

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

The
Panty
Episode

Jessica Darian

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

The Panty Episode

ISBN # 1-4199-0300-4

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Edited by: Kelli Kwiatkowski

Cover art by: Syneca

Electronic book Publication: September 2005

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THE PANTY EPISODE

Jessica Darian

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Chapter One

Her heart beat rapidly, in perfect time with the unique rhythm that made him so irresistible. His seductive tone crooned in her ear. Eyes closed, she focused on his voice. Her cheeks were tinged with a rosy flush as she echoed the words in her head. Reveling in them. Breaths coming in short gasps she was unable to utter a word.

Continuing to puff with exertion, she forced herself to move.

Up and down. Up and down.

She had the rhythm down perfectly, continuing to move in time with his erotic words.

Words of love, of desire, kept her going. He continued to urge her on in the sensual tone only a lover could master. Tiny rivulets of perspiration ran down her neck as she kept pace. Her heart pounded out a frantic beat as she worked toward completion.

She was almost there. A few more seconds was all it would take. Up and down. Up and down. Oh yeah. Feel the burn, baby.

She had to get there. Had to reach that peak. She'd worked too hard to stop now. No way would this sweaty lather be in vain. A groan forced its way past her lips as her legs began to tremble. So close now...

"Let me love you, baby..." his sexy voice continued its sensual tribute. Never letting her forget he was there, waiting for her, needing her desire.

A small smile played at the corners of her mouth.

Endearments rolled off his tongue, smooth as silk. She was his. And he pushed her closer and closer...

Oh please, oh please, oh please. The insistent plea ran through her mind in time with her hammering heartbeat. Her eyes closed. Her head tipped back.

Almost there.

At his tender encouragement, she found her last burst of energy.

"Ah!" The cry was ripped from her throat.

And then finally...*finally* she was done.

The timer on her treadmill flashed, indicating her time was up and she could stop lifting her feet. Hallelujah! She'd actually managed to finish the program this time.

While the latest hot, young singer-of-the-moment was still crooning about making love in the background, Kristine Jeffries dropped gratefully onto the floor in a slumped, cross-legged position. Barely mustering the strength, she grabbed her bottle of water on the way down. She wiped a hand across her brow then let her head drop wearily to her chest.

That treadmill was a bitch.

One of these days she was convinced that thing would be the death of her. After chugging down what was left of her water, she eyed the metal machine with acute dislike. She hated the thing. With a passion.

It had been a recent purchase for her. Always reading about the benefits of exercise, she'd decided to see what the fuss was all about. As far as she'd been able to figure out it was all about punishment and the agony of sore, burning muscles. Oh, and one couldn't forget the sweat. Lots and lots of sweat. So much so she was afraid she'd rust the stupid thing. Hopefully the warranty would cover sweat-induced rust. She made a quick mental note to check the warranty papers later.

For three weeks she'd been using the treadmill. The first time she'd only lasted about ten minutes before wheezing away to lie down in the fetal position. And she'd stayed there for most of the day.

Today she'd managed to finish one of the programs in the treadmill's computer. She'd celebrate later with a big plate of fettuccine Alfredo and chocolate mousse. Right now all she really wanted to do was sit on the floor. Until she regained feeling in her legs.

Why she continued to use the damn thing, she didn't know. Frankly, she'd rather be shopping. Or cleaning. Or having a root canal sans anesthesia. Never mind that she felt better or that she was beginning to notice a pleasant change in the backside that had always been more than willing to comply with gravity. Kris was pretty sure she'd never see the wonder of exercise that others seemed to enjoy. The only way she'd ever enjoy exercise would be if it involved a naked bodybuilder and...well, just a naked bodybuilder. Because getting this hot and sweaty was only worth it if you achieved something spectacular. Like an orgasm.

Speaking of a naked bodybuilder... An image of Alan flashed through her mind.

Beautiful dark brown eyes, light brown hair with streaks of gold and a perfectly sculpted, bronzed body—which she suspected was the result of frequent salon visits rather than time spent in the sun—made Alan the sort of eye candy a girl could feast on for days. Though she'd much rather put her mouth on him and have a taste. A nice, long taste.

As much as she loathed the treadmill and everything it stood for, she had to give the hated thing a little credit for her introduction to Alan.

Her best friend Maddie had convinced her to join a health club recently. Actually, convince was the wrong word. Her memory was still a bit fuzzy, but she vaguely remembered the decision had been influenced by a late girl's night out, a big pitcher of margaritas and a foolish get-fit-together pact.

Either way, before she'd had time to get over her hangover the next day, she'd found herself saddled with a gym membership and the treadmill. Ugh.

Thankfully, Maddie had helped her to justify the purchases by pointing out the club had weight equipment, which she wasn't about to invest in, as well as yoga classes,

which she and Maddie did together. Oh, and she couldn't forget the men. Men who were so diligent about their exercise routines the results were drool-worthy. Men like Alan.

Last week she'd gone into the club, determined to try out the weight equipment at least once. While she'd studied what had looked to be some sort of medieval torture device, Alan had walked over and kindly offered to show her how to use it. Actually, he'd swaggered over and flexed every rippling muscle in his upper body, but you wouldn't hear her complain. She'd pretended interest in the weight equipment while he'd explained the mechanics. Her interest hadn't actually been feigned, it just hadn't been directed at the machine. She'd spent the majority of the conversation wondering how those pecs would look as he strained over her. It would take at least one full weekend to trace every gorgeous contour of his rippling muscles. With her tongue.

In between repetitions, Alan had asked her out. A date Kris was looking forward to.

It wasn't because Alan was so fabulous that he'd spurred the love-at-first-sight phenomena. No, it was more because her social calendar had been sadly bare the last few weeks. An unusual situation for her. He'd sparked her interest enough to give him one Saturday out of her life.

Truth be told, Alan was actually one big walking ego. Built like he was, Kris figured he could afford to be a little arrogant. Built like he was, Kris couldn't care less if his social skills were nonexistent. She found it a bonus he could carry a decent conversation at all. Of course, he'd held the conversation mostly with her breasts, but hey, a girl couldn't be choosy. The long dating dry spell she'd been experiencing would allow her to overlook a few character flaws for one night. Heck, she wasn't out to marry the guy — she simply wanted a night of great sex with no complications. Pretty simple.

Kris figured just touching all of those hard, bulging muscles would be enough for her. Which was good, because if he used steroids, his log and boulders were more likely to be a twig and berries.

Speaking of her date, the clock on the wall said it was already 1:00 in the afternoon. Her hard-bodied hottie was supposed to pick her up at 6:00. With supreme effort, she picked herself up off the floor, ignoring the puddle of sweat she'd left behind. Damn treadmill.

Grabbing the remote for her CD player, she turned the power off. "Sorry honey. Your voice is hot, but you don't do much for me from the speakers."

A quick glance into her closet brought a slight frown to her brow. As Kris rifled through various articles of clothing, she murmured, "Business, business, casual, too tight, wrong season, wrong color, business..." her voice trailed off when she realized she had nothing to wear.

No problem. She had enough time to run to the mall and pick something up. But it would have to be a quick trip. No meandering through the shoe stores like she normally did. It was probably just as well. She'd already met her shoe-spending quota for the month. A few times over. With a rueful smile, she closed her closet doors.

Kris took a quick shower, resisting the urge to close her eyes and fall asleep under the warm spray.

Her legs desperately needed to be reintroduced to a razor, but she hated to shave in the shower. With her less-than-graceful ways, it was a surefire road to a few unsightly nicks. A long bubble bath was in order when she got home. Her skin would smell great, her legs would be smooth and Alan would be putty in her hands. She just needed to get going so she'd have enough time.

Grabbing a cute sundress from her closet, she put it on and surveyed herself in the mirror. Just as quickly, the dress came off and she slipped on her favorite pair of jeans. There was no way she was leaving the house with her hairy legs bared for the world to see. A flirty tank top completed the casual outfit. If she couldn't bare her legs, her arms would have to do.

Purse in hand, she slid behind the wheel of her sporty little Toyota Celica. She loved her car. It was black, fast and she could shift the six-speed like a pro. It had just enough power under the hood that she felt the hum of the engine stroke all of her nerve endings.

With a sigh of pleasure, she stroked the dash. "Hey, sweet baby. Ready for a little jaunt to the mall?" A turn of the key produced the gratifying purr Kris never tired of hearing. Smoothly maneuvering out of her driveway, she sped off down the street.

* * * * *

Because it was a Saturday afternoon, the mall was packed. Kris loved all of the hustle and bustle, but parking was another matter. Each time she thought she'd found a parking spot, it was always occupied by the time she got close enough to pull in. Ten minutes and a few choice words later, she managed to find a spot. Checking to make sure the possibility of door dings wasn't an issue, she locked up. Working up her second sweat of the day, she walked briskly to the mall entrance.

Once inside, she stopped a moment and took a deep breath. The familiar sights and sounds of the mall helped to restore her good mood. This was life at its finest.

Kris loved to shop. She'd been born for it, excelled at it even. Whether it was a new trend, a sale, a date, a gift, she'd use any excuse to shop. A typical mall excursion usually lasted a full five hours.

Today, however, she was on a mission. A mission with a time limit. Determinedly ignoring the gorgeous pair of sandals in one store window, as well as the fragrant candles in the next, she made her way to her favorite women's apparel store.

Winding her way through the clothes, she scanned the racks for something, anything to wear tonight. An outfit that would really reach out and grab her.

The only thing that grabbed her, however, was a sales associate. "Oh, Kris! I was hoping to see you today. We just got the most gorgeous suit in! I saw it and immediately thought of you."

A smile of welcome touched her lips. Kris was on a first name basis with most of the sales associates. Considering how much time and money she spent here, it really wasn't that surprising. Shelly happened to be one of her favorites because she had an eye for fashion and knew what colors and styles Kris preferred.

"Actually, Shelly, I'm looking for a special outfit today. Only one," she added, knowing it wasn't the day to help build Shelly's commission.

She received a conspiratorial wink in response. "Aaahh," Shelly said, with an all-too-knowing grin. "Hot date tonight?"

Kris couldn't help but grin in return. "Very."

"So are we looking for something dressy, casual or dressy-casual?"

"None of the above. I'm looking for something sexy."

The expression on Shelly's face turned serious as she slipped into her professional sales mode. "Hmm. Blow-him-away sexy, or the subtle show-him-a-hint-of-cleavage-and-a-peek-of-thigh sexy?"

"I think I'll go for subtle." It wouldn't do to advertise the fact she was on a dry spell and looking to correct it. Alan already seemed to have a fixation with her cleavage, so subtle was probably the best way to go. She was half afraid if she bared too much cleavage Alan would dive right in and she'd never see him again.

"Why don't you go get comfy in a dressing room, and I'll see what I can find?"

"Sure thing," Kris replied, though Shelly was already striding away, eyes focused in determination. If anyone could find her something quickly, it was Shelly.

Sure enough, by the time Kris had stripped down to her bra and panties, Shelly was back with an armload of clothes.

In her element, Kris greedily began pulling on the different garments, peeking out now and then to get Shelly's opinion. In the middle of outfit number four, her cell phone rang.

It was Alan wanting to know if she could meet him at five-fifteen instead. After agreeing on a meeting place, she hung up and looked at her watch. Three o'clock. Okay, so she wouldn't have time to lounge in the bath. No big deal. She'd just pick an outfit and hurry home.

Settling on outfit number three, a delicate white lace top with a deep V-neck and a pair of black capri pants with a slight sheen, she had Shelly ring it up.

After maneuvering her way out of the increasingly congested mall parking lot, she headed home. Her smile faded to a thin line as she managed to hit every red light along the way. It was a few minutes after four by the time she managed to walk through her front door.

As the bath water was running, she went in search of her tools. "Shave cream? Check. Body lotion? Check. Razor..." Kris grabbed the items as she ran through her checklist. When she'd stockpiled the necessary beauty equipment, she headed for the

tub with her arsenal. Seduction was a fine art that required specific tools. The most important tool at the moment was a razor.

Worried that her blade would be dull, she was relieved when she didn't have to saw at the mini forest growing on her legs. Maneuvering the razor carefully, she managed to finish one leg with no cuts. A thankful sigh slipped past her lips.

Though her razor may have cooperated, her shaving cream wasn't about to. Repeated efforts to dispense the rich lather onto her palm were met with nothing but a hissing sound. Empty.

"Okay. No problem. I'll just grab the extra can from the cupboard," Kris muttered, praying there actually was an extra one. Extending one hairy leg followed by the baby smooth one, she stepped carefully out of the tub. She dripped her way over to the cupboard where she kept her extra beauty supplies. It was just as she'd feared. No shaving cream.

Kris barely managed to bite back the frustrated growl in the back of her throat. "So, no shave cream. I'll just have to...AAAAHHH!" She yelped and flailed wildly as her foot slipped in the water she'd trailed across the floor. Instead of falling on her rear, she managed to catch herself in time to do an ungainly sprawl across the bathroom floor. As she sat there, arms and legs akimbo, she was reminded of a time during her sophomore year of college. The details of the long ago situation were sketchy at best, but the end result had been eerily similar to where she found herself now.

The cold tile pressed against her skin was an unpleasant reminder that she was still wet and quickly becoming chilled. Once upright, Kris was glad to note the only bruise she'd sustained was to her pride. Muttering under her breath, she cautiously walked back to the tub. The bath water was now tepid, so she rushed through shaving her other leg as much as she dared. Her hair conditioner made a passable substitute for shave cream.

Kris felt fortunate to get through the rest of her bath with no mishaps. After dressing, she returned to the bathroom to finish her makeup. Unfortunately, the task of applying cosmetics proved too much.

As she applied mascara in an attempt to create long, full lashes, Kris miscalculated the distance between her eye and the mascara wand.

"Ouch! Stupid mascara...damn, that stings!" Eyes already blurred from tears, Kris wiped ineffectually at the mess she'd created. Her bathroom mirror reflected an image she really didn't want to see. Instead of long, full lashes, all she saw were brown eyes with serious raccoon rings underneath. Actually, one eye was more red than brown from coming into contact with the mascara wand and both were watering, thus the raccoon effect. Looking down, she also saw that her new clothes were now covered with a long, thin streak of black where the mascara had smeared when she'd dropped the wand. Great.

On a normal day, Kris would have shrugged it off with a smile. Life was much too short to stress over the little things. Now she couldn't help but wonder if someone was trying to give her a sign. A not-so-subtle sign.

More than a little disgusted with the whole situation, she picked up the runaway mascara. With a last look at her now ruined outfit, she resigned herself to finding something in her closet. She'd simply have to make do. As she turned to leave, her hip nudged the end of her curling iron, sending the hot iron straight to the floor. Scrambling to grab it before it left a mark on the bathroom rug, Kris once more slipped. This time she was unable to catch herself from falling in the puddle of water. Why hadn't she cleaned it up?

Cold water seeped through the seat of her pants, completely soaking both her pants and her panties. Shrugging the situation off was definitely beyond her ability at this point. There was nothing worse than the feeling of cold, wet clothes against a person's skin, Kris decided as she rose to her feet.

Through clenched teeth, she exhaled loudly. "I'm going to find something to wear, I'm going to put on some makeup, and dammit, I'm going to have sex tonight if it kills me!" The second the words left her mouth, she regretted them. At the rate she was going, she just might do herself in.

With her freshly scrubbed face set in determination, she marched to her closet. Her hands closed around a denim miniskirt. "Works for me," she grumbled, and tossed it on her bed. She didn't have time to go through everything. A black wraparound top with a modest cut and a sleek feel followed the skirt. When she emerged a minute later with shoes and accessories, her face was set in grim lines.

Muttering under her breath, she looked at the pile on her bed. "So...we have a skirt, top, shoes, bra, accessories..." Frowning, she looked again. Something was missing.

"Oh well. It's a little too late to worry about details." She peeled off her wet clothes and, realizing panties were the missing item, began rummaging through her lingerie drawer.

Laughter welled in her throat, and the threat of panic nearly choked her. She had a feeling today really wasn't her day.

Frantically searching her lingerie drawer—incidentally, the most important drawer of clothing a single girl could have—she came up with a fist full of cotton. Big, ugly, cotton granny panties in varying shades of blah, to be exact. The ones she'd bought out of desperation a couple years ago due to a problem that had involved a horny hockey player with a thing for ripping panties. It had taken five pairs—four of which she never received compensation for—to realize the only time that athlete had excelled was on the ice. Needless to say, the panties had been relegated to the far recesses of her lingerie drawer. Until now.

These would never work. Kris wasn't completely sure they could even be considered an undergarment. Not when she had to roll each leg hole three times in order to wear them under sweatpants.

"Give me a break," she muttered. "There has got to be something here." But after emptying the drawer and searching the contents now strewn across her bedroom, she realized she had nothing sexy to wear. Smacking a palm to her forehead, she remembered putting a load of delicates in the washer this morning. A load that must contain every single sexy pair of panties she owned.

Running to the laundry room, she hoped against hope that this was the one time she'd actually remembered to pull the delicates out of the washer and hang them to dry. With a sinking feeling, she looked around.

No panties in sight.

Resignation settled over her features as she lifted the washer lid. There in the garment bag was a pile of sexy panties. A very wet pile of sexy panties. And wet panties today would only be a good thing if said wetness was caused by Alan, not because she'd forgotten them in the washer.

Going without really wasn't an option with a miniskirt. If she knew they were going to be alone most of the time, she'd consider it, but if they were going to a decent restaurant or any other public place... No, there was no reason to flash everyone.

Great. Now what was she going to do? Looking around, she happened to see the time on the clock. It was already five.

"Oh, geez! I'm going to be late!" She was supposed to meet him at 5:15 and it would take her at least twenty minutes to get there. And that was only if she went eighty miles an hour the whole way. Her car was fast, but she didn't have time to sweet talk her way out of a speeding ticket tonight.

Kris sprinted back to her bedroom, quickly pulled on a pair of granny panties—she just couldn't go commando—grabbed her purse and headed out the door. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and this time happened to include underwear that fit her more like a pair of saggy shorts. She cringed at the thought of the horrible panty lines she was now sporting. Or, God forbid, they might even be hanging out from under her skirt.

Horried at the thought, she looked down and spread her legs slightly. Her sigh of relief was accompanied by a glance heavenward, "Thank you for small miracles."

Unfashionable panty lines or no, she was now more worried about the time. Thankfully she knew a shortcut to take, which would put her only a few minutes late.

Ten minutes later Kris drummed her fingers against the steering wheel in frustration. Well, the shortcut idea had been good in theory. However, the construction crew currently doing repairs on the road had put a slight kink in her plan. Would anything go right today? All she wanted was a night out with a gorgeous guy and maybe, if she was lucky, she would get a night of great sex, too. Oh, who was she kidding? She *expected* a night of great sex.

She huffed in exasperation. Okay, she'd even settle for slightly better than average sex.

The long line of cars preceding her was a good indication she had at least a few minutes to sit and stew. Figuring she might as well make good use of the time and try to apply a little makeup, she rummaged around in her purse for her lipstick. Her fingers brushed something that felt suspiciously like lace.

A wide grin split across her face. She might be late, but at least now she had the sexy panties. After an embarrassing situation that had involved a sprinkler system with a faulty timer, a tree with sharp branches and the entire Fourth and Fifth districts' fire crews, she'd vowed never to leave home without an extra pair of panties. A girl had to have backup in case of emergencies.

This definitely classified as an emergency.

The black lace thong that had inhabited a small compartment of her purse didn't match her satin bra, but they were both black. If Alan was as horny as she planned to make him, the material of her undergarments wouldn't make the least bit of difference. Who cares when they're on the floor?

The car in front of her crept forward a measly six inches. If the construction crew didn't let them move soon, it wouldn't matter what she was or wasn't wearing. Alan would figure she was a no-show and leave. The other problem was the fact she was still wearing the granny panties. As late as she was, there wouldn't be time for her to excuse herself to the restroom to make the much needed swap.

Ever the resourceful one, she quickly decided to change in her car. Traffic was currently at a standstill and there was only one lane. There were no cars beside her and the cars in front of and behind her wouldn't know what she was doing. As long as she didn't raise her bare-naked self out of the seat. Besides, her windows were tinted. This shouldn't be a problem, and she might as well make good use of the delay.

Convinced of the soundness of her plan, she immediately began to shimmy out of the dreaded granny cotton. Briefly, she wondered how she would have been able to manage this if she hadn't been wearing a skirt. At least something was going right.

A few seconds later, they were around her ankles. All she had to do was pull them off. She bent forward to do just that.

"HOOOOONK!!"

Jerking upright, she pulled her forehead off the car horn. "Stupid place to put that anyhow," she muttered. With a little more care, she finally managed to pull them off.

Kris grabbed the lace thong, intent on getting the job done. In her rush, her forehead once more connected with the car horn. When she glanced around furtively, the person in front of her was saluting with one finger. Ignoring the insult, she clenched her teeth and continued to struggle with the scrap of lace. There, she had it over one foot, and then...almost...over...the next...foot...

Engrossed with the task at hand, she didn't hear the first tap on her window. The second tap, accompanied by the clearing of a throat and an all-too-masculine, "Excuse me, ma'am?" quickly got her attention.

Turning her head toward the voice, she looked through her driver's side window – which, incidentally, was halfway open – and into the darkest, most gorgeous blue eyes she'd ever seen.

Oh, boy.

When the earth didn't conveniently open up to swallow her, she debated her options. Since she was alone in the car, it probably wouldn't look too good to pretend she'd just had an amazing sexual encounter.

Hmm...

Maybe if she just acted normal he wouldn't notice what she'd been doing. When in doubt, try to fake your way out.

With what she hoped was her most charming smile, she looked up at him. "Yes? Can I help you?"

Chapter Two

Derek stared down at the blonde bombshell with equal parts confusion and irritation. She blinked her soft brown eyes at him with fake innocence and smiled. Just what was a guy supposed to say to a woman when she had her panties down around her ankles? Hell, he knew what to *do* to a woman when her panties were down around her ankles, but he had no idea what to *say* in this particular situation.

It didn't help that his tongue had all but rolled out of his mouth when he'd first peeked in her car. Wow. She was about the sexiest thing he'd seen in a long time. But still.

He knew people ate and drank in their cars. He'd even heard of a woman who'd been pulled over for eating a bowl of cereal while trying to drive. On occasion, he'd even changed shirts on the go. But never, ever, had he seen anyone change their underwear in a car. Especially not when they were stopped in the middle of construction.

What was she thinking?

As he continued to stare at her innocent smile, he could only wonder. Was she one of those women who had a thing for construction workers? It never ceased to amaze him what some women did. There were the standard whistles and catcalls and propositions. Bared breasts weren't unheard of either. Occasionally there were women who made suggestions that caused even his most foul-mouthed workers to drop their jaws in shock. However, Derek had never seen a show like this.

Considering the situation, he continued his slow perusal up her nicely shaped calves. He couldn't help but appreciate the trim legs that disappeared beneath a denim skirt currently bunched high along her thighs. She was still adequately covered. At least enough that he felt a twinge of disappointment.

Looking back down at the black lacy thing around her sexy little ankles, he forgot himself for a moment. The small scrap of material didn't look as if it would cover much of anything. It was more of an enticement. Thoughts of hot, sweaty sex immediately filled his mind. He could use his teeth to pull the lace aside and see if she was a true blonde. Then he'd...

