

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



WHATEVER MAURA WANTS

 PERIDOT

MARDI
BALLOU

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Whatever Maura Wants

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WHATEVER MAURA WANTS

Mardi Ballou

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Chapter One

Bright lights pulsed in neon colors. The air-conditioning, permanently set on high, whirred loudly. A typical night at the Lothario Lounge. Then Antonio deLuc spotted a tall strawberry blonde in barely there jet black. She'd do. He'd started to wend his way through the smoke-filled lounge when his boss, Archfiend himself, sprang out of a shadow and clamped his arm around the blonde's waist.

Bloody hell. Antonio wasn't up for any macho competition bullshit, but his erection was. Usually, Archfiend wouldn't object to sharing, but lately he'd been in a piss-poor mood, ready to bite Antonio's head off over trivial crap.

Not that Antonio would let Arch's surliness get in his way if, up close, he still felt the blonde was worth getting roughed up for.

Adjusting his attitude, Antonio pushed through the crowd. "What's the lady drinking?" he drawled.

"Merlot for her, thousand-year-old scotch for me." Arch looked bored, which meant he was really spoiling for a fight.

Antonio elbowed his way back to the bar, handed the bartender his credit card, cleared a path back to the blonde, clunked the scotch down for his boss and handed her the wine. "I'm Antonio." He kept his eyes firmly locked with hers.

"Lucinda." Her smile indicated small, sharp fangs. Antonio's cock throbbed as he imagined those fangs nipping at his balls.

"Lucinda and I are talking business, so fuck off." Archfiend guzzled down his expensive scotch in one swallow.

"You're welcome." Antonio kept his voice smooth, though Arch's attitude was starting to wear on his nerves. Antonio kept his eyes locked with Lucinda's.

“Lucinda doesn’t like men, ever, so you really can fuck off.” A hint of amusement had crept into his boss’s nasal drawl.

The vibes Antonio was getting off the lady said otherwise. He wanted to say maybe it was only Arch she didn’t like, but, for once, he held the thought. He nodded to her. “So, Lucinda, let’s talk. After all, I am Archfiend’s chief business associate.”

The boss rolled his eyes. “Just gave yourself a promotion, did you? What the hell? You might as well, because that’s the only way you’ll get one.”

Antonio’s fists clenched, though he knew Arch’s warped sense of humor and had long resolved not to let the fiend get to him.

“Cleo sent me.” Lucinda evidently had no intention of joining with Arch to shut Antonio out. When Arch turned aside, she caught Antonio’s eye, whispered, “I do like men,” and gave him a classic come-hither look that made his dick twitch.

That settled that. Antonio would have to find a way to get Lucinda out of the boss’s greedy clutch.

“The empress and I had a date, which she broke,” Arch said in a monotone. Antonio knew from experience a flat voice indicated Archfiend’s highest level of fury. If Cleopatra had inspired that, empress or no, she was in big trouble with Archfiend. A broken date? Cleopatra, symbol of eternal femininity, evidently had cojones to spare—at least for now. Archfiend had a very low threshold of frustration.

“Cleo said she’s too brokenhearted over the loss of her precious green stone to consider a date with anyone—even you, Archfiend.” Lucinda removed his hand from the small of her back. Antonio promptly put his hand back, and set to grazing Lucinda’s left breast.

“Why not just get the stone and give it back to her? Sounds like she’d be appreciative.” Antonio stifled a yawn. He’d expected whatever was pushing Archfiend’s buttons to be more interesting than a simple loss or theft. “What kind of stone is it?”

Lucinda's eyes glittered. "It's the finest of peridots. Everyone thinks it's one of Cleo's emeralds, but it's even better. This one came from a meteorite and bears special powers."

Two small puffs of steam blew out of Archfiend's large, pointy ears. He stroked his goatee-trimmed chin. "Get the stone and give it back. What brilliance. No wonder we pay you big bucks, deLuc." If sarcasm were fatal, Antonio would now be laid out for imminent burial.

Lucinda, who delicately sipped her wine, arched a perfect brow. "We've tried retrieval by all the usual means, including Archfiend's Elite Guard. Their failure casts serious doubt on—"

"That's complete, bloody fucking bullshit," Archfiend hissed.

Antonio and Lucinda gazed at each other and nodded to affirm their growing reciprocal understanding. She slapped off Archfiend's hand. "I've delivered my message," she continued in the same no-nonsense voice. "If you can't return the stone in two days, she'll tell all to the tabloids here below—and find someone who can."

"Advertising helps," Antonio pointed out. Archfiend always turned an interesting shade of puce when the tabloids started in on him—watching him turn different hues was one of the perks of his otherwise thankless job.

"*Et tu, Brute.* Antonio, whatever." Archfiend's voice could have lowered the temperature better than the air-conditioning.

The more unreasonable Archfiend became, the calmer and surer of himself Antonio felt. Also the more determined to gloat when he walked away with the fair Lucinda. A little inner warning voice whispered that he should pay attention to Archfiend's rumbles and find a logical way to back down. But Lucinda encouraged him with her eyes, and he was bored enough to push the envelope.

"I bet you'd find anything your lady lost," Lucinda murmured. Her voice resonated within him like a magical spell.

"That's a bet you'd win," he whispered to Lucinda. A sexy smile lit up her face.

Archfiend was practically spitting flames when he turned to Antonio. “You’re so sure of yourself, are you? I challenge you, Antonio deLuc. You have one Earth day to find and bring me Cleo’s peridot. If you fail, you’ll be banished from my hierarchy forever to suffer the torments of the lowest of the low.”

The old banished forever shtick. Antonio deemed it wise to stifle his yawn. “And if I succeed, Archfiend?” He couldn’t believe how out of control his boss—hell, and he too—was becoming.

This time, Arch actually spewed flames. “I’m never wrong. Get out of my sight. Be gone.” He clapped his hands loudly. Antonio was about to tell him to can the dramatics. Suddenly the lovely Lucinda, the lights, the crowd and the smoke-tinged ambiance of the lounge disappeared as he free-fell into a deep, wide black hole.

* * * * *

“Great party, Maura! Happy birthday!”

The last of Maura Fox’s guests, the couple who lived in the condo above hers, were practically out the door.

“I love how you carried out your green theme,” the woman enthused. “Especially that beautiful stone on your coffee table. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear it was an emerald. As if someone who had an emerald that size would just leave it lying loose.”

What stone was she talking about? Maura shrugged. She’d figure it out once she was alone. “I’m glad you enjoyed tonight. And thanks for the pesto. It’s really yummy. I want to get the recipe from you.”

The neighbors hugged Maura. “Sorry to say you’d have to contact LaSalletta Fine Foods to get the recipe. I know we were supposed to make whatever we brought ourselves, but—”

Before the conversation could grow any longer, a cell phone call snagged the other woman’s attention and got her to join her waiting husband. Maura watched with a pang of envy and several other emotions. Couples. What had possessed her to limit her

guest list to couples? Surely she knew interesting, exciting single people who'd appreciate an invitation to a party like hers, didn't she?

Alone doesn't mean lonely, she reminded herself.

Except tonight, it did. She sniffed. *Great. Now I'm talking to myself. That's one of the warning signs to watch out for, isn't it?*

She surveyed the remains of the party, which would probably take her half the remaining night to clean up. Good. The diversion of physical labor would take her mind off her burgeoning pity party. Waking up in the morning to the mess would be worse than dealing with it tonight. Maura appreciated having her beloved condo in shipshape.

She figured she'd handle the food first and was gratified to see there wasn't a whole lot left—obviously a tribute to her prowess in the kitchen and all the goodies guests had brought—even the ones they'd resorted to buying. On second thought, maybe Maura hadn't had enough food to feed the crowd? Maybe people were afraid to eat much because her buffet looked meager. She'd used her usual rule of thumb, planning enough food for three times the number of expected guests. People had seemed to enjoy themselves as they walked around with full plates of foods in all hues of green. Some even groaned about needing to start new diets tomorrow.

Okay, so she'd probably had enough food. Once she dealt with the remains of a platter of grapes and honeydew, she'd get her dirty dishes, cutlery, glasses and linens into the appropriate piles, then store her extra tables and rearrange the furniture. Vacuuming would have to wait until morning if she didn't want to wake the grouches downstairs.

Music always made work go easier and faster. She had a CD of favorite oldies. The first song that came on made her smile. "Whatever Lola Wants" from the old Broadway show *Damn Yankees*. That song always made her feel so sexy. She sang along, substituting her own name for Lola's. For the few minutes the song lasted, Maura was the sexy Lola, getting whatever—and whomever—she wanted.

When she'd just about filled a trash bag, Maura spotted a leftover goodie sack. Oh, no. One of her guests had escaped without the lime-flavored candy and assorted mints she'd so carefully assembled. Well, she'd chase him or her down tomorrow. Maura must have been slipping for anyone to have left a bag. But when she looked inside, she realized the sack was hers. In all the bustle, she'd forgotten it and, worse, never spotted the card propped against the jade green vase.

Curious now, she sat down on her large daisy-patterned couch and put her feet up on the coffee table. Though she'd eaten more than enough, she bit into a mint-green petit four. As its sweetness filled her mouth, she carefully opened the envelope. A great big heart graced the front of the greeting card. Humph. Somebody was palming off a leftover Valentine for her birthday. Maura opened the card and read.

Happy Birthday! To help you celebrate this special time, a very special man will soon arrive. His sole mission is to make all your birthday dreams come true and to make this night one you'll never forget. Don't forget – your wish is his command.

Love and birthday kisses,

The Birthday Fairy

Maura laughed so hard tears began to roll down her face. Which of her friends had come up with this joke card? Tomorrow, she'd call everyone until the one with the warped sense of humor 'fessed up. She'd just flung the card aside when she spotted a large, gleaming green stone—probably what her neighbor had been raving about. It looked expensive. Could it possibly be an emerald? How the heck did it land here?

Maura swallowed hard. She picked it up and gasped. The sucker felt a lot more substantial than it looked. Her mind skittered over everything she'd done to prepare for her party. She remembered every step of her party prep. Heck, most people accused her of having a photographic memory. But she hadn't bought or found this stone. No way she could ever afford anything like this. As to finding it—if she had, she'd have taken it

right to the police. Someone had to be looking for this treasure. So, how had it landed in her living room?

The stone's coolness traveled through her veins like an intoxicant, filling her with light and a sensation she'd never before experienced. She examined all its facets, marveling at the beautiful shades of green. Maybe this was the universe's way of thanking her for throwing her party with its theme.

Right. She snorted, recognizing the idea as one Aunt Beatrice would call "fanciful". There had to be a rational explanation as to why this particular stone ended up in her lap. Despite the growing mystery, she yawned. It was far too late to try to puzzle it out tonight, but tomorrow, first thing, she'd start calling around to see who had mislaid or lost this gorgeous piece. If she didn't have any answers by noon, she'd call her local precinct.

Tonight, though, she'd let herself enjoy its sparkling beauty. She rubbed a tiny smudge off. Suddenly a bolt of lightning seized her, slamming her against a wall.

* * * * *

Antonio had sparred with Archfiend often enough before, but he'd never seen his boss this angry, irrational or out of control. Clearly, the guy was losing touch with reality to banish Antonio over a trivial after-hours disagreement in a bar. Instead of his maintaining his usual cool, detached demeanor of superiority, Archfiend had dug in his cloven hooves. Now Antonio hurtled through space and time as light beams and meteors flashed around him.

No matter what, Antonio refused to lose his cool. As his free fall slowed, Antonio steeled himself. Would he land behind prison bars in some desert country where he'd broil during the day and freeze at night? Maybe he'd end up tied to a bed in some pestilent Third-World hospital ward bereft of modern supplies, subject to primitive practices that were supposed to make him howl for rescue. He'd heard stories of earthly tortures that far surpassed anything Archfiend could come up with. Or maybe he'd

land on a far-flung planet with a toxic atmosphere and purple squids as his only companions.

Archfiend had specified that Antonio had one day to find Cleo's stone. This time, his gut told him Arch was serious about the assignment. This meant Antonio would have to touch down somewhere in the vicinity of the wayward stone.

Shaken, rattled and rolled, he was growing tired of the whirlwind when, after a final burst of light and an ear-splitting screech of worlds clashing, he plummeted to Earth. To his gratified surprise, he landed flat on his back in what appeared to be the hallway of a most civilized residence. Based on the buildings he'd passed on his descent, he was somewhere in one of his favorite cities—New York. But appearances could be deceiving. This might be the most dastardly trap of all—

He lay stunned for at least a minute—far too long. What had happened to his reflexes? Then awareness of another being's presence struck, and his reflexes sprang to full alert. He leapt to his feet, clenched his fists and crouched in a classic attack posture. A man in a tux who resembled a young Brad Pitt stood poised to ring a doorbell. Though he had no idea why, Antonio's gut directed him to come between the man and the bell.

A moment later, Antonio understood. Cleo's stone was inside the condo. This stranger could not be allowed to interfere with Antonio's mission. Using the merest hypnotic persuasion, Antonio asked, "Why are you here?"

His blue eyes glazed over, the man briefly told Antonio that he was slated to be the condo owner's birthday gift and explained exactly what this role entailed. In a matter of moments, Antonio had relieved him of his duties, given him an amnesia charm, dismissed him and prepared to enter the condo. Though he could easily have entered the condo without any outside aid, tonight he chose acting over breaking and entering. It would be a simple matter to collect the stone and be on his way. To keep him on his toes, he'd rely on personal magnetism rather than hypnosis or spells—unless things got complicated. After all, he did have a time limit.

Antonio rang the bell. As he waited, he ran his hands over his black silk jacket to ensure it was none the worse for his strange journey. No one answered, though he heard a faint moan. When a second ringing yielded the same result, he discreetly let himself in.

He made a quick visual survey without spotting the stone and was about to start a more thorough search when an enticing scent wafted to his nostrils, threatening to throw him off balance. Then his eyes lit on a woman who appeared pinned to a wall. Despite the shock contorting her face, Antonio could see her great beauty, far more appealing than Lucinda's. Her roundness drew him like a beacon on a pitch-black night. He longed to bury his face between her large, soft breasts. Bloody hell, he was such a sucker for softness. His cock sprang to aching erectness, and he had to struggle to hold on to his wits.

