semi-conscious, in a sort of hypnotic sleep state, but I couldn't move or even see my hand in front of my face—if I'd been able to place it there... Terrible." She rubbed her arms again.

Bunny folded her arms beneath her breasts. "Spare me the sob story, Sam, and answer my question. Where's my genie?!"

Sam took in a deep breath, expelling it slowly. "I am at your command," she said, looking none too happy about it.

Her face was wet with what appeared to be tears. At least that's what Bunny surmised because Sam's eyes, nose and cheeks were all red and blotchy.

"To give you pleasure," Sam continued unenthusiastically. "To act upon your every urge."

"Whoa! Wait a minute," Bunny said. "I don't get it. *You're* the genie, not Lugal? But I thought—"

"We traded places," Sam told her. And for the first time since she'd wafted from the bottle, she grinned. "Surprise, Bunny!"

"Traded places. What are you talking about? How? Why on earth would you do something like that?"

Sam smiled. It was one of those pitying smiles Bunny detested. "You'd never understand, Bunny. Not in a million years. In any case, it looks like you won't be fucking Lugal tonight. And I hope to God I'm not your type." Sam shuddered.

"Hardly." Bunny stood arms akimbo, glaring at Sam. "I still get my three wishes, don't I?"

"Yes. When we traded places, all of Lugal's powers and the rules he operated by shifted to me."

"How can you be sure?" Bunny's gaze narrowed. "I don't want to get skunked on this deal. I want my three goddamned wishes."

"It's a sense of knowing that I have inside," Sam replied. "Even though you're a lying thief, a bitch and a selfish, money-grubbing phony, I'm still bound to grant your wishes." She gave a smug smile.

Bunny laughed.

"What's so funny?" Sam asked.

"Before you popped out of that bottle I was trying to decide whether I'd fuck Lugal or make a wish first. I guess that dilemma has been solved. Of course...I suppose I can always command you to bring him to me. I can do that, right?"

There was that grin of Sam's again. "Nope. Sorry. I have to obey your commands, but that doesn't include making people do things against their will."

"Oh, I doubt it would be against his will." Bunny shifted her position, thrusting out her breasts. "Not now that he's free of *you*."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that, Bunny."

Bunny scowled at her. "I want you to call me Master."

"That's the masculine form. Wouldn't you prefer Mistress?"

"Master has a more powerful ring to it."

Sam shrugged. "Master it is."

Bunny gave a sly grin. "Bark like a dog."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I command you to bark like a dog."

Sam promptly obeyed, sounding like a sick Chihuahua.

"Now hop on one foot and caw like a crow."

"Bunny –"

"Master. No, wait...I changed my mind. I want you to call me Most Beautiful and Powerful Master. Let me hear you say it."

"Oh for chrissakes." Sam hopped on one foot. "Most Beautiful and Powerful Master." She cawed like a crow.

"Excellent. Now say, *I'm a big fat disgusting pig* – and keep hopping."

"Oh that's easy." Sam laughed. "You're a big fat disgusting pig."

"Not me, you fat bitch, *you*! Do it. I command you!"

Sam sighed and rolled her eyes. "I'm a big fat disgusting pig."

Bunny clapped her hands, finally letting out the giggle she'd been suppressing.

"Granted, it's not as much fun as fucking Lugal," Bunny noted, "but this should keep me occupied for a while. Besides," she said to the still hopping Sam, "you need the exercise, chubbo." She watched Sam for a moment.

"Okay, that's enough hopping. Get into the bathroom." Bunny gestured to the right. As soon as Sam turned, Bunny gave her a good swift kick in the ass.

"Hey!"

"Hey what?"

Sam groaned. "Hey, Most Beautiful and Powerful Master."

"You're my property. I can treat you any way I want, can't I?"

"Yes, Most Beautiful and Powerful Master," Sam mumbled.

They walked into the bathroom and Bunny opened a drawer. "Here's a toothbrush. There's a bucket and cleaners in that cabinet. Scrub every nook and cranny of this room, including the toilet."

"Oh brother..."

"That's enough of your insolence, genie. Be quick about it. While you're doing that I'll be deciding on the wording of my three wishes. If the job doesn't meet my expectations when I'm finished, you'll be punished. Down on your hands and knees. I want to see that floor sparkle."

"Yes, Most Beautiful and Powerful Master." Sam took the toothbrush and went to work, her sheer purple robe dragging on the floor behind her.

As she went to take it off, Bunny stopped her.

"No, leave it on. You look lovely in that, Sam. Although I believe it needs a few alterations befitting your new status." She opened another drawer, drew out a pair of scissors and cut off the bottom of Sam's garment until it was a jagged waist-high length.

Sam gave a little gasp.

"Oh dear, having you use that tiny toothbrush makes me seem rather heartless, doesn't it?" Bunny mused. "We certainly can't have that now, can we?" She took the plastic bucket to the sink, filling it halfway with hot water. Then she poured in an ample dose of ammonia. Balling the long, sheer purple remnant of Sam's robe, she stuffed it into the malodorous mixture.

"There you go. Now you've got something to use besides that toothbrush." She held the scissors aloft, clicking them open and closed. "Gee, look at the way your big mop of hair hangs in your face when you bend over. That's not conducive to scrub work, is it? No problem. We can fix that in a jiffy and make you far more comfortable."

Sam whimpered as Bunny fisted a hunk of Sam's hair, clipping through it and rendering a mass of jagged, uneven chunks.

"Oh yes, that's much better." Dropping the auburn locks on the floor, Bunny rubbed her hands briskly, whisking away any remnants of Sam's hair from her hands. Extending her bejeweled fingers, she wiggled them. "You may kiss my hand and offer your thanks for my kindness now, genie."

Sam looked up at Bunny for a moment before leaning in and kissing her fingers. "Thank you for your kindness Most Beautiful and Powerful Master," she said just above a whisper as one fat tear coursed down her cheek.

Oh yes! This was turning out to be about the best damn day in Bunny Turner's life.

* * * * *

"Take a look at this," a weepy Rosie said to Lugal, shoving an envelope beneath his nose. "I opened it right after you called. It was part of the legal paperwork making me a partner in BTS that Sam gave me a couple of days ago."

"To be opened only when I'm gone," Lugal read aloud. *"Gone..."* He huffed a humorless chuckle. "Notice she did not say *dead*." He drew the paper out, frowning as he read Samantha's words. "So well thought out," he noted, shaking his head. "How long, I wonder, had she been planning this."

"I don't know," Rosie said. "All I know for sure is that she loved you with all her heart." She sobbed quietly into a wad of tissues.

"Sam states there that she would have made you and Rosie equal partners," Charlie said, "except you have no legal identity, Lugal. That's why she left everything to Rosie, with the stipulation that she find a way to share it with you. Sam never wanted you to be without money, a roof over your head or your job as Warrior Fitness instructor at BTS."

Lugal growled, sailing the paper across the kitchen. "I do not want any of it. I do not want *anything* but Samantha!" He paced back and forth, mumbling with each swift step.

"I know," Charlie said. "We're going to do everything possible to get her back. But in order to do that you need to calm down. You've got to stop doing that imitation of a caged lion and focus on a way to summon Inanna."