Derek jerked his wayward imagination to a stop. Now was not the time. Before his gaze traveled back to her face, he took note of the white cotton underwear lying in a heap on the passenger seat. They looked big enough to fit his three-hundred-and-fifty pound foreman. Flicking his gaze over her, he had to silently agree the black lace was a much better choice. But it still didn't explain why she was changing in her car. With the window down.

"Can I help you?" She asked again, reminding Derek he was still staring.

His voice came out curt. "Yeah. I was wondering if there was a problem."

"Problem? No, there's no problem." She grinned up at him and batted her eyes sweetly. "Whatever made you think there's a problem?"

It was difficult to stifle his incredulous snort at her audacity. This woman was definitely out to get some attention. In a dry tone, he replied, "You were over here honking."

"Oh, right. Yes, well...I was simply...it was just because... Oh, hell," she tipped her head back and laughed.

Lust clenched his gut as he watched her. Her long blonde hair spilled around her shoulders as they shook. Her mouth was open, revealing perfect white teeth. The desire to wrap his fist in her hair and feel that mouth around his dick was nearly overwhelming. She could lightly scrape her teeth along his shaft...

Derek tamped down on his thoughts. What in the hell was wrong with him?

Regardless of his attraction and her intentions, he had to get back to work. He had no time for this. His crew was behind schedule already, which was why they were here late in the day on a Saturday. What he didn't need was some woman trying to give them a peep show, gorgeous or not. The poor broad obviously had issues if she felt the need to get a man's attention in this manner. And it pissed him off even more that she had his attention. His full, standing-in-salute attention.

Irritation laced his voice when he interrupted her amusement. "If there's no problem, then I'd appreciate it if you'd keep your hand off your horn. We're trying to get traffic through as quickly as we can. You just need to be patient." As an afterthought, he frowned and advised her, "You might want to consider getting dressed *before* you get in the car next time. My crew's behind schedule, so you can save the strip show for another time."

Derek ignored the outraged gasp and walked away. It was a damn shame that some women felt the need to pull stunts like that. A beautiful woman should have more respect for herself.

Oh, well. It wasn't his problem. Shaking his head, he pushed her from his mind with some difficulty and got back to work. They had a lot to finish up before quitting time.

* * * * *

What a bastard.

Humiliation and anger burned inside Kris. He'd actually thought she'd been doing that for his enjoyment? She liked sex as much as the next woman—maybe even got a little crazy about it at times—but even she drew the line at some things. Public displays weren't her style. He'd made her sound like a...like a whore. Her face burned at the very idea.

What a bastard.

Traffic finally started to move and Kris was more than happy to leave the area. Her cell phone rang, momentarily distracting her from her anger. It was Alan wondering where she was. Hardbody or no, she was no longer in the mood for anything packing a fully loaded testosterone missile. She'd had more than enough pricks to last her the rest of the day. Maybe even the rest of the weekend.

She used the traffic as an excuse to beg off. Alan was disappointed and pressed her for another date. Faintly annoyed and still not in the mood, Kris agreed to call him another time. After disconnecting, she quickly dialed her best friend.

Thankfully she picked up on the second ring.

"Maddie!? Please tell me you'll meet me for drinks. I'm in desperate need of a shoulder to cry on." *Or a brown-haired, blue-eyed jerk to smack*, she thought silently. When Maddie agreed, Kris hung up and grimly headed for the designated meeting spot.

By the time she pulled into a parking space, she realized the black lace thong was still pooled at her feet on the floor. Looking down in disgust, Kris noted that at least her legs had been smooth.

Come to think of it, she'd noticed a definite spark of interest when he'd been telling her off.

"Ha," she said aloud. "The ass thought I was a whore, but he's the pervert for enjoying the view." The thought brought her a little comfort. But only a little.

Inside, she grabbed a table and ordered a drink. She was still stewing by the time Maddie arrived fifteen minutes later, her husband Ash in tow.

Maddie slid into the chair across from her. "Okay, spill it."

Irritated, Kris shot her a look. "Spill it? That's the greeting I get from my best friend?"

"Oh, please. You call and practically demand I meet you for drinks. It has to be man problems."

Ash had settled into the chair next to his wife. He looked at Kris with amusement. "What happened this time? No wait. Let me guess—you set your kitchen on fire and by the time the fire department arrived, your clothes had somehow all managed to burn off." Ash nodded his head as he warmed to the subject. "No that's not it. You— Ouch!" He rubbed his shin where Kris had kicked him. "What was that for?"

"That whole thing was an accident. You think I planned to burn a hole in the front of my shirt? Would you willingly set fire to the front of your pants?" Kris flashed an evil smile when he grimaced at the imagined agony. "Exactly. No man wants to endanger his poor little love spout."

"Love spout?" Maddie giggled.

Scowling at both women, Ash ambled over to the bar to order drinks.

When he was out of earshot, Maddie turned to Kris. "Seriously. What happened?"

Between clenched teeth, Kris recounted the last five, horrible hours of her day. By the time she'd finished, Maddie was staring, mouth agape. Her mouth slowly opened and closed a few times, no sound emerging.

Kris thought she understood her friend's shock. "I know! Can you believe he thought I was stripping for him?"

Maddie sputtered, "But...but..." Then she burst out laughing.

Kris had to wait a good five minutes before Maddie finally stopped to wipe her eyes and say, "Oh my god! I can't believe it!" Another round of giggles followed.

"It's not funny!" Kris protested. "The guy acted like I was out whoring or something."

"Kris, you were...your panties...around your ankles...with the window down..." Her friend was still laughing too hard to finish a sentence.

Her amusement was infectious in a humiliating, pray-it-never-happens-again sort of way. Kris felt her lips turn up at the corners, unwillingly. Okay, maybe changing in the car hadn't been the greatest idea. She had forgotten to roll the window up, but it still didn't excuse the jerk's assumption.

Maddie barely had herself under control by the time Ash returned. He eyed them warily. "What's so funny?"

After receiving the go-ahead from Kris, Maddie retold the Panty Episode. Ash turned a disbelieving gaze on Kris. "Is she kidding?"

Kris shook her head curtly.

"You left your window open." Ash stated carefully.

Kris nodded again, beginning to feel more than a tad bit foolish.

"In the middle of construction." Ash clarified in the same careful tone.

Feeling the need to defend herself, she raised her chin. "Look, it was either change my panties or go on a date wearing granny bloomers. Would you want to strip a woman and see her wearing panties big enough to double as a cover for your car? No. No guy in his right mind would. It's a sure way to kill the mood. But I think you're both missing what's important here!"

"Well, you have a new cover for your car. What could be more important than that?"

Kris narrowed her eyes at Ash, who was smiling broadly at his cleverness. "Shall I set your love spout on fire now or later?"

Maddie held up her hands between them. "Okay, okay. Settle down. Kris, what are we missing?"

"Isn't it obvious? He thought —"

A raucous group of men walked in at that moment, drawing their attention. Normally Kris would have flashed a simple smile and gone on with her conversation.

However, her mind flashed back to where her panties had been earlier—somewhere down around her ankles.

Smack dab in the middle of the group stood the jerk from the construction crew.

Their eyes met across the room. His widened in recognition. Hers narrowed in anger and the hurt she couldn't quite fess up to. It was the anger she decided to concentrate on.

"Well, well, well. Speak of the devil."

Ash and Maddie looked up at her sharp tone.

"What?" Maddie asked, following her stare.

"Let me guess. You know the guy in the middle from a— Ouch! Dammit, stop kicking me!" Ash rubbed his shin again.

"Stop being such a wiseass then," Kris shot back. "I know the guy in the middle because he's the jerk who thinks I'm a whore."

Shock had Maddie sputtering. "A what? Whore? What are you talking about?"

Before Kris could answer, the same masculine voice she'd heard through her open window drawled, "What I think she meant was, I believed she was trying to attract attention by stripping in public."

Chapter Three

Kris was irritated to feel her body react to his voice. Her temperature rose a few degrees, but she convinced herself it was due to anger. She has hot with *anger*. The tingling up her spine had to be in response to his gratifying voice. *Grating*. His voice was grating, not gratifying. And the moisture between her legs? Kris figured that could be a result of lack of use. If the plumbing isn't used regularly, it tends to rust or leak. Grimacing, she scratched that. She was too young to start rusting. And really, what woman wanted to leak just from hearing a man's voice? Especially one who thought she enjoyed providing free peep shows.

The thought helped her to regain a hold of her anger. Without turning around, she shot a grim smile at her friends but spoke to him. "I said exactly what I meant. And again, you chose to make an assumption. Which just goes to show who the real ass is here."

Maddie and Ash watched in rapt fascination as Derek came to stand beside Kris. "So correct me then. What exactly were you doing?"

"I wasn't providing a show for your benefit!" Hurt colored her tone, though she was too irritated to notice. When he continued to stare at her, Kris clenched her teeth. "I was changing and didn't realize my window was down. Period. It was all a big misunderstanding. On your part."

One eyebrow raised a fraction. "Do you make it a habit to change in your car? In the middle of construction?"

Damn the man and his arrogance. "Actually, I was running late for a date and didn't have time to finish getting ready at home."

She could swear he actually started to smirk.

"I see. And you forgot to put your underwear on before you left the house and thought you'd slip them on in the car?"

Normally Kris would have let it go. What did she care about other people's opinions? But this was different, and she really didn't want to analyze all of the reasons why. Instead, she gave him a murderous glare. "I was changing into something more appropriate for a date. The granny panties I had on were a guarantee to a solitary evening." Hoping that was a sufficient explanation, she turned away and sipped her drink.

He seemed thoughtful for a moment. "Granny panties?"

Kris ignored him, praying he would go away.

Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Oh! You mean the white thing on the car seat? I thought it was a sheet for you to cover up with after the show."

Both Ash and Maddie had a sudden coughing fit. Glaring at them, she growled, "Which was exactly why I was changing out of them."

Her traitorous friends gave up the struggle and began to laugh uproariously. Kris thought briefly about grabbing the granny cotton and wringing their necks. It was definitely a much better use for it than a car cover or sheet. There was certainly enough material there to tie a decent noose or two. Looking at the smug jerk and his annoying smile, she figured she could probably squeeze three good knots out of it.

Frustrated with facing another weekend alone and extremely irritated with the present company, she stood to leave. "It's been great having my character maligned, but I really need to get to my next *show*. Wouldn't want to keep the perverts waiting, would I?" Not bothering to wait for a response, she hastily made her escape.

She made it to the parking lot before a gentle hand grabbed her elbow.

"Hey, slow down a minute."

Jerking her arm away, Kris turned around to blast him. "Look, I'm supposed to be on a date right now. But for some reason, my day went from bad to worse to downright humiliating. Now, instead of having sex tonight I get to go home. Alone. No wait...I still have my *sheet*! Maybe I can find someone willing to pay for a show!" Her voice had risen with each word.

Derek held up his hands. "Settle down, okay? I'm sorry if I insulted you earlier —"

"Insulted me?" she was incredulous and more than a little hurt. "You all but called me a whore! And hey, I enjoy sex, but I've never wanted to make it my profession." Eyes flashing fire, Kris went on. "You thought I was stripping for your benefit, but let me tell you something. Honey, if I really were a whore, you'd be the last man who could afford my services. And I'd probably charge you extra for having to fake my way through it!"

His eyes had narrowed dangerously. "Now hold on a minute —"

Too angry to care, Kris interrupted him once more. "No. You hold on a minute! Right now I could be in bed with a bodybuilder. A bodybuilder! But now the best I can hope for tonight is forgetting this afternoon ever happened. So why don't you do everyone else a favor and keep your big mouth shut from now on!" She deliberately turned her back on him and opened her purse, hoping she could find her keys quickly and leave.

Derek had other ideas.

Before she knew it, he flipped her around and pressed her up against her car. "I think I'll take your suggestion and use it to shut your mouth at the same time." And he kissed her.

Shock kept Kris from immediately dropping him with a well-placed knee.

The bruising force of his lips wasn't the most pleasant sensation she'd ever experienced, but it was certainly the most surprising. Without words, he demanded

entry into her mouth, forcing her to yield. More than willing to fight fire with fire, she obliged.

Unexpected longing shot through her as she encountered the heat of his mouth. Their tongues fused as each fought for control. Kris was surprised to feel herself soften against him.

Changing the tempo of the kiss, he traced the contours of her mouth, using his tongue with amazing skill. Kris leaned closer, unable to stop. She had gripped his shoulders to push him away, but now used them as an anchor. The solid muscle beneath the thin fabric of his shirt bunched as she returned the kiss. Insults or not, this man could kiss. And she wasn't above getting a little pleasure out of this evening. Even if it meant kissing this jerk.

The jerk that was busy making her hotter than she'd been in a long, long time.

At five-feet-four-inches tall, Kris was used to craning her neck to kiss a man. But she fit against him perfectly. He stood a hair under six feet, she would guess, and it was just right. She could feel the heat of his erection nestled against her stomach while his thighs cradled her body gently. He'd leaned down slightly and the effect was a near flawless fit.

His tongue was soft against hers, stroking, caressing. He nipped her lower lip lightly, running his tongue along the bruised flesh. She shivered at the delicate contact. Yum.

His mouth was hot. And delicious. Which was exactly what she'd been wanting. Too bad this was the wrong man. Too bad she now had to go home angry, hurt, alone and so aroused her body was tense from head to toe.

Enough was enough. She'd allowed him a few too many seconds of her mouth, and he was...wow...he was an amazing kisser. But he'd called her a whore.

Before she lost her will, she shoved away from him and stared coolly despite the heat in her stomach. "Well, big guy, you've proven me wrong. I probably wouldn't have to fake my way through anything with you. I would recommend asking a woman *before* you make a move next time, however. It's considered common courtesy even for whores. But I have to admit, it's a shame you don't use your mouth like that more often instead of throwing out insults." In fact, she had more than a few suggestions on just how he could put that amazing mouth to good use. Starting with her breasts, and he could slowly work his way down. His skill was the only reason she hadn't dropped him with a knee.

He stared at her with a slightly pained expression. "I could say the same for you."

For a moment she could only stare at him. The man definitely had a set of steel ones. Which Kris could reluctantly respect. There weren't many men out there who could give as well as they got. And she would bet he could do so on every level.

She felt a stab of regret that they hadn't met under different circumstances. Shrugging off her disappointment, she gave him a pointed look. "So, now that we got

that out of our systems, if you'll excuse me?" She waited for him to move. Needed him to move—either away, or closer so she could rub up against him.

He continued to stare at her steadily.

"You'll need to move," she prompted him.

For a moment, she thought he'd ignore her. Then he sighed and said, "Look. I really am sorry."

Not one to hold a grudge, she nodded tersely and replied. "Don't be. I know women who would weep to have access to that tongue." *Me included*, she thought silently. What a shame.

Derek growled in frustration. "I didn't mean the kiss. I meant for what I said earlier. It was a dumb assumption and I feel pretty shitty about insulting you like that." He shook his head. "Is everything about sex with you?"

She tilted her head and looked at him. Was she the only one who'd been affected by that kiss? "When it comes to the opposite sex, what else would it be about?"

He just shook his head, annoyance clearly written in his eyes.

"Oh, please. Don't tell me you're one of those mythical men who actually believe in romance. Wine and dine a woman, but instead of sex, you propose marriage?" Kris laughed and continued her search for her keys. She had to get home. Now. "That's really cute. And while it's been interesting, I'd really like to get home now. So if you'll move—"

"There's more to life than just sex."

She looked up in surprise. "Oh, I know that. Believe me, I do. And don't get me wrong, I'm not a woman scorned or anything like that. But when it comes to men and women, sex is much easier and more enjoyable than some of the rest." And she was tempted to offer to show him how just how enjoyable it could be.

He folded his arms across his chest. "Then you've obviously never been romanced."

She laughed without humor. "I'm not waiting for my knight in shining armor to whisk me away to his castle."

"That's not what I'm talking about." His brows were drawn down in a frown.

She waved his words away. Finally locating her keys, she looked up. "I know what you're talking about. But I try to enjoy the moment. Since today hasn't been all that enjoyable, I hope to go home and salvage the evening." She graced him with a brief smile. "And if I have to do it alone, so be it. Then again, there's always someone out there who's up for a show." Or a vibrator around to finish what they'd just started.

Turning her back to him, Kris unlocked her car door. A large hand covered hers as she moved to open it.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." His apology was sincere. She could read it in his gaze.

"Yeah, well... Let's just forget today ever happened. Tomorrow's a new day and all that." Kris flashed a half-hearted smile, tugged her hand free and opened the door.

Sliding behind the wheel—she was determined to leave before she did something stupid, like invite him home or cry—she put the keys in the ignition. The engine hummed to life and, peeling out of the parking lot, she didn't look back.

* * * * *

Her taillights had long since disappeared and the smoke from her tires had faded. The guilt, however, still weighed heavy on Derek's shoulders. And the lust was still eating at his gut. Remorse and desire. An ugly combination any way you looked at it.

That kiss had hit him like a nasty sucker punch to the jaw. Never had he tasted anything sweeter than her luscious mouth. Never had he felt anything as sexy as her hot little body pressed against his. But damn if that wasn't the last thing he needed right now.

A woman to screw with his head. And his heart.

Of course, insinuating she was a prostitute was a surefire way to kill any chances he might have had. It was really too bad, because after getting that one small taste of her he was already addicted.

He'd have bet his job when he saw her struggling to pull that tiny excuse of lace up her legs she'd been out for a cheap thrill. Her defiant in-your-face sort of attitude had proven his point.

Or so he'd thought.

Tonight when he'd overheard her with her friends and seen the quick glimpse of hurt in her eyes, it had told a different story. One that had affected him almost as much as the kiss.

And he had called her a whore. No wonder she'd been so pissed off. Hell, he deserved to have his ass kicked. Derek still couldn't believe she'd tried to make light of everything.

Rubbing his hands over his face, he wondered what he could do.

Part of him wanted to look the other way and forget today had ever happened, which was what she obviously intended to do. A bigger part of him wanted to make it up to her. The bigger, throbbing-to-the-point-of-pain part of him. More than anything, though, he wanted to apologize to her, romance her, taste every hot inch of her until neither of them could remember or care how they met in the first place.

Her slightly jaded outlook on romance wouldn't make it easy. Not knowing her name was an even bigger complication.

While he completely agreed that sex and only sex could be great, he also knew there could be a hell of a lot more to it. Which was partly why he'd bowed out of the dating scene almost eight months ago.

Eight months.

It was a long time for self-imposed celibacy, and truthfully, it was starting to wear on him. He wanted more than the typical fling. A lot more. He just hadn't been able to find a woman who interested him enough. So he'd stopped looking and focused on work. Summertime kept him so busy he hardly had time to piss standing up let alone date.

But now...now he was tempted. After that kiss, he was left wanting. In fact, she made him want so bad he was actually in pain. Sex wasn't enough this time around, though. He'd promised himself that eight months ago. Derek wanted something more worthwhile. Hearing her opinion, he wanted to show her that romance could be worthwhile. For someone who proclaimed to enjoy life, she was definitely missing out on one of the richest experiences life had to offer.

Derek shook his head and headed back inside. There was only one thing he could do—figure out how in the hell he was going to romance her while keeping his pants zipped.

* * * * *

When he got home later that night, Derek had a fairly sound plan in place. Thanks to Ash, Derek now had her name, address, and a good idea of what would and wouldn't work. He'd been stunned to realize that Ash—one of his Wednesday night poker buddies—was married to Kris' best friend. Of course, as busy as he'd been with work, he hadn't been to a poker game for a few months. However, it had been good to see Ash again, and even better to get the scoop on Kris.

After a couple of beers and a little bit of catching up, Maddie and Ash had wished him well in his pursuit. He now knew he'd need it. If ever a woman deserved romance, it was Kris.

Unlocking the door to his apartment, he stepped inside and flipped on the light. Looking around, he couldn't help but grimace. His apartment was pathetically empty. At thirty-three, he knew he should be embarrassed by the sad state of his living quarters. One of these days he was going to do something about it, but right now he was just too damn tired. Ignoring the bare walls and sparse furniture, he strode into the kitchen. Pulling open the fridge door, he grabbed the lone carton of orange juice and took a swig.

Derek was fairly neat, so everything in his apartment was picked up and clean. Problem was there wasn't a whole lot of anything inside. He had a couch and a television. And a coffee table with a picture of his family from last Christmas sitting on top—compliments of his sister. His bedroom had a bed and a dresser. The necessities. But it lacked warmth and color, with the exception of the two throw pillows an ex-girlfriend had bought him. She had always harped about how he should decorate his place with something and the multicolored throw pillows had been a big hint. Unfortunately, she hadn't been the one he'd wanted to allow carte blanche to decorate. Though he did like the throw pillows, which is why they were still on his couch. Aside

from the pillows, there was nothing to make it stand out as a home. *His* home. During the summertime he was too busy to deal with what his place should and shouldn't look like. And in the winter, he never had the inclination. Frankly, he'd rather be working on his cars or watching a football game. Maybe someday he'd get around to dealing with it.

Derek dropped onto his bed, completely exhausted. It had been a grueling day at work. He had a love-hate relationship with the summer season. On one hand, the days were long and the work was hot and punishing. On the other hand, the warm months brought a huge workload and a steady income. He tried to look on the bright side and think about the job security.

Rolling onto his back, he stared at his ceiling. What a day. He knew that the timing was poor to be starting a relationship. He often didn't get off work until late and was usually too tired to do more than shower and hit the sack. His schedule didn't allow much time for wining and dining a woman.

Closing his eyes wearily, Derek had to admit the blonde bombshell who'd dropped into his life would be more than worth the energy. As aggressive as she'd proven so far, she might even take the reins so he wouldn't have to expend as much energy in bed, as well. Smiling slightly at the image, he wondered exactly how she'd go about it...

She leaned above him, straddling his waist. The sexy little chemise she wore didn't even come close to covering the heat pulsing at her core. Heat he wanted to feel much more intimately. One of the tiny straps holding the slinky material in place slipped off her shoulder. Derek lightly grasped the scrap of silk in his fingers. Pulling carefully, he exposed the top of one perfect breast. God she was gorgeous.

Her husky laugh caught his attention. She pulled the strap from his grasp and smiled down at him. "Sorry big guy. You're in the passenger seat tonight."

Returning her smile, Derek propped his hands behind his head. She wanted to run the show tonight? He was fine with that. Work had drained the last of his energy, but he had a feeling she would find a way to wring a few more drops out. He couldn't wait.

"Roll over," her husky voice penetrated the darkness.

Without thought, he did as she commanded. Completely naked, he was glad for the cool sheets against his skin. Derek knew things would heat up soon enough.

He felt her small hands creep up his back. A groan of pure pleasure pushed past his lips as she began to knead the tight muscles in his shoulders. Fourteen-hour days could create a lot of tension in his muscles. She carefully worked out the knots and made her way down his back. Derek was in heaven. His eyes drifted shut as she continued to relax his overworked muscles.

Just as quickly they popped back open. He could feel her hot mouth pressing kisses along his spine. Now this was interesting. By the time she reached his lower back, he was strung tight once more. That was all it took, a simple touch of her mouth. She was

kissing her way along the top of his ass. He jumped when he felt the sting of her teeth. Little tormenter.