Internal warning bells clanged. This woman might entrap him and destroy his strength, but what a way to go. Antonio's arms tingled to hold her. He was so tired of the hard women back home. Tall, sharp-angled, tough as their long spiky fingernails—a man risked concussion when he tried to snuggle with them. Antonio gritted his teeth at the sense memory. Their orgasms were like brief showers of little metal pellets pinging on a concrete floor. How many centuries had gone by since he'd been with a tender woman—one with breasts and hips, thighs he could clamp his hands and mouth on, a big, soft ass, and, most of all, a generous belly? When was the last time he'd felt a woman really shudder and come?

Despite his being primed to grab the stone and get the hell out, Antonio's cock grew larger and thicker with desire. He throbbed to possess this woman, though he'd prefer to have her stop screeching—the ugly sound she emitted reminding him too much of those cold, nasty women back home.

Her lovely, generous mouth, currently open as she emitted unearthly noises, beckoned him. He wanted to ravage her sweet lips with his hard, hungry ones and turn

her screams to whimpers. The image of her clamping those lips 'round his pulsing erection nearly made him moan aloud. But he had to appear strong and invulnerable.

She stared at him, eyes open wide with terror. Beautiful blue eyes the color of daytime skies, long hair the color of wheat. He wanted to grab her by that hair and pull her to him, to fist his hand in that hair when he claimed her with his kiss.

But what if she wasn't alone here? What if she was the advance guard for some other power that would challenge Antonio with unforeseen superior force? Though he longed to let down his guard and claim the beautiful female, Antonio wasn't home free just yet.

Maura couldn't get down off the wall.

As if the strange stone, the lightning and being pinned to her wall weren't enough, now she was hallucinating. She screamed for help, hoping, for once, her nosy downstairs neighbors would investigate the noise and tumult—preferably before she went berserk.

A hallucination took up all the space and air in the room. Six feet plus of sheer male animal. Thick black hair crowned a perfect Michelangelo sculpture of a face, complete with dark eyes that looked capable of piercing her. He wore black from head to toe and moved with the grace of panther.

As visions went, at least she'd conjured up a winner. Maura's mind raced. How much had she drunk? She remembered only a fast glass of wine and half a margarita, but excessive drinking could lead to memory blackouts. Still, if this was an alcohol-induced hallucination, she wouldn't mind a few encores—once she got down off the wall.

But then Mr. Perfection began to move toward her, his steps resolute, a scowl on his face. Leave it to her to conjure up a gorgeous but angry hallucination. She closed her eyes to clear her mind.

When she opened her eyes, the hunk was practically in her face. He was even hotter close up. She didn't know where to look first. There was a strange man—a big, strong one—in her living room. Her condo had been filled with people earlier, but now she and he were abso-friggin'-lutely alone. Then he grabbed her in his powerful arms and dragged her down off the wall.

At which point she screamed again. Mr. Perfection's big, strong hand clamped down over her mouth. She had fleeting thoughts of getting sufficient purchase to bite him, but he held her much too tightly.

"If you cooperate, I will not hurt you." His voice was deep with just a hint of rasp and a foreign tinge that, damn it, turned her on. Of all times for horniness to strike and turn her thinking processes to mush. A gorgeous man with an erection tenting his pants that made her mouth dry and her cunt wet had his hand clamped over her mouth. Could she believe him the he wouldn't hurt her? What choice did she have?

"If I release my hand, will you refrain from screaming?"

She nodded. Sometimes lying was justified.

As soon as he'd freed her mouth, she shrieked. Before she got out enough noise to matter, the hand was back.

"You lied. I hate liars." His cock evidently didn't share this negative opinion. But his eyes fired icicles, and his mouth formed a cruel tight line. Man, was he strong. Maura tried to swallow and couldn't. She was in major trouble.

"Unlike you, I do not lie. I told you I wouldn't hurt you, which is the truth. We need to talk. Can I trust you not to scream again this time if I remove my hand?" The hint of threat sufficed to convince Maura not to scream. She'd have to think of another way to save herself. He said he wanted to talk. She was good at talking. Once she engaged him in conversation, she'd find a way to save her life.

His eyes were nearly black, and he sure could sustain a stare. She could drown in those eyes. He warily removed his hand, holding it near enough to cut off any noise she

might make. Maura managed to swallow, then took the deepest breath she could manage. Her mind raced.

"I am Antonio deLuc. What is your name?"

Were they going to shake hands? She eyed his cock, still huge, still pointing at her, and she fantasized shaking it instead of his hand. Sheesh. She had to get a life. She needed to hold on to her hard edge of panic to keep alert and alive, though she realized the peak of her terror had abated.

"I'm Maura Fox. Why are you here in my condo? No one invited you. Leave immediately. If you do, I won't call the police." Her voice hardly quavered.

He smiled, which did funny things to her heart. "You are wrong there. I am evidently your designated birthday gift. When no one answered the door, I let myself in to surprise you."

He was her birthday gift? That card hadn't been a joke? Holy moly, what the hell was going on? "Who sent you?" she managed to whisper.

His shoulders sketched an elegant shrug. "I don't know. I merely accepted the assignment, and here I am." He devoured her with his gaze. When he spoke again, his voice sounded husky, giving her full-body goose bumps. "Now why don't you tell me exactly how you want to celebrate?"

Chapter Two

Antonio wanted to go home. He could cut through any of Archfiend's bullshit and make Hades his own personal pleasure palace. It would be a simple matter to pry Cleo's stone from Maura's hot little hand and take off. So why was he still here?

He ground his teeth. Every time he made a move to end his mission, something stopped him—something deep inside, something not rational. After all, how could Maura compete with what he had waiting? Back home, sex was cheap and plentiful. If he searched, he might even be able to conjure up a woman who'd remind him of Maura.

Knowing this did nothing to break whatever spell he was under.

His gut wouldn't let him just razzle-dazzle her with a few hypnotic tricks to get her in the sack prior to relieving her of the stone. He wanted more from her, though every instinct warned he was headed for deep, murky waters.

For every good reason to leave, four better ones compelled him to stay. He loved the way she tried not to stare at his hard-on. His perverse streak drove him to flaunt it just to see her reactions. The woman could blush fourteen shades of red. He took her free hand and placed it firmly on his erection, surprising himself when her touch made him suck in his breath and start panting.

"Why don't you tell me exactly how you want me to make love to you, Maura Fox?" he asked when he could breathe again.

She pulled her hand away as if he'd singed it.

He claimed her lips with a kiss that seared them both. Cupping her chin with his hand, he held her gaze captive. "Tell me every detail of how to make this your best birthday ever. What do you like most in bed?"

She gulped. "Antonio, you're very sexy, which you clearly know. But I have to understand what's happening. You've gotta tell me who sent you. I have no idea who 'Birthday Fairy' is."

He licked the tender skin near her ear and nibbled his way to her sweet, full lips. This time he explored her soul during the space of a kiss he could sense curled her toes. "Let's just say, my being here is a gift to you from the universe. My only mission is to make your dreams come true. Trust me."

She drew away when he said that. "Talk is cheap and easy, but trust is neither."

From the expression on her face, Antonio realized he'd pressed a hot button. Usually he'd make use of such information to gain what he wanted from an opponent. Now he felt he couldn't resort to the same bag of tricks.

"Fair enough. I won't ask that of you. But you received the card. I arrived. It's your birthday. At least relax enough to tell me one little fantasy. Can't you read it in my touch? I'd never hurt you."

She rolled her eyes. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

He intended his smile to reassure. "I give even more than I get. I'm yours for the rest of your birthday."

She looked at the clock. "My birthday doesn't really start until midnight. Just twenty-five minutes to go."

"Let's start early," he whispered in her ear.

"Okay, Antonio deLuc. What I've always wanted for my birthday is a love slave. For the next twenty-four hours, my every wish will be your command."

"Done." Delicious thrills ran through him as she said each word.

"I want wild, passionate, no holds barred, swinging from the rafters sex—lots of it. Twenty-four hours." She licked her lips and stared pointedly at his groin. "Are you up for it?" She crossed her arms defensively in front of her beautiful breasts.

He groaned his response to her delicious challenge. Up for it? His cock twitched to get started. Twenty-four hours of hot sex wrapped in this beautiful woman's arms, and he figured he'd have her out of his system. Then he'd pick up Cleo's stone and bid Maura's world a fond farewell. "You're on."

In her wildest dreams, Maura had never expected a man who looked like Antonio to cross her path, let alone agree to be her love slave. There had to be something that would get in the way —

"Oh, Lord. I'm supposed to open my boutique extra early in the morning. We're having a huge sale in honor of my birthday, and I like to give my steady customers first shot."

He nuzzled the side of her neck, his breath hot on her skin. She creamed her panties at the prospect of his intimate touch. "Surely those customers want you to have the birthday of your fantasies."

Her head spun. "I hate to disappoint..."

He slid a finger along the inner contours of her pussy. She wantonly closed her legs to trap his finger right there. "Ohhh. I can't think, Antonio, not when you touch me like that."

He grinned, withdrew his finger and put it in his mouth.

She wanted his mouth and all his fingers on her, in her. "Right. Think, think. I'm going to call my assistant and tell her something huge has come up. She's been begging for a chance to run the show on her own. She can call in extra help, do what's needed." Her voice turned a tad shrill on the final words.

She reached to the side table for her phone. "Heck, she'll be excited for me. She's always saying I should get a life. But I'm going to tell her I'm not alone, without going into all the details. You know, I'll just tell her your name and all. So if anything weird happens and I disappear off the face of the earth or something, she'll come after you like a vengeful banshee."

He ate vengeful banshees for breakfast, but Antonio decided to keep that information to himself. "I'd never hurt you, but arrange as you will."

When Maura returned her attention to him, he offered her wine in a goblet he'd conjured up, a white wine of superb vintage. She warily watched him drink. "Where did you say that wine came from?"

"Part of the supplies a birthday wish granter comes with," he purred. "You didn't see me when I came in." When he'd swallowed, he proffered the goblet to her. "This is quite delicious."

Hesitant, she took the goblet and opened her lovely mouth to take the tiniest of sips. "Oh, that was quite nice. Unusual, but delicious."

"The best is yet to come. Now, my dear, your wish is my command."

How could she tell him what she wanted without exploding into a massive, body-engulfing blush?

What was wrong with her? She never had any problems telling a guy what she wanted. A few had confided her forthrightness intimidated them. But Antonio deLuc didn't look or act as if anything she'd come up with would intimidate him.

As she continued her internal mind wrestling, the clock ticked away. Maura looked longingly at Antonio, whose mouth and cock quirked up at a very sexy angle.

He extended his hand to her, and a jolt of soul-shattering warmth claimed her. It didn't, unfortunately, restore her power of speech.

"I want the same thing you do. I'm sure my constant erection has told you that." His eyes twinkled, and he now favored her with an almost tender smile. Maura was in serious danger of melting into a puddle of goo.

"So your bed for our first time?"

A moment's clarity pierced the fog that enveloped her. She could swear Antonio could read her mind. She shivered. This virile, powerful man apparently had easy access to her most personal mental meanderings. Though she'd always longed for a man with such skills, now that he was actually here, she remembered the old adage about being careful what you wished for.

He stroked her chin, and she marveled at the effect of the simple touch. "Try not to worry, my pet."

She let out her breath. "Even though you're not saying the word this time, you're still asking me to trust you a lot." Maura doled out trust in tiny portions—her form of emotional armor. Antonio could easily breach her protective walls with just his touch and presence, and he knew it. She couldn't totally let down her guard.

"I feel like I'm dipping my toe into a huge, cold ocean."

He nodded. "And a beautiful toe it is. You are a beautiful woman, inside and out. Now it is past time for me to make a full, passionate acquaintance with all of you as your special birthday officially begins."

His voice set off goose bumps all over her body. Luckily, he continued to hold her up with his hand because Maura didn't think her legs would support her. She'd never before felt so excited, nervous and lustful all at one time. Most of all, she wanted and needed Antonio. The strong conviction that all would come clear once she had him between her legs brought a whiff of calm.

Though sometimes Maura wished she weren't such a perfectionist, she appreciated her crazy-making standards when she led Antonio into her arranged-for-a-seduction bedroom. Everything was where it should be. In moments, she'd turn down her comforter to expose a gazillion-thread-count sheets. Luxury and every creature comfort would surround them.

Antonio, suddenly naked and harder than ever, now took the lead. Realizing she'd have to get naked, always a self-conscious process with a new lover, Maura's mind resumed skittering. Though they hadn't turned on a lamp, ambient light pierced the

room's darkness. She'd have preferred much less light. Maybe she should close the door —

"I want to see you, to savor every nuance of your body as you reveal yourself to me." Of course he'd read her mind again, and he said exactly the right things.

Bloody hell, more demands for her trust. Nothing overtly expressed, but clear as a bell, nonetheless. He read her, knew her insecurities and self-doubts. He could have used that information against her, but, instead, he said exactly what she longed to hear. She could no more hold back her growing feelings of trust than her rampant desire. Her heart expanded as she reached out for everything he offered.

He sat them both down on her bed, turned his face to hers and captured her lips. Of course he was a world-class kisser. She instinctively knew that already. Though she'd expected him to press in on her with harsh demands, in fact his kiss began as the gentlest of explorations — as if they had all the time in the world.

Her birthday gift from the universe tasted like a clean, sexy man with just a hint of mint and something she couldn't identify on his breath. After licking and nibbling on the sensitive skin around her mouth, he slowly thrust his tongue between her lips in a sensuous foray.

Maura could scarcely breathe, her arousal so overwhelmed her. She wanted to be as attentive as he, wanted to take in every detail of being with him so the memories would be with for always. Heck, she wished she could access many more senses to take in and store this amazing moment.

Antonio abruptly broke the kiss, which was probably a good thing in light of her need for oxygen. "I'll turn on the lights. It's far too dark in here for me to appreciate your total appeal, and I won't be deprived."