Lugal threw his hands into the air. "Then all is lost. I have been trying to summon her for thousands of years!" he bellowed. "She turns a deaf ear to me, Charlie."

"Have you ever used the incantation that the priest and priestess used when they summoned her?"

Lugal stopped pacing and stood in silent contemplation for a moment. "Nay, I think not. I do not remember it."

"Then that's what we'll use," Charlie said, opening the attaché case he'd brought along and drawing out a stack of papers and several small books. "Along with the other information I've gathered about summoning Sumerian deities. Now let's get to work."

Wild-eyed and frustrated beyond belief, Lugal countered, "Did you not hear me? I said I do not remember it, Charlie. I do not have the incantation." He pounded his fist on the kitchen table with such force, everything on it bounced.

Charlie stood up, braced his hands on Lugal's shoulders and gave him a reassuring smile. "Of course you do, man. You have a photographic memory, remember? The

incantation is hidden in that brain of yours, Lugal. You just need to retrieve it so we can get to work."

"So many thousands of years ago," Lugal began. "I don't know if I can recall—"

"You've got to, Lugal," Rosie said, resting her hand on his arm, rubbing in a slow, soothing motion. "If you ever want to see Sam again."

"Together, the three of us can do this," Charlie said. "I know we can."

Lugal straightened. For the first time since Samantha disappeared he felt the strength of resolve flowing through his veins instead of the numbing cold of fear.

"Yes. We will get to work." Lugal sat at the head of the table. "Charlie, I will say the words as I recall them and you will write them down." Pen in hand, Charlie nodded. "Rosie, you must prepare offerings of food for Inanna. Before we attempt to summon her we must have an array of fragrant, pleasing food and drink ready to help entice and persuade."

Rosie nodded. "I can do that. What should I make? I make killer brownies, and my chocolate chip cookies and pecan fudge have won awards at fairs. If you want something savory, I could make macaroni and cheese, or maybe a tuna casserole."

"Traditionally," Lugal said, "the offering would consist of roasted goat or mutton with bitter herbs, chick peas and lentils. Perhaps a few ducks and pigeons and some fresh fried fish from the Mesopotamian rivers. A platter of figs, dates and fruit conserved in honey, some pungent cheese, stacks of barley-wheat cakes with good lard, as well as onion and cucumber and, finally, some barley ale or wine."

Rosie blinked.

Lugal smiled at the look of shock and dread across Rosie's features, realizing his suggestions were beyond her culinary aptitude. Since he'd come to appreciate modern foods such as chocolate, he felt certain they would appeal to the goddess as well.

"But I have tasted your delicious brownies and cookies, Rosie," Lugal continued. "I believe Inanna would perceive these delectable sweet treats to be of rare and precious quality."

"Rosie's a whiz in the kitchen," Charlie said proudly. "Inanna won't be able to resist anything she cooks up, I guarantee it."

Lugal smiled at the unmistakable look of love he saw passing between the couple as Charlie covered his wife's hand with his own. Lugal wanted nothing more than to be able to share that look with his beloved Samantha again. To be able to grow old with her and give her a passel of little goats.

"I agree," He said, pulling himself out of his reverie. This was no time for rumination. "Rosie, I suggest you prepare whatever you do best and it will most assuredly entice the goddess. To that we will add a selection of wine and beer, and maybe some hot cocoa too."

"I'm on it," Rosie said, scooting away from the table and whipping pots and pans from cupboards. "With a kitchen this huge and well-equipped, I'll have a feast fit for a goddess prepared in no time flat."

"Thank you, Rosie." Lugal smiled and turned to Charlie, his hand firmly on the man's back. "Your wife is kind and good, my friend. A true and loyal friend to Samantha. No wonder she entrusted Rosie with her beloved home and business."

"They're closer than sisters," Charlie said, watching his wife scurry through the kitchen, carrying bags of flour, sugar and chocolate chips. "I don't even want to think about what would happen to Rosie if we didn't get Sam back, Lugal."

"I understand. It would be a dark shroud of grief over her heart. Fear not, Charlie. We will succeed in our mission. I feel it deep in here." Lugal widened his fingers into a claw-like shape and clutched his abdomen.

"When we formulate our incantation," Charlie said, studying his notes, "we'll make use of the fact that you were fathered by Enlil." He paused until he found the written passage he was looking for. "The great god of air and storms, who guards the tablets of destiny." He glanced up at Lugal. "I imagine that would give you somewhat of an advantage with Inanna."

"Depending on whether or not the deities are at odds or on friendly terms these days," Lugal noted, recalling stories of the mighty battles between the gods and goddesses and the considerable havoc they wreaked during their conflicts.

Within the hour, the kitchen was redolent with the tantalizing aromas of sweet treats and savory dishes—and Lugal and Charlie had constructed the outline for their incantation.

"All we need to do," Charlie said as he skimmed the document he'd written, "is to substitute your name and position for the high priest, Ibi-Utu, as well as for Sabit, the priestess of Nanna, the Moon God of Ur."

"Then we will light candles and incense and begin reciting our plea," Lugal said, feeling edgier than he had since he could remember. His head pounded, his mouth was dry, his palms sweaty and his heart felt as if it was on the verge of exploding.

In a short time the trio had prepared the dining room, making the setting as appealing, fragrant and attractive as possible.

"It looks like Christmas in here," Rosie noted, taking in the bounty of foodstuffs and the candlelit décor. "Inanna won't be able to resist."

Lugal's hands fisted at his sides, the muscle at his jaw twitched. Fine rivulets of sweat trickled down his face.

"We shall see," he said solemnly, taking the sheet of paper from Charlie and scowling as he witnessed his hands shaking. "You have been of such great help to me," Lugal told Charlie and Rosie. "I would not have been able to do this on my own. Whatever happens, know that my heart will forever be full of gratitude for your valued friendship."

His gaze settled firmly on the couple. "But now you must go. It may not be safe and I will not risk your lives."

"Hell no!" Rosie said.

"I'm not going anywhere," Charlie said. "According to the ancient texts, as well as the scene you recreated from your own experience, Lugal, chanters need to be present at any invocation of the gods." He turned to his wife and smiled. "You need to go home, Rosie. Lugal and I can manage this on our own. You need to keep yourself safe for the kids." Drawing Rosie into his arms, he kissed her lips. "I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you too," Rosie said, planting a quick kiss on Charlie's jaw. "But there's no way I'm leaving now. Lugal needs both of us here to chant and to give him support. And if you think I'm going to sit at home twiddling my thumbs as you two macho men try to bring my best friend back all on your own, you've got another thing coming." She drew in a deep, trembly breath. "Besides, I want to see what Inanna thinks of my killer brownies," she quipped.

Charlie grinned at his wife. "There's no use arguing with her when she makes her mind up," he told Lugal. "We're ready whenever you are."

"She is made of stubborn stock, like Samantha," Lugal said with a smile. "I thank you both from the depths of my being. I pray the gods keep you safe."