Growling, he flipped over. He was rewarded with the sight of her stunning smile. She crawled up along his body until she was sitting on his stomach.

"Are you relaxed?" Her voice was tinged with laughter. He knew she was teasing him.

"I was."

The silk of her chemise lightly tickled the sides of his abdomen whenever she bent over. He could feel the soft press of her curls against his lower stomach. They were damp with her arousal.

She barely managed to hide her grin. "Poor baby. Are you tired?" She stroked his chest and cooed with false concern. She didn't wait for his response, but leaned close so her mouth was next to his ear. "Don't worry, honey. I'll help you to feel much, much better."

When she'd leaned over, her straps had once more slipped down over her shoulders. Derek caught a peek of her lush nipples. Before he could touch the tempting flesh, she grabbed his hands and pulled them over his head. "Keep these right here for me, big guy."

His eyes glittered with desire, but he said nothing. She took his silence as assent and moved higher on his chest. "I know you need your rest, so I'm going to make this hard and fast. But first, I need you to make sure I'm nice and wet for you. Can you do that?"

She was tempting him. Teasing him. He nodded his head, eagerly wondering what she was planning.

A wicked smile graced her lips as she shimmied higher up his chest. He could feel the heat of her pussy against his neck. The smell of her arousal made his dick harden to almost painful proportions. He wanted her now. Their gazes locked as she began to pull her chemise up around her hips.

He held his breath.

She stopped and let the material shimmer back down her thighs. "Derek, I need you to make sure I'm very...very wet for you."

This time his smile was full of wickedness. "I'm waiting," was all he said.

Placing her knees on either side of his head, she once more pulled the material up along her hips. Her moist heat was now exposed to him.

His arms came down to grasp her hips. He pulled her a little closer so her curls were tickling his lips. There was a slight hitch in her breath. Derek placed his tongue against her pink folds and lightly traced the small cleft.

A long moan was drawn from her throat.

Bringing his hands around so he could part the dewy folds, he placed his mouth flush against her and began to taste. She was hot, and already very, very wet. But Derek

wasn't about to miss out on this feast. He greedily lapped at her pussy, loving every small moan she made. His lips closed around her clit and sucked lightly. Her hips began to rock against his mouth.

"Derek," she whispered his name.

"Shh," he mumbled against her, drawing a sharp cry. "You're not wet enough yet."

His thumbs spread her open further. Plunging his tongue deep inside, he felt his erection throb as he encountered her scorching heat. Sliding his tongue back out, he ran it along her cleft and back up to her clit. Playful flicks of his tongue kept her hips moving restlessly. She was ready. And he couldn't wait any longer.

Smoothing his hands up her thighs and around to cup her ass, he gave a satisfying squeeze. "I think you're ready now, love."

She needed no further encouragement to shimmy down his body. Whipping the chemise over her head, she exposed all of her mouthwatering, golden skin. Dark-tipped nipples were hardened and begged to be tasted. Her curls glistened from his mouth and her arousal. And it was there that he had to be.

His hands hadn't left her ass and he used the position to spread her cleft and help her sink deep onto his shaft. God help him, it was glorious. Like coming home. Her pussy was so hot against his aching flesh he nearly came at the contact. Nice and tight around him, the feel of her nearly made him groan.

She leaned over him and cupped one of her breasts. Without words, she offered the dusky nipple to him, pressing it to his lips. Derek willingly laved at the hardened peak as she began to move. Her breasts were full and lush, the perfect size. Her nipples were large and Derek loved nothing more than drawing them deep in his mouth and running his tongue along them.

Up and down she slid along his shaft. As she came up, her inner muscles clenched. Derek growled at the sensation. She was trying to milk him dry and damn if he wasn't going to die of the most intense pleasure of his life.

Moving to her other breast, he continued to caress and lick. His hands were still on her ass, gripping the curvy flesh as she rode him. His hips began to thrust up as he tried to go deeper, as deep as he could inside of her.

He could feel his orgasm building. She sat up and he penetrated her deeply. He ground his teeth together to keep from yelling. She felt so damn good. Her hips continued to slide her up and down along his shaft as she squeezed her inner muscles tighter around him. When she cupped her breasts and began to roll her nipples between her fingers, Derek lost it.

With a guttural groan, he thrust hard once, twice, and exploded inside her. He could barely hear her cry of release with the blood thundering in his ears.

Holy shit.

Derek opened his eyes to see the wet stain on his sheets. He closed his eyes again and shuddered slightly, still caught up in the aftermath of the mind-blowing fantasy. Un-friggin-believable. He had no idea how he was going to survive long enough to carry out his plan. But he did know one thing—he would have her, one way or another.

Chapter Four

Large, warm hands slid up her thighs. Biting her lip in anticipation, she watched him through half-closed eyes. He took his oh-so-sweet time smoothing his hands over her. The rough, calloused hands abraded her sensitive skin. It was delicious. His mouth followed the trail his fingers were lightly tracing. Gradually up along the inside of her thigh. Reversing direction to leisurely sample the tender skin behind her knee. Back up again to tempt and tease her into thinking he'd relieve the tension he was creating.

She shivered, unable to help her response.

It was torture. It was perfect.

Goose bumps rose on her flesh as he continued his sensual assault. To her dismay, he moved higher, too high, swirling his tongue around her navel. The teasing stroke did nothing to satisfy her hunger. And he knew it. He moved higher again, deftly removing her satin bra. She drew in a quick breath as he rolled one nipple between his thumb and finger. Just the right amount of pressure and yet not enough. The heat of his mouth soon enveloped her, his tongue again stroking her, teasing her. Her fingers wound into his hair as he bit her nipple gently. As she held him close, he feasted on her breasts. The damp heat between her legs became molten liquid as the pressure continued to build. Moving restlessly, she begged him with her body.

Now, please now.

If he didn't touch her, didn't put his dick inside her, she would go insane. She needed him, craved him. She wanted it hot and fast and she wanted it now.

She could sense his smile against her skin, his satisfied amusement at her urgency. She didn't care, could only think of having him. Inside her, around her, with her. Now, please now. She couldn't wait another second.

Her skirt was bunched high along her thighs. But not high enough. He moved to get rid of the offensive material. Lost in her sensual haze, she missed the look of disgust that crossed his face.

"What in the hell..."

Jerking upright, she looked around, only to see his shocked gaze upon her. With dawning horror, Kris looked down. She was swathed in large granny panties. "No... No, this isn't right." She had to explain. It should have been something sexy. Something to entice and arouse. Not this monstrous-looking diaper.

He didn't give her a chance to speak. Backing away, he shook his head. "You are a whore. A whore should know better than to wear something like this..."

A whore.

Kris slowly opened her eyes. Scanning the room, she was relieved to note she was alone. Peeking under the covers, she was even more relieved to see she was wearing her simple cotton chemise and not the awful granny panties.

The bed rocked as she fell back against the pillows. What had started out as an erotic dream had quickly turned into her worst nightmare. No, that wasn't true. Her worst nightmare had been when she'd been caught with her shirt down with a man dressed as a Vulcan. She'd had the unfortunate timing to schedule a vacation the same weekend as a big Star Trek convention. The Vulcan hadn't wanted to take no for an answer and when he'd gotten a little too touchy-feely with her, she'd pulled a Spock and dropped his ass. Too bad he'd had a hold of her tube top and it had dropped with him.

But a whore?

Her throat closed up as the hurt welled once again. She wasn't a whore. Never had been, never would be. She enjoyed sex, but she was selective, dammit. Just because she wasn't into relationships didn't mean there was something wrong with her. Kris simply didn't handle commitment well. She'd had her share of real relationships. Some had ended worse than others, but they all had one thing in common.

They'd ended.

The physical aspect of her relationships had always been great. No problems there. The emotional aspect was another matter entirely. And it was all her fault. When it came to love, Kris had missed the boat. Or maybe she was missing a crucial gene. Either way, it wasn't there. At the age of twenty-nine, Kris figured love wasn't in the cards. It was a fact she'd long ago learned to accept.

She'd never been able to get serious about any of her boyfriends. Not the deliriously, head-over-heels kind of serious. In fact, thoughts of happily ever after made her slightly queasy. In a delirious, head-in-the-toilet kind of way. She'd tried to fake it a couple times, but it hadn't worked. In the end, she'd always walked away. It had taken her years to figure out she simply wasn't meant to do it. Love, that is.

Sex, on the other hand, was something she could enjoy. And that didn't make her a whore.

Shaking her head to clear the negative thoughts, she swung her legs out of bed. Sunday mornings should be the perfect time to wake up and stare into a gorgeous pair of eyes and a sexy smile. To remember a delicious night full of giving and receiving pleasure. Sharing a cup of coffee over a companionable silence. Have morning-after sex a few times. Then step into the shower together and...

No, not this morning.

Kris stared in the bathroom mirror, noting with displeasure the dark circles under her eyes and the serious case of bed head. She heaved a big sigh.

Bad idea when you have morning breath.

Settling for a heartfelt groan, mouth closed, she struggled into her robe and made her way to the kitchen. If she couldn't have a warm body beside her to help start her day, she damn well wanted a hot cup of coffee instead.

As she sipped her coffee she had time to consider yesterday's events. They say that things always look better in the morning. So far the theory wasn't holding. As for the Panty Episode...well, it still didn't look much better than it had yesterday. From any angle.

It hadn't helped that the starring role in her dream had belonged to none other than the hunk from yesterday. Frowning, she mentally corrected herself—the *jerk* from yesterday. But jerk didn't sound right either. So what if his blue eyes made her want to melt in a huge puddle at his feet? So what if his large hands had done things to her? So what if his kisses were the best she'd experienced in a long time? So what if...

"Oh, who am I kidding?" Kris groaned aloud. Coffee sloshed onto the table as she dropped her head onto her hands.

The man had given her a sincere apology, an amazing kiss and a bad case of lust. A seriously bad case of lust. Last night, she'd tried to write off the itchy, twitchy feeling she'd had as a rash. But really, who wants to have a rash down there? No, it was better to simply admit she wanted him. Wanted him in her bed. Wanted all of his large, hard heat inside her. Wanted him thrusting in and out until she was...

A quick gulp of coffee helped to suppress the images threatening to consume her.

Last night Kris had debated calling Alan to reschedule, but for some reason, his golden, hard-bodied glory hadn't seemed quite so appealing. Instead she'd lain in bed for a long, long time trying to forget the kiss that had rocked her to her core.

Something that had never happened to her before now.

The doorbell interrupted her disturbing musings, for which she was thankful.

Kris figured it was Maddie coming to weasel her into a morning jog. More likely she was going to pump Kris for details on the construction hottie. But for once, Kris didn't want to talk about it. Hearing about the Panty Episode this early in the morning wouldn't help matters.

Kris opened the door and with barely a glance, turned back to the table. "Maddie I'm not really up for a run this morning. And I don't want to talk about it." Shuffling back toward the kitchen, she muttered "Okay, I will say this—he kissed me and it was fabulous. But really, I don't want to talk about it."

"I'm glad to know a lady doesn't kiss and tell."

The voice stopped Kris in her tracks. Turning around slowly, she gazed into the gorgeous blue eyes that had haunted her all night long.

Damn. First granny panties, and now bed head and no makeup. And on the tail of a really hot dream. Nightmare, she corrected mentally. Luck really had deserted her.

She managed to maintain her composure before it completely shattered at his feet. "Lady? Hmm. Yesterday I was a whore and today I'm a lady. Glad to see I've moved up in the world."

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "I didn't mean —"

"I know," Kris interrupted, already regretting her impulsive words. "I'm sorry I brought it up again. I'm not exactly at my best this morning." She took a sip of coffee, her own brand of liquid courage.

She became wary when a devilish smile graced his lips. Her irritation grew. "What?"

"It was fabulous?"

"Oh, geez," Kris rubbed a hand over her eyes. "Did you come over here specifically to torment me or was there an actual purpose to your visit?" Another thought crossed her mind. "Wait a minute. How do you even know where I live?" *And are you up for sex while you're here*, she wanted to ask.

Morning breath, bed head and grumpiness helped her to refrain. But only for his sake. Then again, maybe he deserved it.

His grin turned sheepish. "Your friends. I, uh, felt bad about yesterday and wanted to make it up to you."

"Make it up to me how?" Suspicion laced her words as she watched him, not daring to hope he'd come to sweet talk her into the sack. Because bed head or not, she was almost willing to take him up on it. Oh who was she kidding? She'd take him and she'd love every hot, sweaty second of it.

Instead of a proposal, he presented her with a package he'd been holding behind his back. Taking it gingerly, Kris stared at it. "What's this?"

"A present." When she continued to hesitate, he sighed. "Just open it. I promise it won't bite." *But I'd love to*. The thought rose unbidden in his mind. Boy, not even two minutes in her presence and already he was thinking of taking a bite of that sweetly scented skin. He definitely needed to get a grip. A grip on her full, pert breasts and maybe a handful of that perfectly rounded ass...

When she'd first opened the door, he'd had to literally stop his hand from reaching for her. She was wrapped in a worn flannel robe. The ragged garment looked incredibly soft and inviting on her. And the thought of what she might or might not be wearing underneath was driving him insane.

She smelled sexy too. All warm and sleepy. Derek had the craziest urge to bury his face in her hair and sniff. With a sinking feeling, he realized this romance business was already turning into a bad idea.

Her movements cautious, she unwrapped the gift. Inside the garment box she found three pairs of panties. One pair, a vivid scarlet bikini, was made of the smoothest satin with skimpy straps on the sides. Another, a soft lilac bikini, was made of a

delicate, sheer material guaranteed to reveal much more than it concealed. The third was a beautiful blue lace thong.

Confused and not a little mistrustful as to the meaning behind the panties, she looked up at him. "What are these for?"

"Uh...I thought you could use a few extra. Just so you don't get caught in another situation like yesterday." Derek shifted uneasily, only now questioning the intelligence of his gift. It hadn't been intended as a romantic gesture, but more of a peace offering. Seeing the anger welling in her eyes, he hastened to explain. "I didn't mean it as a joke. I just...I thought maybe you could...um...throw out that pair you had on yesterday and...um..." he trailed off, not wanting to say the wrong thing and risk riling her again. Why had he ever thought he could be romantic?

Kris stood there for a moment, unsure whether to slap him or laugh at the absurdity of the gift. Finally she smiled, deciding humor was the better choice. "What, you didn't like my granny panties?"

Relieved, he smiled back. "Only when you're not wearing them."

Awareness flared between them at his casual words.

"I mean...I don't... What I meant to say is, they're probably better off on someone who's ninety. And weighs about three-fifty." He quickly backpedaled, not wanting to veer off into dangerous territory so soon. He was still reeling from last night's fantasy.

"I suppose that puts me out of the running." Kris heaved an exaggerated sigh.

His quick laughter brought an answering smile to her face. She took a moment to study him. Something she hadn't had the opportunity to do yesterday.

He was dressed in a pair of snug blue jeans faded at the seams and a plain white T-shirt. Nothing exceptional until one noted the trim physique underneath. The T-shirt was stretched tight over sinfully broad shoulders and abs Kris would bet money was a six pack. The jeans were snug enough she could almost make out the muscles in his thighs as he shifted his weight. Mmm...

His hair was dark. Not black, but a deep, rich brown. Kris thought of her favorite dark chocolate. At first glance, his features were average. Attractive enough, but nothing to stop a woman in her tracks. His nose was a little crooked, though still appealing. Small laugh lines appeared at the corners of his mouth when he smiled. But it was his eyes Kris found fascinating. Fringed by thick, dark lashes, they were cobalt blue and so soulful and intense Kris wanted to drown in them. They were watching her now with amusement and a flicker of something else.

Her hormones jumped when she dropped her gaze and caught the teasing grin curving his lips. It was the last straw. She'd been too long without a man and here was a guy who not only cranked her gears but had brought her panties to boot. Sexy panties. Picking up the sheer pair, she slid the fabric between her fingers. "So you brought these over to see if I would look better in them?"

With great interest, she watched his eyes darken with arousal as he thought about it. Arousal was much better than the disgust she'd seen in her dream. Now if only she could replace the erotic thoughts with actual events...

Just as she was contemplating the best way to get him into her bed, he stuck out his hand in an obvious attempt to diffuse the situation. "I suppose now is a good time for a formal introduction. I'm Derek Reynolds."

Taking the offered hand, Kris slid her fingers through his. "Kris Jeffries. But I'm sure you already know that."

He glanced down at their entwined hands, his throat working hard. "Um...yeah. I, uh, I'm here for a reason."

Arching a brow, her smile turned wicked. "Is that right?" She held up the panties. "Would it by chance have anything to do with these?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean..." shaking his head, Derek took a deep breath. Christ, if it was this difficult to ask her out, making it through dinner would be pure torture. "I wanted to know if you..."

Kris interrupted his question by leaning close and licking his lips. She felt them go slack in surprise. Taking the opportunity presented, she pressed her lips to his, allowing her tongue to dance along the contours of his mouth. What a perfect mouth it was. His eyes may be gorgeous, but his mouth was sinful. Absolutely delicious. Hot and bothered since yesterday, she was more than happy to feast on him. He was every bit as scrumptious as she remembered. And just as potent.

She brought one hand up to his cheek. It was rough against her palm, a sexy rasp against her softer skin. Teasing, she nipped lightly on his firm lips. With a gentle demand, she deepened the contact, slanting her open mouth over his. She wanted to fully taste him. Yesterday she'd been too upset to fully appreciate his unique flavor. Today she wasn't going to make the same mistake.

He let her inside, let her taste him. She stroked his tongue with her own, feeling the shock of his hot mouth clear down to her core. The heat was incredible. He made no move to press closer, but his tongue moved in time with hers. The simple dance of their tongues had her ready to beg for release.

Her nipples tightened as she pressed closer. His body radiated the same scorching heat as his mouth. And the fit was still perfect. He stood very still, in shock she assumed. Kris moved one hand down to cup him through his jeans. She found him very ready and very willing. He filled the worn denim out impressively. Murmuring her approval, she slid a finger along the length of him, loving it when he jerked in response. Oh, he was very ready.

Pressing closer still, Kris rubbed her cleft against him, amazed to feel so much through the constraint of their clothing. A sense of urgency filled her as she boldly made love to his mouth.

Derek growled low in his throat. It took every ounce of strength he possessed to grab her hands and step back.

Her eyes were half closed and her cheeks flushed with desire as she stared at him. With her already tousled hair, she was knock-your-socks-off sexy. He was breathing hard and had to open his mouth a few times before words would emerge. "Okay, we need to just slow this down a second. I came over here to ask you to dinner, not screw you over a cup of coffee."

Her laugh was throaty. "Honey, I'll save you the trouble of taking me to dinner and we can just get to dessert." She glanced at the clock on the wall. "It might be a little early for you, but trust me, indulging in the morning has its benefits." She punctuated the remark by placing the tip of her tongue at the base of his throat and gently licking his skin.

Derek nearly swallowed his tongue. The woman was sin wrapped up in a very sexy package and she knew how to use it to her advantage. He took another step back, though every inch of him protested. "Wait. Just hang on a sec..."

She must have seen his near desperate state because after one more taste of his skin, she let him move away. "I have condoms, if that's what you're worried about."

Closing his eyes against the temptation she presented, he shook his head. "No. Not here...for sex...dinner." Those few words cost him more effort than he would have liked.

"Like I said, you don't have to buy me dinner —"

This time Derek interrupted her, having finally found his voice. "I know that. I *want* to buy you dinner." He stressed the word. "You know, a date? Where two people go out and get to know each other? I have much more respect for you than to expect I could come over here and get a quick thrill." Even though he was sorely tempted. But they both deserved to see this through. If she'd only give it a chance.

That made her laugh. "I have more respect for myself than that as well. But I also know my own mind." She walked closer, smiling when he took a step back. "Do you want to know what my mind is telling me?"

No. He didn't want to know. Not in the least, because he had a suspicious feeling it didn't involve dinner. Or romance. Opening his mouth to tell her, he was dismayed to hear a hoarse voice ask, "What?"

"That you and I could get to know each other very well in my bed. With you inside me," she tiptoed her fingers up his chest. Moving her mouth close to his ear, she whispered, "I want you, Derek. Let me show you how much."

Desire hit him so hard he felt his eyes cross. Tipping his head back, he had to wonder why. Why him? Why now? His intentions this morning had been good. Ask her to dinner. Show her a good time. Prove to her that romance can be something wonderful—without sex. And at the same time maybe help to make up for the insult he'd dealt her yesterday. Yet here she was, offering herself up like a succulent feast to a very hungry man.

God was he hungry. Hungry because of his eight-month fast. Hungry because she was so damn sexy. Hungry because he knew she'd be more than his equal in the sack. And as his partner.

He'd like nothing better than to taste her sweet tits. And nibble on her perfect lips. And slowly feast on her clit until she was screaming his name. Dreaming his name. Blood thundered through his veins. Grinding his teeth together to keep from taking a bite, he took a large step away from her. And her very talented lips.

"Look—" he stopped to clear his throat when his voice came out as a growl. Derek tried again, "Look, I want to take you to dinner. Just dinner."

She stared back at him for a moment, obviously skeptical. "Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'?"

Kris shrugged. "Why would you want to pass up sex for dinner? Just dinner." She threw the words back in his face with a mocking smile.

Derek shook his head, wondering what kind of assholes she'd dated in the past. "Is it really so hard for you to believe I want to take you to dinner and get to know you? Without jumping into bed first?" Though it was taking every ounce of willpower he possessed not to take her up on the offer.

"Considering less than twenty-four hours ago you thought I was a whore...yes." She shot him a wry look.

He rubbed a hand over his face, not wanting to go over the topic again. "I know you're not a whore. Now. But yesterday...you have to admit the situation was a little strange." And even worse was the fact that he couldn't get the image of her with those panties out of his mind. Especially when he started to think about exactly what those panties had covered. Had touched...

Kris had the grace to look sheepish. "Okay, I'll give you that. But that doesn't answer my question."

"You want the truth?" At least a PG-rated version of the truth. "Because you're a beautiful woman. And because I want to show you something none of the other guys you've been with have." He saw the spark of interest light her eyes. "No! Not that. I was talking about *romance*."

Kris shook her head in mock sorrow. "And here I was hoping you had some extraordinary skill. What a shame."

Derek knew she was baiting him and he couldn't help but rise to it. This time he was the one who stepped close. Close enough to make her eyes widen. He stopped when their lips were mere inches apart. "You can save your tears. I have never had any complaints about my skills. But I'm not looking for a quick lay. So is that a yes or a no?"

Kris hid her sudden apprehension behind a sly smile. "Is that a challenge? You only want romance. No sex?"

"Exactly." Derek was smart enough to know he couldn't show any sign of weakness at this point. Which was unfortunate because the hard-on he was sporting

was all but waving the white flag of surrender. A surrender he was already willing to concede.

"Fine. I'll go to dinner. And you can try and show me the wonders of romance," sarcasm dripped from her tone. "But I'm going to show you that sex is an important part, if not *the* most important part, of what goes on between a man and a woman."

"We're not going to have sex. We're going to dinner—" Derek bit off a curse as she slid her hand around his erection again.