Lights were not her friend. Visions of cellulite tumbled unbidden through her chattering mind. He'd take a good look at her and be so turned-off —

"You should never hide yourself." He didn't have to touch the lamps to turn them on. Somehow, both came on at the same time, banishing the shadows she'd counted on. That had to be her overheated imagination, right?

"Not everyone has your confidence or pride in their body." She blurted out her concerns before she'd really thought them through.

He looked her up and down. "Every body has its own beauty. Now, Maura, let me see yours."

Almost as if she were levitating to an irresistible tune, Maura rose and began to strip. For just this moment of her life, she swayed to a primitive internal rhythm.

So first went the jewelry—large silver hoop earrings landed next to the strings of beads on top of Maura's huge mahogany jewelry box. Two silver filigree rings joined them. That was the easy part.

Her hands trembled as she reached to open the ivory silk blouse she'd paired with a brightly colored gypsy skirt. For a moment, she suspected he'd take over unbuttoning her blouse. But he kept his gaze steady, and, surprisingly, she calmed down enough to open the buttons without tearing any.

Maura always invested in quality bras and panties, for which she felt immensely grateful tonight. Becoming surer of herself as she went along, she opened her blouse to reveal smooth, cool ivory satin with a small jeweled rose between her breasts. Antonio sucked in his breath, hard.

"Magnificent." His voice hoarse, low and sexy, he said something in a language Maura couldn't identify. His words flowed around her, like a stream of warmth. Just listening would have turned her on. Add the visuals—and she was a goner.

Before Maura could continue, Antonio drew her to him. "I cannot resist. I must touch you."

Like some wanton harlot, Maura thrust her large breasts forward, offering herself to him. Antonio, who tongued her cleavage as he claimed those breasts with his large hands, eagerly accepted.

For a moment, Maura feared the fierce hammering of her heart would distract Antonio from his sensual search, but he evidently was single-minded and determined. Even through the thin barrier of her bra, Maura responded to his touch. Her nipples contracted with a delicious ache, and she burned for more intimacy.

"I, also," Antonio murmured. His lips were already slick and swollen from their kisses, and he looked dreamy-eyed, but he didn't miss a beat in reading her mind. He traced the outline of her bra with his fingers, then he'd teasingly palm her breast and stimulate her already aching nipples. Lust clawed at her, and her panties were almost drenched with the wetness of desire.

Though she always preferred her men to move slowly, this time she felt so on fire she'd burn to a crisp if they tarried much longer in foreplay. She was inches away from stretching out, hiking her skirt up, kicking her panties to oblivion and dragging Antonio down square on top of her. Then she would finally make full contact with the erection she'd been drooling over since he arrived.

"Sounds excellent," he whispered.

Maura blushed and shivered, either from confusion or madness. But she didn't care what had possessed her. Now she finally understood being driven, being obsessed, being crazed with lust. She'd turned into one mass of longing.

"Perhaps you would like me to slip off your bra so we can fulfill your fantasy." His hot breath tickled the skin between her breasts.

She moaned, which he took, rightly, as assent. In moments, he had the bra undone and flying across the room.

With Antonio focused on her, her nipples and breasts sprang up high and tight. For once she imagined they might almost pass for perky. Antonio appeared to drink them in with his eyes before he began to stroke and suck. His mouth on her nipple was sheer nirvana. Each glide of his tongue and teeth sent sensation spiraling through her, like a drug coursing through her bloodstream.

He kept murmuring words in his harshly musical language. Awareness spiked as she shattered and melted in his arms.

Antonio had to keep his wits about him. This was a challenge with Archfiend, who despised losing arguments, but Antonio had always managed. But he'd never imagined needing those skills for lovemaking with a beautiful woman. Maura challenged him in ways Archfiend couldn't begin to. His inner guidance warned that Antonio should be very scared, but a tidal wave of pleasure soon drowned out the faint signal.

Maura took his breath and several centuries of sophisticated patina away. For the first time in eons, Antonio found himself with a being who was real, authentic down to the cellular level. He'd never encountered authenticity in Hades. Maura's power hit him in the gut like a well-aimed punch. He should run, but he couldn't bring himself to.

The bond wasn't the only thing growing between them. His cock had been erect since the moment he first saw Maura. With ultimate pleasure and satisfaction so long deferred—he couldn't remember this ever happening before—Antonio's desire tormented him. He needed to get between Maura's legs and deep into her pronto or he'd suffer agony beyond what even Archfiend at his most evil could inflict.

"Maura, my lovely, let me ravish you."

"Yes to whatever you say." Her voice sounded breathy.

Despite her reservations about trusting, she let herself be vulnerable to him—a form of trust truer than words. With a start, he realized he'd been using his own language, not one any mortal could decipher. So much for total self-awareness. Antonio forced himself to stick to his somewhat rusty English. Though he'd ultimately have to betray Maura when he returned to Hades with Cleo's stone, at least now he could be open enough to speak her language. "I want to make mad, passionate love with you. I want you to entwine me with your lovely legs so I am deep inside your warmth."

"An offer I can't refuse. I will obey your desire, my slave."

No woman had ever refused him. He'd have been crushed if Maura refused him, though since he was her slave, she could have. "I take that to be a 'yes'."

Maura placed her hand on his cock, and the energy her touch generated made the air waves around him sizzle.

"I've wanted you since the first moment," she confessed. "I couldn't imagine a more perfect birthday gift." She gazed at him, her eyes half lidded with lust and something more.

Delicious as her touch was, he had to move her hand or he'd lose control and come like a firecracker.

"Cleo's stone surely works wonders."

Maura looked mystified—and she had every right. "What are you talking about?" Though Maura still glowed with desire, a glimmer of confusion also showed.

What was wrong with him, bringing up the stone when they were both champing at the bit to fuck? "Nothing important. I'll tell you some other time. Much more pressing matters call to us now." To make the point, he slid her skirt and panties down past her hips, then caressed her soft belly and traced a direct path down from the indentation of her navel over the pubis to the wet, welcoming heat of her femininity.

"Ahhh." His touch appeared to electrify her as much as it stirred him.

"You are so delicious." He licked her cream from his fingers before re-plunging them into her waiting cunt. This time he followed with his tongue. Reveling in her musky scent, he made teasing sweeps across her plump pink folds.

"Oh, god," Maura moaned.

Antonio bit back a response as he nibbled on her so obliging clit and savored the sounds she made. Maura, legs now flung wide to accommodate him, tentatively held his head to her. Antonio could feel her restraint.

"Let it go, sugar, do whatever you want. Show me." He practically hissed the words. Thank whatever, Maura got the message and accepted. Her hold strengthened,

and now she pressed him to her for all she was worth, letting him know exactly how much his mouth turned her on.

He wanted to keep on lapping up her warmth and cream forever, but he needed to get into her — now.

Except she was on the brink of coming from just the mouth play. He wouldn't stop now, not until she'd climaxed for him.

Maura's clit practically stood up to meet him. Not wanting to stun her with too much sensation on that sensitive nub, Antonio teased all around it, his tongue darting to the threshold of the intense sensations and then pulling back, teasing her exquisitely. Maura whimpered, a delicious sound that pumped him up. Then she took charge, showing him exactly where and how she wanted him to attend her.

"Antonio." Maura strung out his name for a long exhalation that stirred him to his toes. He wanted to pleasure this woman, and his assurance that he could swelled him up with pride and other emotions he couldn't identify. He needed her physical and emotional surrender.

She shivered and trembled with the force of her gathering climax. Antonio, accustomed to maintaining a superior detachment that enabled him to remain unaffected by his lover's release, felt drawn into her energy. This time his usual detachment remained beyond reach. Maura, with her warmth and tenderness, her utter openness and erotic sensuality, threatened his self-containment like no one before. Antonio was far too intrigued and involved to pull back now.

Deep down inside, Antonio had the rock-hard assurance of his identity, his boundaries. Surely Maura Fox couldn't threaten him on any fundamental level. He was a high-level demon, one of Archfiend's chiefs. Mere mortals succumbed to him—his charm or his force—not the other way around. But no one had ever affected him the way Maura did, and he couldn't stop himself from wanting more.

"Oh, Antonio," she sighed. And then she gave herself fully over to the throes of a hot, juicy climax that nearly brought him off too. But he would be in her when he finally allowed himself to climax. His dick twitched in anticipation.

As she shuddered in his arms, Antonio steeled himself for some restraint. After all, having waited so long, he didn't intend to come the moment he entered her. He continued to lick her cunt as her climactic tremors subsided, and the warmth of being with her conquered him.

Though he ached to plunge into her and bypass his usual finesse, Antonio knew that if he stretched out over her or pulled her down over him, he'd come far too soon. Seeing her face, feeling her breath would push him over the edge.

Maura drew him to her. "You smell like sex. I bet that's how you taste, too." He didn't make her wait long to find out as he opened her lips with his tongue. The tip of his cock nudged into her opening and it took every iota of his strength to hold his hips still. With a groan he pulled back. A glimmer of hurt flashed through her eyes. "I want you to make love with me this way," she whispered.

Much as he wanted the same, he motioned her to get on her hands and knees. If he came into her from behind, he wouldn't have to look at her eyes and her lips, wouldn't be able to read the emotions that animated her beautiful face. Bloody hell, she was sexy enough from behind to push him to his limits. A man could only take so much.

"This time, we'll do it this way." His voice sounded rough and raspy.

"This time?" she echoed. "Do you mean there will be more than one?"

Hell, yes. "If that's what you desire from your love slave." He stroked her as he positioned himself behind her soft, curvy ass. She put her head down between her arms and waggled her ass. His throat went dry. He swallowed, then took a deep breath. Desire had him near out of his mind. He wanted to fuck her in the ass, but, right now, getting his dick into her pussy took precedence. Still, he could play with her tempting crease while he put his cock where they both wanted it.

His fingers determined that Maura was still creamy and smooth. In moments, he'd glided his throbbing penis along her feminine mound and stood poised. Then all restraint collapsed and he slid all the way in. Maura felt tight around him. With a satisfied mental smile, he realized he was big for her to take in fully, maybe too big.

She moaned her assent, then tentatively swayed her hips, which unleashed tremors that rocked him. He growled his appreciation. Though neither had said an intelligible word, mutual understanding and deep communication bonded them even more closely than their intimate connection.

Though he could have happily stayed where he was for hours, maybe days or forever, the impulse to move, to create the divine friction they both craved could not be long delayed. He had to grit his teeth to move as slowly as he knew he should for maximum pleasure, so he did. Infinitesimal slowness allowed him to feel every bit of her hug him with her rapturous heat as he eased his huge dick into her. Then, once he was deep inside her, exercising every drop of his self-control, he withdrew from her core so he could stroke her clit with his cock. Her moan and waggle expressed her appreciation.

And then he was back inside her. She awakened him to a whole new range of sensations and took his breath away.

Her ass beckoned. He wet the fingers of one hand in his mouth and then by touching her sweet, wet vulva. When he first touched her crease, she hissed like a steam radiator. For a moment, he felt confused. Had he hurt her? Did she dislike his touch back there? "What is it, Maura?"

Chapter Three

Omigod. Maura never acted the way she was tonight, getting intimate with a stranger. So what if Antonio claimed to be her birthday gift? How hard could it have been to find out it was her birthday – and some unidentified friend had the weird sense of humor to leave her that card – or, maybe, to really order a live, good-to-go gift? So why did it all feel magical and totally right? Had she finally gone ‘round the bend?

Everything Antonio did, everything he introduced her to, hit her awe button and turned her willpower to mush. Who knew such total pleasure existed or that she could feel such range of sensations?

At first, when Antonio told her to get on her hands and knees, a twinge of sadness hit. Did he think she was ugly and not want to look at her when they fucked?

But despite all her insecurities and doubts, she couldn’t deny the power of the link between them. It was like they were in their very own magical cocoon, keeping out any intrusions – keeping them safe and complete together.

His touch back there aroused her like nothing before. Whatever he did excited her in ways she’d never imagined. She hungered to know him on every level and maybe invent a few new ones.

But her ass. He was stroking her between her cheeks while he pleased her deep inside with his large hard cock – making love with his hand in her ass. The double sensations made her head swim.

“No one’s ever touched me back there.” Her words sounded lame and inane to her.

He laughed and pressed his cock in even deeper, opening her up. She wanted to hold on to the sounds and scents, the sheer erotic feel of him in her, forever.

“I’m glad to be the first.” He spoke barely above a whisper.

She snorted, which ended in a whimper. "It's just kind of...strange."

His fingers froze. "Should I stop?"

"Ah, no." Never that, even if she had to beg him not to.

"You are beautiful everywhere. Maybe later I will show you in a mirror how lovely you are. But for now, I will admire you with my cock, my hands and my mouth—humble worship for your magnificence."

Humble? Antonio must have choked on getting that word out. Nothing about the man was *humble*. Thank goodness. Well, they could laugh over that together later.

He was moving so slowly, arching in and out of her. Languorously delicious. After she'd come before, she figured she was done for the night. But the way he moved in her, the way he touched her clit with his glans, the whole package... She shuddered.

His playing with her ass crease stimulated her beyond imagining. She wanted him to kiss her neck and her back, maybe even kiss her where he had his hand— She quivered at the thought and hoped he wasn't reading her mind just now. He wouldn't be able to bend down to kiss her and maintain his penis and his hand where they were. For a very quick moment, she fantasized what it would be like to have two Antonios there, showering her with their erotic attention.

She really hoped he didn't read her mind on that one. Good god, one Antonio nearly drove her out of her mind. Two would turn her into a dribbling basket case—but she'd be smiling all the way.

With one very wet finger, he began to press her opening and quest inside. Her heart fluttered madly at the new sensation, part fear and embarrassment, way more pleasure. Antonio had large hands and fingers. Though he was gentle as he probed, she could definitely feel him back there.

She sucked in her breath hard as he pressed harder, sure it would hurt. It didn't. She wanted more but couldn't bring herself to ask.

"I want to go deeper into you and then add a second finger." His whispered words made her shiver. He *had* read her mind.