He sucked in a deep breath, saying a silent prayer, a soul-to-soul prayer, sending his undying love to Samantha. He took another moment to read the document they'd prepared, committing it to memory. Handing it back to Charlie, Lugal looked to the heavens, raising his arms, palms up, in the traditional prayer of entreaty stance.

"O great Inanna, Queen of Heaven, goddess of love and war, I summon you," he roared. Charlie and Rosie chanted short praises of adoration to Inanna that Charlie had discovered in his ancient texts.

"I am Lugal Damu-Zid, he who boldly led the armies of Sumer into battle, who fought many battles in your name. He who was fathered by Enlil, the great god of air and storms, who guards the tablets of destiny. You are the great lady of the gods. Your terror is fearsome as it weighs on the land. No man anticipates your commands."

The crystal candelabra on the table vibrated. Upon seeing that, Rosie and Charlie shuddered.

"The heavens fold themselves in your presence like a mourning garment," Lugal continued, his deep voice resonating in the sizeable room. "You are she who hastens like a north wind storm into the midst of the people. You are she who hears prayer and pleading."

The flames on all of the candles flickered, then grew higher and brighter.

"I summon you, great Inanna to reverse a mighty wrong, an injustice of the greatest enormity..."

Lugal continued his heartfelt plea as Rosie and Charlie kept chanting, despite the palpable signs of supernatural forces around them.

Lugal spoke the final words of the invocation. "O make it be, great and wondrous Inanna! Let it be so!"

The entire room rumbled, as if in the midst of a small earthquake. The boom of thunder resounded throughout the room and fine threads of white lightning cracked overhead.

Gasping, Rosie clutched onto Charlie, who held her tight to his chest.

The ethereal visage of a woman, as beautiful as she was fearsome, suddenly loomed over the proceedings.

It was the same formidable countenance Lugal had seen five thousand years before...on the fateful night that had sealed his destiny.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"You insignificant peasants, you inferior organisms, you worthless oddments of mediocrity!" Inanna boomed before she became fully visible. "Why have you deemed to summon me?"

Lugal stood tall, chin elevated, as Rosie and Charlie sort of slipped behind him.

"Great Inanna, it is I, Lugal Damu-zid, he who boldly led the armies of Sumer into battle, who fought many battles in your name. He who—"

"Yes, yes, I know." Inanna yawned, waving her hand, indicating for him to stop. "I heard all of it during your rather lengthy incantation."

Inanna's torso shimmered into solidity and she went on, "How am I supposed to keep the cosmos functioning when I'm constantly being pulled this way and that? This had better be good, Lugal Damu-zid." She sniffed the air, closed her eyes and moaned.

"Mmmm...do I smell brownies?" She opened her eyes, nailing the threesome with a fierce glare. "They'd better be for me and they'd better be damned delicious or there'll be *Kurnugi* to pay."

"Oh they are, your majesty," Rosie said. "I made them just for you."

Inanna crooked her finger and Rosie passed her the plate of brownies.

"Mmm, delectable. You may keep your head," she said to Rosie as she munched. "Now, what's up?" She licked the chocolate crumbs from her fingers.

Inanna's entire body was discernible now, as was the lion on a diamond-studded golden leash beside her. When the beast let out a blood-curdling roar, Rosie and Charlie jumped about a floor off the floor. Used to stories of the gods and their wild beast pets, Lugal stood firm.

"Holy shit!" Rosie said.

Inanna tsked. "Hush with your vulgar outbursts. You're going to frighten poor little Ninazu." She petted the lion, making soothing baby talk to the animal. It closed its eyes, purred and rubbed its mane against her.

"She's wearing a business suit," Rosie muttered in surprise, taking in the ultra-chic personage hovering in midair.

Inanna looked down at the sleek gray shantung silk suit hugging her perfect figure. "What? You expected a diaphanous gown? Why is it that you brainless mortals expect your gods and goddesses to conduct daily business wearing gauzy scraps of material? This is the twenty-first century, honey, and Inanna doesn't do diaphanous unless she's in the bedroom. I *am* a liberated goddess, after all." She patted her blonde chignon.

"Great goddess," Charlie said, "my name is Charles Dudchowski. I'm a professor of ancient history and classical archaeology at the university."

"Well bully for you." Inanna pointed at a chocolate chip cookie, which floated through the air to her fingers. "Since we're throwing around titles, I'm the Queen of Heaven, goddess of love and war. I'm one of the seven gods who decree the fates."

Inanna gave a sigh of satisfaction as she bit into the cookie. "Is that tuna casserole I smell?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, I—" Rosie began.

"Good. Bring it to Ninazu. I think he's hungry."

Rosie's eyes bugged. "You-you want me to—"

Inanna snapped her fingers three times in rapid succession. "Hop to it, mortal. I've just given you a command."

Tuna casserole in hand, Rosie muttered, "Ohmigod, ohmigod," and did as Inanna asked, inching toward the huge golden lion. "Nice kitty," she said as soothingly as her quavering voice would allow.

Wincing, Lugal sincerely hoped the big creature preferred tuna and cheese over human flesh.

Charlie cleared his throat as he watched his wife. He swallowed hard, breathing as sigh of relief as the lion tested the tuna and nibbled at it. "Uh, Inanna, we've summoned you because—"

"Because it was time for me to go back into my bottle," Lugal blurted, no longer able to be silent. "I was fully prepared to face the bleak, dark realm once again when, to my horror, the woman I love, my possessor, Samantha Rutledge, made her final wish and asked to take my place in servitude so that I could be free of the bottle's cruel imprisonment forever more.

"This woman is kind, sweet and good. She does not deserve to be trapped in the cold, dreary netherworld of the bottle, great Inanna. I have summoned you to plead for Samantha's freedom. I beg of you, I beseech you, O great and compassionate goddess, let me exchange places with my beloved Samantha so that she—"

"No!" Charlie and Rosie exclaimed in unison.

Ninazu roared, clearly scaring the shit out of Rosie, who was close enough to feel his hot breath on her face because her hair blew sideways as the lion bellowed.

"We beg you to set them *both* free, great Inanna," Charlie said. "Neither Samantha nor Lugal deserve to be trapped in that bottle for eternity. As it is, Lugal was wrongly imprisoned in the first place. You see, he was only trying to—"

"Silence!" Inanna raised her hand in warning and a series of lightning bolts shot straight up from her fingers. "Enough blather from all of you!"

She sat at the head of the table, with the vast array of food Rosie had set out at her fingertips. With a nod, a bottle of rare red wine uncorked itself and poured into her

glass, while a chosen assortment of olives, cheeses, fruits, crusty bread, honey and virgin olive oil were magically portioned on a plate.

"As stated in your plea, your sentence was set in place to obliterate your transgressions to womankind by serving them for all eternity. Now tell me, Lugal Damu-zid, why you believe you were wrongly condemned. And for heaven's sake, don't drag it out. I've got a full schedule ahead of me today."

Lugal sat to the right of Inanna, with Rosie and Charlie taking seats farther down toward the foot of the table, away from Inanna and her menacing pet.