"We'll see," she purred. Turning away, she sauntered toward the front door. "Why don't you pick me up on Friday at 6:00?" Without waiting for a reply, she led him to the door and before he'd caught his breath, he found himself outside at his car.

Derek wasn't sure if that had gone well or not. It hadn't gone as he'd planned, but at least they had a date.

Shaking his head, he had to smile at her tactics. Yes, this would be a hell of a lot more fun than he'd anticipated. Then again, the anticipation just might kill him. With another slight shake of his head, he hopped into his car and sped out of her driveway. Before he crawled back and begged her to show him all she knew about sex.

Kris watched from behind her curtain as he drove off with a smile on his gorgeous face. She could still feel the imprint of his dick on her hand where she'd cupped him. Yum. Double—no, make that triple—yum. The man was huge. Built for pleasure. A hot shiver worked its way up her spine. He wanted to play? Then let the games begin. She'd done this routine too many times to count. There was no reason why this time should be any different.

Chapter Five

The flowers arrived on Tuesday evening. Kris had barely pulled into her driveway when a delivery van pulled up at her curb. Hopping out of her car, she waited as the delivery man walked up to her with a smile.

"Ms. Jeffries?"

"That's me," she replied, looking warily at the large bouquet in his hands.

The flowers were handed over with a flourish. "These are for you."

Perplexed, she took the vase. Before she had a chance to say thank you, the guy was already in his van slamming the door shut.

Okay then.

Juggling her purse, the vase and her keys, it took a little effort to open her door. Detouring to the left, her purse and keys were dumped unceremoniously on the living room coffee table as Kris took the flowers to the kitchen. Who could they be from? She saw the small white card peeking out between the blooms and eagerly grabbed it. Impatient hands ripped at the envelope. The card inside simply read, *I'm looking forward to Friday.*

For a split second, she felt herself go soft. What a sweet thing to do. He hadn't needed to send flowers. Why, the last time she'd received flowers had been...

Whoa. Kris set the card down and took a step back. No way was she going to start getting all mushy just because he'd sent her flowers. He was out to prove a point. She'd almost forgotten. Though she couldn't help but lean forward to take a delicate sniff of the roses. They really were beautiful. They were a gorgeous peach shade—a cross between a light pink and a sheer ginger hue. And they smelled divine.

Since he'd been nice enough to send them, she might as well enjoy them. Shouldn't she? It didn't mean she was conceding defeat. Did it? A thoughtful expression on her face, Kris walked back to her bedroom to change.

* * * * *

On Friday evening, Derek arrived at five minutes to six. He knocked on her door and wondered what he would see when she opened it. There was no doubt she would come with guns drawn, and a small—no, make that large and growing larger—part of him couldn't wait to see what she had in store. The sane part of him was a bit worried. Was he really up for the challenge? If he was honest with himself, the answer was no. Hell no.

But damn if he was going to concede without a fight. At this point, however, he was afraid it might not be much of a fight. He shook his head at his own weakness. No, she would be romanced, if only for a short while.

The door opened, interrupting his inner battle. Rational thought fled and lust rose quickly in its place. Before him stood a gorgeous, sexy woman who all but screamed "Take me big boy." At this point, he doubted he'd need even that much encouragement.

Kris had dressed carefully for the date. A sleeveless, form-fitting top made out of a slinky material was paired with a black miniskirt that rode low on her hips. Lots of cleavage and even more thigh. Her blonde hair was loose, hanging straight down her back. Her tresses were shiny and soft, and Derek's fingers itched to run through them. She'd slathered on a delicate, yet seductively scented lotion with a hint of shimmer that made her skin glow. He didn't have a chance. And they both knew it.

Flashing a flirtatious smile, she greeted him. "Hey there, handsome."

Derek barely managed not to swallow his tongue. Yeah, he was a dead man. But he couldn't give in just yet. Maybe in a few minutes, though. "Evening." He let his gaze roam over her one more time. "You look...beautiful."

"You look pretty delicious yourself." Kris punctuated the compliment by slowly licking her tongue along her lips and granting him a saucy wink.

Determined to ignore her teasing as well as his body's reaction, Derek took her hand. "Ready to go?"

"Absolutely." Judging by the way she was all but purring, she was already very much aware of his discomfort.

It was going to be a hellishly long evening.

Derek led her to the car, solicitously holding the door open for her. She slid around him, cupping his butt and squeezing in the process. "Thanks."

He couldn't still his body's involuntary jerk at the touch. Lightning-hot lust streaked through him. But he refused to succumb. God help him, he couldn't succumb. Not yet.

She took her sweet time sliding into the seat of his restored '69 Ford Mustang Mach One. When he'd selected the leather for the seats, he'd never thought about what a woman's bare skin would look like lying against it. Now all he could think about was all that gorgeous golden skin and the smell of an aroused woman. He tried not to salivate at the picture she presented. Never had he considered his downfall would be quite so...perfect.

He didn't realize he'd been staring until she laughed. "Something wrong? Maybe you've changed your mind about dinner after all?"

With a grim smile, he shut the door on her knowing smirk. "Nope. Everything's fine." So damn fine, he almost hurt with it. Walking around to the driver's seat a little stiffly, he muttered under his breath, "We'll go eat some damn food even if it kills me."

On the way to the restaurant, he spent most of the time alternating between curses and fending off her roving hands. The woman could slide her fingers into amazing spots before he had a chance to defend himself. Not that he wasn't enjoying the subtle and not-so-subtle caresses, but it was the principle of the thing. At least that's what he kept telling himself. Over and over again. Until it was a desperate chant in his head.

Derek was able to breathe a huge sigh of relief when they pulled into a parking spot. Little did he know that Kris had only just begun to torment him.

* * * * *

Derek was more tempting than any man she'd been with in a long time. Maybe ever. The game they were playing was definitely arousing. She'd never been one to back down from a challenge, and this was definitely one challenge they'd both enjoy every step—and touch—of the way. Her panties, the blue thong he'd brought her last Sunday, were already damp with her arousal. Had been almost from the moment she'd opened the door.

Any other time she would have written it off to the car. He drove one fine machine. But she'd barely been able to appreciate the powerful ride when she'd only been able to imagine the powerful ride Derek could give *her*.

His thick brown hair looked as if he'd run his fingers through it instead of a brush. The effect was very sexy. Disarmingly so. Plain khaki slacks were made perfect by powerful thighs and a butt made for grabbing. Which she'd done with great pleasure as she'd slid into his car. His shirt, a black polo, did nothing to disguise the sinewy muscles of his chest and arms. Her attempts to touch him were as much for her pleasure as they were for his torment. She couldn't seem to help herself. Actually, she did want to help herself—to all of Derek. And she'd most certainly be going back for extra helpings.

More than idle curiosity prompted her to ask, "So Derek, what's on the menu tonight?"

Barely sparing her a glance, he escorted her to a small building. "Catalina's. This is one of my favorite places to eat, though I consider it an indulgence."

"Catalina's? I don't think I've ever been here," she mused, as they reached the double glass doors.

Derek held one open and silently ushered her in. She stepped inside and stopped abruptly, forcing him to step around her.

Holy cow. The building had seemed small and simple from the outside, but on the inside it was pure class. Shades of burgundy and navy were swirled throughout the interior in an array of rich fabrics. Private booths and a few open tables made up the small dining area. Stylish table cloths were topped with artfully arranged napkins and delicate votive candles. In fact, the whole place was illuminated by the flickering flames of the candles. As far as Kris could tell, they were used as the main source of light in the

dining area. A lone pianist sat in the back corner. His fingers dancing lightly over the keys as he performed a slow, jazzy piece.

Talk about romantic. Derek hadn't been kidding about that part, she realized. She'd have to really be on her guard from now on. It was time to heat up the seduction and get this game over with. The way things were heading, she wasn't sure how long she would be able to play.

After being seated by a *maître d'* – in a tux, no less – they each ordered a glass of wine. A basket of bread was set before them, still warm from the oven. A little anxious, Kris had to wonder if she was in over her head. She had already realized that subtle caresses weren't going to work. Derek was definitely not a pushover, which she could appreciate. On the other hand, his downfall – into her bed – would be all the more satisfying because of it. Which reminded her, it was time to get back to the business at hand. After she indulged in a piece of the delicious, crusty bread.

They'd been given a private booth and Kris sat across from him, studying his face. A body's reaction was only one of the many pleasures of sex. For Kris, it was all about the look of pleasure on a man's face or the sounds of gratification he made as she teased him. Satisfaction came in so very many forms.

Right now he wore a look that was a cross between acute pain and frustration.

Perfect.

She tried to smother a laugh. What had she been worried about? This was going to be easy.

Kris took his hand across the table, linking their fingers. "So, Derek...you said you wanted to get to know me better. What would you like to know?"

In a wary tone, he replied carefully, "You could start with the simple things, like...I don't know, what you do for a living maybe."

"Oh, Derek! Here I thought you'd be one for stimulating conversation. Maybe ask me about my favorite erogenous zones or something," Kris chastised with a shake of her head. "I'm a travel agent and I absolutely love it. There's just something about helping people choose their dream destination and making it happen for them. In the five years I've been doing it, I haven't yet been bored." As she spoke, she drew soft circles on the palm of his hand.

He was watching her fingers and didn't seem to be aware she'd stopped speaking. She brought her foot to his leg and played with the hem of his slacks. His only reaction was a muscle ticking in his jaw.

"Are you sure you don't want to know something a little more...interesting about me?"

"Only if by interesting you mean you participate in triathlons or you're a professionally trained sushi chef." He tried to move his legs away, but in the small booth there was nowhere for him to go.

"You couldn't pay me to do a triathlon and I've never had sushi." She wondered how far she could push him before he snapped. Her toes walked a slow trail up his pant leg. Before she reached his knee, he grabbed her foot. In the blink of an eye, his demeanor switched from confused frustration to alpha male.

Wow.

Looking her straight in the eye, he said in a low voice, "Don't. Keep it up and I'll flip you over so fast you won't have time to blink."

"Oooh. Like it doggie style, do you?" Kris teased, secretly surprised by his about-face. She couldn't help but wonder what other surprises he had in him.

"No. I'll blister that sweet little ass."

She looked at him thoughtfully, her mind whirling as fast as her libido. Thankfully, her quick wit didn't fail her. "I never figured you'd be the kind of guy who liked spanking." And she never thought she'd be the kind of gal who'd find it so arousing. At least with him.

"It wouldn't be for pleasure, trust me," he growled through clenched teeth.

Briefly, Kris wondered if he was upset because he was treading that fine line between sexual frustration and chivalry or if he was really and truly angry.

Deciding not to push him over the line quite yet, she held up her hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay. I can take a hint. I'll leave you alone now. But it'd be interesting to know why you're so adamant about the no sex thing." Her eyes narrowed on him in speculation. "You're not gay, are you?"

"Hell no, I'm not gay! What the hell kind of question is that?" Derek was pissed off she even had to ask. Especially after the kisses they'd shared. And the erection that was all but poking her in the face.

"What am I supposed to think? You were obviously feeling the same thing I was when you kissed me, yet you only wanted to ask me out to dinner..." she trailed off. "Is this some stupid man thing? You lost a bet with your buddies and now you have to go on a date and not have sex? Or maybe you're trying to get on my good side by pretending you want romance when you really do just want to have sex? Or maybe—"

"No, no and no," Derek cut off her next words sharply. "I'm not gay, I didn't lose a bet, I'm not trying to get on your good side and I don't have any damn ulterior motive."

"Then what is this all about?" Kris gestured between the two of them.

"*This* is about our conversation from last weekend."

She blinked in confusion. "You took me out to dinner because of my granny panties?"

If he clenched his teeth any harder, he was pretty sure he'd lose a few molars. "No," he replied slowly, praying for patience. "I asked you out because I'm attracted to you." He held up his hand when she started to speak. "However, I didn't ask you out just to get you in the sack and forget about you the next day. Or to have you do the same. This is about romance. Sex is great, but romance is better."

Kris picked up her glass of wine and looked at it. "I'll admit this wine was a good choice, but I'd prefer you inside me."

Derek nearly choked on his tongue. Every particle of his being wanted to take her up on that one. Inside of her, on top of her, surrounding her...

The problem was he didn't want her for just one night.

He hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud until she replied, "Okay, how about two nights. Or maybe a week. Or even three. We have to start somewhere."

"That's not what I mean." He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. What was it with this woman? "It's much more complex than that."

"No, it's not." Her gaze was serious as she contemplated him. "It's about two people who are attracted to each other. We're both adults. We want to have sex, so we do, and everybody's happy. Very happy. Scout's honor." She held up her hand to show him.

Derek wasn't about to point out scouts normally didn't make oaths regarding sex. Instead he said, "Don't you ever want someone to hold your hand? Someone to rub your feet at night? Someone to share your laughter and tears with?" Christ, he sounded like a sap. If he wasn't careful, he'd find himself spouting poetry or watching chick flicks. But he couldn't help it. She must be crazy. He'd never met a woman who wanted sex with no strings. One who didn't want romance or any form of a relationship. This was a damn strange case of role reversal, but he was determined to play his part.

Kris had to force a laugh. "I haven't needed anyone to hold my hand since I was old enough to cross the street by myself. As for the rest...yes, that would be nice, but...I don't know. I haven't really been looking for that." She wasn't about to admit she'd tried the whole hand-holding, feet-rubbing, laugh-and-cry-together thing only to fail time and again. She wasn't at all pleased that she was considering it now.

Derek was quiet for a moment. Finally he shook his head. "Well, that's what I want to do. Show you exactly what you've been missing."

"What if I don't want to know? What if I'm content the way I am?" she asked softly. She knew what she was missing. Nothing, as always.

He considered her question for a moment. "I just want you to know that there are men out there who value women for more than sex. I'm one of them. And I felt something last weekend that made me want to get to know you better. *Outside* of the bedroom." It was the truth. He really had felt more than a spark of lust with her. Although considering how horny he was, lust was definitely at the forefront.

A little amazed by his frankness and intrigued by the prospects, she nodded her head slowly. It was only fair to be honest with him as well. "Okay, but I want you to know...I want you. A lot. You're sexy, a great kisser and I felt something too. Something that made me want to take your clothes off and explore what you have to offer. *In* the bedroom."

His eyes closed as if in pain.

She felt a momentary pang of pity. "Tell you what. Because I'm feeling generous, I'll let you try and romance me through dinner without any more comments about sex, okay?" She batted her eyelashes in a parody of innocence.

Those intense blue eyes opened to regard her with wary amusement, doubting her sincerity. "How kind of you."

Kris wanted to tell him exactly how kind she could be if he'd simply let her, but she kept her mouth shut. He'd find out soon enough.

He obviously knew what she was thinking, because his eyes darkened to a deep midnight color with desire. Instead of reacting, however, he merely sent her a clipped nod to acknowledge her concession.

Deciding to offer another olive branch, she asked, "So why don't you tell me a little about yourself?"

"You already know I work construction."

"Right, I don't think I'll forget that particular detail," she countered dryly.

Chuckling at her discomfiture, he continued, "I work for the county as a project manager. I oversee any major roadwork and repairs. Right now we're slammed. Summer is our busiest time of year, as you can imagine."

"That's right. Don't you guys usually work until the sun goes down?" She looked out the window pointedly. The sun was just beginning to disappear for the day.

Derek flashed a small, mischievous grin. "Yeah. It's great to be boss."

Kris laughed. "So you're playing hooky? A man after my own heart."

"You'd be surprised," he murmured with quiet intensity.

The laughter died in her throat. Yikes. Kris was going to pretend he hadn't said that. She feigned a casual attitude. "Okay, boss man, what do you do for fun? When you have the time, that is."

He leaned back in the booth. "Fun? This time of year I don't know the meaning of the word. But when cold weather hits and things slow down, I like to catch a football game now and then. I like to ski." Tapping his chin, he thought for a moment. "I also enjoy working on my cars."

"Cars?" Kris perked right up. "You're into cars?"

"I wouldn't say I'm an expert, but I have fun with them. You've already seen my Mustang, and I also have an older Corvette I'm going to be fixing up soon. I drive a small four-by-four pickup in the winter, but the real beauty is my Viper."

Kris couldn't breathe. "You have a Viper?"

"Oh yeah," Derek replied proudly. "I had to save a pretty penny for that one, but man it was worth it. I love that car. She's my baby."

She couldn't stop from asking, "Are you going to let me drive it?"

"Drive it?" Derek looked a little uneasy. "Um, I don't really let anyone drive that car. Ever."

"Oh, come on. I'll be nice and easy with her. Promise." Kris would do anything to drive that car. She loved fast cars. Always had. Her love affair with sleek bodies and big engines had started back in high school when she'd taken an automotive class on a whim. What better way to meet hot guys? The teacher had brought in a rusted '67 Chevy Camaro, and let the class restore it piece by piece. Old cars were fun and the class had been a blast, but Kris much preferred the newer cars with their shiny chrome trim and gorgeous leather interiors. Not to mention their powerful engines and sweet-sounding purrs beneath the hoods. Though her car wasn't one of the fastest out there, she'd been drawn to the punchy accelerator and feminine feel. And just once in her life, she'd love to drive a Viper.

"I'm not sure," he hedged. Suddenly, he smiled. It was a slow, sexy smile that immediately put Kris on her guard. He leaned forward. "Okay, how about this. You tell me three things about yourself that you've never told anyone else and I'll let you drive it for five minutes. And you have to keep her under thirty."

"I tell you two things about myself that only my closest friends know, you let me drive for fifteen minutes and I'll keep it under eighty." She countered.

They stared at each other for a full minute before Derek finally conceded. "Deal." He looked at her expectantly. "Well?"

"When do I get to drive it?" No way was she parting with personal information until he'd given her specifics.

"Next weekend."

She closed her eyes for a moment. Just the thought of sitting in the driver's seat of one of those babies made her hot. And with Derek in the passenger seat? It would be a hell of a ride.

"Two things, huh?" At his nod, she sighed. "This doesn't go farther than you, got it? The first thing I'll tell you is that I used to have a lisp."

A comical expression crossed over his face. "A lisp?"

"Yes, a lisp," Kris repeated. "I had to see a speech therapist when I was a kid. It was brutal, but now you'd never tell. Listen, 'Sally sells seashells by the seashore'." She smiled proudly, well aware he thought she was nuts. He was way too easy.

"Uh-huh." He looked at her dubiously.

"And the second thing," she continued casually. "Now this is something you can never, ever tell another living soul. It would completely ruin me."

Derek shook his head, sure she was pulling his leg. "Gee, I can't imagine what could be worse than a lisp."

"I quilt."

Her declaration shut him up. "You quilt?"

"Yup. And I'm not too bad at it."

"You quilt." Derek knew he was repeating himself, but he wasn't sure how to react. "Okay, uh, I guess that settles that." It wasn't really what he'd been looking for, but they were surely interesting pieces of information.

Call him crazy, but he just couldn't picture the sexy blonde sitting at home stitching pieces of fabric together. It was too domestic, too tame. To him, she seemed anything but. But a deal was a deal.

He was saved from having to change the subject when the server arrived with their food. They'd each ordered a salmon fillet with hollandaise sauce. Sides of delicate asparagus and Parmesan-topped baked potatoes rounded out their dishes.

"Mmm, this is delicious," Kris mumbled around a mouthful of the steamy potato.

Their wineglasses were replenished and they lapsed into silence, concentrating on the meal before them.

Kris managed to talk him into sharing a slice of tiramisu for dessert. Once the plate of rich dessert was placed on the table, Kris set to work.

Dinner had officially ended.

* * * * *

Derek was dying. He was dying and he didn't see any great white light or angels to greet him. All he could see was a set of pouty lips that belonged to...well, she couldn't be an angel because angels didn't eat dessert the way Kris did.

She'd taken her spoon and scooped a generous helping of tiramisu onto it. Those luscious lips had opened wide to accommodate the large bite. Wide enough to show him he'd fit inside too. Her eyes had closed and she'd made a low moan of pleasure.

Derek felt sweat break out across his brow.

Why? Why had he wanted to do this? Why was he fighting having sex with her when she was so very willing? And when every part of him was so very willing?

The spoon had been pulled out slowly while her tongue had wrapped around it. Making sure to get every last morsel of the sweet confection. The process was being repeated, with great relish, just for his benefit he knew. He should ask her to stop, but he wanted to—had to—see her mouth open again and again. To watch that tongue wrap around the spoon so lovingly, knowing it could be his dick receiving that same...wonderful...wet...hot...attention.

He wasn't even aware when he groaned.

Kris looked up with false concern. "Derek, is something the matter? Oh, how rude of me. You must want a bite too. Here." Scooping another generous bite onto the spoon, she held it to his lips.

No, he wanted to say, he didn't want any tiramisu. He wanted to *be* the tiramisu. He wanted to feel her mouth close around him. Hear her make that sexy little moan again.

She could take bite, after bite, after bite and wrap that sexy little tongue around and around him...

But, weak man that he was, he opened his mouth. He at least wanted to put his lips and tongue where hers had been moments before. Their eyes met as he accepted the dessert from her. She watched him through lowered lids as he swallowed.

Amazing how so much could be said with a simple look.

"Would you like more?" They both knew what she was asking. God help him, he had to hesitate before he could answer her. Yes, he wanted more. He wanted to lick tiramisu off of her body for hours. Then he wanted her to lick it from his body. Then he wanted to...

"No...thanks." His voice was strained, but steady. He'd see this thing through. He had to, because he'd set the stakes so high.

Disappointment flickered briefly in her eyes. Then she squared her shoulders and forced a smile. "Tiramisu must not be your dessert of choice, hmm?"

"Oh, I like tiramisu just fine." Probably too much, now. He'd never be able to look at it again without thinking of Kris.

"But...?" she prompted when he didn't elaborate.

"But a tiny bite like that is nothing more than a tease." He smiled when he saw her eyes flash in anger. Derek leaned closer so she could hear the heat in his voice, "If I'm going to eat dessert, I want the whole panful. That way I get to enjoy everything there is to enjoy. I don't have to eat it all in one evening. It's there for me to savor for days."

Knowing full well where the conversation was headed, Kris felt compelled to point out, "There's only one problem with the way you eat your dessert. Some may last up to a week, but most tend to go bad after a day or two."

His eyes twinkling, he flashed a grin, "Not at all. You just have to know what temperature to keep them so they stay as perfect as the day you got them."

"Temperature?" her mouth turned down in a skeptical frown, now unsure where he was taking the conversation.

This time he took her hand and slid his finger along her slender arm, lightly traced her delicate collarbone and finally came to rest his fingertip under her chin. "You keep the desserts hot. As hot as you can without completely melting them. A little melting is okay, but too much and you can ruin them."

"Hot," she repeated slowly, her eyes darkening at the implication.

"Mmm-hmm," he replied, running his thumb over her lower lip. "We'll work on keeping this dessert nice and hot until we're both ready to sample."

"Hon, I'm always ready to sample dessert."

Derek looked into her eyes, but only saw desire. With a small smile, he shook his head. "Not this dessert. Not yet anyway." She would be soon, but not yet. Not until he knew that this wasn't another brief fling for her. It bothered him to think he could be nothing more than another night in her past.