"I can't be big enough back there for you to put two fingers in, can I?" The last word came out as a squeak.

He chuckled. "I guess there's only one way to find out."

She stiffened, the prospect making her deliciously nervous.

"Don't worry, pet." His words caressed her. "You can easily stretch to fit my two fingers and more. But I'll stop the moment you ask me to, I promise."

Once again, to her surprise, she found she trusted him. She trusted his words, but more than that, she trusted her own instincts and his bodily understanding of what she wanted. Trust and yielding were very new. As she relaxed, she felt him do as he said he would. When he joined the second finger to the first, she gasped—more a mental reaction than a physical one. And then, when she allowed herself to savor the erotic pleasure of his total lovemaking, she fully accepted him.

He murmured something luscious. Though she'd never have believed he could get bigger and harder, the evidence was clear. She'd never been so completely filled before.

Talented, teasing fingers stroked her clit, and Maura rotated her hips in instinctive response to his probing touch. Antonio was so skilled and intuitive in his lovemaking, he'd ruin her for every other man in the future.

The future. She froze for a long moment, but he wouldn't let her hesitate. With a groan, she submitted. Why let anything intrude on the spectacular present? Whatever their lovemaking might cost her, she was willing to pay the price. Sex with the mysterious Antonio had to be a peak moment in her life. Even the tiniest interval on the mountaintop outweighed a lifetime of the mundane.

And he had murmured *more than once*, hadn't he? She trembled. Maybe they were just at the beginning of something too magnificent for her to take in when she was so addled.

“Maura, you make me lose control.” This time when he muttered, she could decipher the words. Though it might have been wrong and selfish, she couldn’t help enjoying the power she had over this incredible man.

Accustomed as he was to marathon sex, Antonio almost couldn’t believe it when the first stirrings of his orgasm grabbed hold of him—especially because those first stirrings struck like a bolt of lightning. Usually he didn’t start to come until his partner was panting with exhaustion from multiple orgasms. But Maura had had only one, from before he’d entered her. His climax clutched him up like a swirling tornado. He had to get Maura to come pronto if he wanted her to orgasm first.

And he did.

Her clit throbbed for attention and he listened, shifting his weight to give the sensitive nub more play. At the same exact moment, he revved up his finger play in her ass. Lovely Maura cried out her exquisite reactions, panting and moaning. She tightened her thighs around his hips and stroked him with her clit and her dripping-wet folds.

Damnation. He had to bite his lip and clamp down on his senses to keep from coming while he was outside her. Trouble was everything about her pushed him out of control, and he had to clench his teeth to keep from exploding until he got his aching prick back inside her. With an Archfiend-worthy growl he plunged deep inside her. His whole body pulsed with understanding. He was home.

“Ahhh.” She whimpered and shuddered, tossing her head back and forth, as she joined him in a world-melting come.

Just in the nick of time. At long last he spurted out his glacier-melting, pent-up release. Giving up everything he had in him, Antonio staked his claim.

He’d never be the same again. Neither, he knew deep inside, would she.

With a shudder, he understood. Making love with her had transformed him. If he’d foreseen how she’d affect him, he might have, should have, chosen the path of wisdom

and run, not walked, away. After all, he hadn't been looking for transformation—just Cleo's stone.

Too late.

Still half-erect within her, Antonio began to withdraw, both from her pussy and from her ass. The only way he could bear the separation was to promise himself it wouldn't be for long. He kissed the skin from the nape of her neck all the way down to that ass. He couldn't get enough of her scent, wanted to swallow her into him. But then he had to see her face, had to read in her eyes to see if she'd experienced anything even partly as intense as he had.

When they lay down next to each other, touching lightly, she opened her eyes. In just a moment, he could read everything he needed to know. Though a mere mortal, Maura Fox showed herself to be his true companion throughout their life-altering mating. And he saw something else light up her face, some emotion he couldn't identify but which made him shiver with fear—definitely an unfamiliar and unwelcome sensation.

"Antonio," she said at last. "The way we just made love. Wow. Does whoever sent you guarantee that kind of satisfaction from their birthday gifts?"

He almost choked, remembering the guy whose place he'd taken at Maura's door. Her simple, almost naïve question nearly made him laugh, which he managed to swallow. "That was just the beginning of your birthday surprises."

Her eyes flew wide in genuine surprise. "*That* was just the beginning? Uh, I'd say you made the earth move." She turned crimson. "I've never come more than once in a night. Usually even once is a lot of work." Her blush deepened.

"Where I come from, we'd say 'nice work if you can get it'."

She reached back, picked up a pillow and smacked him. Her breasts swung enticingly at him, but he resisted the temptation to grab and suckle—for now. What self-discipline!

"So this happens for you all the time when you go out as a birthday gift?"

"Guilty as charged." And of so much more. A hurt look distorted Maura's face, and he regretted his lie. He snuggled closer to her, nipped a fast kiss on her lips, then traced her profile with his fingertip. Her expression turned receptive, even gentle. "I'm glad the earth moved for you. It did for me, too." Bloody hell, he couldn't believe how his voice quavered as he said these simple words.

But he could deal with his discomfort because now she looked pleased. "I really made the earth move for you, too?"

He nodded solemnly. "And several planets and stars, maybe the whole universe. You don't realize your own appeal, do you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Hardly. I never believed in the power of birthday wishes before, but wow, have I changed my mind. This is too good to keep to myself. I want to find out who sent you and give her the thanks she deserves."

He sat bold upright. "Whoa. My understanding is that the gift-giver wants to be anonymous." He did not want Maura to investigate about how he got here, maybe find out that she was supposed to be with another guy.

"Why?" She looked disappointed as she cocked her head to one side. "If I gave someone a gift like this, I'd want to share the joy." She thought about her words and put a hand on his chest. "I don't mean to share you or something kinky like that. I mean, just to really let her know..."

Gratitude wasn't an emotion he had much experience with, but Maura's enthusiasm for it touched him. She and he really were opposites, weren't they? But that didn't impinge on the physical pleasure of being with her. He lay back down and they snuggled some more. Despite his huge ejaculation, his erection had never gone completely away. Now he felt the first stirrings of the need for more lovemaking come roaring back to life. "Without going into too much detail, I'll tell you a bit of what's going to happen." He nudged his cock against the inviting flesh of her thigh.

"Is that a foretaste?" She licked her lips, the minx, which caused him to dart over and nip at her mouth. Glutton that he was becoming, he couldn't get enough.

When they both came up for air, he said, "Yes, my deliciously wanton wench. The best is yet to come."

She actually leered. "You've got that right. This wench is definitely wantin'. I appreciate the taste you treated me to, and now I want lots more."

"I aim to please." He inclined his head in a mock bow.

"Really?"

Her skepticism stunned him. "You're not saying I failed to please you."

She shook her head. "God, no." She grasped his arm. "You can't have any question in your mind about that. Antonio, I've never faked with any man, and I never would. Trust me, what you saw was my reaction to what I was getting. First time ever that I came twice. And those were teeth-rattling. Usually one like that lasts me a month—or longer."

He couldn't doubt her sincerity or complete candor. Never prone to self-doubt, the brief moment he'd just experienced shook him. He did not want a repetition. "I'm glad to broaden your horizons."

She groaned. "As if anything about me needs broadening." She ruefully smacked the flesh of her butt.

He removed her fingers and kissed them. "If you would like some spanking play, I'd be happy to oblige. But any striking of your glorious ass must be undertaken with complete respect and reverence."

She didn't look completely convinced.

He caressed her ass, massaging each cheek. "My first goal will be to convince you that you're totally beautiful. Any other attitude is intolerable. Check?"

She nodded. To his surprise and consternation, her eyes filled with tears. Mustering tenderness from he knew not where, he kissed them away. The intimacy of the moment rocked him.

"Checkmate," she replied softly.

He took her hand and put it over his heart. "There is much more to come. Your birthday has barely begun."

She smiled sadly. "Maybe we can stretch things out and call it my birth month." Her eyes pleaded with him, and he longed to tell her they could do things as she wanted.

But that wasn't the way of it, and he had to tell her right away. After all, no matter how much Maura tempted him, he couldn't lose sight of his ultimate mission. He needed to get back to Hell with Cleo's stone. Maura's birthday celebration fit in with his timing, but more than a day would be stretching things. "A birth month sounds perfect, but we don't have that yet. But we can make your birthday magic."

She bit her bottom lip. "Right. One amazing day." She sighed. "Heck, I didn't even know I'd have tonight, so a whole day sounds like an eternity of time, right?"

Eternity. At this moment, he didn't want to think about long stretches of time when he'd be without her. But, despite often playing fast and loose, he knew the bloody rules that governed his existence and hers. She searched his face for a response. He nodded.

"But, Antonio, what's in it for you? This must be one fantastic job you have."

Time to suck up his oozing emotions and be the cool, detached minion of Hades. "It is. Actually, this assignment will give me the chance to mend some fences. I had a major fight with my boss."

"He fired you?"

Antonio considered this. Could a demon be fired from Hell? "In a manner of speaking, but it's not permanent. He has an awful temper, you see. He fires his assistants often, but he never means it. So, you see, making your birthday special is the key to my returning home." That and taking possession of Cleo's stone, which gleamed provocatively from Maura's dresser.

She stiffened. "Everything that's going on between us is part of your job description?"

He felt her discomfort and grimaced. "I didn't express myself well." How should he put this? "I came here because of my job assignment. No, they're not all like this one. As a matter of fact, being with you is the most special..."

Relief glowed from her. Thank goodness lying came so easily to him. Except, in the matter of his feelings, he wasn't lying at all. "Yes, I have much to gain from our time together, and I'm getting more than I bargained for. I like you, Maura Fox, a lot. It gives me great pleasure to make this birthday memorable. And then I'll get to go home."

"Which will give you even more pleasure." Her voice grew faint. She shook herself, as if to shrug off momentary sadness. "Antonio, where is home?"

"I can't tell you that." He answered far too quickly, without thinking. After all, what would it cost him to tell her another easy lie?

She shook her head. "You can't? Really, why not? That's weird. It's not like I'm asking you anything really personal—like if you have a wife or girlfriend or something." She winced.

He snorted. "No wife, no girlfriend. Look, I don't want to get into a lot of deep stuff with you. All I'll say is where I live is pretty much hell."

"Right." She rolled her eyes. "Okay, so you don't have to tell me. But if your home is so awful that you'd describe it as hell, and you work for a weird, temperamental boss, why don't you leave? Even if you don't want to stay with me, you've got to be able to do better." A combination of pain and determination animated her features.

Where could he begin? How could he explain the draw of his life, of his home, of all he was familiar with—the bonds that attached him to Archfiend and all the habitual torments? Something in him craved the darkness, life perpetually on the edge. But with Maura, he could see himself slipping into the trap of comfort and warmth. If he didn't have Archfiend to wrestle with and the threat of eternal agony, he'd lose his sharpness, and what would become of him?

Of all the dire fates and catastrophes he'd ever envisioned, he'd never begun to grapple with being an ordinary man, one without any special powers. The prospect frightened him beyond the worst tortures he'd seen in Hell.

Realizing Maura Fox was a far more dangerous trap for him than any Archfiend at his cruelest could devise, Antonio resolved to resist her, to protect himself from the multiple onslaughts on his senses of being with her. Soon. He'd start very soon.

Maura considered herself greedy. She wanted a life full of good things—beauty, luxury and ease. Just as she loved to spoil her friends and family, to shower them with attention and comfort, she longed to have them reciprocate. Except none of her loved ones ever seemed to get it. They gratefully accepted all she gave, but no one ever seemed to suspect that part of her motivation was to inspire similar behavior from them. She was like a kid looking through a window at a candy shop—after she'd bought all the candy for everyone else.

Actually, her failure to get what she wanted from her loved ones made her a diva wannabe. She needed to take lessons on how to get the attention and indulgences her soul craved.

She'd become almost resigned to being a giver rather than a taker. Then Antonio fell into her life. Some unknown donor actually got her, as if that person had taken the trouble to tap into her most intimate dreams. Now that she'd gotten over being scared, Maura loved what was happening. She felt reborn. Suddenly she could revel in the sheer luxury of being pampered. The reality was far better than anything she could ever have imagined. She could definitely get used to having Antonio around to spoil her on a permanent basis.

Of course she knew he wouldn't be for long. This one special day and then he'd be gone. Most guys weren't so clear about when they were going to disappear. Maura appreciated Antonio's honesty, but, more than anything, she wished he'd change his mind.

Hell, she wished she could change his mind. Right. Maura Fox was not the kind of woman who tamed the bad boys who fell into her life. To keep from a total meltdown when he left, Maura would have to arm herself with some heavy-duty emotional self-protection. The key to enjoying this amazing one-night stand and not letting its briefness undermine her was to make like a honeybee sipping nectar from a flower — she'd take her pleasure and fly away.

Or something like that. She wouldn't think overly long about much of anything, especially the ever after when Antonio turned his back and left.

Enjoy. Self-protect. Don't take anything he says or does too seriously. Live in the moment. Wishing she could paper her bedroom with Post-It reminders, she let herself coast alongside Antonio.

"The rest of the day sounds very full and busy." Her voice sounded drowsy, as well it should. She'd been on the go since early the previous morning. After a full day's work, she'd raced home to prepare her condo for her green birthday party.

"It will be. Tonight is an extra for us, a bonus. Tomorrow we'll celebrate your birthday in earnest." He pressed against her, and Maura could feel Antonio's insistent erection. Considering the hot sex they'd just shared, she couldn't believe he was hard again. Talk about a love machine, a studly stud. She licked her lips.

"Do you want to make love again?" she asked sleepily.

"Always, with you." He ground his penis against her hip to punctuate his words. "But you're tired. Rest now so you'll be ready for the new day."

Though part of her wanted to stay awake the whole time he was with her, her body demanded rest. Here she still lay, totally naked with the equally naked Antonio, not making a move to get her nightshirt or do any of her normal going-to-bed rituals. Though she'd never slept in the buff before, now it felt like the only reasonable option.