Lugal told Inanna the whole story, trying not to sully the priestess Sabit's name as he explained. Charlie jumped in here and there, fortifying the details, clearly making sure Inanna fully realized that it was Sabit who had unwittingly brought this terrible sentence down on Lugal's head.

After a good twenty minutes they'd finished and Inanna sat back in her chair, tapping her lacquered red fingernails against the marble tabletop. To Lugal, it seemed she sat there like that for an eternity. He yearned for her to hurry, but wisely kept his mouth shut as Inanna ruminated.

"If what you say is true," Inanna finally said, "then you are the victim of an atrocious injustice, Lugal Damu-zid. Why did it take you so long to come forth and bring this travesty to my attention?"

At a loss for words, Lugal's mouth hung open.

"He's been trying to contact you for five thousand years," Rosie said. "You never answered him."

"The incantations must have been faulty," Inanna speculated. She held out her hands, palms up and nodded. A state-of-the-art laptop computer appeared in her grasp. She set it on the table, busily clacking away at the keyboard.

"You work with computers?" Charlie asked, amazed.

"Only when my abacus is on the fritz," Inanna said sarcastically. "Now be silent while I search the archives for the hall of ancient records. I'm also going to send Enlil an instant message so he can check to see what's been inscribed on the tablets of destiny regarding your fate."

A short while later, Inanna tsked. "Look at this...page after page of lamentations, all on your behalf, Lugal. It seems the young priestess pleaded with one god after another to...well, here, let me read it verbatim.

'To free the brave, honorable warrior who took the blame for my foolish actions to save me from being beheaded. Through my fear, my sweet mouth became venomous and I condemned a worthy and honorable soul to a cold, dark fate.'"

Inanna looked up at Lugal. "The woman pleaded, lamented, wailed and tearfully confessed her sins and failings for the rest of her life, trying to undo the harm she'd done to you."

"What happened to Sabit?" Lugal asked. "Did she remain a priestess?"

"After five years in service to her symbolic betrothed, Nanna, the Moon God of Ur," Inanna read, "Sabit left the *ziggurat* and became a prostitute. Later she married and had children. When her children had grown, she returned to the temple and, once again, pledged her service to Nanna. She was past sixty when she died."

"Why didn't anyone listen to her?" Rosie asked.

"Beats me," Inanna said with a shrug. "Maybe they thought she was love struck or loony. If she tried to reach me, I never knew about it. Okay, hold it a minute—incoming from Enlil, and another from Ereshkigal, goddess of the underworld..."

Lugal, Charlie and Rosie sat forward in their chairs, waiting for word from the important gods.

"Ereshkigal reports that Sabit's soul is now at rest." She looked up at Lugal. "Guess that means you've been found innocent."

Lugal felt a heavy burden evaporate from his soul.

"In all this time Sabit never stopped pleading for your freedom, Lugal. As for Enlil..." Inanna clicked the mouse. "Ah, okay, that seals it." She slapped her laptop shut. "You've been completely cleared of any wrongdoing by your daddy, Lugal. Enlil said the tablets indicate you're destined to live a long and fruitful life, full of love and happiness, etcetera, etcetera. As of this moment that decree has gone into effect. Your curse is broken."

"I am full of gratitude," Lugal said, "but, Inanna, what about—"

"Well, I guess that's it. All's well that ends well." Inanna stood up and smiled. "I regret that it took a while to resolve this, Lugal, but—"

"A while?" Rosie said incredulously. "You call being trapped in a bottle for five thousand years and undergoing humiliation and torture and God knows what else *a while*?"

Inanna aimed an outstretched finger at Rosie. "I caution you, mouthy mortal. Do not overstep your bounds," Inanna threatened. "I am not renowned for my patience and I have no qualms in lopping off the heads of those who annoy me."

Charlie wrapped his arm around Rosie's shoulder. "She didn't mean anything, Inanna. She just cares a great deal about Lugal. We all do."

"Very well. I'll be off then." Inanna raised her arm in the air, looking as though she was about to snap her fingers.

"Wait!" the other three chorused.

"What about Samantha?" Lugal hurried. "She is trapped in the bottle as we speak. Please, great Inanna, I beg of you, free her. Return her to me for I cannot be happy without her in my life. I will be but a shadow among the living without my Samantha."

Inanna let out a thunderous sigh and sat down again. "Okay, bring me the bottle." She stretched out her hand, wiggling her fingers. "I'll take care of it."

"Thank God!" Rosie said, jumping up and down.

"Thank goddess, you mean," Inanna corrected. "You'll have plenty of time for merriment later. Get the bottle so we can get this over with and I can get out of here. It's nearly time for Ninazu's nap." The lion yawned, punctuating Inanna's observation.

Rosie, Charlie and Lugal exchanged dumbfounded glances.

"Bunny!" they cried.

"I forgot all about it until just this minute," Rosie said.

"Do you think Bunny's opened the bottle yet?" Charlie asked.

"I sincerely hope not," Lugal said. "She is not a good-hearted woman. Her wishes would not be beneficial ones, except to herself. In addition, she could be mistreating Samantha." He scowled, the thought of her suffering at Bunny's hands harsh and bitter.

Inanna's frustrated sigh was monumental. "Would someone mind cluing me in, hmm?"

"We don't have the bottle. Sam's old boss, Bunny Turner, found out Lugal was a genie and she stole it," Rosie explained.

"Bunny is wicked," Lugal added. "And envious. I fear for Samantha's wellbeing."

"Samantha's old boss?" Inanna asked. "What kind of work?"

"Bunny owns Tuned by Turner," Charlie offered. "A weight-loss clinic."

Inanna's smile looked just a tad malevolent. "I see. All right, be quiet while I take care of this."

Inanna stood again, arms upstretched in the same manner as Lugal's earlier when he summoned her. Her powerful voice reverberating, Inanna uttered what Lugal recognized as a ruling in ancient Sumerian.

The air chilled. Thunder clapped. Lightning sparked.

And Ninazu roared.

* * * * *

"I'm ready to make my wishes, genie," Bunny yelled from the bedroom. "Get your big fat ass off the bathroom floor and get over here to do my bidding."

Samantha rolled her eyes. She wanted nothing more than to take that bucket of ammonia water and soak Bunny's head in it. But, as she'd sadly discovered, genies were at the express mercy of their possessors and unable to fight back against cruelty or injustice.

"Yes, Most Beautiful and Powerful Master," Samantha said, getting to her feet and wincing as her spine cracked while she straightened her back.

She thought of poor Lugal and all the time he'd spent at the beck and call of his owners, some good women and some miserable, rotten, selfish bitches like Bunny...or worse. It was a miracle the man had maintained his sanity after thousands of years at the whim of such women.

But he was free now. Forever free of women like Bunny. Samantha knew Lugal was probably angry and grieving right now, but that would pass in time and he'd find happiness with a good woman. Rosie would set him up with someone. *Rosie...* God, Samantha would miss all the laughter they shared.

"Come on! Move that lazy ass of yours," Bunny barked. As soon as Samantha stood before her, Bunny burst out laughing. "That's a perfect look for you, Sam. Go ahead, take a good long look at yourself in the full length mirror. Get an eyeful of the great and mighty owner of Beyond the Scale."