In silence, Kris watched as Derek calmly paid for their dinner and escorted her out to the car. She didn't know whether to be angry that he'd assumed to know what she needed or feel intrigued with the promise he'd made. A promise she knew would turn into a spectacular night for both of them. This was new territory for her. She decided to simply let go for a while and see exactly where this gorgeous, enigmatic man would lead her. As long as it led to bed, that is...

Chapter Six

Derek had planned to extend the evening beyond dinner, whether it had been a leisurely stroll or dancing, whatever the mood had dictated. As he helped her into his car, once more receiving an eyeful of her golden legs, he knew the mood wasn't leading toward a walk. And the only dancing he was ready to do involved nude skin and... Derek shook his head. *Don't finish that thought.* It was very dangerous territory considering how edgy he was.

Deciding retreat was probably the best course of action, he drove back to her place. Hoping against hope he'd have the strength to leave her at the door. Then again...

An idea crept into his mind.

What if he indulged her without completely indulging himself? What if he gave her the pleasure she was seeking without actual intercourse? He could show her that sex had many subtle nuances that didn't involve intercourse. No, not sex—making love. Pleasuring her, making love to her body with only foreplay. His dick hardened immediately. Yes, this idea had merit.

But he'd have to take it slow. Regardless of what she wanted. And what he wanted.

A small smile played at the corners of his mouth. This would probably be a lesson for both of them. Her in restraint and him...well, he knew he was doing it for much more than romance. He'd only now realized he really was playing for keeps.

By the time they pulled up to her door, Kris was ready to pull out all the stops. She wanted him and he wanted her. There was only one possible solution to that equation and it all led to sex. Not romance and not a relationship. She wasn't in the market for any of that. Was she?

No, she wasn't. Not at all. At least, that's what she'd told herself after dinner. And on the way home. And now that they were at her place.

Relationships were too much work. It wasn't that she had a problem being exclusive. She simply didn't have the time to worry about another person right now. That and the fact she couldn't fake an emotional connection. It took too much time and energy and it wasn't fair to anyone involved.

Nope, a relationship just wasn't in the cards right now. She didn't think. Though foot rubs and hand holding had sounded nice when he'd mentioned them...

Kris turned toward him. "Want to come inside?"

He turned to her with a killer smile. One that had her sucking in a deep breath. "I'd love to."

Wow. That was the last thing she'd expected him to say. And the look in his eyes...

Wow.

Kris was half afraid she'd melt into a puddle at his feet right then and there. She had to keep it together. At least until they hit the bed.

Returning a seductive smile of her own, she opened the car door. Her legs almost betrayed her by stumbling as she stood up. What was wrong with her? She'd experienced enough romantic interludes to know how the game was played. No, not romantic interludes...it had been sex. And that's all this was going to be. Her heart was only beating faster because she was aroused.

She thought.

Derek stood close as she unlocked her front door. Close enough that she could smell his skin. He smelled like heat, soap and gorgeous male. It was her favorite scent. Her mouth was practically salivating at the thought of tasting him. She'd been right. This challenge had been easier than she'd anticipated. He must have decided to give it up. Now she wouldn't have to worry about the whole relationship issue and her emotional deficiency.

Confidence restored, she flashed a smug smile of victory and sashayed into the living room, knowing he was right behind her. A little wiggle of the hips never hurt. Turning around, she waited for him to come closer, kiss her, guide her to the bedroom...

He stood a few feet away, also waiting.

As the seconds ticked by, she began to wonder.

Finally he asked, "Are you going to offer me something to drink?"

"You want...something to drink?" Kris was baffled to say the least.

"That'd be great. Thanks. Whatever you have around will be fine." That said, he went and sat down on her couch, calm as you please. Acting as if they were on a *real* date.

Seconds ticked by as Kris tried to figure out what was going on. He'd come inside to have sex, hadn't he? Now he wanted something to drink?

What was wrong with this picture? What was his angle here? Suddenly Kris knew...he was going to play hard to get.

No problem. She'd simply have to make the first move. She remembered a long ago boyfriend who'd gotten off on dominant women. Kris had loved it too. Until he'd shown up to their one month anniversary date with a box of...well, he'd called them goodies—she'd just called them sick and wrong. A gorgeous pair of lace panties complete with garter belt and stockings, four-inch high heels and a matching bra. It would have been a great gift, except they hadn't been for her. He'd wanted to wear them while she... She shook her head to clear the bad memory. Some things never needed to be dredged up. Needless to say, she'd quickly shown him the door. After she'd strung the garter belt around his boys and showed him where to put the four-inch heels, that is.

Maybe a drink was a good idea. Something to help relax her and something to quench his thirst before things got too heated between them. And she'd make sure they did.

She poured a small glass of wine for each of them and walked into the living room. He looked up as she sat down, taking the proffered glass.

"Thanks."

"You're very welcome," she purred, anticipation thrumming through her veins. She could already picture his sun-darkened skin on her cream-colored sheets. Though she hadn't seen him naked, she remembered the feel of his body against hers. The man was rock-hard in all the right places. In part due to his job and the other part...that would all be up to her.

Scooting closer, she kept one hand wrapped around the stem of her wineglass and let the other trail along his shoulder. His only reaction was to turn his head and watch her with a steady gaze.

Undeterred, she traced the rim of his ear, delighting when his jaw clenched and goose bumps broke out along his skin. "Derek, I think we should just cut to the chase."

He merely lifted an eyebrow, maintaining his calm. "You do?"

"Mmm-hmm." Placing the glass on the table, she leaned over and put her mouth to his.

God, he tasted good. With a light touch, she traced her tongue around his mouth. His lips tasted of wine and heat and Derek. He remained still as she continued her exploration. Firm lips yielded ever so slightly as she explored deeper. Her tongue entwined with his, seeking, retreating. Yet he remained passive. If it weren't for the erratic beat of his heart beneath her palm, she'd wonder if he was even interested. And here she was, heart hammering and body aching in a way she'd never experienced. Kris wasn't about to let him remain unaffected.

Moving closer still, Kris pressed her breasts against his chest. She could feel his breath catch for a moment. Good.

Her lips softened on his mouth and she brought her right hand up to his shoulder, while her left hand encircled his neck. Slow caresses brought her right hand down his arm. Reluctantly, she drew back a few inches, but only to gain better access. Skimming her hand down his stomach, she found the top of his slacks. Carefully, she moved her fingers back and forth along the waistband. She could feel his muscles contract. Yum.

When her fingers began to slowly coax the zipper down, he stopped her.

"No. I said no sex and I meant it. This is about romance." His voice was ragged, but his eyes attested to his sincerity. And his determination.

Frustrated, horny and more than a little hurt by his rejection, she pulled away. "What is this? Some sick sort of role reversal where you play the tease?"

He scowled at her accusation. "Tease? How can I be a tease when *you* were the one who kissed me?"

He had a point, but Kris wasn't about to admit it. Before she could think of a suitable reply, he sighed. "Okay, let's try this. I am attracted to you—"

"Why do I sense a big 'but' coming here," Kris interrupted in a sarcastic tone, her still-wet lips drawing down in a small frown.

"But, I don't want to just have sex. I do, however, have a proposition for you."

"If it doesn't involve whipped cream, massage oil and various *Kama Sutra* positions and not necessarily in that order, then I'm not interested."

Derek had to smile at her surly tone. "Oh, it involves touching." He hid his smile when her interested gaze turned toward him. "And laughing. And long evenings together. And maybe even massage oil."

She eyed him in speculation. "What's the catch?"

Smart lady. But everything would work out to their advantage, not only his. "No sex."

Kris sat in silence. No sex. He was proposing romance. Dates with no pressure to perform in bed. Long evenings of companionship, laughter and maybe a massage. But no sex.

Did she want him? Absolutely. But for some strange reason, he was dead set on romancing her. If she was completely honest, she would admit that this romance thing was starting to sound...nice. Not that she'd been interested, mind you, but now she found she was somewhat intrigued by the prospect. She still, however, wanted sex. Specifically with Derek. And she'd pretend the implications of that were purely carnal. The desire she felt had everything to do with how sexy he was and nothing to do with how he made her feel. Not in the slightest.

She thought.

But no sex? Why couldn't she have her cake and eat it too? And she asked him that.

Derek was patient when he explained, "You can. We both can. There just won't be any sex involved."

"Hon, that's like cake without frosting. Not much fun for anyone. Pointless even."

He traced a finger along the line of her jaw, the length of her throat, drawing a small shiver. "It'll be plenty of fun. Trust me on that."

His eyes promised to fulfill her desires and she was tempted. But how would he do it? Fulfill her desires, that is. She had no doubt he *could* do it. He just seemed to not *want* to do it. Some women might get off on a box of chocolates and a dozen roses, but she wasn't one of them. No, she wanted all of her senses stimulated at once, thank you very much. Even though the flowers he'd sent still sat beside her bed where she could see them before she drifted off to sleep.

All he was asking for was to date her, though. Really, what could it hurt? A few dates, a little wining and dining, a little romance, as he kept saying. And maybe, just maybe if she could wear him down, a few nights of great sex. No, not *if*, but *when*. It would all happen before he realized she was lacking.

"I want sex. You're offering romance. So what's in this for me?" She didn't realize until the question was out of her mouth, exactly how much his answer mattered. It scared her that it did.

Derek's answer was simple. "Everything."

Everything. That one word embodied so much. Kris figured it was safest not to consider the implications of it. So she merely nodded her head. "Okay, you have a deal."

His mouth curved into a smile so full of heat she had to shift uncomfortably against the moisture between her legs. Derek leaned closer to say, "Perfect. Let's kiss to seal the deal."

Holding up a hand, she stopped his mouth mere inches from her own. "Wait just a minute. You sit there and say 'no sex' and yet you want to kiss to seal the deal?" Now she knew he was out to tease.

Derek's look was telling and not in the least contrite. "Yes. I said no sex, but I didn't say anything about pleasure."

Understanding dawned as she looked at him. He wasn't only offering romance, he was also offering... "So these dates you have planned, are they going to involve, ah, foreplay?"

"If you want." His tone was calm though the look in his eyes was anything but.

"Hon, I've already told you what I want."

He tipped her chin slightly as he moved closer again. "So you did. But let's start with this and see how it goes."

While her kiss had been hurried, his was a soft, leisurely taste of heaven. With gentle strokes, his tongue caressed her lips. For long minutes he sampled the outer corners of her mouth, the fullness of her lower lip. Kris was entranced enough to let him play. She wondered how far he'd take it.

His hands came up to lightly stroke her back. It was a simple touch, yet it sent a jolt of heat straight to her stomach. And lower.

Finally, Derek slid his tongue between her lips. Kris moaned at the smooth invasion, welcoming it. One of his large, warm hands cupped the back of her neck, holding her in place. His thumb gently stroked her cheek as he delved deeper into her mouth. Sucking lightly on her tongue, he caused butterflies to flutter wildly in her stomach.

Oh, he was good.

Their tongues danced together as she responded. Desire had her leaning closer, hoping to gain another touch, a different caress. Instead, he intensified the kiss, plunging his tongue deeper into the warm recesses of her mouth.

His hands remained in place, yet every nerve ending in her body tingled as if he were touching her elsewhere. She'd wanted her senses stimulated but this was almost...overwhelming. A simple kiss, yet it had her complete, unwavering attention.

Derek bit down on her lower lip, causing her to gasp in surprise. His eyes twinkled momentarily before he began to nibble on her chin. Following the curve of her jaw, he pressed soft kisses to her throat.

Kris prayed he'd move to her breasts.

She was disappointed when he moved back to her mouth. Disappointment quickly fled as he kissed her again. This time the kiss was anything but gentle. She could taste the hunger on his lips. Could feel it as he feasted on her mouth. Firm lips slanted over hers, his tongue moved in and out, creating a delicious, sensual pull in her womb. His rhythm was perfect, his obvious desire even more so.

Oh, he was *very* good.

His hands moved to tangle in her hair, effectively pulling her closer. She hadn't thought the kiss could deepen, yet he managed it. He rubbed his lips against hers, sliding his tongue inside again and again.

The familiar pressure began to build within her. Amazing. It was only a simple kiss. Or was it?

She placed her hands on his face, gently framing the rugged contours. One finger traced his ear while the other hand cupped his jaw.

Again, he sucked on her tongue, this time inviting her to sample him. More than willing, Kris allowed her tongue to follow his, sliding past his warm lips. He groaned in appreciation. Kris felt the vibrations of that groan in places that usually needed a firmer touch.

"Again," she whispered against his mouth, licking his lower lip.

He complied as his tongue slid against hers. His groan had her arching against him. He teased her tongue, her lips, sending those delicious vibrations throughout her body. Kris was shaken by her reaction.

She just needed a little more...

Well if he wouldn't do it, she would. Shifting a bit on the couch, she pushed her miniskirt high up her legs, exposing her panties. In a restless motion, she moved the damp material aside and pressed her fingers against her aching clit. She gasped at the contact. When had she ever wanted so badly?

She drew back so she could straddle his waist. He opened his mouth to protest, but Kris placed a finger to his lips. "Watch," she commanded.

His gaze followed her hand as she once more lowered it to her panties. His eyes flared when he saw her pull the material to one side and caress herself. Breathing hard, he watched hungrily.

Kris slid a finger inside, helping to spread the moisture around her outer lips. Her clit was aroused and aching. But she wanted to draw this out. Instead of taking care of the immediate need, she wanted to tease him.

She watched his throat working hard as she slid a second finger inside. In slow movements, she drew them out and skimmed them up to her clit. With light pressure

she rubbed the sensitive nub. While he watched, she explored with her fingers. Spreading her folds, she exposed herself to his gaze, wanting him to see. Derek made a sound somewhere between a moan and a low growl. Kris couldn't even smile at the noise.

Through a haze of lust, she watched his fists clench and unclench at his sides. Lost to her rising passion, she stroked herself. By watching his eyes, she was able to judge exactly what he liked. His eyes flashed fire when she rubbed her clit firmly and moaned. His tongue came out to lick his lips when she slid two fingers inside her pussy. His throat worked hard to swallow when she moved her hips against the motions of her fingers. She was getting very close.

"Kiss me." Her words were husky with her arousal.

It was with some effort he brought his gaze back to hers. Grasping her shoulders to hold her still, he complied. His lips were hard and ravishing. She could sense his need and she loved it. As his mouth stroked her tongue, she continued to stroke herself. Fingers slid inside, then pulled out to massage her hot clit. A small moan worked its way past her throat.

Derek moaned against her mouth as well.

Closer to the peak, Kris pushed her fingers inside one more time before moving back up to caress her aching clit. She imagined it was the tip of his dick rubbing her. His hard shaft would press against her with delicious friction. Faster now, she worked her clit, needing release. When he once again sucked on her tongue, the pull of his mouth, her fingers rubbing her clit, it all had her shuddering with the force of her reaction.

His arms came around her as she trembled. Derek buried his head in her neck, breathing as hard as Kris was. In languorous movements, she continued to stroke her wet flesh, drawing a few more delicious tremors.

Wow.

Very carefully, he pulled away. "Damn," his voice was hoarse. "Did you just...?"

She blinked slowly. "Yeah, I did."

"Damn," Derek said again, looking down to where she still had her hand.

She felt the muscles beneath the hand on his shoulder stiffen as he stared. Lust etched the planes of his face. He wanted. Badly.

Kris couldn't help the wicked smile that crossed her face. "You know, I think I like this deal more and more. You're quite convincing when you put your mind to it."

Derek didn't respond. Carefully, very carefully, he moved her hand away from her curls and pulled her skirt back down. In a move that shocked them both, he took her fingers into his mouth. Closing his eyes, he drew them in deeply, feasting on her taste, her essence. Kris shivered with renewed desire.

When he'd had his fill, he opened his eyes and licked his lips. With a shake of his head, he smiled ruefully. "I think I'm the one who's been convinced."

"Of what?" She didn't even care that her voice shook.

His palm brushed her cheek softly. "The fact that you're amazing."

Yikes. Was that her heart that just lurched and fell at his feet? She needed to get a grip or this could get out of hand before it had even begun. Or maybe it was already too late. No, it had to be the heat of the moment. A false reading. Her heart had never had problems before and she couldn't believe it would start to now.

She shook her head to clear the confusion. Keeping things physical was the plan, she needed to remember that. To cover her uncertainty, she forced a laugh. "If you don't plan on spending the night, you'd probably better go. If that was a prelude to what you're like in bed, I'd be willing to sign on as your permanent love slave."

Frustration at her emotional withdrawal dimmed the light of appreciation in his eyes. "You're probably right." He stood and offered her a hand up.

She walked him to the door, holding his hand for the few short steps. Before he walked out, he kissed her softly on the lips. "Thank you for a wonderful evening."

"No, thank you. That was the best time I've had in...a very long time." Kris meant it, too.

Derek must have seen the sincerity in her eyes, for he smiled. "Are you busy next weekend?"

"Not yet."

"Good. I'll see you on Saturday."

Without waiting for a reply, he walked to his car and drove off.

Shutting the door, Kris went and sat back down on the couch before her legs gave out. Well, that had been...interesting. No sex, but a wonderful guy, a great dinner, a heavy make out session and she actually felt...satisfied. In many ways.

Kris couldn't remember the last time she'd spent an evening simply making out. And this evening would most likely rate at the top of her list for a long time to come. A fact that still amazed her. Who would have thought?

Bemused, confused and more than a little enamored with the fascinating Derek, Kris got ready for bed.

Yes, things were definitely looking up from last week.

* * * * *

Derek couldn't figure out what had been more stupid, suggesting the no sex rule or thinking he could touch her without wanting to spread her out beneath him. Over and over again.

When he'd seen where her hand had been... A groan slipped past his lips. He'd been so close to dropping to his knees and taking her right then and there. Tasting her had been an even bigger mistake.

Now he had a boner that he knew would be a permanent fixture as long as Kris was around. A fixture that would serve no real purpose because of his stupid idea. Then

there were the questions that had popped into his mind before, during and after their interlude. Questions he didn't know the answers to. Throw all of that on top of the fact he could still taste her. A taste he couldn't get out of his mind.

Was there a solution to the mess he'd gotten them both into?

Derek sighed heavily. Yes, there was. But how was he going to convince a commitment-phobic woman that romance was not only wonderful, it was even better with love?

Damn, he really hadn't expected this. Who would have thought that seeing a woman changing her panties in her car one day would lead up to having dinner with her a week later and taking that final, emotional plunge?

He briefly remembered in the movie *Jerry McGuire*, when the woman said, "You had me at hello." He wondered how Kris would take it if he told her, "You had me with your panties around your ankles." Or maybe it had been the sumo wrestler underwear on her car seat. A small smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

Either way, he was a goner. Now he just had to hold out until she felt the same.

Looking down at the serious discomfort in his pants, he sighed again. Someday, maybe, he'd learn to keep his big mouth shut. In the meantime, it was going to take all his strength to keep his pants up.

Chapter Seven

It was noon the following Saturday and Kris was studiously ignoring her treadmill. It didn't deserve any of her time today. She was convinced it was completely to blame for the entire, horrible event now officially known as the Panty Episode. So as punishment, she'd let it sit there in the corner of her living room. Alone and unused. And a big, ugly eyesore.

She had her sewing machine whirring on the other side of the room, which allowed her to keep her back to the treadmill. Humming tunelessly, she focused on keeping her stitching straight. Taking her foot off the pedal, she sat back to study her work. "Not too bad," she muttered, after eyeing it critically.

Kris had noticed a slight tear in one of her curtains and was busy repairing the damage. It only took her a few minutes to fix the tear and put the curtain back up. Dusting her hands, she looked over at the treadmill with a grimace. Maybe she should make a cover for it. A really pretty cover that would allow her to forget the stupid thing was even there.

Shrugging her shoulders, she sat on the couch with her big basket of fabric. What she really wanted to do was get to work on her latest project. A quilted bedspread for Maddie. After seeing the one Kris had made for her mother, Maddie had strongly hinted she'd like one too. And since her birthday was just around the corner, Kris figured it was as good a time as any to get it done.

She'd chosen pale colors to match Maddie's décor. Lilac, taupe and a soft sage green. The design was a simple one, but it fit Maddie perfectly. Kris hoped she'd like it.

The fabric was measured, cut and ready to be pieced together. Sticking numerous pins between her teeth, Kris spread the fabric onto the coffee table and set about pinning it together. She'd no sooner stuck in the first pin and the doorbell rang.

"Great," she muttered around the pins. How typical of Maddie to show up for a visit at a time like this. But there was no help for it. She didn't want to stuff it all back in the basket when she'd just laid it all out. Maddie would just have to act surprised on her birthday.

Mumbling under her breath, she kept a hold on the fabric and barely managed to open the door. It wasn't Maddie.

In surprise, Kris looked up at Derek.

He was watching her with unease. "Um, did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Mmmff." She nodded her head, indicating he should step inside.

Derek followed her in, amazed to see her mouth full of wickedly sharp pins. He noted the fabric swathed across the couch and piled high in her arms. He saw the

sewing machine against the wall, something he'd missed the first couple of times around. His incredulous gaze swung back to her. "You really do quilt."

Her brow rose and her eyes twinkled with amusement. She dropped onto the couch and resumed her work. Removing the pins from her mouth, she asked, "What's the occasion?"

"Huh?" Derek was too busy watching her nimble fingers at work.

Kris didn't even look up. "Your visit. What's the occasion?"

"Oh. I thought we had a date to go driving."

Her fingers stopped abruptly. Her head snapped up and she stared at him with growing excitement. "Driving? You brought the Viper?"

Derek flashed a quick grin and pulled the keys out of his pocket. "A deal's a deal."

Kris closed her eyes in bliss. After a few deep breaths, she opened them. "I didn't think you'd really bring it."

He shrugged. "Like I said, a deal's a deal. Besides, I thought we could make a day of it."

She eyed him in speculation. "What'd you have in mind?"

"I thought after your fifteen minutes in the driver's seat, we could have a picnic. I hope you haven't eaten yet."

"Nope. A picnic sounds great." Actually, she couldn't remember the last time she'd gone on a picnic. And as long as she got to drive that car, she was up for anything. Looking back down at Maddie's quilt, she sighed. "But you'll have to give me a minute here. I just need to finish putting this together."

"No problem. I'll just sit here and try to find the courage to hand over the keys in a few minutes." She smiled broadly, just as he'd hoped.

Derek took a moment to look around. He hadn't really noticed much about her place the first couple of times he'd been here. It was a far cry from his apartment. She had color everywhere. Her furniture was done in muted shades, but there were brightly colored quilts thrown over the back of the couch and an oversized easy chair. Large and small throw pillows were artlessly placed around on the furniture as well. Pictures covered most of the walls. Many were elegant prints of vacation destinations, from sandy beaches, to Rome, to the green hills of Ireland. A china hutch in one corner was filled with an array of knickknacks. He saw deco-style plates, a chic vase and a figurine of Betty Boop.

Derek had to smile at that.

A small gas fireplace took up a good portion of the wall facing the couch. The small mantle above housed a few framed photos and a half dozen tapered candles in a rainbow of shades. The effect should have been disorderly and the numerous colors discordant, but somehow it wasn't. The colorful shades and inviting arrangement of her belongings only served to make the home feel cozy. Lived in. Everything his place wasn't.

It was so very like the Kris he was coming to know. A lot of color, a mix of styles, and underneath it all was one amazing woman.