Feeling as if they were weighted, her eyelids drifted down. Entwined with Antonio, Maura fell into a blissful sleep.

Antonio never slept more than an hour. He couldn't afford to. He awoke with a start soon after falling asleep in Maura's arms. Sleep felt delicious, but he couldn't waste his time lost in oblivion. He had no difficulty seeing in the dark, and he allowed himself a few moments to gaze at Maura, who looked as beautiful in sleep as she did awake. Utter peace and tranquility lit her face. Antonio could understand the impulse to worship.

As he lay on his side and resisted the temptation to touch Maura, he remained alert for the messages darkness would bring. An immediate vision sprang to life. Cleo was hounding Archfiend for her stone. Archfiend bared his jagged green teeth, a sign of a coming storm. If Antonio didn't return promptly, stone in hand, there'd be consequences.

He could handle Archfiend. He wouldn't cut short a moment of the time he'd promised Maura, no matter what.

Antonio would pay attention—lots of it—to Maura in a form she could easily assimilate. In other words, lots of sex. Thinking of their time together, Antonio groaned with lust. His cock grew thick in anticipation. Eyes fastened on her, he fisted his cock, something he hadn't done in centuries. Though primitive, it felt good to touch himself, so he kept on doing it.

He watched Maura sleep, the way she turned her head when she followed a dream and the slight adjustments she made to her position. Everything was fruit for his arousal, and he pumped his cock in rhythm with Maura's warm breath. The intensity of his climax stunned him. With all the flavors and varieties of sex readily available to him, he'd become jaded. But since he'd met Maura, he felt like he'd begun to regress—in a great way.

The Antonio Maura put him in touch with wouldn't stand a snowball's chance of surviving in the hell he called home.

Antonio couldn't deal with the enormity of that thought and its implications now. Instead, he focused on his instincts.

Hold Maura's hand and you will feel what she needs and wants. A wave of sadness, an unfamiliar, uncomfortable emotion Antonio wanted to distance himself from, rippled through him as he read Maura's mind. Her loneliness and her frustrated efforts to get her needs met coursed through him. He'd never before realized anyone could feel so sad.

He would make it up to her, give her the ride of her life before he left. Whatever Maura wanted, Maura would get—if only for this one magical birthday. He would pamper her and spoil her in all the ways she'd fantasized about, and he'd make passionate love with her until they'd moved the earth and the stars.

Chapter Four

Maura couldn't remember having slept so soundly in years. She woke with a smile, enticed from her dreams by the heavenly smell of her favorite chocolate hazelnut coffee.

Someone was brewing coffee for her? It had to be Antonio. And along with the coffee, her nose twitched with delight when she smelled bacon frying. Maura's tummy rumbled. Still naked, she stumbled around her bedroom for her robe, made a fast pass at brushing her teeth and fluffing her bed hair, then dashed to the kitchen.

Antonio, who'd apparently conjured up tight, worn jeans and a black T-shirt, stood in the middle of the kitchen while bacon sizzled in one pan and sunny-side down eggs warmed in another. The table was already set for two, with toast, butter and pots of jam and honey surrounding a vase with a perfect red rose in the center. With a flourish, he removed a platter of French toast from the oven. Maura grinned at the domestic scene. She'd never have imagined Antonio producing a breakfast like this.

"You read my mind again."

His grin made her heart lurch. "May I serve you?"

Oh, god. Could he ever. "I hope you're going to have breakfast with me."

"If that's what you want."

That was one of many things she wanted. "Oh, yeah."

He bobbed his head, and a plate with generous servings of bacon, eggs and French toast appeared before her. The eggs were great—no broken yolks, no burned edges, the French toast fluffy, and the bacon looked crisp. Sliced oranges and strawberries garnished the rim of her plate. Its duplicate appeared at his spot.

"Toast? Juice? Coffee?" he asked.

"Yes to all, but sit down. I'm not helpless."

He slipped into the chair across the table and gazed at her. "Of course you're not. But allow me to give you what you crave." He took her hand.

Maura swallowed hard as she tried to keep from tearing up. Antonio looked and sounded like the ideal man, one she could imagine conjuring up only in dreams. "Thank you," she managed to whisper. A small glass of fresh grapefruit juice—her favorite—suddenly stood before her. Her head whirled.

"This is just the start." He toasted her with his own juice.

Even as she thought about reaching for a piece of toast or pouring her first cup of coffee, she had what she wanted.

Okay, so whatever kind of magic Antonio knew how to perform was amazingly convincing. Maura could easily persuade herself to stop questioning and just go with the flow. Maybe someday she'd actually understand what was going on. Or not.

The food was, predictably, delicious. When Antonio proposed a champagne toast, she shook her head. "Not noon yet," she pointed out. Her voice quavered, and her short laugh didn't ring true. "I never indulge until after noon."

Antonio's eyes looked darker and more intense than before. "Today you will forget the word 'never'." He poured them both flutes and raised his in toast.

Silly taboo, anyway. She'd never been one to run her life according to the dictates of the clock. Fingers trembling only slightly, she brought the flute to her lips.

"To Maura, may this birthday be all you could ever want and the start of an amazing, lifelong adventure."

Her eyes misted as his words sank in. In moments, they'd drained their champagne. She then indulged in a third and last cup of the luscious coffee.

Unable to take even one more bite or sip, she began to clear the table.

Antonio put his hand on her arm. "I'll take care of that and all the other chores for today."

"I don't mind." Maura had never imagined she'd find it so difficult to have a gorgeous man cater to her. *Interesting*, her detached inner observer pointed out. *Are you nuts? Sit back and enjoy it*, her inner adviser chimed in.

"Not negotiable. For today, you're on a holiday from the mundane." In what seemed like no time, the kitchen shone with cleanliness and order.

"I guess I should shower and dress." Maura could never remember being at such a loss as to what to do next.

"May I shower with you?" His mouth quirked up on one side, and she wanted to slide her tongue between his lips.

Heat suffused her. With him here, the mundane was transformed into something crystal sharp and new. Reality would never again be the same. "Yes, of course," she managed to croak out.

His smile grew wider as he took her arm and steered her to her bathroom. "What would you like me to wear today?"

She thought the jeans and T-shirt were fine and said so. Besides, he hadn't brought much wardrobe with him, had he?

"I'm your companion for the adventure of your dreams. Surely jeans and a T-shirt aren't what you see your knight wearing."

"I'd rather have you in jeans than in shining armor, which would make you very hard to get to." Maura blushed ten shades of red. Had she really said what just came out of her mouth? Must have been the booze.

"We'd find a way to remove the armor very quickly and efficiently," he murmured.

"Right. I want to see you all in black. Leather jacket, tight black designer jeans and a black silk T-shirt. How's that sound?"

"I expect I can come up with something that you'll like. Now let's shower." Faster than she could nod, he stood before her stark gorgeous naked.

Maura wished she could so unselfconsciously strip. Hyperaware of how she'd look in daylight, Maura wanted to retreat or at least slow things down a bit. "Maybe we should just shower individually. I'm sure it would be much faster that way, and then we could go out."

His eyes flashed, and he shook his head. "You know I'm not doing anything you don't want to do."

Oh, god. He'd read her mind, and now he had both big hands on the lapels of the fluffy white terrycloth robe she'd thrown on. She had nothing underneath, so she was quickly naked as he was.

Though she wanted him to avert his eyes, he didn't. Accepting his gaze had been a lot easier at night, when it was dark and she'd been a bit fuzzy around the edges. "No, you actually don't want me to look away any more than I want to look away."

He totally creeped her out when he did that. Not totally, her inner voice reminded her. Heck, even without his own particular magic and his skill at reading her mind, Antonio would make her crazy. But with those enhancements, the man was downright lethal. "Right. Let's shower. It's a gorgeous day, so we should get out while the gettin's good."

He mock bowed. Did the man ever not have an erection?

He laughed heartily. "With you around, it's easy to be hard."

She stepped into her tub and he followed. Her arrayed shampoos, conditioners and liquid soaps glistened invitingly as the exhaust fan whirled.

"Do you have any preferences as to soaps and hair products?" she asked.

"No. I'm okay with whatever you want to use."

Now she wished she'd stocked more than her usual array of feminine scents.

"I'm not concerned." He winked.

If only she could turn off her traitorous mind. She adjusted the stream of water and raised the temperature to borderline too-hot. He seemed to approve.

"If you'll wash me, I'll wash you," he offered.

That sounded exactly like what she wanted.

"I'd like it if you would put your desires into words. Easy as it is for me to read your mind, I'd still enjoy hearing you voice what you want." He licked his lips, which Maura found incredibly sexy. Heck, she found everything he said and did incredibly sexy.

"I'll try," she promised and meant it. He was giving her so much and asking for so little in return. "Will you wash my hair first?" Her voice quavered.

"Turn around," he whispered. "I can't wait to get my hands into all that gorgeous hair. You should always wear it down, though I love being able to see your neck when you wear it up."

His strong fingers massaged herbal-scented shampoo into her scalp. With the comfort of the hot water, the fragrance of the herbs and the pressure of his touch, Maura felt herself slipping into a haze of sensuousness. "That's wonderful. Your touch is incredible." In more ways than one. His erection rubbed against her lower back each time he moved, turning her on.

"You tempt me to forget everything but being with you." His voice resonated through her, and his words thrilled her. No one had ever spoken to her in such a romantic way, and she wanted to take each word and store it away in a golden memory box.

By the time he'd washed her hair, rinsed the shampoo out and applied a thick coat of conditioner, Maura was completely turned-on. She wanted him to do more with his hard-on.

"Oh, yes, my pet. You'll have my cock exactly as you want it." He ground his erection against the top of her butt crease, and Maura's knees buckled. She grew soft and wet with desire. Though she'd never had a man like this before, she'd always been curious but too shy to ask for it. Now Antonio was going to butt-fuck her, and she couldn't wait.

He nibbled at the nape of her neck and kissed her from there down to her butt. Then he positioned her so she bent from her waist with her hands on the tiled wall. He kissed her back there, running his tongue up and down her crease. If she hadn't been holding on to the wall and supported by Antonio, she'd have fallen flat on her face.

"I wouldn't let that happen, ever," he assured her. "Now, my lovely, I'm going to provide you with some lube. Roses and strawberries, right? That's the fragrance you like."

"Yes."

With the water and steam around them, Maura felt like everything except Antonio had grown soft and blurry, as if she really had been transported into an alternate world. He slathered the lube—cool and smooth, comforting and exciting at the same time, just as if he'd plucked it from her fantasies—generously on her. His fingers conveyed confidence and assurance with even the slightest touch. Follow me to ecstasy, his fingers promised. With total pleasure, she responded.

"I want this to be so good for you." He sounded hoarse, less detached than before.

He inserted one lubed finger, then a second. She enjoyed the sensations of his fingers back there, but now she wanted his cock.

"Your wish is my command." In moments, the head of his huge prick pressed hungrily against her opening. Very conscious of how big Antonio was, Maura began having second thoughts. Maybe he was just too big for her. Maybe it was too late for her to change her mind. She tensed up.

He drew back. "I'll stop whenever you want. Your pleasure and delight are paramount to me."

So far, everything they'd done together exceeded her desires and took her to a whole new place. She loved the way he led her to try something new. And she trusted him to keep his word. "Please, more. Slowly."

With what must have been supreme self-control, he did as she asked. She could feel his big penis slowly move into her, opening her up and stretching her. It never hurt.

Once she relaxed, she could savor the sensation of being filled, of taking him into her in an entirely new way.

"This is very delicious for me," he whispered. "I thank you for your invitation."

"Oh, god, Antonio. You are so very, very welcome." She gasped as pleasure radiated through her.

"Now, my darling one, I'm going to lean over you with my cock in you so I can touch your lovely pussy."

Maura was about to protest she was at her limit for how much she could handle, but he gently hushed her. "Trust me on this too. Let me teach you, let me show you all the pleasure paths you've never before explored."

Soon, he had his cock buried deep inside her and began to arch his hips in a very subtle movement. His balls lightly tapped her upper thigh with each movement. She wished she could take one hand from the wall to cup him. But she didn't trust herself not to fall if she did. Then her mind went blank, on sensory overload as Antonio began to finger her clit.

Maura had turned into one bright shining orb of erotic rapture. Her usual talent for analysis kicked into place and she tried to break apart what was happening, to understand all the pieces so she could comprehend the whole. But there was too much. So she gave herself up to the intimacy of the moment, to being fully present in her body, with this man.

Though she hadn't expected to climax this time, Antonio's fingers insisted otherwise. He knew how to touch her exactly where she needed to feel him, and the friction of his fingers gliding over her smoothness set her teeth on edge.

With him wedged deep inside her and his fingers playing rapturous games with her feminine mound, Maura could not stay still. Her movements heightened the intensity of their contact. Antonio, she sensed, was as into it as she.

"You are so right, my minx. You make it impossible for a man to remain cool, even a man like me."

“Good. Why should I be the only one who—oh, god!” Her orgasm rose and swept her under like a tidal wave.

“Like that, Maura, like that. Heart-pounding, breath-taking. Let yourself melt into it.”

She panted. “I’m melted, I’m melted. Antonio, I don’t know where your magic is from or what you really do, but I’m convinced.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet.” He kissed her nape again and slowly stood upright, which shifted his position inside her.

She wagged her hips and took enormous satisfaction in hearing his surprised gasp. “Oh, Maura, I’m com—” Before he’d completed his announcement, she felt him spasm inside her. He muttered curses and words that made no sense to her as he pumped his full come into her in a series of bursts that seemed to take him by surprise.

When it was over and his erection began to soften, he leaned back down and kissed her back. “You beautiful, beautiful woman. I cannot believe what you do to me.”

What she did to him?

“Oh, Antonio. I’m the one who can’t believe. Not to press the mundane too much, but my hot water doesn’t last forever.”

“I can fix that.”

“Another time. Let’s finish showering.”

He nibbled on her lips in a brush kiss. “Did we start?”