Samantha gazed at her reflection, breathing a deep sigh as she spotted running eye makeup, haphazardly chopped hair and less than half of her sheer purple robe, raveling around her waist and hips.

"So much for your short-lived fame, chunko. Tuned by Turner and I will be back on top again before the end of the day!"

Samantha maintained her silence, unable to rip into Bunny the way she wanted. With a weighty sigh of acquiescence, Samantha imagined the dark, deadly quiet of the bottle would almost be a welcome retreat after spending this humiliating time with Bunny Turner.

"For my first wish," Bunny began, and Samantha held her breath, wondering what heinous, selfish wish she was about to grant for the woman. "I wish to be the richest most powerful woman in the—" Bunny's eyes widened in horror as her clothing split at the seams. "Shit!" She looked down, grabbing the tearing material at her midriff. "What's happening to me?"

"Oh my God!" Samantha cried. "You're getting fat!"

Growing chunkier by the second, Bunny glared at Samantha. "You! You did this to me, you despicable bitch!"

Caught up in wonder, Samantha whipped her head from side to side. "No, honest to God, Bunny, this isn't my doing. I don't know what's happening."

"Where are you going?" Bunny screamed. "Sam!" And then Bunny started to sob. The usually self-assured woman suddenly looked weak and pathetic. "Don't leave me like this, Sam. Please."

"Bunny, relax, I'm not going anywhere," Samantha said, reaching her hand out to comfort Bunny, only to discover her hand was on its way to becoming transparent. In fact, so was the rest of her. "Oh shit..."

She gasped, watching her flesh grow fainter and wondering if this was the end for her...if she'd just fade away into thin air and cease to exist.

As she became a vapor, she glanced Bunny's way once more. The woman looked at least fifty pounds heavier.

"Come back!" Bunny cried out, reaching for Samantha, clutching at thin air. "What about my three wishes? Chocolate. Oh God, I need chocolate. *Chocolate!*"

Bunny's earsplitting wail for chocolate was the last thing Samantha saw or heard before everything went black.

* * * * *

Inanna's eyes flashed like newly ignited torches.

The entire house shook. Ninazu continued to roar. Inanna's demeanor was fearsome to behold as she called out the ancient words.

When gray storm clouds appeared just beneath the dining room ceiling, Rosie shuddered from head to toe and clung to Charlie. Charlie clung to Lugal. Lugal's fingers dug into the back of the mahogany chair so tightly he half expected them to bore through the heavy wood. His teeth were clenched so tightly he was amazed his jaw didn't fracture.

It was one thing to be a bold warrior in battle, equipped with his saber and facing a mortal enemy. It was quite another being at the mercy of a temperamental immortal who was, Lugal hoped, bringing his beloved back from the oppressive curse of the bottle.

As Inanna's voice rose, a faintly lavender-hued vapor emerged from the storm clouds, floating down toward the floor. Inanna spoke the final words and Lugal, Rosie and Charlie watched as the vapor slowly took form.

"Samantha!" Lugal cried, breaking away from the others and running toward the materializing form of his beloved. The instant she became solid, he grabbed her into his arms and held tight, terrified she'd disappear again if he let go. "Oh my love, my sweet, sweet love," he murmured, covering her face with kisses. "You've come back to me."

"Lugal? But how...what happened?"

"Sam!" Rosie and Charlie shouted, running to the embracing couple and making a cumbersome but welcoming four-way hug.

"Oh, Lugal...you're crying," Samantha said, brushing a tear from his cheek.

"Yes. And it is without shame that I do, little one. The intensity of my love for you, and the immense gladness in my heart at seeing you again has momentarily reduced me to a sniveling babe." Lugal rocked her in his arms.

"Um...hello? Remember me?" Inanna said. "Shouldn't someone be groveling at my feet and giving me kudos just about now?"

Lugal released Samantha and fell to his knees before Inanna, thanking and praising her in his native tongue.

She smiled. "Yes, that's much better."

"You were able to conjure Inanna," Samantha said in awe. "I don't believe it. How?"

"Don't worry, we'll fill you in on everything later, Sam," Charlie promised. "I can't tell you how glad I am that you're back. Lugal's been out of his mind with grief." He pulled Samantha into a squeeze.

"Thanks, Charlie. I'm damn glad I'm back too." Looking over his shoulder, Samantha's eyes widened when she spotted Ninazu. Right on cue, the big cat yawned. "Oh my God. There's a lion in my dining room!"

"It's okay...I think," Rosie said, squeezing her friend. "He's Inanna's pet, Ninazu, and he's crazy about my tuna casserole. Oh, honey, we were afraid we'd lost you forever." She hugged her again before standing at arm's length, eyeing her best friend. "Whoa...you really look like shit. What in the hell happened?"

Samantha's eyebrow arched. "Bunny Turner happened to me. That woman's one crazy, power-hungry bitch." She walked to Inanna. "Thank you so much for saving me. I never thought I'd see Lugal or my friends again."

"What you did was the height of foolishness, young lady," Inanna chided. "It was sheer idiocy to sacrifice yourself for your lover like that. You could have been trapped for all eternity in that bottle, looking like a drowned rat."

"Inanna is right," Lugal bellowed, shaking a chastising finger at Samantha. He remembered the sick feeling of dread that enveloped him when she'd disappeared from his grasp after making her final wish. "You had me turned inside out with guilt, rage and anguish. Had I but known what you were thinking, Samantha, I would have—"

"On the other hand," Inanna sniffed and dabbed her eyes with a tissue that suddenly appeared in her hand, "it was also incredibly romantic. Naturally, as the goddess of love, I've always been a sucker for a good romance story."

"I'm sorry for causing you all such heartache," Samantha said. "But I really didn't have any other choice. I love you far too much to send you back to that horrid bottle, Lugal."

Lugal kissed her fingers. "You are foolish, yes, but you are also the most loving, devoted, adoring, generous woman I have ever had the good fortune to know."

"True love," Inanna sighed. "Perfectly matched souls."

"So we're both free...forever?" Samantha asked the goddess. "Lugal can stay here with me? No more bottle or genie duties for either of us?"

"You are both free, yes." Inanna gestured with her hand and the spun glass bottle and box appeared on the table before them. "From this moment forward, this vessel is nothing more than a rare antiquity. Hang on to it for a keepsake or smash it to smithereens if you like."

"We will have a ceremony," Lugal stated solemnly, sneering as he eyed the objects that had been his prison for so many centuries. "We will take turns wielding deathly blows to the box and bottle until they are both reduced to naught but dust."

"That suits me," Samantha said. "We don't need valuable antiquities. All we need is each other."

Lugal gazed at his beloved, smoothing his fingers through her hair. It was only then that he noticed what a sad, sorry state of disarray she was in. "Oh, little one, Rosie is right...you look like shit." Samantha chuckled a bit at his words. "What did Bunny Turner do to you?"

"Well, aside from the obvious," she flipped her choppy hair and fingered her ragged robe, "she made me scrub her bathroom. With a toothbrush, the other half of my robe and a pail of ammonia. That was after she commanded me to bark like a dog and hop on one foot and call myself a fat pig and...oh, it was awful."