Turning his attention back to her, he watched as she pieced the last of the fabric together.

"There, all done." Kris folded the material carefully and placed it back in her basket. "Let me change really quick and we can head out."

Kris all but skipped back to her bedroom. She was going to drive a Viper! She could hardly contain her excitement. And the funny little dance her heart was doing was all because of the car. It had nothing – absolutely nothing – to do with Derek's arrival.

She thought.

Grabbing a pair of jean shorts and a simple white tank top, she changed quickly. Kris found her favorite pair of sandals in the back of her closet and was about ready to leave the room when an idea hit her.

Tapping her chin thoughtfully, she walked over to her dresser. He'd said this whole thing could be about foreplay *and* romance, so why didn't she help the poor guy out a bit? Opening her lingerie drawer, she pulled out her backup dildo. With a wicked smile, she put the seven-inch rubber penis in her purse. She wanted Derek and Derek wanted foreplay. Being the helpful person she was, she'd just bring along her handy-dandy sidekick and show Derek *her* idea of foreplay.

By the time she walked back into the living room, Derek was standing by the door. He turned to her with a smile. "All set?"

"You bet, big guy."

When he would have walked outside, she stopped him by clearing her throat. Loudly.

"Something wrong?" His brows were drawn down in a puzzled look.

She held out her hands. "Keys please."

In obvious reluctance, he dug the keys out of his pocket and handed them over.

Snatching them quickly, she flashed a brilliant smile. "Thanks." She stepped outside and sucked in a quick breath. It was gorgeous.

Bright cherry red, sleek and smooth and a convertible to boot. Kris hadn't ever been this close to heaven. She walked up slowly and put her hand on the hood. Trailing her fingers along the glossy finish, she said in a reverent tone, "God, she's gorgeous."

Derek's eyes were full of pride. "Isn't she?" Then he sighed. "Well, let's get on with it then. I'd rather get this part over with."

Kris couldn't help but laugh at his apprehension. "Don't worry, Derek. I'll be nice and gentle with her, I promise." She slid into the seat with a loud sigh of appreciation. Stroking her hands over the dash, she sighed again and put the key in the ignition. The engine roared to life and Kris closed her eyes for a moment to simply appreciate the delicious vibrations humming through her.

After a moment she opened them and saw Derek watching her with a bemused expression. "You okay there?"

"Perfect," she replied. And she was. Better than perfect, even.

* * * * *

Derek stepped out of the car twenty-five minutes later and hastily put the keys in his pocket. That hadn't been too bad. She'd kept it under eighty, like she'd promised. And he'd let her drive a little longer than promised. Mainly because he'd had his eyes closed and hadn't been checking his watch.

But it was all over now. His end of the bargain was fulfilled. And now he could once again focus on the romance at hand. Grabbing the picnic basket out of the back, he headed for the grass. Kris had already hopped out and was waiting for him.

"See? That wasn't so bad, was it?" When he just grimaced, she laughed. "Oh, you big baby."

Linking her arm through his, she pulled him away from the picnic tables placed twenty yards from the parking lot. "Let's go somewhere a little more private."

The park grounds were extensive and finding a secluded area wasn't difficult. Kris managed to find a spot with tall, dense shrubs to shield them from curious eyes, and a handful of large maple trees offering shade from the midday sun. Despite the fairly private setting, Derek was relatively certain she would behave in public. He hoped. Spreading a blanket out, he set the basket down and drew Kris down beside him.

There was a great deli a block from his apartment that, in his opinion, made the best sandwiches anywhere. He'd stopped by earlier and had them fill up the basket. Opening it now, he found a roast beef and cheddar piled high on sourdough, a turkey and provolone stuffed between wheat bread, two helpings of pasta salad and two bottles of water. Fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies were tucked in for dessert.

Kris eagerly grabbed a sandwich. "You mind if I take the turkey?"

Amused, Derek watched her take a big bite. "Help yourself."

She winked at him and resumed eating. They quickly managed to polish off the sandwiches before slowly savoring the cookies.

"That was delicious." Kris finished her last bite of cookie and licked her lips in appreciation.

Derek watched the motion surreptitiously, and barely managed to stifle a groan. Did she have any idea how tempting she was? Yes, she probably did. And she was probably doing it on purpose to torment him. Derek couldn't say he minded.

Leaning back on her elbows, Kris looked up at the blue sky. "Wow, it's a gorgeous day, isn't it?"

He mumbled an agreement, too intent on the way her nipples poked against the thin, white fabric of her tank top. She was wearing a bra, but it wasn't enough to disguise the dusky peaks. Derek felt his mouth go dry.

She turned her head to look at him. "Just right for a picnic. Thanks for inviting me."

"My pleasure." And it was. Derek couldn't think of anything but pleasure at the moment. His pleasure, her pleasure, mutual pleasure—hot, sweaty, naked pleasure.

Lying back against the blanket, Kris sighed. "There's only one thing that would make it even better."

Derek didn't want to know unless it involved him on top of her. Naked. Whoa, back up. He did a mental head shake. He had to get a grip. He cleared his throat noisily. "What's that?"

Her naughty smile should have clued him in. Too late he realized he should have simply changed the subject. "Foreplay."

"Ah," words stuck in his throat. How could he respond to that when it was all he really wanted too? "Um..."

Still smiling, Kris motioned toward her purse. "Would you grab that for me?"

Glad for something to do, Derek all but lurched for her purse. Anything to keep from rolling directly on top of her. And thrusting inside of her.

"Thanks." She let her fingers trail over his hand as she took it from him. She made a show of rummaging around, then exclaimed, "Ah, here it is!" She whipped out her dildo.

Derek gaped at her. Was that what he thought it was?

Innocent brown eyes blinked at him. Derek could only stare. And wonder.

A breath huffed between her lips. "I suppose you expect me to do all the work, don't you?" Not giving him a chance to answer, she shimmied out of her shorts and tossed them on the picnic basket.

"Ah...ah..." He couldn't seem to draw a breath. What in the hell?

She was wearing a pair of the bikini panties he'd given her. The sheer lilac material revealed much more than it concealed. A fact Derek was pathetically grateful for.

Through the gauzy material, he could see the damp evidence of her arousal. His breath whooshed from him. He wasn't sure, but he thought he might have gurgled as lust threatened to choke him.

Looking up, she smiled at his obvious discomfort. "Did you want to take over?"

"Ah...ah..." Derek was rooted to the spot.

A slight shrug lifted her shoulders for a moment. "Suit yourself." Her focus returned to her panties. Her left hand had swept the material aside, exposing her glistening curls. She was gloriously wet. Derek felt his dick twitch as he processed that tidbit. Shifting uncomfortably against his too tight shorts, he continued to watch her.

In her right hand she held the dildo. She brought it close, so close to her curls Derek felt his mouth go slack. Was she really going to...? Again?

She stopped abruptly and her brow puckered. "Oh, I almost forgot."

His hungry gaze followed the dildo as it was brought to her full, pink lips. Her mouth opened and her tongue came out. Derek swallowed hard. He watched hungrily as she laved the dildo, spreading her tongue along the entire length.

Derek fisted his hands in the blanket spread beneath him. His knuckles were white with the effort.

Her mouth, now wet from her ministrations, curved into a devilish half smile. "Can't forget the lubrication." Her gaze dropped to the erection straining at his fly and flicked back to his eyes. "You're more than welcome to join me."

His hands twitched, longing to slide his zipper down and indulge. But he had to stay in control. If he even had such a thing left. He shook his head curtly.

She merely continued to smile, not in the least deterred. Her right hand went back to her curls, the dildo firmly in her grasp. Sweat broke out across his brow. How could he sit through this? Again? Then again, how could he not?

She placed the sex toy against her pussy before sliding the tip in an inch. Derek cursed softly. For a minute, she simply teased, sliding the tip in and out, but only barely. Then in a swift motion, she buried it inside, moaning softly at the invasion. Derek groaned right along with her.

Her eyes had closed, but she opened them to look directly at him. They were glassy with desire. Derek couldn't hold her gaze. Instead, it dropped to her hands. Again.

She was slowly sliding the dildo in and out. "Mmm, that was the perfect amount of moisture."

Her words had him grinding his teeth. It was more than enough for his dick to... He cursed again and tried to stop thinking.

His brain completely shut down when she pulled the dildo out and slid it up to her clit. With small movements, she teased the small nub until Derek was ready to go up in flames. Her mouth was parted slightly as her breath began to quicken. Shifting the dildo to the left hand, she slid it back inside her hot little pussy and brought the fingers of her right hand back to her clit. In rapt fascination, Derek watched the dildo move faster and faster as she thrust it in and out. Her fingers were rubbing her clit in firm movements as her orgasm began to crest.

A low keening cry built in her throat. Derek watched her head tip back and her eyes close. The dildo plunged deep and her fingers worked her clit. Her hips moved impatiently as she moved closer to the peak.

Derek hadn't even realized his hand had begun to stroke his erection through the cloth of his shorts. He was too enamored of the sight before him. Her knees dropped to the sides as she opened herself to his gaze. Derek felt a fierce longing to be the one

plunging into her heat. To be rubbing her clit, pushing her over the edge. Unconsciously, he moved closer.

"Oh, god!" The cry was ripped from her throat as the dildo was buried deep. Her fingers moved frantically as she climaxed.

As her hands eventually slowed and stilled, Derek watched her legs tremble slightly. He didn't even realize his were trembling as well. He was in shock. He was so damn worked up he didn't think he could walk. And he was in love.

That had been incredible. The sight of her caught in the throes of her orgasm would be forever branded in his mind. And he figured the memory would be a nice companion to go with his rock-hard erection.

With a wry grimace, he looked down. Not surprisingly, he found his shorts wet. This romance stuff wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Chapter Eight

It was back to work on Monday morning and unlike her co-workers, Kris wore a genuine smile. She was looking forward to this evening. Derek had told her he'd try to get off a little early and swing by. The mere thought of seeing him again sent excitement thrumming through her. Which should have given her pause. But she was too content with everything to worry about the details.

Life, in a nutshell, was good.

When Maddie called to see if she was available for lunch, she readily agreed. Maybe her friend had some advice on how to speed up the physical part of this romance thing. Heck, Maddie had landed her hunky husband at an erotic resort. Of course, Kris had tricked her into going, but when she'd found her happily ever after she hadn't complained.

By the time she arrived at their usual diner, Maddie was already waiting. She took in the satisfied expression Kris wore and said, "Well, it looks like that cat got a bowl full of cream after all."

"Nope," Kris replied cheerfully. "But I do have a date tonight."

"Ooh. With the Panty Episode man?"

She wrinkled her nose at the reminder. "Yes, but we've gotten past that already."

Maddie laughed. "You've got to be kidding. If you think we're going to let that one go any time soon, you'd better think again."

With a sigh, Kris nodded. "I figured as much. That one will probably die a slow, painful death after you and Ash rub it in every few days. Knowing Ash, it might be every day," she finished glumly.

"Probably. So tell me all about him." Maddie got straight to the point.

"Well..." Kris hesitated. "There's not that much to tell."

"Right," Maddie scoffed. "This coming from the woman who can categorize each and every lover she's had since college. The same woman who can recite their measurements, achievements and favorite erotic zones. The woman who can—"

"Yeah, yeah. I get your point." Kris took a sip of her iced tea to stall, and wondered what to say.

Maddie beat her to it. "How about you start with the sexual noisemaking category."

"The what?"

"You know. What noise does he make during sex? Is he a grunter?"

"Um...no. Maddie, I—" Kris tried to speak.

But Maddie was too excited about her musings to listen. "What about a squealer? Maybe he bellows or roars? Oh, oh, I know! I bet he squawks or squeaks. Or warbles? No, you wouldn't be with a warbler. That would just be...weird. I know! He—"

"Stop!" Kris held up her hand to try and stem the tide of questions. "Geez, are you talking about sex or the animal kingdom?"

"Kris, with you I'm just never sure."

"Thanks," Kris said dryly. "But to answer your questions, no, no, no and no. None of the above. Honestly, I don't know what kind of noise he makes."

Surprise made Maddie's eyes widen. "You're kidding."

You would have thought Kris had just confessed to being a nun. Shaking her head in disgust, she looked at her friend. "No, I'm not kidding. I don't know."

"You mean you haven't...you know...with him yet?" Maddie looked staggered by the announcement.

Kris felt uncharacteristic warmth steal across her cheeks. "No, we—"

"You're kidding!" The complete disbelief in Maddie's voice made her face flame.

"Oh, my God! Are you okay? Your face is turning all red." Before Kris could explain why, Maddie was out of her seat. "Kris! Kris, what's wrong!?" Without waiting for a reply, Maddie turned and waved frantically at a waiter. "Sir, excuse me, sir! I need help. Something's wrong with my friend."

"No, Maddie...I—"

Maddie turned back to Kris and interrupted her before she could get another word in. "Kris, can you breathe? Is there something stuck in your throat? Are you choking!? You're choking! Don't try to talk! It'll be okay. Wait... Are you having chest pains? Oh, no! You're getting blotchy now! Can someone call nine-one-one!?" Maddie began to pound on her back. "Just take deep breaths, Kris. It's going to be okay."

Kris slapped her hands away. "Calm down, Maddie! I'm fine, okay? It's not a heart attack, its called *blushing*."

Maddie froze. "You're...blushing!?" Her face went as pale as Kris' was red. She turned to look at the waiter, who was watching them with concern. "Something's wrong with her! Can you get an EMT on the line or something? Tell them to hurry!"

"Stop! Would you just stop!? I'm fine," Kris walked over to the confused waiter and plucked the phone out of his hands. "Really, I'm fine. My friend just forgot to take her medication this morning. No big deal. I'm sorry for the misunderstanding."

Returning to the table, she glared at Maddie. "Calm down, okay? There's nothing wrong with me."

"But...but...you were...blushing!" Maddie stammered, still floored at the thought.

"So?"

"So!? You never blush. Ever." Maddie grabbed for her wrist and tried to check her pulse.

"They say there's a first time for everything, right? Well this is a first for me, okay?" Kris shook her head and pulled her hand back. "The past couple of weeks have been full of firsts for me."

"Wow," her friend said softly, and sat back. A thoughtful expression crossed her face. "Wow. I never thought I'd live to see the day."

"What does that mean?"

Maddie's face split into a wide grin. "The great Kristine Jeffries has finally met *the* man. And not just any man," a giggle escaped. "A man who's seen her granny panties." Maddie gave up the fight and erupted into laughter.

Kris threw a sugar packet at her, which only increased the giggles. "Okay, ha-ha. Real funny."

"Oh, but it is. Hilarious, even." Maddie wiped a tear from her eye. "Wait until I tell Ash. He's going to die!"

"No!" She all but yelled the word. Kris lowered her voice and leaned closer as the other diners turned to stare. "No, Maddie. Don't breathe a word of this to Ash. Or anyone else, okay?"

Turning a speculative gaze on her, Maddie lifted a brow. "Why not?"

"Because, I...because I don't know what's going on yet." And there it was. The truth in all its mystifying, terrifying glory. Kris briefly explained what had happened that weekend, leaving out the more intimate details. Some things she wasn't ready to confess at this point. Another first for her.

Maddie tilted her head as she considered Kris. Moments ticked by as Kris waited for her to hand down her verdict. Offer some advice. Anything at all that might help.

Nervous now, Kris finally broke the silence. "Well?"

"Well what?" Maddie leaned forward and calmly took a bite of her food.

"Oh for the love of...what do you think!?" Kris groaned in exasperation.

"I think you should see where this one goes."

"That's it? That's all the advice I get?" She could have found that wondrous tidbit in a fortune cookie. "I can already tell you it's leading to sex."

"Yes, but is that all you want out of it?"

Kris opened her mouth to say yes, but stopped. Was it? The question was a loaded one for sure. Did she want a notch on her bedpost with Derek's name on it? "I don't know," she finally said. "I really don't know."

"Then I suppose that's what you need to figure out." Maddie looked thoughtful. "Ash and I really liked him. And of course, it says a lot that he saw your grannies and still wanted to take you out."

Kris threw another sugar packet at her.

"No, really. Most guys would see those and run as fast and far as they could, or they'd laugh so hard you'd probably have to administer CPR. Wait a minute," Maddie's

eyes gleamed with renewed amusement. "Didn't you have to do that once? It wasn't because he was laughing, but he had started to choke because you were—"

"Gee, look at the time, will you?" Kris interrupted, glancing at the imaginary watch on her wrist. "I'd better get back to work. Thanks for lunch." With a small wave, she slid out of her chair and headed for the door. The sound of Maddie's giggles followed her to her car.

The afternoon sped by due to the mountain of work in her in-box. Kris didn't get home until after seven. She had barely enough time to kick off her shoes before the doorbell rang.

Ignoring the butterflies in her stomach, she opened the door with a smile. "Hey there big guy. I wasn't sure if you'd make it tonight."

"Hi yourself. I was able to pull a few strings." Derek lounged against the doorframe.

"Well, come on in. I just got home. Work was crazy today."

"No problem. We don't have any set plans for the evening."

"We don't?" Kris looked back at him. "Well, would you mind if we stayed in and I cooked then?" That way they'd be closer to the bed.

Derek was surprised. "You cook?"

With a small laugh at his hopeful expression, she shook her head. "Um, no. She wiggled her fingers at him. "But I can dial and order a mean takeout dish."

A wide smile crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Sounds good to me."

"Perfect. Just let me change and I'll order something." She grabbed a handful of menus she kept next to the fridge. "Look through these and see what sounds good."

Derek watched her sexy hips sway out of the kitchen and disappear around the corner. Damn, she looked good enough to eat. Her long hair was loose, swinging along her back. She'd worn minimal makeup and still her dark brown eyes managed to look sultry and exotic. He only wished she was on the menu tonight. Shaking his head to clear the wicked thoughts that threatened to consume him, he tried to focus on the takeout menus.

And yet...he ran a hand along the kitchen table. Derek found himself inspired by the possibilities. Yes, this table definitely had possibilities...

By the time she returned, he had randomly selected something from an Italian restaurant. He handed it to her.

"Oh, good choice. They make the best lasagna you've ever had." Kris took the menu from him and grabbed the phone.

"Great. That's what I'll have then." Derek couldn't have cared less what she ordered. He was too busy drinking in the sight of her. Though work had kept him busy, his day had taken forever. All he'd been able to think about was seeing Kris again. Cursing himself for saying he didn't want sex. Touching her again. Hating himself for saying he didn't want sex. Tasting her again. Scrambling to figure out if having a

constant boner for weeks at a time was going to damage anything vital. And again, damning himself for saying he didn't want sex.

He heaved a sigh. Record length of time with an erection or not, he was simply glad to be with her again.

Kris must have heard the sigh, because she looked at him. "Everything okay? Hey, if you don't want the lasagna, there's a pretty good Chinese place that has some great almond chicken. Or maybe you want something else?" Her look turned mischievous. "Maybe you're in the mood for tiramisu now?"

Only if it was slathered all over her golden skin. Skin he wanted to lick and... "No," he managed to say. "Spaghetti's fine with me." Dessert would have to wait. But they'd most certainly get to it.

She looked confused. "You wanted spaghetti? I thought you said —"

"Not spaghetti, I meant...uh...the lasagna. Or whatever it is you ordered." Now he was convinced his boner was doing damage. His brain was already beginning to function improperly.

Kris looked at him knowingly and winked. "Sure, okay. Well, you can always change your mind, you know."

He didn't answer, only looked at her. No, he couldn't change his mind. Unless he wanted a one-night stand, which he didn't. Not now. Not with her. His mind was made up.

She shrugged her shoulders at his silence. "Suit yourself, big guy. How about a glass of wine in the meantime?"

"Sure." Anything to help him swallow past the lump in his throat. Anything to help cool things down inside. Anything to get him through dinner.

"So," Kris leaned up against the kitchen counter after handing him his glass. "How was work today?"

"Busy. Hot. The usual."

"That's too bad. Its always more fun when something *unusual* happens."

A little more in control of himself, Derek sat down at the small kitchen table. He flashed a grin. "Don't I know it. I kept looking for a beautiful woman with her panties down around her ankles." He heaved an exaggerated sigh. "But all I saw was an eighty-year-old woman picking her nose and a group of teenagers who were mooning people." Derek shook his head sadly. "It just wasn't quite the same."

"Geez, is anyone going to let that one go?"

"Probably not. It's not everyday a guy gets a view like that. Although, I still don't understand why you were wearing a parachute instead of regular underwear in the first place."

"Ha-ha. Laugh it up, big guy. I'll have you know there are a lot of guys who like women in granny panties."

Derek shook his head, still grinning. "Nope. Nice try sweetheart. I guarantee that the men in the world would join forces and have a giant bonfire with those ugly things before they let their women actually wear them."

"Join forces? Like they were the granny panty patrol or something?" Kris laughed at the image.

"Sure. Let me try and put it into perspective for you." Derek drummed his fingers against the table as he thought. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers. "Okay, I've got it. How do you feel about tighty-whities?"

Her shudder said it all.

"Exactly. Now think, if every guy wore tighty-whities, how would you handle that?"

Kris grimaced. "I wouldn't. Literally, I wouldn't *handle* anything. That's like packaging your Mustang's engine into a 1980 VW Rabbit or something. It's all about presentation. A guy presents his purple-headed warrior in a pair of tighty-whities and a woman's more apt to think he's sporting a Wee Willie Winkie."

"A Wee Willie?" Derek howled with laughter. "Kris you are something else, you know that?"

"Hon, you should try me in bed." The remark was out before she'd even thought about it, she was so used to flirtatious banter. For one unexpected moment, she wanted to recall the comment. Instead, she decided to wait and see how he'd react. This was her. He could take it or leave it.

But he only looked at her and said in a light tone, "How about we try it my way for a bit longer and see how things go."

Funny, that was exactly what Maddie had suggested.

The doorbell rang, announcing the arrival of their dinner. *Saved by the bell*, Kris thought, as she paid for the food.

The conversation all but stopped as they enjoyed the hot Italian food. By the time Derek's plate was clean, he was rubbing his stomach. "That was great. You were right, that was the best lasagna I've ever eaten."

"Told you," she replied. "Whenever I order from them, I usually don't have to eat for about three days afterwards because I get so stuffed."

His gaze was intent upon her. "I'm pretty full, but I'm still hungry."

"Here," she pushed her plate toward him, completely missing the hungry look he sent her way. "You can finish mine. I can't eat another bite."

"I was thinking more along the lines of dessert," he said quietly.

Kris perked right up at that. Everywhere. She raised her gaze to his. "Dessert, hmm?"

He carefully removed their plates from the table. The dessert he had in mind would require quite a bit of table space. No utensils necessary.

Derek turned back to her with a devilish grin. "Come here." He could tell that the independent woman in her wanted to rebel at the command, but her interest was piqued so she complied with only a raised brow.

When she stood directly in front of him, she dared to say, "Standing up is all right, but I prefer to eat my dessert in a more comfortable manner."

Derek leaned in close and said, "Kris, you aren't going to be the one eating." With great satisfaction, he watched her jaw drop. He had a feeling she didn't let too many people—especially men—get the better of her. Which was good. That gave him just the edge he needed.