She snorted. “You did wash my hair. If you’ll lean down, I can wash yours.” He leaned enough for her to reach his head. Fingers trembling, she shampooed his hair. By the time she was ready to rinse, her fingers no longer shook. Touching him, even through the barrier of water and soap, brought her senses alive. Heck, with him, lathering and rinsing became foreplay. She could happily spend a whole day with him and never get out of the shower.

The water began to cool. Even with Antonio, the prospect of a cold shower had little appeal.

"I really can fix the water and make it a perfect temperature again."

She had no doubt he could, but Maura figured her flesh would soon resemble a prune if she didn't get dry. "Delightful as this is, I'm ready for what comes next."

He inclined his face, but not before she caught his sardonic smile. "Yes, I can see curiosity is leading you forward. The water will stay hot as long as needed."

They finished washing, with the water hot as promised, and each dried off. Though Maura would love to feel Antonio's hands on her through the thick, soft towels, they couldn't afford the time. They dressed quickly.

"Where are we going?" Maura asked, though she knew exactly where she wanted to go and what she wanted to do. But she still didn't completely believe in the mind-reading thing.

"We're going exactly where you want. With a picnic lunch."

Oh, yeah, he'd done it again. Maura blushed as the full details of what she wanted flashed through her mind – and widened Antonio's evil grin.

So who could say no to having her fantasies come true? Nearly trembling with anticipation, Maura took Antonio's hand and closed the door to her condo.

* * * * *

Central Park? Antonio hadn't been to that Manhattan oasis in decades. Whenever he came up to New York, he tended to choose other entertainments, but today Maura was calling the shots. She wanted a romantic picnic lunch in a meadow in Central Park, and that was exactly what she'd get – Antonio-style.

It was a perfect New York summer day – sky clear, sun high and mild and low humidity. This of course meant many New Yorkers would come out to enjoy their park. Antonio chose the most secluded spot and made sure to keep it that way – at least for now – with a charm.

Maura wore a colorful flowered cotton dress and a wide-brimmed straw hat and looked fresh as a dewy morning. In black, Antonio looked like the specter on the horizon, night to her morning, but she didn't seem to mind. She always seemed lit by some internal light.

"A picnic in the park?" Maura looked surprised, as if this hadn't been part of her very clear fantasy. A red and white square cloth covered a patch of green grass, with a large basket right in the middle.

He'd play along because that was also part of her fantasy. "Will you do me the honor of sharing a simple lunch with me?"

She kissed his cheek. "Of course. Simple lunch? Antonio, what have you gotten and where did it come from?"

Since Maura's fantasy included which high-end food emporium she wanted lunch to come from, Antonio shrugged nonchalantly and left her to discover the source on her own. Arranging the delivery had been trivial.

Maura knelt down next to the basket and, with great care moved the cover aside. Instantly delicious aromas wafted up and filled the air. Antonio surprised himself with how much they stirred his appetites. He'd considered himself completely immune to that kind of sensory appeal. But his reaction to this food was just one of the ways being with Maura was changing him.

"Omigod! A whole picnic lunch from Metro Retro."

"Food the old-fashioned way," he quoted.

She looked up at him and beamed. "Right. Everything possible is homemade from ingredients fresh from their farms and other local suppliers."

He sat down next to her. "Are you hungry now?"

"Always. But I don't want to actually eat this food. Let's just look at it and inhale the aromas."

"Uh, no. Food is meant to be eaten, wine to be drunk—just as beautiful women are meant to be well-loved." He bit his lip to keep from laughing as she rolled her eyes and fanned herself with her hand.

She hugged him. "Antonio, this really is perfect."

He shrugged.

"Just one thing missing."

Huh? What part of her fantasy had he missed? "Tell me."

"Music. I want flutes and harps providing background music."

He snapped his fingers and music from an invisible source flowed around them.

"How'd you do that?"

"It's easy to prearrange everything. That's all I'll say."

She shook her head. "A girl could get used to this. Are you ready to eat?"

"Yes. Let's see. There should be fried chicken, slaw, roasted vegetables and mozzarella on sourdough, Chardonnay, iced tea, fruit salad and double chocolate nut brownies."

She'd been unloading the basket as he enumerated the items. "Yes, exactly."

"Let's start." He lounged back while Maura distributed fine china, linen napkins, fine crystal and sterling cutlery. Though he'd wanted to serve them, she insisted—and, this time, he went along.

"This feels completely decadent," Maura murmured.

The sun's rays warmed him. Funny, after all his years in Hades, he'd have expected he'd had his fill of heat. But it felt damn good experiencing different kinds of heat—like the gentle warmth of the sun, the comfort of hot food and, most of all, the heat of his desire for Maura—and hers for him. One day wouldn't sate his desire. One hundred years wouldn't. "Decadent is good. You should get used to decadent."

Maura had bitten into a drumstick. Crumbs and grease coated her lips. She put down the leg and licked her lips. Though he could tell she wanted to lick her fingers,

her inhibitions stopped her. "Here I am, on a day when I should be working. Instead, I'm eating expensive fried chicken that's probably a thousand calories a bite with a really bad boy in Central Park."

"Go ahead, lick your fingers."

She blushed and shook her head, but he wouldn't look away until she complied. Then, taking charge of their staring contest, she put a finger in her mouth and sucked. Oh, hell. His dick went concrete hard. The minx seemed to know exactly how sexy she looked as she continued to suck. "Point taken," he rasped.

"Much more of this decadence, and I won't be able to go back to my regular life."

"Sounds good to me. Uh, Maura, could I have a bite of that drumstick? It looks so delicious."

She could, of course, have pointed out there was probably at least one more in the basket, but she didn't. Instead, her smile wide and inviting, she brought the drumstick to his lips.

Never breaking eye contact, he took a large bite. She bent toward him and did the same. Now they both had greasy, crumbly lips. He took the bone from her hand and tossed it in the basket. Then he licked the grease and crumbs from her lips, and she did the same for him. She tasted like the chicken, the sunshine and a spirit of hope. He wanted to swallow her whole, but for now, he'd settle for kissing her senseless.

Lunch abandoned, Maura gave herself up to his kiss as he deepened his demands on her. "You are more delicious than any lunch could be," he murmured. He wanted to taste her everywhere, to leave a trail of his kisses all over her body.

She moaned. "Antonio, every moment with you is pure, delicious delight. You're better than chocolate."

Their kissing became frantic as their growing desire raised the stakes.

Chapter Five

His kisses seared her. She half expected to see a trail of scorched flesh everywhere his lips touched. Maura had never felt so completely turned-on, so sensuous. The air around them hummed with an erotic charge.

Even lunch from Metro Retro couldn't compete with their making love. Her entire body throbbed with desire.

"I want you, now," he growled.

Yes, she cried out with her words, her eyes and her body.

Then a tiny glimmer of sanity claimed her attention. "Antonio, we can't."

"Why not?"

He had his hand under her dress and his fingers were performing wicked maneuvers, making her pussy cream. She pressed her thighs together to capture his hand exactly there. "We're in the middle of Central Park," she whispered, each word wrenched from her. "People might see. We need to go somewhere private, like my condo."

He tweaked her clit and she nearly lost it. "I don't see anyone around. This place is our little mecca for today."

She groaned. There wasn't anybody else in the meadow right at that moment, but this place was open to the public, and there was lots of activity in the park today. "Can you hire guards to stand at the edge of the meadow to seal it off from other people?"

He placed her hand over his jean-enclosed bulge. "I can, but I won't."

Ah. So he'd read into that fantasy too. Deep down in the most secret recesses of her dreams, for years she'd imagined making love in public—specifically, her favorite park. But that was a *fantasy*. Maura knew she'd never have the nerve to act on it.

"You do now, Maura. You know you want this as much as I do."

She pressed his cock through the jeans and thrilled as he jolted. There was nothing she wanted more than to lower the zipper and set him free. She wanted to see, touch, smell and taste his erection. And, yeah, she wanted to do it right here, in the park, with hundreds of people passing by mere feet from where they played.

"Go ahead, Maura. Do it. Take my cock out."

When she unsnapped his waistband, Antonio exhaled hard. In moments, she'd lowered his zipper and his magnificent erection stood proud and tall. He got to his knees, which meant he had to stop fondling her. She wanted him back, but she wanted to get him naked even more. Antonio hadn't bothered with underwear. With his help, she quickly lowered the jeans enough to free his butt and cock. After admiring him for a moment, she took him into her mouth and licked him.

"Delicious," he murmured before pulling out. "More later?"

She eyed him with passion. "Yes."

"Because right now I want to be deep inside your irresistible cunt." In one fluid movement, he was on his back with her pulled down on top. He raised her skirt so they were skin to skin. In a blink he had her tiny scrap of lace panties off and his penis poised between her folds.

"Do you want me, Maura Fox?"

"Oh, yes, Antonio. You know I do." She swallowed hard and pressed against him. She took pleasure feeling him twitch in response. He pressed back, and the erotic friction nearly had her eyes crossing.

He laughed low. Something wicked in the sound made her shiver. She was at his mercy, totally vulnerable to this man. "I do know, Maura Fox, because I've read your mind. But, darling, you've got to do better. You've got to say what you want, ask for it. Others can't read your mind like I can."

That gave her momentary pause, reminding her again that her time with Antonio would be over very soon. She didn't want to think about that, especially not now when he lay between her legs.

"Say, it, Maura. Say you want me. Here, in Central Park. The crossroads of the world."

"I...want...you. Here in Central Park. The crossroads of the world. Where anyone might see us." Her stomach clenched with each word, but she managed to get them out. And her reward was instantaneous. Guided by his sure touch on her butt, she straddled him to take in his cock. So wet, she slid down his shaft until the backs of her thighs nudged the fronts of his.

"Oh...god," he ground out through gritted teeth.

She savored each distinct pleasure of being intimately joined with him in this sunny meadow in Central Park on the most beautiful day ever. If she could stop time here and now, she would.

But change came, unwelcome as it might be. They couldn't hold the pose, not when the temptation and the hunger to move clutched them both in an iron grip. So, with her hands holding on for dear life to his powerful shoulders, Maura began the most subtle of dances. Antonio had his eyes closed, and the expression on his face betrayed his deep sensuous trance. He had his hands on her butt and moved her to maximize their pleasure.

Maura toyed with opening one eye. She wanted to have it all, to watch him and yet keep her eyes shut so she could focus on their lovemaking. Closed position won.

She rotated her hips and experimented with different rhythms—speeding up, slowing down, and trying every variation between. Each rhythm enthralled them, inviting them to tarry.

"I want to kiss you," Antonio whispered.

With his hands guiding her, she shifted so she lay on top of him. Her skirt was scrunched between them, but their bellies were bare and nothing impeded his intimate penetration. A light breeze ruffled the back of her skirt but did nothing to cool her.

Antonio fisted one hand in her hair and drew her face to his. His kiss now deepened the passion of their connection. Lost in the pleasure of his erotic touch, she could read him as clearly as he read her. Though he'd deny he even had a soul, Maura knew otherwise and took the measure of his. In an instant, she knew more about Antonio than he knew about himself. Yet.

Her understanding both elated and saddened Maura. What a waste that Antonio had so little self-awareness. His wickedness and arrogance were a surface disguise—one that fooled many, including him. If Maura could wish on a star with any confidence, he would come to know the Antonio she experienced in that flash of insight.

But the sensuous power of their lovemaking overwhelmed her thoughts, and she gave herself completely to the intimate moment. As Antonio's kiss ravaged her mouth, the rhythm and intensity of their thrusts increased. Soon Maura was lost in a shared cocoon of erotic sensation.

All she knew now was her relentless hunger to reach the pinnacle of pleasure with Antonio—to achieve her release and his. All her senses combined as she climbed to the elusively tempting peak, as he took her there and she took him. He drew her tighter and she shattered into a thousand pieces. Breaking free from his kiss, with all thoughts of public places banished from her consciousness, Maura cried out the tumultuous emotions of her climax.

Antonio, now grown larger and harder, joined her chorus. Acutely aware, she felt him pump the waves of his orgasm into her again and again and again.

Spent, managing never to break contact, Maura rolled with Antonio to lie facing him.

Antonio felt like Maura had burrowed into his mind and delved into secrets he had no intention of sharing. Not for the first time since he'd met her, Antonio suspected it was not a good idea to underestimate her. Clearly his assignment to retrieve Cleo's stone grew less and less simple and straightforward. He'd have to deal with his puzzling, unprecedented involvement with this woman, but right now he had to see this particular fantasy of hers to completion.

Completion. He couldn't believe how utterly complete he felt with Maura. He was no stranger to fantastic sex, but nothing could have prepared him for how he was with Maura. Fortunately, once he finished his assignment and returned to normalcy, he'd have eternity to sort things out. He expected that nonstop sex for several centuries might help.

"Antonio, I can't believe you seduced me into making love out here, *al fresco*."

He lazily half rose and looked at her. "It didn't seem to take much convincing on my part."

She rolled her eyes. "We're lucky no one came by. Did you hire guards for the meadow after all?"

"I said I wouldn't and I didn't. Besides, how do you know no one came by when we were otherwise occupied?"

He loved the way she blushed and the frisson of discomfort that flitted across her face. With Maura, what you saw was what you got. He'd have to remember to advise her, before he left, never to play poker. Before he left...

A single day could be like an eternity. More than eight hours left, but who was counting?

Maura sat up and was reaching for the ridiculous but extremely sexy little scrap of lace she called an undergarment. She'd smoothed down her wonderfully wrinkled skirt and now had one foot positioned to put on the panties. Why — "Stop!"

She looked up, puzzled. "Stop what?"

"Don't put those on."

"Why not? Antonio, I'm not in the habit of going around in public sans underwear." She put her feet through the openings and began to pull the lace up her legs.

He put a hand on her arm to underline his command. "You're not in the habit of making love in Central Park either, but you just did," he reminded her gruffly.

Her blush was more than worth the price of admission. He had to stifle a laugh.

"You're right," she said slowly.

"So you'll keep the panties off?"

She nodded. "While we're here."

"Okay. That will be our little secret, Maura, yours and mine. You're not wearing anything under your skirt."

"And the cool breeze will crawl up my legs and fan my pussy."