She took in a deep breath. "But it's all over now. I'm sure it was nothing compared to what you've been through all these years, Lugal."

Samantha rested her head against his chest and sighed.

The feel of his woman beside him was more precious than gold to Lugal. Just being able to touch her, smell her, hear her voice, feel her heart beating against his flesh...

"During the whole time Bunny berated me," she said, "I kept thinking about you, Lugal and it gave me strength. I'm awfully glad it's all over now."

"I will make Bunny pay for causing you such grief," Lugal threatened. "You have my word."

Samantha looked to Inanna and the women shared a knowing smile. "Oh, I think Inanna's already taken care of that, Lugal."

"Indeed," the goddess said, puffing out her cheeks like a blowfish and patting her almost nonexistent belly. "And Bunny will stay that way until she learns her lesson and redeems herself."

"Stay like what? What happened to Bunny?" Rosie asked.

"She's fat," Samantha offered with a wink. "Obese."

Rosie gasped. "Are you serious?"

"Yup, at least fifty pounds heavier."

"And she is profoundly addicted to chocolate," Inanna added. "The woman will have no memory of Lugal being a genie, or of you being her genie, Samantha. She will only remember that she has been gaining weight lately because of her uncontrollable chocolate binges."

"Oh, that's sweet," Rosie said, chuckling.

"Once the paparazzi snap shots of the newly obese Bunny and plaster them all over the supermarket rags," Inanna explained with a satisfied smile, "the woman's business will collapse. She will be disgraced, an outcast in the weight loss industry."

"Excellent," Lugal said. "It is what she deserves."

"Oh no," Samantha said. "I mean, I really dislike Bunny, but that seems excessively cruel. Couldn't you have her quietly sell TBT instead? In fact, I'll buy it and turn her facilities into BTS clinics."

"Ouch," Rosie said. "Bunny would probably rather be a disgraced outcast."

"We'll do it in such a way that she saves face," Samantha said.

"I do not like it," Lugal said, frowning. "She deserves to be boiled in oil."

Samantha smiled. "Not in my kitchen." She returned her attention to Inanna. "What do you think?"

Inanna gave a nonchalant shrug. "It will be as you suggested, Samantha. Even though I believe my way is far more just due to what I know of this woman, her petty cruelty, lack of compassion for the very people she claims to want to help and her underhanded ways."

"Thank you, Inanna," Samantha said. "What happens as far as Lugal's identity? He'll need some sort of legal identification so he doesn't get deported or something."

With a wave of her hand, a leather-covered box, the size of a cigar box, appeared on the table. "In there Lugal will find all he needs. Birth certificate, college degrees, resumes, letters of recommendation, bank accounts, credit cards, etcetera."

"College degrees?" Lugal hadn't expected anything like that. "In what subject? I doubt that I am qualified for much of anything."

"Don't be modest, dear boy." Inanna flicked her wrist. "You're smart as a whip. I had a look at your records, remember? You've been busy these last five thousand years, acquiring skills far beyond what most mortals can achieve in a single lifetime. Whatever degree or document you need or desire will be there when the time is right. Simply open the box and ask for it."

"You could easily be an exercise physiologist," Charlie offered. "Or a professor of ancient studies, for that matter."

"Just so long as he's not an electrician," Rosie quipped and they all chuckled.

The soaring possibilities for his future as a twenty-first century man eased Lugal's mind. He'd be able to fit into modern society easily, without having to worry about eluding legal authorities. "This is wonderful. With my own driver's license," he said with a satisfied smile, "I will be able to drive!"

"No," Inanna and Samantha said at the same time.

"That you'll need to earn the traditional way," Inanna explained. "I saw the report on your mailbox encounter." She rolled her eyes. "You have a stubborn streak, just like your father."

"Another question, great goddess," Lugal said.

Inanna looked down at Ninazu, who was sound asleep and purring. "As long as I'm out of here before it's his feeding time. He gets a bit testy if I let him get too hungry."

Lugal pulled Samantha close, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. "Will I be able to father Samantha's babes?"

"As many as you like," Inanna said. "Enlil's tablets show that Samantha is destined to conceive later today."

Samantha gasped. "Really? That's wonderful! Oh, Lugal, we're going to be parents!"

"Our very own little goats," he said, grinning and hugging her.

"Sam, that's great!" Rosie chimed in.

"Of course now you'll be mortal again," Inanna reminded Lugal, "so for heaven's sake, listen to your future wife and don't go getting yourself into electrical hazards or car accidents, because, not only can you be hurt, you can also die. Understood?"

"Understood. I will strive to be a good husband who listens to his wife's cautions."

Inanna huffed a laugh, shooting a glance at Samantha. "Yeah, good luck with that." She looked at the foursome and smiled. "Be seated, all of you. I wish to bestow my blessings for long life and happiness for both couples and all of your offspring."

As Inanna stood at the head of the table, Lugal, Samantha, Rosie and Charlie took their seats on either side, close to her. They listened with respect while Inanna conferred abundant blessings and sang a soulful chant to the gods, asking that they be kept safe and protected for all their days.

After each offered Inanna profuse thanks, she and Ninazu swiftly departed in a blinding flash.

Lugal propped his elbows on the table, his face falling into his hands. "Gods," he groaned, raking his fingers through his hair, "that was a lengthy and precarious ordeal. I feared we would not be victorious."

He looked to his side and smiled at Samantha. "But at this moment, with the other half of my heart, my soul, sitting beside me, I am truly the happiest man on earth. Past or present." He leaned close, giving Samantha a tender kiss. "You taste of ambrosia, little one. The thought of existing on this plane without another kiss from your sweet lips was utter agony. Implausible torture."

"I've always believed in happy endings," Samantha said, smoothing her fingers over his jaw.

Charlie and Rosie exchanged glances. "I think it's time for us to go," he said. "We've been at this almost all night and we have to pick up the kids in the morning."

"Besides," Rosie offered, "I have a feeling you two might have some baby conceiving to do." She winked.

Samantha and Lugal exchanged a few quiet words, nodding in agreement.

"Rosie, Charlie, please stay and sup with us a while." Lugal clapped his belly. "My stomach speaks to me and Rosie's luscious array of foods beckons. After we eat, then you can go." He gave them his warmest smile. "You both know, don't you, that I shall forever be in your debt? Whenever you are in need of a friend or assistance of any kind, you will call me first."

That goes double for me," Samantha said. "Thank you for being there for Lugal...for me. Without your help I'd have my head in Bunny's toilet right now, scrubbing it with that toothbrush." She shuddered.

"Hey, that's what friends are for," Rosie said. "If Charlie or I ever get trapped inside a genie bottle, I'm sure you'll do the same for us."

Lugal looked at the lavish spread of sweets and savories before him and grinned. He had his woman at his side and he finally had his appetite back. Ah yes, he was ready to dig in and soothe his savage hunger.

As he reached for the plate of cheese and olives, it disappeared into thin air. One by one, each of the platters of food were zapped away. Not even the wine was spared, it vanished too.

"Best brownies I've ever had," came Inanna's voice from far away.