With one finger he tapped on her chin, closing her mouth. "I got to watch you savor each and every bit of your dessert that first date. Now it's your turn to see how I can savor my favorite thing to eat. Bite after sweet, delicious bite."

Her eyes darkened as he slowly pushed her back against the table until her knees buckled and she was lying on the tabletop. Her mouth opened and closed a few more times, as if she wanted to say something. Derek wasn't about to give her the chance.

Sitting on a chair, he fit himself between her spread legs and leaned over. Touching his lips softly against her throat, he took a moment to inhale her scent. And while she smelled perfect, it wasn't quite what he was after tonight. He wanted to prove that she would taste as good as he remembered. As he had dreamed.

His hands slid down the sides of her waist, stopping to provide a caress at the swell of her breasts, the soft curve of her stomach.

She was silent but for her breathing. Watching him with a fascinated gaze.

She'd changed into a pair of jean shorts. While he could appreciate what they did for her legs, they weren't going to help his cause.

"Sorry love, but these have to come off." When he tugged on the waistband, she obediently lifted her hips. Derek was so engrossed in his actions, he didn't pay attention to the endearment that rolled so smoothly off his tongue.

Kris noticed. And boy if that didn't cause her already revved up libido to do a little happy dance. Still, she remained silent. No way was she going to risk interrupting his...dessert.

She felt the shorts slide down her legs. Closing her eyes, she waited for him to remove her panties as well. Moments ticked by and...nothing.

Kris opened her eyes to see what the problem was. His dark head was bent and he was staring intently between her outstretched legs. Briefly, she remembered her bad dream where he'd looked away in disgust. Fortunately, it wasn't disgust in his eyes this time. It was pure, unadulterated need. Fascination. Desire.

Kris was usually confident about her body, having the sexual appetite she did, but his continued silence was making her nervous.

What in heck was he looking at that would cause him to wear that expression?

Kris peered down between her legs, wondering if she had suddenly sprouted something. Nope, nothing there. Except the parts she'd been born with. Hmm...

"Um, is something wrong?" She hated the trepidation that crept into her voice. It made her sound...needy. Desperate, even. Two things she was, but neither of which she wanted to advertise to him.

He ran a hand lightly over her thigh, up to her stomach. Finally he lifted his gaze to meet hers. "No. Nothing's wrong at all. In fact," he bent forward to press a light kiss to her navel. "Everything is perfect." The words were whispered softly against her skin. And never had she felt so truly...perfect. Yeah, this romance thing was getting better all the time.

Her legs trembled slightly as he pressed soft kisses on her stomach. She knew what was coming and still, the anticipation was killing her. Every now and then, in between kisses, Derek would inhale deeply, as if memorizing her scent. The guy was going to give her a complex if he wasn't careful. First she thought she'd grown an extra part or two, now she wondered if she should have taken a quick shower.

When she told him that, he shot her a quick grin. "I love all of your parts and you smell so damn good, I'm just trying to figure out where to start."

"Start what?" She had a pretty good idea, but she wanted to make sure they were both on the same page. Especially given his habit of putting an abrupt halt to things.

"Eating." It was all the warning she received.

Derek smoothed his hands up and down her silky thighs, wondering at the soft texture. He'd definitely have to explore her skin, but that would have to wait for another time. With one finger, he traced circles around her navel, dipping lower and lower until he was teasing the top of her curls.

Kris was quiet except for her breathing, which was becoming more ragged with each move he made.

Smiling to himself, Derek knew it was only a matter of time before that changed. He would make damn sure she was yelling by the time he was done. Yelling his name. That was the only thought he wanted her to have. His name. His name on her lips, in her thoughts, in her dreams.

His finger delved lightly into her curls where he found her already wet. She hadn't been kidding when she'd said she wanted him. Though he found her desire satisfying, it wasn't quite enough. He wanted her over the edge. To that place of no return. Right beside him.

Her legs were moving restlessly around his waist. Derek knew what she was urging him to do. And he was more than anxious to bury himself inside her. But not tonight.

He was ready for his second feast of the evening. Only this time Kris was on the menu. And he knew he'd enjoy the taste of her more than anything he'd indulged in before in his life.

Kris was propped up on her elbows, watching him through half-closed eyes. When she saw his intent, she bit her lip and moaned. Derek smiled up at her, loving her reaction, knowing it was only about to get better.

With a light touch, he moved his thumbs along her clit, down her moist lips. Gently he spread her open, loving how her soft pink flesh opened for him. God, she was perfect. His dick was throbbing for release. Wanting so badly to pound into her sweet, hot cleft. Derek had to grit his teeth against the wave of lust that crashed over him. His fly was strained so tight at that moment, he was afraid he'd bust a seam.

He took one hand off her to yank at the top button of his jeans and rip down his zipper. Finding only a small measure of relief when he pulled his jeans open, he stroked himself a few times through his boxers. He was fairly sure he wouldn't last through this. Intercourse or not.

Not wanting to prolong either of their tortures a second longer, he brought his hand back up and lowered his mouth between her opened legs. When his lips encountered her heat, he nearly exploded at the contact.

It was pure heaven.

He took a minute to familiarize himself with her taste. Her scent. His lips moved leisurely over the feast spread before him. Up one side of those perfect, pouty lips, stopping to press a soft kiss to her hard little clit, down the other side. He inhaled deeply, loving the spicy, female scent of her.

Kris was writhing beneath him, lifting her hips to beg for more.

"Easy, love," Derek crooned softly. "We'll get there. I promise. Just let me enjoy myself for a minute, okay?"

Her only answer was a long moan as his tongue delved inside her in a shallow movement. Her knees squeezed his shoulders to urge him deeper. But Derek wanted this to last for her. In a teasing motion, he pulled his tongue back and again made his way to her clit. This time he flicked his tongue over her, once, twice. Again and again.

She bucked beneath him, tangling her hands in his hair.

As he toyed with her clit, he slid one finger inside her. She moaned her approval. Pleased with her response, he slid another inside while continuing with his teasing. With slow, deliberate movements, he pushed his fingers in and out. She was so wet. So goddamn wet.

He could tell from her moans, which were getting louder, that she was getting closer to her orgasm. Pulling his fingers out slowly, he eased back.

Eyes wild with passion, she looked down at him. "You're stopping!? God, Derek, this is not the time to tease!"

"Not on your life. But I'm not letting you come just yet. Sorry love, but it won't end this quickly." His voice was deep and raspy. His mouth glistened with the evidence of her desire. Licking his lips slowly, he made sure she saw his hunger. "This is the best

dessert I've ever had. Ever. And I'll be damned if you rush me through it. I want to savor every...last...drop."

Her breath hissed between her lips as she dropped her head back on the table. "Please Derek. Please don't make me beg." She was too far gone to realize she already was.

Instead of answering, he brought one thumb to her sweet little nub and began to rub lightly. His other hand moved down into his boxers and fisted around his dick. To hell with a cold shower, he was going to come one way or another. He might as well pleasure them both while he was at it.

His tongue once more replaced his thumb. He used that hand to hold her in place and continued stroking himself with the other.

Derek had teased her with shallow strokes of his tongue before, but now rewarded her by delving his tongue deep inside her. She was fiery heat and wet desire. Her hips lifted to meet his mouth as he slid his tongue in and out. Her hand moved up to touch herself and he quickly stopped her.

"No. Not this time. This time you let me give you pleasure."

"Please, Derek," her throaty whisper nearly undid him.

"Not good enough, love. I want you screaming my name."

She moaned when his lips encircled her clit, sucking lightly. He chuckled against her, causing her hips to jerk. "You'll have to do better than that, babe."

"Derek," she cried, a little louder as he pushed a finger inside her, his tongue stroking her wet labia.

Derek could feel the tension building in her as her muscles began to tighten beneath his mouth and hands.

His own desire had left moisture at the tip of his dick, which he quickly used to lubricate his shaft. He stroked himself harder as his finger pushed inside her. Again and again he tongued her clit, sucked lightly. Her cries grew louder, more frantic.

His balls were drawn up tight as he neared his own release. A second finger joined the first inside her as he slid them in and out. It was only when he sucked harder on her sweet little clit that she finally, finally screamed his name.

"Derek!"

He felt her tighten around his fingers, convulse against his mouth. Still stroking himself, he kept his mouth against her as her body trembled with the last shudders of her orgasm. When she lifted her head to smile weakly at him, he was a goner.

Closing his eyes, he tipped his head back and groaned, "Kris!" He felt the force of his ejaculation clear down to his toes. His body shuddered at the release. His dick throbbed as he stroked out the last few drops.

When he was finally able to open his eyes, he looked at her. She stared back with a mischievous twinkle and said, "Boy, hon, when you said that romance was better than sex, I didn't believe you. But now...whew! Am I ever a believer."

Chapter Nine

When Derek continued to look at her, she smiled. "I was more than ready to return the favor. Was looking forward to it actually." She looked pointedly at his hand, which was still holding his not-quite-erect penis. He followed her gaze.

With a curse, he jerked his hand away. "Shit...I mean...ah, shoot. You don't have a washcloth or something, do you?"

"Sure." Comfortable with her nudity, she slid off the table and sauntered into the hall. Seconds later she returned with a washcloth. Derek was still in a daze.

When she would have kneeled between his legs, he managed to get a grip on himself—his mind, not his, ahem—and stopped her. "Ah, thanks, but I can get it from here."

A sexy pout pushed her lower lip out. "Come on, big guy, I promise I'll be gentle."

Derek took the washcloth and avoided her eyes while muttering, "Oh, I'm sure."

"What, you don't believe me?" Her innocent tone didn't fool him for a second.

Making sure his pants were zipped, Derek finally looked up. "I believe you'd be so gentle it'd nearly kill me a second time. But this isn't about returning favors. I don't expect you to 'return the favor' every time I give you pleasure."

Kris blinked. What? She shook her head, hoping to clear the cobwebs muddling her brain. And her hearing. "Say that again."

"I said I don't expect you to return the favor each and every time."

Tilting her head, she considered him. If she believed him, he was telling her that he not only intended to pleasure her simply for her enjoyment, but he also wasn't going to keep tabs. Hmm... When it sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

Deciding to play along for now, Kris nodded in agreement. "Sure, Derek, whatever you say."

His brows shot up. "You don't believe me?"

"Nope. But if it makes you feel better to say it, you'll get no argument out of me."

Derek was furious. "I don't know what kind of ass—"

Kris put her finger on his lips, stopping his tirade midsentence. "Derek, I haven't dated every asshole out there, like you seem to think. The relationships I've had have been about pleasure. *Mutual* pleasure. You know, a give and take sort of thing. *Sex*," she stressed the word.

"You're talking physical pleasure. That's it."

"Of course. That's all I've wanted it to be about. It was my choice. I haven't been looking for a knight in shining armor to ride up on his white steed, okay? My choice," she repeated. But even to her ears she didn't sound convincing.

Derek considered her for a moment, and then quietly asked. "And what about now? Is that still all you want?"

"I'm not going to lie and say I don't want to have sex with you," Kris replied, dodging the question. She was not pleased with where this conversation was headed. Her mind had yet to catch up to what her body was feeling and now was not a good time to get into that particular train of thought. Dwelling on her inability wouldn't serve any purpose. It never did.

He blew out a breath. "Yeah, I know that, but that's not what I asked."

His gaze bore into her as she thought about her answer. Finally she offered him the only thing she could. The truth. "I really don't know."

A half smile played at his lips, though his eyes were still solemn. "That's a lot better of an answer than a straight out 'yes'."

She couldn't help but smile in return. "Hon, you still haven't *totally* convinced me." Kris nodded toward the table. "However, I have to say you're very, very persuasive. I'm looking forward to more of this...romance thing." With a wink, she turned away.

A hand on her arm stopped her.

"Kris."

When he said nothing more, she turned her head to give him her full attention.

"This is exclusive. Got it?"

Temper began to simmer at the edge of her fast fading desire. Jittery nerves caused by the look in his eyes and her own racing heart helped to fan the flames. "Still think I'm a whore? What, you think I'm going to hit the bars trolling as soon as you walk out the door?"

Muttering a soft oath, Derek dropped her arm and rubbed a hand over his face. "No, dammit! That isn't what I meant at all. I just wanted to make sure—"

"Make sure of what? That I wouldn't spread my legs for every asshole in town?"

"Would you stop!? You misunderstood what I was saying." His frustration was palpable, but she was beyond frustration.

"I don't think I did!" Quiet fury laced her every word. "This whole thing is about romance to you. Like you're on some sort of mission to save me from my wicked ways. I'm not, nor have I ever been, a whore. Not *ever*! I may enjoy sex, but I'm pretty particular about who I let get near me. And it's not every jerk around like you're hell-bent on believing." She was so damn mad, she wanted to kick him. Where it would really, really hurt. Then he would have a small idea just how much she was hurting.

The deficiency was in *her*. Her! Truth be told, she'd dated some great guys in between some not-so-great guys. The great guys had treated her well and in return had expected her to care, to feel. Kris hadn't been able to give them that. At least not to the

extent they'd expected. She knew she wasn't being completely fair to Derek, but sometimes she did wonder. Was she really just a whore? A woman who could only enjoy the physical part of a relationship and never experience the emotional side? And every time she thought about it, she'd had to wonder why she was lacking.

Kris hated to believe she was lacking in anything. She had a great job, great friends and a great life. She wasn't a whiner by nature and she didn't intend to start now. So instead of dwelling on what she was missing, she focused on what she could have. Great sex.

Derek was taken aback by her anger. And nearly unmanned by the wounded look in her eyes. Before she could turn away, he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her close. She tried to push away, but he held on tighter.

"Kris, I didn't mean it like that. I just..." he sighed into her hair. "I've never been this worked up over a woman before. You'll have to cut me a little slack here. I wasn't insinuating you were a whore. I thought we'd cleared that up already." When she remained silent, he sighed again. "It's a little hard to be articulate after what just happened. I only wanted to make sure that while we're together, it's just the two of us."

Hardly mollified by the explanation, Kris pushed away enough to tilt her head back and stare at him balefully. "The way you said it made it more of an order. Asking is preferable these days."

"You're right. I'm sorry," he stated sincerely. Tipping her chin up, he focused a serious gaze on her and asked, "Kris, will you do me the honor of remaining my exclusive romance slave for the duration of our relationship?"

"Romance slave?" Kris wrinkled her nose at the idea, her anger slowly evaporating. "Sex slave, yes. Crazyed-with-lust-and-horny-as-a-wild-beast sex slave, even better. But romance slave?"

Derek couldn't help the chuckle that escaped. "So are you saying you didn't like what we just did? Because I consider that all part and parcel of this 'romance thing' as you like to call it."

Kris turned a long, considering look on the kitchen table. He could almost feel her reactions, could almost see the images that flashed through her mind in remembrance. When she faced him again, her look was pure heat. "Hon, I'd *love* to be your romance slave. But I do have one condition."

Immediately on his guard, Derek hated to even ask. "What would that be?"

Standing on tiptoe, she whispered against his lips. "You have to let me return the favors every now and then. I insist upon it."

Let her return the favors? Would he survive through even one of her favors? Probably not. But regardless, he'd die a happy man. Smiling against her lips, he replied, "Well, if you insist. I suppose I'll have to agree to it. As long as we're not talking about sex."

She huffed out a laugh, her breath tickling his mouth. "You're one tough sell, big guy, you know that?"

Derek skimmed a fingertip across her cheek. "Yeah. But that's what intrigues you."

"Yes and no. If it was simply about the chase, I'd have already given up on you. Why go to so much effort when there are always bigger fish out there?"

Leaning back slightly, he looked at her carefully. "I don't know if I should be insulted or not. Are you saying you think I'm worth the chase, or right now you're willing to make do with a smaller fish?"

Kris pulled him back and kissed him. A long, slow kiss. She could taste herself on his lips. An erotic flavor that set her hormones to humming once more. When she pulled back, they were both breathing hard. "Well, I can attest to the fact that you're not *smaller* in any way, shape or form. Nor are you anything like a fish. And as for being worth the chase...yes. I think you are."

A wide grin split his face. Kris would have willingly given him anything he'd asked for at that point. Anything to see him light up like that. A fact that made her uneasy. Wow, was this ever getting deep in a hurry. She liked to move fast, but only when it was physical. The emotional stuff tended to leave her behind quickly, which is why she avoided it.

She took a step back to put distance between them. He seemed to understand the need, because he let her go without protest.

"So, um, do you want dessert? Actual dessert?"

He shook his head slowly. "No, thanks. I'd probably better head home. I've got an early morning at work tomorrow."

Kris ignored the small twinge of disappointment. This was better than having to ask him to leave later. Or waking up next to him and having morning breath and bed head. Wasn't it?

"Okay, sure." She stood there in the sudden, awkward silence. Now what? Should she thank him for the great...foreplay? Ask him back for seconds tomorrow?

He took the decision out of her hands when he said, "Hey, I was thinking maybe we could catch a movie on Friday."

"That'd be great." It would give her a chance to step back and get her emotions under wraps. *Not that they're out of whack*, she reminded herself quickly. She could simply use a breather. "What time?"

"I'll probably need to catch the later flick, in case I have to work overtime. Like I said, I had to pull a few strings to get off in time today." His look was sheepish. "I should have called, but I...ah...would have rather been here than at work."

She arched a brow at him. "Hon, are you telling me you played hooky again?"

Derek's smile was pure wickedness. "Yeah. And I don't regret a second of it."

She smiled back, unable to help herself. "Me either."

Derek was sorely tempted to throw her over his shoulder and head to the bedroom. With superhuman strength, he forced himself to turn away. "Great. I'll see you on Friday then."

They walked to the door in silence. He couldn't resist a quick, soft kiss. "Bye."

He was already in his car by the time she replied softly, "Bye, big guy." Closing the door, she shook her head to clear the desire clouding it. "Hon, you're on the menu for Friday. Hope you're up for it. I know I am."

* * * * *

Normally Kris was pretty casual about the whole idea of sex and dating. But this romance business had her nervous, twitchy and ridiculously excited. She felt as if she should be shopping for a prom dress or something. Ridiculous.

Though work kept her fairly busy, she couldn't help but wonder how Friday would go. It was almost nice not to have to worry about the pressure to have sex. Though she'd never thought of it like that before. It had been mostly pressure she'd put on herself, but in order to get something good you have to give something good. Mediocre sex was about as big a waste as birth control for a nun in her book. Any way you looked at it, it still served no purpose.

But now the pressure she felt was of a different nature. She wanted Derek to like her. Not based on how well she performed in bed—or on the kitchen table for that matter—but as a person. As a woman.

Not because she wanted to be great girlfriend material or anything. That was his goal, not hers. At least that's what she would continue to tell herself. No, she simply wanted him to enjoy her enough that their time together was well spent. And when she won this little challenge she'd know they'd both walk away happy. Satisfied. Completely satisfied in every way. With emotions still in check.

That was why she was taking special care to think of a spectacular way to spend the evening. Sure, they'd hit the movies. But afterwards would be when it would really count.

So she did the only thing she could do at this point. She enlisted her best friend's help.

On Wednesday night during their weekly yoga class, she told Maddie about the current state of her affairs. One particular affair, that is. "I have to think of something good. Really good."

Maddie took a deep breath before lifting herself up into a back bend. On the way down, she shook her head in acknowledgement. "You're right. Something that's going to blow his mind."

Kris laughed wickedly. "Hon, I was thinking more along the lines of blowing his—" Maddie slapped a hand over her mouth before she could finish.

"Kris," she hissed, casting a furtive glance at the other yogis. "Keep it down. We are in public, in case you've forgotten."

"Oh, please. They're all probably getting a little tingle from what we're talking about. I'm probably making their whole week, right now."

Maddie rolled her eyes. "A tingle? You're sick."

"Which is why you love me." Kris waved a hand expansively. "So? Do you have any ideas?"

"Give me a minute, geez. You expect me to think of something spectacular in two seconds? I don't have your vast knowledge of the opposite sex," Maddie returned dryly.

"But you learn quickly, young one," Kris said, in her best mentor voice. "Besides, didn't you pick up a thing or two at the erotic resort I sent you to?"

Her friend merely rolled her eyes again. The class was almost over, so they silently agreed to finish their conversation afterwards.

As they rolled up their mats and headed for the door, Kris asked, "Okay, how about this...I could try the Twinkie Tonsil Teaser."

"The what?" Maddie cast a dubious glance at Kris.

"Oh, come on. Don't tell me you haven't tried that one."

Maddie's eyes got round. "A Twinkie?"

"Hon, you wrap a Twinkie around his dick, eat it off, savor every bite and voila...double the cream filling." Kris winked.

Her friend slumped against the side of the car. "Please, please, please tell me you are kidding."

"No," Kris sighed and shook her head. "Remember the security guard I dated about...oh, two years ago? Well he had this thing for Twinkies. I mean a serious *thing* for Twinkies. I finally had to dump him because I had gained five pounds and developed a gag reflex whenever I saw one." She shuddered at the bad memories. "On second thought, scratch the Twinkie idea. No way could I stomach another one."

"I can't believe you. I swear, one of these days you'll have to write a book." Maddie tapped her chin in mock seriousness. "You'd have to change your name and the identities of all your men for their protection, but I think you'd have a best seller on your hands. You'd be the next leading sex expert."

"Ha-ha. You're a real comedian." She brushed her friend's teasing aside. "Let's get back to the issue at hand. What are your ideas?"

"Okay, I have one. Why don't you go for some plain, old-fashioned foreplay? Instead of trying to wow him with something way out there—Twinkies included—you should stick with tried and true."

Kris opened her mouth to discount the idea, but stopped. Tried and true. The simplicity of the idea had merit. Truth be told, she'd had more than her share of wacky, kinky experiences, and some uncomplicated sex—or foreplay—would be a welcome change. Just two people who desired each other. Besides, with Derek, it would be anything but plain. Or old-fashioned. Smiling, she finally nodded her head in agreement. "You know, that's the best idea I've heard in a long time."

"Hey, if you can't get good ideas from me, what am I here for?"

"Oh, I think sometimes you prefer the role of tormenter. And I think you also enjoy reminding me of the many god-awful embarrassing moments of my life." Kris returned dryly.

Maddie laughed. "Well, sure. There are so many to choose from. If you weren't around, what would I do for entertainment?"

"Yes, that's my goal in life. To provide endless entertainment for you." Her sarcasm wasn't lost on her friend. Though Maddie merely smiled, not apologetic in the least. Kris sighed, giving up. "I'd better head home. I have a seduction to plan."

"Good luck, though I doubt you'll need it." With an exaggerated wink and a wave, her friend was gone.

Getting into her car, Kris smiled slightly. Actually, for one of the few times in her life, she'd probably need all the luck she could get. Just so she could get lucky.

Chapter Ten

Friday hadn't come soon enough, in Derek's opinion. In fact, the week had dragged on so slowly he'd found himself driving to her house a half-dozen times. And not for the sake of romance. Thankfully sanity had returned in time and he'd managed to turn the car around. Barely.

The huge boner he'd been sporting had made steering a tad difficult. Not to mention painful.

On the other hand, the long week had given him time to think and plan. He'd told her he'd romance her, yet his only gestures of courtship had been sadly lacking. A single bouquet, a picnic, one dinner out and ravishing her on her own kitchen table. Yeah, he definitely wasn't up for Most Romantic Man of the Year. Disgusted with himself, he'd racked his brain for ways to show her she was special. He'd already done flowers and he knew he wouldn't make headway with a box of chocolates. No, it needed to be something unique, just as Kris was.