"If I can't personally fan your pussy, then at least let me enjoy that image," Antonio said, charmed.

Maura let out a long sigh and pressed her thighs together, which aroused Antonio. "Whew. You sure know how to turn up the heat."

"You inspire me."

"Right. Okay. No panties now – and that's definitely a secret."

He winked. "My lips are sealed."

"Not for long, I hope. You distracted me from this lunch earlier, but it's got my attention now. Let me tell you, considering the competition, that says a lot for this lunch. But, Antonio, I figure with a guy like you, a girl's got to keep her strength up."

"That's not all that's up," he muttered. He would never tire of seeing Maura squirm in pleasure-pain, which motivated him to press the appropriate buttons. But lunch was definitely on the immediate agenda. Antonio's personal mission was to guide Maura to the realization of satisfaction in all areas of her life, not just sex.

"Hmm." She delved into the large wicker basket. "We never got past the fried chicken before."

"I loved our detour."

She nodded. "So what do you want now? There's more chicken, the slaw and the sandwiches. Also drinks. And then fruit salad and brownies for dessert."

Antonio uncorked the chilled Chardonnay and poured them both glasses.

"This will go right to my head. I'm not sure I'm over this morning's champagne." At Antonio's insistence, Maura took a cautious sip.

What was up with cautious sipping? From what Antonio could tell, Maura had been too cautious for far too long. He drank up and poured more wine. She watched, wide-eyed, but didn't follow suit. Instead, she poured herself a glass of iced tea.

"What do you want to eat next?"

"I'm sure it's all delicious." She didn't express her next thought, which he read loud and clear. Instead, she said, "Let's finish the chicken, have some slaw and eat the sandwiches."

Now why did she say that when she really wanted to dive right into dessert first? No reason to speculate when the lady was right there and could express herself. "You want to eat the brownies first. Why not say so?"

Nearly choking on her iced tea, she sputtered and put down her glass. "Antonio, you really are a devil."

"No, just a demon. But you didn't answer my question."

She actually groaned. "It's just not right to eat dessert first. That's what kids do, not responsible adults."

"You think I'm a responsible adult?" No one had ever accused him of that before.

For a moment, Maura was speechless. Then she laughed. "I may not actually be a responsible adult, but I sure as heck try to give people the impression I am," she admitted.

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't really know. I suppose that's just part of what's supposed to happen once a person gets to a certain age." She seemed to think some more as she sipped her Chardonnay. "You know, Antonio, I think you're on to something. What is that saying? Life's short, so eat dessert first."

"I don't know about life being short—"

"You've got it right. I really want to dive into those brownies. All that rich chocolate is just calling to me. And, I can't think of a single good reason not to eat one first. So, Antonio, can I interest you in a double chocolate nut brownie?" Her eyes danced with merriment.

"Darling, there's very little you wouldn't be able to interest me in."

Maura took two brownies from the basket and put them on plates. "This looks amazing. This is the number one favorite dessert at Metro Retro, where the competition's really stiff." She gazed down at his crotch. "Just like you." She laughed at her joke, which had him smiling too. Of course her regard had made him stiffer.

"Are you that excited about the brownie?" She took a bite and licked a crumb of chocolate off her lip.

"It ain't the chocolate and nuts," he growled. They both guffawed. He leaned over and took a nip out of her brownie. "Though this is really delicious."

"Hey! You've got your own brownie. Paws and teeth off mine." She held the dessert protectively to herself.

"You can have some of mine, too." Antonio held his brownie up and Maura took a large bite.

"Hmm, I guess I took too much. Here, Antonio, you can have another bite of mine."

Strategy time. Should he take a big bite or a small one? He wasn't accustomed to giving so much thought to minor actions, but he began to realize nothing he did with Maura lacked significance. While he pondered what size bite to take, Maura took

matters into her own hands and broke off a small piece of her brownie for him and held it to his lips. He gobbled the bit and managed to nibble her fingers.

“Hey, that hurt.” Judging from the expression on her face, it didn’t.

“What a brute I am! Want me to kiss them and make them all better?”

She held her fingers to his mouth. “I think you’d better.” As he kissed one hand, she used the other to bring the brownie to her mouth.

“That’s got to be good, having one hand kissed while the other holds the brownie you’re enjoying.”

“I know something even better.” Maura’s smile lit up her face. “Take a bite of your brownie but don’t swallow.”

She did the same. Then she drew his face to hers and kissed him square on the lips. In moments, they were both open-mouthed, eating the brownie from the other’s mouth. Antonio had thought nothing could ever improve the taste of the brownie, but once again Maura proved him wrong. They nibbled, kissed and laughed their way through four brownies.

“Now that’s what I call just desserts! Except now I’ve got a problem.”

“What’s that?” What Maura labeled a problem—being far too aroused to wait before they made love again—was more what Antonio viewed as an opportunity.

“Luckily my panties are already off.”

Taking advantage of that easy access, Antonio went for a second dessert.

Maura couldn’t believe herself. Talk about turning into a wanton wench. She was behaving like a bimbo who didn’t let anything get in the way of what she wanted. If anyone had ever told her she’d go at it with a man in Central Park in broad daylight, she’d never have believed it. But who could blame her for acting like a total wild woman? With Antonio reading her mind and then making it his business to fulfill all her fantasies, how was she supposed to resist?

Of course, Antonio would only be around for today, so he could never fulfill her deepest, most cherished fantasy. But he was doing an amazing job on all the rest. He made her come with his tongue and lips and his huge, gorgeous cock. She might as well grab for the gusto while he was here with her.

She'd lost track of how many times she came that afternoon. After all, she'd never been one for higher math. Before long the line between eating food and eating each other melted away as food and sex blended into an erotic romp.

Far too soon, the day grew dark with an approaching thunderstorm and they had to leave their enchanted meadow. As they packed up what was left of lunch, Maura inhaled the scent of their sex, the musky fragrance that imbued their blanket. She'd remember their picnic as one of the best days in her life—and a birthday that can never be topped.

Though a hint of sadness threatened to color the end of the day, Maura reminded herself that he was going home with her for now. They'd have until midnight together before this magical birthday ended. That much time could be enough to last her a lifetime if she played her cards right.

When they got back to her place, Maura's first thought was that she hadn't planned anything for dinner and she figured she owed Antonio an apology. Of course, after all their eating this afternoon, who needed another meal? On the other hand, men usually wanted three squares.

He cupped her chin and raised her face so they locked eyes. "First of all, why are you apologizing?"

She shrugged. "You're my guest. Hospitality is supposed to include proper meals at appropriate times."

He brush-kissed her. "Do you hear me complaining?"

That gave her pause. "No. But you might just being polite."

Antonio roared with laughter. "Polite? Another first. No one's ever accused me of that either." He kissed her again, and she felt all warm inside. Thunder growled and fat

raindrops splashed against the windows, making their refuge cozy in contrast. They were together, safe from the storm – at least for now.

“Maura, do you think I’d ever hesitate to ask for anything I want?”

“Of course not.”

“On top of the fact that you don’t owe me dinner, I feel like we just finished lunch. But if you want dinner, we can go out or order in. You name it. After all, you shouldn’t have to cook on your birthday.”

As he spoke, she realized dinner now would have been an automatic response to the numbers on the clock. “Actually, I’m fine. Maybe, if we’re hungry later, we can get takeout or make a snack. Whatever we’re in the mood for.”

“Exactly.” He kissed her again. “Unlike food, I can’t ever seem to get enough of you.”

Her heart sped up at his words and his kiss. “That sounds great. Antonio, everything’s been perfect so far. There’s just one thing.”

He cocked a brow. “What’s that?”

She wrung her hands. “Can’t you tell me more about yourself? After all our intimacy, I feel weird that I don’t know the most important basics about you. Where are you from? What’s your middle name? There’s so much more... For this day to be perfect, I need to have my curiosity satisfied.”

He turned away, and she realized she wouldn’t get the straight answers she craved. “I know you do, Maura, but I can’t tell you any more than I have. I know I keep saying it until you must be tired of hearing the words, but trust me. Please. And let’s not spend any of our time on trivialities.”

He sounded so reasonable. She hated feeling like a demanding, unreasonable diva. Actually not. She wasn’t used to feeling like a demanding, unreasonable diva, but there were definitely some perks in playing that unaccustomed role.

“You don’t really want to be a diva, do you?” His voice sounded gentle.

She chuckled. "Not really. But I would like the star treatment they get."

He nodded. "Exactly. Which is my job here with you. Star treatment without star tantrums."

"And except for not explaining exactly who you are and who sent you, you're doing a great job."

He didn't reply. Suddenly a smile lit up his face just as thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. "I like your most secret fantasy. Let's make it happen."

Her face flamed in recognition of the thought she hadn't managed to suppress.

For a moment, Maura's fantasy had caught Antonio off guard, but he enjoyed the element of surprise. He'd never have imagined Maura as the type who'd want to experience bondage, but still waters definitely ran deep.

Of course the way bondage scenes played out back home might singe off her eyebrows, and Antonio didn't intend to go there. On the other hand, seeing Maura with her arms and legs bound ramped up Antonio's erection to semi-painful.

"You're not going to tie me too tight, will you, Antonio?" Maura's face shone with a combination of pleasure, desire, anticipation—and stark raving fear. Her voice faded out as she spoke his name.

He was going to enjoy this. "There is no such thing as too tight, not if we're going to do this right. And, trust me, I'm a master." He conjured up his fiercest, sternest expression—talk about playacting.

Her eyes grew wide, but according to how he read her, she was definitely not getting cold feet. Quite the contrary. She wanted him this way, and she wanted the experience he could give her. He owed it to her to give it to her. Anything less than perfection was unacceptable.

He prepared lengths of rope.

"I thought you would use silk scarves or something else that wouldn't be so rough on me."

Now she was having second thoughts, but Antonio knew this was all part of the process for her. He'd charmed the ropes so they would feel much more comfortable than they looked, more gentle than the finest silk. "You thought wrong, woman. Strip down to nothing and get on the bed. Now."

Acting more meekly than he knew she felt, Maura complied, eyes cast down. When she lay on the bed, she curled up and hugged her knees. "Legs flat and open wide so I can see your cunt." Keeping his voice harsh and authoritative called on all his skill as an actor.

She swallowed hard, then did as he'd ordered. At moments like this, Antonio well understood how Archfiend must get off on his power. But that satisfaction dissipated before the strength of Antonio's other, more tender feelings for Maura. Fortunately she couldn't read his mind, or there was no way he could pull off any of this scene.

His beautiful Maura opened her legs for him in perfect submission. Antonio wanted to feast his mouth and eyes on her loveliness, but he had an agenda to follow. By using the ropes to tie her arms and legs to the head and foot of the bed, he'd be making her fantasy come true—a last gift he could give her before he left her forever.

Wrenching himself away from his contemplation, Antonio moved quickly to make the most of their time. Maura whimpered, which told him he'd made the ropes too tight. He went to loosen them before he reminded himself this would interfere with the bondage delusion. "You'll adjust," he growled. Muttering under his breath, he strengthened the spell that would keep her comfortable.

"Antonio, this wasn't the way I thought it would be, being tied to the bed." She kept trying to move her arms and legs further than the ropes would allow her, which of course tightened them even more. Antonio knew the ropes weren't anywhere close to too tight. He also realized her whimpers were part of her fantasy. She wanted to be with a dominant lover who'd take control—yet be a man she could trust. He felt up to the

challenge of walking that fine line and glad of the need to focus to keep the precarious balance.

Most of all, he finally realized how much Maura did trust him. With this fantasy, she'd taken him into her innermost sanctum. Trust was in short supply in Hell. He'd never before even wondered how it felt to be trusted. The warmth that suffused him at this additional bond between him and Maura confused him. Should he let it deepen or run like hell?

His delectable Maura now lay completely vulnerable before him. Antonio paused before allowing himself to pleasure them both. Where should he touch her first?

"Antonio, what are you planning? You have a devious gleam in your eye."

Devious. He grinned lasciviously and licked his lips. "I have you where I want you, Maura Fox. You are completely subject to my whims. And, believe me, if you displease me in any way, you will regret it."

Now Antonio could see Maura strategizing possible reactions to his threat. Would she be defiant or submissive? Hell, either response would arouse him. Conjuring up a small whip, he held it up over her and snapped it with a loud, satisfying zing. Thunder and rain formed a convincing counterpoint. He'd have conjured up the sound effects if nature hadn't. Maura's eyes flew open. "You wouldn't use that on me, would you?"

He snapped the whip again and judged its sting to be just sharp enough to stimulate. Her mind now was a confused muddle as she struggled with her reactions to the implicit violence of the whip versus her curiosity. Knowing the power of curiosity, Antonio knew she'd soon ask for the bite of the lash on her tender skin. "Are you going to do as I say?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"I didn't hear you." He arced the whip through the air.

"Yes," she called out. "But first, you have to tell me your secret. I can almost buy that you hid the whip to make it look like you got it by way of magic, but the thunder? How'd you manage that?"

He cocked a brow, struggling not to chuckle at her earnest question. "Ah, the secrets of nature. I'll put the whip aside for now, Maura, just as you must put aside your curiosity. But I'll use the one and satisfy the other when I see fit. Trust me. Now other matters call." After all, a man could resist overwhelming temptation for only so long. He was going to conjure a feather and trace circles on her sensitive flesh with it, but he needed to touch her. He replaced the feather with his fingers and then with his lips, his tongue and his teeth.

Chapter Six

Maura's stomach felt permanently clenched, and her pussy was pumping cream. She'd never expected to actually live out her bondage fantasy, but now, here she was, with Antonio. Nothing she'd ever imagined could come close to her high pitch of excitement. Antonio had her at his complete mercy, exactly where she wanted to be.

Now she wanted to feel him on her and in her. His lips grazed her, raising goose bumps and causing her nipples to bud. Never before had she felt such pussy hunger, the ache to be filled by him. Despite all their intimate contact, she couldn't get enough of him. Maybe it was knowing he'd be gone so soon. Maybe her body craved to take in enough Antonio to last her a lifetime — as if that were possible.