Samantha shrugged. "Well, looks like we have no choice but to get busy conceiving that baby now. Goodnight, Rosie and Charlie." She gave a little wave.

Before Rosie or Charlie had a chance to reply, Lugal had swept Samantha off her feet, carrying her up the stairs to their bed.

As he took each stair he whispered Sumerian odes of love and devotion in her ear, illuminating a score of deeply erotic attentions for his beloved, soon to materialize as soft flesh coupled with hard.

Epilogue

One Year Later

“Our little goats are finally asleep,” Lugal whispered, gently drawing the blanket over little Rosie while Samantha fussed over baby Charlie in his crib.

“The twins are such little angels, aren’t they?” Samantha asked. “Charlie looks just like you. He’s going to be a real lady killer when he grows up.”

“They are both angels, like their mother,” Lugal replied as they tiptoed out of the nursery.

Each time she gazed at her children Samantha gave thanks. It wasn’t too long ago that she thought she’d be existing only in a void, intermittently serving a variety of possessors, while Lugal made a life with someone else. It still amazed her that she’d been so bountifully blessed. The man of her dreams, her handsome hunk of a husband, was devoted to her and the babies – as well as their business.

Beyond the Scale was thriving far beyond her wildest expectations. After purchasing Tuned by Turner’s assets, Samantha and Rosie made the decision to franchise. It was time. The demand across the nation for the popular and proven successful BTS concept was too great to ignore. Tomorrow marked the opening of their first overseas clinic, in London. Paris was soon to follow.

Samantha engaged in a secret smile. Too bad they couldn’t equip each facility with clones of Lugal. Wherever her darling exercise physiologist husband appeared, the lines were long and the women were hot with anticipation of getting close to the fitness superstar.

Bunny Turner, Samantha’s newest weight-loss client, didn’t make out too badly in the TBT deal. Enterprising as always, she used the proceeds of the sale to open Bunny’s Chocolate Haven in downtown Portland. Still plump, she seemed happier and more content than ever before...more humane and compassionate, as well as ready with a willing smile as she proudly showed off her assortment of designer chocolates.

The most sensational and exciting happening for Samantha was just around the corner. In one week, she and her business partners, Rosie, Charlie and Lugal, would be appearing on Oprah.

On Oprah!

The media superstar wanted to explore Beyond the Scale’s unique wellness concept. The notion of thousands of people dieting and exercising and actually feeling happy, excited and satisfied about it was a mind boggling anomaly.

Samantha had to pinch herself each time she thought of her good fortune. She shook her head in wonder. The good things just kept coming, one after another.

Dear Lugal, he seemed to think it was all because Samantha was a special woman. He was especially fond of telling her that goodness begets goodness and that a kind heart is rewarded with bountiful gladness.

"Let us go now and make more angelic babes," Lugal suggested with a playful bounce of his eyebrow, snapping Samantha out of her reverie. "The twins will need playmates."

"If it were up to you I'd be kept barefoot and pregnant," she countered, laughing as they entered their bedroom.

"And naked, Mrs. Damu-zid," Lugal said. "That is the most important part."

"Did you bring the champagne up from the refrigerator?" Samantha asked.

"Of course. And a box of chocolate truffles. Our anniversary would not be the same without them, my love."

"It was nice of Bunny to give us that big box of her finest truffle collection for our anniversary, wasn't it?"

"Nay." Lugal scowled. "We will not be eating those. I disposed of them."

Samantha gasped. "You threw out a five-pound box of chocolate? Oh dear God, Lugal, that's a mortal sin."

His eyebrow arched. "No matter how pleasant the woman seems now, I still do not trust Bunny. Remember the kindly old woman who offered the apple to Snow White?" he asked, having just watched the classic cartoon for the first time a few days before. "She turned out to be an evil witch and the apple was poisoned."

"Come to think of it, you have a point there." Samantha smiled. "Oh, just think of it, darling. It's been one year and six months since you popped out of that bottle and scared the hell out of me."

"It was the day my life began," Lugal said, kissing her nape.

"And mine," Samantha agreed as Lugal peeled off her clothing. "It's also the one year anniversary of the night we each gained our freedom from the bottle." They glanced at the dresser. Atop it, on a marble pedestal, sat a transparent, solid plastic cube. Suspended inside were the fine powdered glass particles of the ancient bottle.

On the wall over the dresser, Lugal's genie outfit and saber were displayed in a shadowbox frame. It had been a hell of a job getting Lugal to agree to put his saber to rest. Samantha assured him he could always break the glass and retrieve it should a lethal band of ninjas break in the house.

"Sometimes I wish we hadn't framed your balloon pants and vest," Samantha noted with a sigh. "You looked so damn sexy in them. Just thinking about it makes my pussy drool." True to her word, she felt that distinct warm sluicing sensation between her thighs and she squirmed.

"If we had not retired my genie garb it surely would have disintegrated by now. Such ancient material is no match for my wild, insatiable little cat." He caught her

bottom lip in his teeth and sucked it. "Perhaps I will have a duplicate outfit made, if it pleases you."

"Mmm, yes. I'd like that." She tiptoed her fingers from Lugal's abs to his pecs, playing with the traces of hair on his chest. "Maybe you can order a harem-girl outfit for me to go along with it." She grasped his biceps and nibbled at his small, flat nipples.

Lugal smiled through a groan of pleasure. "It would be my delight to strip it from your lush curves, my sweet. Perhaps we should have several made so I can tear them from your velvet-rope-bound body."

The sight of Lugal disrobing captured Samantha's attention, making her forget what she was about to say next. Standing before her, his proud cock saluted, telegraphing its lusty intentions.

"You're such an exquisitely beautiful man, Lugal." She stroked his chest, his hard belly, then fisted his cock. "No matter how many times I've seen you naked, I can't imagine ever finding your muscled warrior's physique with its magnificent cock monotonous." His splendid fleshscape thrilled her just as much now as it had the first time she'd laid eyes on that perfect form of his.

"You already know I feel the same about you, my curvaceous erotic queen. Our bodies were specifically made for each other, Samantha. Did Enlil's tablets of destiny not say just that? According to Inanna we are perfectly matched souls. Ideal lovers."

Enjoying a husky chuckle, Samantha slid her hands between Lugal's thighs, cupping his scrotum and massaging gently. "I didn't need a god or goddess to tell me that," she cooed. "I figured that out all by my little old self."

"Your cool, gentle touch charges my balls for action. It is as if I can feel the eagerness of the seed inside that awaits connection with your moist channel. Tonight we will make another little life, Samantha. I feel sure of it."

"I have the same feeling." She slipped one hand to his cock, tracing its length and each prominent vein with her fingers.

"I almost forgot," Lugal said. "I have a special anniversary gift for you." With obvious reluctance, he left Samantha's touch and went to his nightstand drawer, retrieving a small box.

Recognizing the wrapping as that of an upscale jewelry store, Samantha tore open the wrapping, gasping with delight when she sped the glimmering gold and diamonds twinkling in the light. "Oh, Lugal, what a stunning necklace. Thank you."

"It is not a necklace. Look again. Do you remember our shopping trip to the sex toy shop shortly after I came out of the bottle?"

Samantha laughed. "How could I ever forget?"

"These are to replace the Clipples I purchased then."

Lifting the delicate chain from the box, it became clear to Samantha that the fine jewelry was, indeed, a pair of diamond-studded nipple clamps connected by a gold

chain. "This definitely isn't from Fabolicious Pleasure Products," she mused with a chuckle.

"I had this made for you at a jeweler downtown," Lugal said, taking the chain from her hand and clipping the ends onto her nipples. She sucked in a sharp breath at the sudden sensation of pleasure-pain. He bent to kiss each reddening peak as Samantha breathed out a lingering moan. A droplet of milk beaded at each nipple and Lugal licked them.

"Whenever you wear this, little one, you will be reminded that you are my woman...forever. And that I am your man."

"Forever, my love," Samantha breathed, stroking his jaw as Lugal tugged on the chain. The delicious ache encouraged another moan from deep in her throat.

"And each time I look at the gift you have given me," Lugal said, fingering the new platinum piercing at his cock, "it will remind me of your sweet pussy and how its warm juices soothe my hard, eager flesh."

"Have I told you how goddamned unbelievably sexy your pierced cock looks?" Lugal's splendidly decorated column of flesh jerked at her praise.

"Mr. *Gar-Du Gis* likes it when you say nice things about him." Lugal gave a devilish grin as he stroked his cock. "He is impatient to thrust. He yearns to hammer hard...deep...relentlessly..." Lugal's cock rested in his hands. He pinched the tip and it twitched again.

Samantha was mesmerized by the sight, and just as impatient as Mr. Warrior Cock was to get to the hot, sweaty business of fucking. She looked up at her husband, licking her lips. "Oh Jesus, fuck me, Lugal, before I come right here on my feet."

His lips curled into a deliciously wicked smile. "Your wish is my command, Samantha."

His legs spread, her husband lifted her high, seating her on his erect cock as he stood a few feet from their bed. "Like a tight, wet, silken glove," Lugal groaned, his eyes dark with passion. "And your eyes, Samantha...that look of wonder is still there. Just as it was the first time I thrust into your cunt, my sweet. Promise me you will never lose that look of marvel. It is special to me."

"I may get old and gray, my darling." She combed her fingers through his hair as he walked to the bed, cradling her. "But I promise I'll never lose that spark of wonder that you see. Because each time you make love to me, Lugal, I'm reminded of that very first time that I was bedded and bedazzled by a big, bold, barbarian of a genie."

"I am glad, because when we are linked, flesh to flesh," Lugal said, twitching his cock inside her, "that is when I feel most alive—when I feel your soul essence mingling with mine. Nothing makes me happier than to think of us growing old together, Samantha. I will love and adore you just as much when you are eighty as I do today. I have spent a small eternity being young and I look forward to the winter years with my dearest heart."

"Before we get outfitted for our rocking chairs," Samantha suggested, "how about we rock our youthful, middle-aged world with some sizzling hot fucking?" She screwed herself down on his cock, loving the way it abraded her G-spot.

With the dexterity befitting a strong, skilled fitness trainer, Lugal lowered them to the bed, still joined cock to cunt.

As she lay beneath him, he explored her pussy lips, stroking them inside and out, before sinking his fingers into the crevice between her ass cheeks.

"You're looking at me as if you've never seen my pussy before," Samantha said, writhing as he slid almost all the way out and then jackhammered into her.

"Your sweet woman's body is such a wonder to behold," Lugal said between impassioned grunts. "So soft and pink and delicate, yet resilient enough to birth two babes, one right after the other. You are a living miracle, my love. I thank the gods each day for bringing you into my life. There is no greater gift I could ask for than to be the recipient of your love."

As he gazed into her eyes, love shining from the windows of his soul, Lugal's hips twisted and he did that remarkable screwing action that propelled his cock right to her G-spot. God in heaven that felt incredible.

Happy tears trickled from the corners of Samantha's eyes. "And to think I almost passed up the salt and pepper shakers." She clutched his arms, finding her rhythm as she met his deep, jarring strokes.

Lugal's features skewed, perspiration beading at his temples and trickling down his cheeks as he pumped into her. "You wish to discuss cooking at a time like this?"

"No." Samantha chuckled. "I'm talking about the estate sale, here at Henley House. I'd vowed to stop collecting things, especially salt and pepper shakers because I had dozens. Your box and bottle were hidden beneath the dusty old collection on the shelves in the basement. If I hadn't dug the box out from beneath the bottom shelf, we never would have met."

"And I would be awaiting my next possessor," Lugal noted, the muscle in his jaw flexing.

Samantha's voice caught at the unbearable thought of living without her beloved genie—her *former* genie. "Oh God, I don't even want to think of that. I can't imagine not having you in my life, Lugal. I love you, my darling, with all that's in me."

Lugal was silent for a moment as he gazed at her intently, setting her world afire with each magical thrust of his cock. His eyes never leaving hers, he reached down and found her clit, pinching it and eliciting a lengthy moan from his wife. His fingertips swirled over the sensitive bud and then he leaned down, close, taking the fine gold chain between her breasts in his teeth.

When he tugged on it, Samantha felt the unmistakable trembling sensation, the first waves of ecstasy whirling deep in her belly, ready to break, storming through her body with the familiar rush of intensity that never failed to accompany her spectacular Lugal-induced orgasms.

"And I love you with all that is in me," Lugal said finally. His gaze never wavering, Lugal's face contorted. His primal growl echoed off the walls as his hot seed gushed into her waiting depths. Before he was finished coming, Samantha's climax triggered and, once more, they were carried together on *lil* to *an*.

"Do you feel it my love?" he said, collapsing atop Samantha and holding her close.

"What, darling?" She wound her fingers through his hair.

"The love we have just expressed for each other." He placed his hand on Samantha's belly and smiled. "It has manifested in the creation of a new life."

Lugal was right, Samantha could sense it. "How much love and happiness can one woman stand before she expires from a severe overdose of unadulterated joy?" she asked.

Her husband grinned down at her, a devilish glimmer in his eye. "Let us find out," he said, lifting her knees, his head sinking between her thighs. "We have the rest of our lives to discover the answer, do we not?"

Samantha's heart soared as he worshipped her with his mouth.

"The rest of our lives..." she whispered, threading her fingers through his hair. "Yes...yes, my darling genie."

About the Author

Daisy Dexter Dobbs has a valid reason for lying when she's asked where she gets the ideas for her books. She knows most people wouldn't believe the truth about the madcap mayhem that goes on in her daily life. Case in point: Imagine frantically trying to file your way out of a locked bathroom door with a teeny nail file, dressed in nothing but a too-small towel while you're waiting for a real estate agent and a family with three small kids to arrive for a showing of your house. Okay, now picture the contents of a box of just-delivered sex toys (purely for research purposes, you understand) strewn on the bed just outside that locked bathroom door. Mmm-hmm, it really happened.

Happily married to her soulmate, the award winning artist and writer believes in love, happily-ever-afters and the wondrous, magical escapism of reading and writing.

Daisy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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