He plunged his tongue deep inside her, and Maura's mind clicked off. Stimulated beyond endurance, she had to move. But the bonds held her in place, and the little she could move didn't begin to meet her needs. Her limited range intensified the contact and the effect of Antonio's touch. He pressed harder, nibbling her folds and clit in a way designed to drive her out of her mind.

Her moans and cries filled the air. A smug expression on his face, Antonio came up for air. Her fluids shone around his mouth and on his lips, an intimacy that made her heartbeat accelerate. But she wanted him back where he was, only she wanted to be free to move. The contradiction between what was and what she wanted would drive her bananas.

"Antonio, you have to let me free or I'll go out of my friggin' mind."

He paused, looked up and laughed. "I have to, Maura?" One perfect eyebrow shot up. Then he reached for the whip and tapped her hip with it. Maura didn't remember what she'd expected — certainly not the erotic tingle of the whip's touch.

He tapped her three times. Maura surprised herself by wanting more.

"Later," he muttered. When he lowered his face to her once more, Antonio sped up his attentions, flicking his tongue over her in a frenzy that soon had her panting—and brought her to the peak of a climax that engulfed her.

Shaken and shattered, Maura had scarcely recovered when Antonio stretched out full length over her. Pinned by his weight and bound by the ropes, Maura had never before felt so gloriously powerless. "You're mine," Antonio muttered over and over as he plunged his huge cock into her wetness. "Mine, mine, mine." His words resonated through her.

For just this time, he was hers too.

She longed to close her thighs around him so she could make her mark on him through sheer possession, but the bonds held her fast. Not one to give up easily, she struggled against the ropes, which didn't loosen an iota.

Soon caught up in Antonio's passion, Maura frantically arched her hips to meet his thrusts. Antonio was on fire, searing her with his intimate contact. She yearned to touch his cock and cup his balls, but her damn hands were now trapped by the ropes she'd so desired.

Antonio's mouth fell harshly on hers. His kiss was more teeth than tongue, as if he needed their strength to express the hunger that drove them both. Maura panted, lost in their mutual desire for the ultimate intimacy of being completely joined.

Hot and wet, Maura could feel herself almost melting off the bed, but her bonds trapped her tightly in place. A wave of frustration capped the other emotions churning through her because she wanted to become fluid and meld with him.

"Even now, even with you tied to the bed, I can't get enough of you," Antonio gritted out. Every word hit her with sensuous awareness. Though she was tied and he was free, she understood that Antonio was as bound as she was.

With a cry, Antonio exploded into his release, sweeping her along in erotic sensation. Shuddering within her confines, Maura gave herself up to this magical man.

The aftershocks of her orgasm rocked her so, she was sure they'd have to loosen the bindings – but they didn't.

Now, though, with Antonio collapsed on her, Maura no longer struggled to get loose. If she had any power, she'd make time freeze and keep him with her.

"If only," he muttered. "My Maura. I never expected to meet anyone like you or have such experiences on – in New York." His whispered words tickled the delicate skin of her ear. "Time is fleeting."

The moments flew like ticking time bombs. "My birthday's almost over, but I won't let go. Come on, Antonio. You said my every wish is your command."

He'd risen off her, and Maura felt the rush of cool air hit her like a betrayal. "This is the one wish I can't fulfill." The pain on his face when he said these words wrenched her heart.

He made short work of untying the ropes, which she wished back in place, just as she wished they could go back in time. She'd been so full of wishes today. Just when she'd gotten used to having them come true, she was back to the reality of seeing them dashed.

"Except now you are coming into your power to express these wishes. From now on, you'll be able to tell the people in your life what you want. No one will ever have to read your mind." Antonio's facial expression, so tender before, grew more distant, as if he were closing down the intimacy between them. Maura wanted to reach out and hold him with both hands. Most of all, she wanted him to be there with her, but she could see him shutting down and distancing himself from her.

The ticking clock was the scariest enemy he'd ever had to face. He had only one hour left with her, and all the ways he could spend it skittered through his mind and got his cock aching hard. Though she claimed she could handle the lovemaking without any soreness, her mind told him otherwise. Even with the charms he cast over her, Maura couldn't keep up with him. He'd never before had to think about anything

but his own satisfaction, the responses of his own body. He wasn't sure he altogether liked his new awareness.

He wanted to touch her and be intimate with her all the time. Previously he'd considered tales of this kind of obsession flights of overwrought imagination.

Taking the coward's way out, he cast a sleep spell on her. He'd take Cleo's stone and leave while Maura slept. If his spell worked the way he intended, maybe, just maybe, she'd believe the past night and day to be a dream. She'd retain a dim memory and the clear conviction that she could express what she wanted to all who loved her.

He forced himself to rise from the bed so he could leave her alone to rest. She stirred but didn't waken. A weird ache, the closest he'd ever come to having what he'd heard called a headache, rumbled behind his eyes. He began to massage his head. Nothing should interfere with his last moments with Maura.

An urgent recall message flashed through his brain with a roar that made the thunder sound like a whisper on the wind.

Bloody hell. The ache in his head intensified, and he had to bite his lip to keep from yowling.

"I need you back here now – with the cursed stone." Archfiend did not relish using the word *need*. "You have five Earth minutes before I transport you back – and if I do, it will hurt you and the mortal."

"The human has hidden Cleo's stone. I need this last hour to get it from her."

The pain intensified. "Don't lie. I can see the stone, and I know you can. Grab it and run."

What could he possibly tell Maura to explain who and what he was? He bowed his head in acquiescence. The abrupt cessation of pain left Antonio shaken and nauseous.

One last kiss. That's all he'd allow himself. One last kiss, and he'd be on his way. He pocketed Cleo's stone, kissed Maura's lips and flew back to Hell.

With a clunk, he landed in the Lothario Lounge. Archfiend evidently had chosen a Medusa type for the night's entertainment. Even before Maura, Antonio hadn't been big on snake-headed women. Tonight, the emptiness of the scene before him reminded him all too crushingly of what he'd lost.

Antonio was the prince of moving on—right? He sighed deeply, then squared his shoulders and prepared to take up his life where he'd left off.

* * * * *

Maura awoke at eight a.m., hungry and thirsty—and all alone. Antonio was gone, just as he'd said he would be. He'd never said good-bye. Trust him, humph. Hell, she could write the book on who not to trust. Okay, so it had been a wild ride and a great fantasy—however she'd conjured Antonio up. Had he really been a birthday gift from some mysterious donor? Or—had the whole fantasy been a dream?

She pinched herself, which hurt. She may have been living a dream, but reality had struck with a vengeance.

Nothing's changed, she told herself as she went through her condo straightening up. Her condo, her boutique, her circle of friends—she had a pretty damn good reality to return to. Her boutique. She'd bailed on the big sale yesterday, though her reasons now seemed hazy. She should go in today, catch up on what she'd missed and apologize to anyone she'd disappointed. But today was Sunday, and her boutique was closed. Tomorrow. She'd sort it all out tomorrow...

As her mind cleared, she raced to her dresser. At least the stone was solid and real, something she could hold on to. But when she reached for it, she came up empty. She searched high and low. The other mysterious birthday gift was gone too. Could Antonio have taken it? She cringed at the thought of him being a thief. Certainly the man of her fantasies would never steal from her. Would she ever understand the events of what had just happened?

A coldness gripped her, and she hugged herself. No matter how much she tried to convince herself otherwise, something fundamental had changed. Though she'd always be the kind of woman who took care of her loved ones, now she'd also be the kind of woman who got taken care of. She wanted what she wanted, and she'd make sure her loved ones knew what that was without having to try to read her mind. Though she wasn't sure exactly why, on a soul-deep level she knew she'd learned this from her fantasy interlude.

Of course, Antonio never had any problem reading her mind. Most likely, though, he'd been a figment of her overactive imagination.

She had to get out of her condo, where the atmosphere was heavy with the musk of their togetherness, or she'd go bananas. Tossing down her feather duster, Maura headed out without any destination in mind. Maybe she'd visit a friend or get Starbucks or just walk.

She actually did all three, which ate up a good part of the morning. Instead of heading back to her condo she called a friend and conned her into going on a boat ride around Manhattan. Anything to avoid going home to her empty condo.

* * * * *

Archfiend downed a scotch.

"Here's the stone," Antonio told him. "You giving it back to Cleo yourself?"

Arch glared at him from under half-lidded eyes. His breath reeked of brimstone and single-malt liquor. "I don't give a flying fuck about that old bag and her ugly green stone. Snake-lady's more my taste, at least for tonight."

Antonio wasn't sure how to parse Arch's bizarre comment. "What should I do with the stone?"

His boss shrugged. "Toss it into the roaring pit for all I care. The bitch can go retrieve it if she wants it that bad. Sit down and have a drink, deLuc. You're all uptight, and I need you relaxed to talk to some politicians who want to negotiate."

Antonio's stomach flip-flopped, no doubt a carry-over from his recent sojourn. He couldn't believe it. After he'd gone to Earth expressly to retrieve the stone and he'd taken it—probably Maura thought he'd stolen it—Archfiend wasn't even interested in it any longer.

Antonio grabbed a scotch and raised it to his lips. He'd been about to chug the drink down when he realized he hated scotch, only drank the swill to keep his boss company. He didn't want the liquor any more than he wanted Maura to hate him for leaving the way he had—and taking the stone. He hated his crazy life here in Hell, hating having to deal with Archfiend's mood swings. Talk about a diva.

For this he'd left Maura's arms and torpedoed her trust in him?

He remembered now how he'd told Maura she could choose. Damn it, he could too. Once before he'd taken the vow to serve Archfiend, a vow that granted him immortality and superhuman powers. All those faded when he thought of what he had to give up—namely the love of a good woman.

Time to renegotiate his vows, which were coming up for renewal. He'd tell Archfiend exactly where he could go, and then get the hell out of Hell.

Then all he had to do was hope Maura could trust him again—and would give him one more chance.

* * * * *

Maura stayed away for a week. She booked herself a hotel room near her boutique and survived each day without Antonio. Finally, though tempted to do otherwise, she realized she had to go home sometime. Shaking so hard she could barely hold on to her key, she unlocked and opened the door the door to her condo, turned on the light and there—

Antonio jumped up and ran over to hug her. Maura's heart, which had gone into overdrive at the sight of a man on her couch, hammered madly. He kissed her, and

Maura's senses went wild. "Antonio—" she wheezed when she could get enough breath.

"Maura." He kissed her again.

Eventually they managed to get over to the couch. "Antonio." She repeated his name as if trying to convince herself he was really there with her. "It's really you."

He grinned ruefully at her. "It's me, Maura. Except I've changed."

"Talk to me, Antonio. Tell me. Oh, god, you're real, not a dream. I'm so glad you're here." She couldn't stop touching him. "You went away, and I thought I'd never see you again." Her eyes filled with tears, which he kissed away.

"You really thought that, didn't you?"

"Of course I did." She looked hard at him. "Antonio, you know what I'm thinking. You can read my mind."

He smiled ruefully. "Not anymore, I can't."

Actually, that was a bit of a relief. But she didn't understand any of what was going on. "Explain to me quickly so I can show you how glad I am that you're back. You are back, aren't you?" She looked at him warily. "Uh, has some unknown donor hired you for another twenty-four-hour gig or something? It's not my birthday again..."

He threw back his head and laughed. "No. I'm here on my own. And about that gig thing. One of your friends did hire a guy to help you celebrate your birthday."

Her eyes sprang open. "Who? What? A guy?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. But I got here just when the guy did, and I managed to persuade him to let me take his place."

"I see." Actually, she didn't. Her head spun from Antonio's presence, and she found it hard to follow everything he told her.

"And so, I came for the peridot. I'm sorry to say, I had to take it."

She shrugged. "Heck, I don't care. I'd rather have you than some old stone any day of the week." She squeezed his arm as if to test his realness.

"I hope you'll still be happy when I tell you the whole story, including about why I took the stone. You see, Maura, I have no special powers anymore. No more mind-reading."

"No more amazing, marathon sex?"

He grinned. "I didn't say that." He leered at her. "If you'll take me back, that is... But you have to know, it's just me, Antonio. I'm an ordinary man."

She chuckled. "Antonio, nothing about you is ordinary."

"It is now. You see, when I returned to Hell—"

"Yeah, where are you from? I know you called it hell, but you can tell me where it really is."

"Really Hell. Brimstone, fire, lots of sulfur stinking up the air..."

The planes of unreality opened up before her again. She listened in fascination, occasionally pinching herself and him to be sure she wasn't dreaming.

Antonio knew how to tell a story. He wound up with, "I knew Hell wasn't home anymore. Nothing felt right there, not when the only thing I wanted was to be back here with you. Maura," he indicated the room around them, "this is home now. If you'll have me. If you'll forgive me, and if you can trust me. Because you see, Maura Fox, I love you."

She pinched herself even harder. He was saying all the words she'd longed to hear but never thought she would. As she listened, the ice of distrust around her heart melted. "Oh, god, yes. Antonio, I love you. But how were you able to get your freedom from—"

Antonio gulped air. A frisson of pain crossed his face, and Maura suspected she might never know the full story of what he went through. But she'd trust him to tell her all that was essential. "I caught Archfiend in the right mood. I also managed to convince him a man in love with a mere mortal was hardly the right image for his chief. And

voila. When my vow came up for renewal, he permanently fired and banished me, stripped me of everything but my mortal lifespan. So here I am.”

“Oh, Antonio. He certainly didn’t strip you of everything. He couldn’t. I’m yours forever.”

Fortunately, forever began right then.

About the Author

Exploring the erotic side of romance keeps Mardi Ballou chained to her computer – and inspires some amazing research. Mardi's a Jersey girl, now living in Northern California with her hero husband – the love of her life – who's also her tech maven and first reader. Her days and nights are filled with books to read and write, chocolate, and the pursuit of romantic dreams. A Scorpio by birth and temperament, Mardi believes in living life with Passion, Intensity, and Lots of Laughs (this last from her moon in Sagittarius). Published in different genres under different names, Mardi is thrilled to be part of the Ellora's Cave Team Romantica.

Mardi 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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