Friday night found him in front of her door, gift in hand. Before he could lift his hand to knock, she opened the door.

"Hiya, handsome."

Her sultry tone did as much for his revved libido as her barely there sleeveless top did. Neither left much to the imagination. Not that Derek's imagination wasn't already working over time, but boy was the sight gratifying. And torturous.

"Hey," he replied with a mouth suddenly gone dry.

She must have spotted the gift, because she smiled and asked, "More panties?"

With a strained laugh, Derek shook his head. "Nope. Not this time."

"Do I get to see what it is, or are you going to stand there all night and tease me with it?"

Oh, if she only knew.

"Ah, sure, you can open it now." He followed her into the living room where she promptly sat down and held up her hands. Greedy woman. He could only hope she'd stay that way.

Derek handed her the basket and waited.

She didn't disappoint. Impatient fingers tore at the ribbon and gift wrap around the basket. When she revealed the contents, her expression changed from anticipation to confusion.

Derek waited, hiding his smile.

Finally she looked up. "Um. This is, uh...great. Thanks." She picked up the small box of cornstarch. "I'll be sure to use this the next time I...need it. And this...this honey looks great. I can...put it in tea and stuff," she finished lamely. After a moment, Kris held up the small bottles of sweet almond oil and essential oil. "Oh, I'm always running out of these when I cook."

It was difficult to maintain a straight face, but he had no intention of revealing the true purpose behind his present. "Great. I'm glad you like it."

"Sure. No, this is really...nice. Thanks."

"No problem. So, are you ready to go?" Derek wanted to leave before he was tempted to explain to her. As well as show her.

"Yes, all set." She put the basket on the coffee table with one last puzzled look. "Let me just grab my purse." He was thankful she didn't mention the gift again.

When they were settled in his car, Derek turned to her. "Movie first or dinner?"

"Movie. I want to be able to enjoy my M&M's. If we eat first, I'll just feel guilty about eating my dinner and not saving any room for dessert."

Derek smiled. How like her. "Whatever the lady wants."

Kris turned to him with a gleam in her eye. "Whatever I want? Well in that case—"

"Which movie were you thinking about?" he asked quickly, cutting her off.

Not missing a beat, she replied, "Something awful, so we can sit in the back of the theater and neck."

He should have expected a response like that. But damn if it still didn't take him off-guard. The quick jolt of lust fired his simmering blood to a full boil. "Kris," he growled in warning.

"Hon, you said whatever the lady wants," she turned to him with a challenge in her eyes. "And that's what I want. Really, what do you think I can do to you in a public place?"

When he just growled again, she laughed. "Okay, how about this—I promise your reputation is safe for tonight. When we're in public," she clarified.

"It's not my reputation I'm worried about," he muttered under his breath.

"What was that?"

Derek cleared his throat. "I said, fine. Sounds great. Just keep your hands above my waist and we have a deal."

She shook her head in mock disgust. "Derek, you really know how to take the fun out of an evening."

He didn't bother to correct her. She'd know soon enough just how much fun he really had planned. Hell, the fun would probably be worth at least three cold showers for him, so it was bound to keep her entertained.

Fortunately for Kris, when they arrived at the theater there were plenty of bad movies to choose from. She chose a horror flick that promised more than its fair share of gore.

Derek raised an eyebrow.

"What? It'll be motivation for me to keep my eyes averted. You should be happy," she teased.

Oh yeah. He was so happy at the moment it was amazing the zipper to his jeans was still intact. But he merely reminded her, "Hands above the waist."

Her laughter teased his ears, and various other parts of his body just begging for her attention. Derek was in for another long evening. But he knew he'd see that sexy smile of satisfaction grace her lovely features more than once tonight, which helped make his own discomfort more bearable. Barely.

Kris went to grab their seats while Derek stayed in line for snacks. She chose seats in the very back of the theater. The perfect spot for a little make out session. Even more so when she noticed there were only a few other people there. She'd purposely chosen a movie with horrible reviews.

Grinning at the wicked thoughts in her head, she couldn't help but recall the pained expression on his face as she'd suggested necking. If only the poor guy knew what he was really in for.

She was lost in thought when Derek sat beside her, hands full of popcorn and soda.

"Couldn't you have sat a little farther away? This might damage my eyes being this close."

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you, big guy. I happen to like being back here. People tend to miss most of what's going on in the back seats."

She grabbed his sleeve and yanked him back down when he stood to move.

"Kris, I said —"

Pressing a finger to his lips, she shushed him. "I heard what you said. But we'd also agreed that I'd get a little time for paybacks, remember?"

His only answer was a hard swallow and a strangled noise.

Flashing a wicked smile at his strained expression, she took the snacks and set them aside before leaning close to whisper, "I promise I'll keep my hands above your waist. But Derek, you didn't say anything about my mouth."

He grabbed her before her mouth could descend. "Kris, I'm going to ask you for a huge favor."

The mutinous light in her eyes didn't deter him. "If you keep putting me off like this big guy, I might begin to wonder if there's an issue here."

His grip didn't loosen on her arm as he replied, "The only issue I have is that I have no desire to share my pleasure with everyone else in this damn theater. I'm asking you to wait until we're somewhere a bit more private." And hopefully by then he'd have a little more control over himself.

Tilting her head to one side, she considered him. "Let's compromise."

Derek was wary. Her idea of compromise and his probably differed greatly. "Compromise how?"

"I'll make sure your rocket doesn't launch and instead I'll ensure everything's ready for takeoff later. For no other reason than because I really, really want to. And I think you really, really want me to." She winked at him.

Boy did he ever. But he wasn't kidding when he said he didn't want to do it in a theater. He was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to keep silent. "You're right about that." He couldn't have missed the satisfied light in her eyes.

"So do we have a deal?" She'd leaned close to whisper the words against his neck.

"Mmm, I suppose we do." Derek couldn't shake the feeling he'd just sealed his own doom. The road to his demise was going to be an amazing one for sure.

The previews had barely started when Kris placed a small, warm hand on his crotch. When he twitched, she purred in his ear. Derek's eyes nearly rolled back in his head. Yes, this would definitely be torture for him.

She started out with long, slow strokes through the denim of his jeans. The man was built. He was long, hard and judging by the serious twitching he was doing, more than ready. She couldn't wait to have him inside her.

Leaning over slightly, she nuzzled his neck and slowly, very slowly, pulled his zipper down. The rasp of the zipper couldn't be heard over the noise from the big screen, but Derek felt the vibration clear to his toes. When she got close to his ear, he turned and whispered, "Be nice."

"Derek," she purred his name, pausing to lick the rim of his ear. "I intend to."

Kris took her sweet time releasing him from his boxer briefs. After pulling his zipper down, she spent a few minutes simply stroking him through the thin cotton. Derek shifted in his chair and slid the confining denim down a bit. His boys needed to breathe. And he was hoping she'd get on with it. Now that he'd committed, he had no desire to wait. Just the thought of her hot mouth around him made him shake. He was like a damn virgin on prom night. The anticipation was killing him. The waiting was arousing him beyond his wildest fantasies. And after meeting her, he'd had quite a few.

Kris cupped him through the cotton. With a sexy smile, she popped open the button on the fly of his boxers. In a smooth move, she pulled his erection free and he bit back a curse. Her touch alone sent a sharp, almost painful wave of lust through him. No way was he going to last through this. At this point, he didn't know if he even cared.

Her hand stroked him in gentle movements. Up his shaft, swirling the tip of one finger around the head, then back down to the base. Over and over he felt her light touch through every nerve ending as she stroked him. Then she grasped his balls, cupping their weight in the palm of her hand.

"Perfect," she whispered.

Derek heard her and felt a fierce pleasure in the desire and longing he heard in that one simple word. He choked off a breath as she lowered her head. Through heavy lids, he watched her golden hair spill over his lap. The soft strands tickled his skin in the most erotic of caresses. He felt her warm breath on the tip of his dick.

Paradise. It was right here in his lap. Teasing him, tempting him.

A low groan escaped as her moist lips enveloped him. Just the tip. He was about to go up in flames. Her tongue flicked the sensitive underside of the head once, twice. She swirled that perfect tongue around him. The temptation to surge his waist up and bury himself in her mouth was overwhelming. The thin thread of control he'd been barely maintaining was about to snap. She must have read his mind because at that moment, she opened her mouth fully and took him deep inside.

Derek barely stifled a curse.

Hot. Her mouth was so hot he almost exploded at the glorious feel of it. She pulled him in deep, taking his entire shaft down her throat and dragging another low groan from him. To hell with sharing his pleasure. He was pretty sure he'd resort to begging if she stopped now. He was fairly well-endowed and the fact she could take all of him wreaked havoc on his senses.

Her head came back up as she pulled her silky lips along his shaft. The perfect amount of pressure, the perfect amount of heat. She kept one hand on his balls and gently rolled them in her palm as she swallowed him again and again. Derek threaded his fingers through her hair, needing to touch her. Barely able to keep from urging her to move faster.

She hummed her approval. The vibration against his shaft was almost too much. She must have realized, because she drew back for a moment. With a smile on her face and a mischievous look in her eyes, she said softly, "Easy big boy. I'm not ready for you to be done just yet."

"Kris," he growled in warning.

She leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Please, please let me finish this for you."

He clenched his jaw, almost afraid to answer. But the look in her eyes and the thought of that tempting mouth finishing what it had started had him nodding his assent. He couldn't have said no if his life depended on it.

She bent her head again. She took him in deep, deeper and pulled back, sucking on his head. The hand that held his balls moved up to encircle his shaft. Grasping lightly, she stroked him in rhythm with her mouth. Derek felt his hips lift in an involuntary plea. He closed his eyes and he dropped his head back against the seat.

Her hot mouth surrounded him again and again, taking him blissfully deep as the pressure built. His fingers were now tangled in her hair as he held on by a thread. That amazing mouth was driving him slowly insane with pleasure. She brought him closer and closer to the edge. His balls were drawn tight.

"Kris," this time her name was a whispered plea on his lips.

Her strokes became more firm as he finally let himself go to the amazing feeling of her mouth on his dick. His release was explosive as he came in long, hot spurts into her mouth. For long moments after, she continued to caress his shaft with soft kisses and long strokes of her tongue, keeping him semihard.

Minutes passed as he waited for his heart to resume beating. Sated and feeling like a new man, he opened his eyes to look at her. "Thank you." Then he pulled her close for a leisurely kiss. Never had he had a woman give pleasure so freely. Never had he been more in love.

Pulling back after a minute, she flashed him a wicked grin. "No, Hon. Thank *you*. You're as delicious as I knew you'd be. But this was just the appetizer. I'm still waiting to get to that dessert."

Shaking his head, he grinned back. He was beginning to believe that Kris never gave up. Good thing he didn't either.

* * * * *

By the time the movie had ended and dinner had been consumed. Derek was on fire yet again. Kris had teased and tormented him during the entire movie and well into dinner. Not that he hadn't enjoyed every second of it, but dammit he was only a man. A man whose former iron will was slowly turning to molten liquid before one very determined woman.

He had to give her credit. She was very, very talented.

Deep breaths. That's what he needed right now. Some serious deep breathing. Maybe a pacemaker to help keep his erratic heartbeat in line. And some medication to lower his blood pressure. And Kris in a tight, short, nurse's uniform dispensing his medication...

Derek's imagination managed to serve him until they pulled into her driveway.

Now it was time for some payback.

He shut off the engine and turned to her with a look full of wicked promise. "I hope you were planning on inviting me in."

Momentarily taken aback, Kris could only stare. She knew he'd more than enjoyed her techniques in the theater, but she hadn't expected him to cave on the "no sex" rule he'd imposed. Especially after he'd already come once this evening. Now he decided he wanted her? Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, she slowly smiled. "Absolutely."

"Good." He came around and helped her out of the car. "I want to explain the basket now."

Kris tried not to grimace. She sure hoped he didn't expect her to cook with that stuff. He'd probably meant it to be a nice gesture, but she'd never received a worse present in her life. Granted, the basket of kitchen things wasn't the most horrible gift a girl could get, but it wasn't romantic in the least.

She gave a mental shrug. If he said he wanted to explain it, who was she to argue? Maybe it had special meaning to him. Maybe his grandma had used those things, or maybe... Frankly, Kris had no idea what it could be. All she really wanted was to get him inside and get him naked. At this point, the basket really didn't matter.

Unlocking the door, she kicked off her shoes and walked to the couch. He sat down beside her and grabbed the basket.

"I suppose you're wondering why I brought you these things."

"Um," she briefly considered lying but decided against it. "Yeah, I suppose I was."

The smile that curved his lips piqued her curiosity. As well as a few other things.

"Well," Derek replied slowly, drawing out the word. "I think it would be better if I showed you what they were for."

Perplexed, Kris could only stare. Finally she found her voice. "You want to give me a cooking lesson?"

His short bark of laughter made her blink. "No. Not exactly. Here," he got up and lowered the shade over her picture window. When they were hidden from the outside world, he turned back. "Perfect. Do you have a blanket or something that you don't mind getting a little messy? And maybe a washcloth or two?"

Now this was more like it. Kris had a feeling—a shivery, weak-in-the-knees sort of feeling—that things were about to get good.

Standing up on feet that weren't quite steady, she smiled, "As a matter of fact, I do. I'll just go grab it."

By the time she came back with blanket in hand, he had pushed the coffee table over to make more room on the floor and set out the various products.

Cornstarch. Small paint brush. Honey. Two small vials of oil. Mortar and pestle. Small stirring spoon.

Okay. Kris had a fertile imagination, but a few of the items were beyond even her creative abilities. The curiosity was killing her. "Are you going to put me out of my misery and explain now?"

"Nope." Derek was kneeling on the ground and reached out a hand for the blanket. With a precision that amused her, he spread it out. He crooked a finger at her. "Come here, please."

Kris walked over and dropped to her knees in front of him.

Derek cupped the back of her neck and pleased her with a soul-searing kiss. This time he was in no hurry to sample her. His tongue moved leisurely against hers, teasing lightly, promising much. A few moments later when he pulled away, she wasn't at all ready for it to end. With a small sound of protest, she tried to pull him back.

The chuckle that escaped past his lips was slightly strained. "I would love to continue that train of thought, but I have other things on the agenda tonight."

She tugged ineffectually on his shoulders and said, "I never was much for structure. I've found the best laid plans are so much better when they're shot to hell."

"And with you, I'm sure they are." Derek had to smile at her tenacity. "However, I think you'll like what I have planned even better."

Knowing she wouldn't get him to budge, she dropped her hands. "Fine. I'll trust your judgment. But if it looks like my way will be better, we're going to forget your plans and move to plan B."

"Deal." He wasn't paying much attention to her words since his hands were currently engaged with removing her slacks. It was almost humorous how quickly she decided against further argument when she realized what he was doing.

"Derek, you're right. I already like what you have planned better. In fact, it's amazing how similar our ideas are. They say that great minds think—"

He silenced her with a finger to her lips. "Hush for a second, will you? Just lie back and enjoy. And prepare to be romanced."

Kris smiled at the gentle demand. She couldn't quite help the slight shiver of anticipation that slid up her spine. Yes, this was getting better and better.

He must have taken her silence as assent because he finished removing her clothes until she was wearing nothing but her flushed skin. For long moments, he simply stared at her.

A stare that made Kris feel like a beautiful, sensual woman.

Ragged breathing was the only noise to be heard in the small living room. Kris could feel his desire in his gaze. Her nipples tightened. The moist heat between her legs increased when she saw the proof of his arousal straining against his zipper. Ooh, the man *was* ready for more. Could life get any better?

He was huge and she wanted all of him. Now. The taste she'd received in the theater had barely whetted her appetite.

"Derek, please!" Her throaty whisper was unmistakable. As was her plea.

She could see the indecision in his gaze. But he shook his head. "Romance first. I promise you'll enjoy it. Lie on your stomach."

"I don't think—" she broke off when he motioned her to roll over by twirling his finger in a circle. Heaving a huge sigh, she rolled onto her stomach, grumbling all the while.

Fine. She'd do it his way for a few minutes and if it wasn't doing anything for her, she'd take matters into her own hands. And she knew he'd thank her for *that*.

Turning her head, she watched him pour the oils into the small bowl. He mixed them together with the small spoon.

"What's that?"

Without looking up from his task, he replied, "Sweet almond oil and some scented essential oil. It smells good, trust me. Now turn around and lie down."

"Wow. Getting pretty bossy there, big buy. I didn't know you were into domination and such."

To his credit, he didn't rise to the bait.

Seconds later, she felt a trickle of what she assumed was the oil on her back. Large, warm hands soon followed.

"Ohhh," she groaned. She did like his plan better, though for a different reason. The long, sensual strokes up and down her back were pure bliss. Sensual, yet soothing at the same time. Definitely an odd combination.

The last time she'd had a massage was when she'd dated an actual Swedish masseuse. The man had had extremely talented hands. Unfortunately, his talent had only extended to massage. In the bedroom, he'd been unable to hold an erection for longer than two minutes, let alone her interest. That and he'd had the irritating habit of warbling out Swedish phrases at the worst possible times. She'd been reminded of the Swedish chef from *The Muppets* and had promptly lost her desire.

Derek didn't have that problem. In fact, she could feel the heat of his erection pressing against her thigh where he was straddling her. No problems there. Not a single one. And no Muppets in sight.

For nearly ten minutes, Derek continued to stroke her skin, massaging the fragrant oil into her back. When she'd completely relaxed under his hands, he leaned over and said, "Are you ready?"

"For what?" she murmured sleepily.

"To test your senses."

A husky laugh escaped. "Hon, I thought you were just testing my ability to take orders and keep my hands to myself."

He grinned in spite of himself. "That too. But I wanted to show you that there's more to physical pleasure than just sex. So this is an exercise for the senses."

"Great. What's my homework, Professor?"

"I was getting to that." Luckily she couldn't see his grin. No way did he want her to know how amused he was. She'd use that as leverage. How, he wasn't sure, he simply knew she'd find a way to use it to her advantage and his downfall.

Then again...he considered her naked body for a moment. Maybe not.

Shaking his head to clear it, he got back to the business at hand.

"Your first assignment is to feel." He grabbed the small pestle that had been in the basket. It was marble, cool to the touch. After warming it in his hands, he placed it on her neck, using it to gently apply pressure in the contours.

"Mmm. I'm feeling that. And unless you've shrunk from earlier this week, I'm guessing that's not your bald avenger."

There was a pause in the gentle strokes followed by what sounded like a coughing fit. Finally he answered, "Ah, no. No, it's not my...it's not any part of me."

His voice was slightly edgy, so she decided to push him a little more. "That's good. Because if it was, I'd be wondering why it was in my neck when there are a number of

other places that would be much more wet. And hot. Definitely much more pleasurable, I can guarantee." Her words came out as a seductive purr.

She shivered as she felt his hot breath tease her ear.

"Kris, when I'm ready to make love to you, I guarantee that I'll be more than able to find all of those nice, wet, hot, tight places that I can bury myself in." His growl was almost a whisper. Yet the weight of his words had her nearly begging for him to end this.

But she didn't. He wanted to play this game and she'd indulge him. For a short time. So instead, she closed her eyes and said, "I feel the hard, cool slide of stone...um...marble, against my skin. It's warmer now. The more you rub it against me, the warmer it gets." Her words were deliberately provocative.

He remained quiet, so she went on. "I smell the oils on my skin. I'm not sure which essential oil it is, but it's...a heady scent. Alluring. Mysterious. Very sexy."

"Perfect," the hoarse words were whispered as he continued to ply her skin with the marble. "It's funny," Kris continued softly, "how I can feel the muscles relaxing beneath your hands, and yet...I'm still strung tighter than I've ever been in my life."

A sharply indrawn breath told her she'd scored a direct hit. But it was all the reaction she was to get from him.

"Okay...let's...ah," he stopped to clear his throat. "Let's try something else now."

She didn't even bother to convince him what *she* thought they should try. The man was stubborn. It was a good thing she was too.

Her body was feeling decidedly pleasant. Her muscles were nice and loose from his hands. Desire thrummed through her veins slowly now. It was a definite change of pace for her, but it was one she was thoroughly enjoying.

Her languorous thoughts were interrupted when he said, "I need you to roll over."

Hmm. Now that sounded promising.

She stretched before slowly rolling onto her back. It was highly arousing to see the appreciation in his eyes. To watch his eyes darken further with his desire. To see his fist clench to keep from reaching for her, touching her.

Watching his throat work to try and swallow, Kris had no doubt Derek wanted her. Badly. It was always good to know the feeling was mutual. Just seeing his gorgeous blue eyes filled with need, his features drawn tight with it, made her hot. The man was the most delicious sight she'd ever seen. And she wanted him more than anything or anyone at that particular moment.

"Now what?"

Derek gave her a blank look. He shook his head slowly and smiled. "You are gorgeous."

A warm flush swept across her face. Any more comments like that and she'd be complete putty in his hands. Though as it was, she was close to being putty.

"Thanks." She smiled back at him.

Holding up one hand, he showed her the cornstarch. In his other, he held the small paint brush. "Close your eyes." Once she had complied, he instructed, "Tell me what you feel now."

The tip of the brush lightly swept across her neck. The bristles were soft, tickling her skin.

"What do you feel, Kris," he prompted.

The brush made lazy sweeps across her shoulder, down her arm...

"It's tickles. But not enough to make me laugh. Just enough to give me goose bumps." And make her nipples tighten even more. A fact he had probably noticed.

For a few seconds, the brush stopped. Then Derek said, "Okay, what about this?"

Light strokes from the brush and a soft, silky sensation. What was he doing? Surreptitiously, she glanced back and saw he had the cornstarch open. Kris assumed he was distributing it along her skin.

"Different now," she sighed. The brush was on her right breast, spreading the velvety powder. When he lightly teased her nipple, she moaned softly.

A shiver ran through her as he moved the brush to the other breast. Short, delicate strokes. The brush painted down around her navel, along the sides of her abdomen.

It was one of the most erotic sensations she'd ever experienced. The light touch was teasing, not near enough yet at the same time almost overwhelming. Kris opened her eyes to look at Derek.

He was watching her face. "Tell me," was the quiet demand.

"Silk," she managed to gasp out. "It feels like powdered silk."

A small smile played at his lips. "Powered silk on the silk of your skin. How fitting."

Arousal lent a delicious sensitivity to her skin, allowing the light touch of the brush to tantalize her nerve endings. "Derek—"

"Ready for the next one?" he interrupted softly.

"No," she all but growled at him. "Unless *you* are the next one."

Derek ignored her, placed the cornstarch and paint brush on the coffee table and grabbed a washcloth. With more pressure than he'd used with the brush, he rubbed at the cornstarch covering her. The brisk movements wiped away the white powder clinging to her skin. It was a different touch, yet she moved into the caress. Craving his touch.

As he moved down her stomach, she silently prayed he'd move between her legs. Her hips lifted in invitation. He flashed a wicked grin and moved away.

Kris groaned and thumped her head back on the blanket. The man was beyond frustrating. What would it take?

Discarding the washcloth, he picked up the honey and dipped the small spoon into the jar. "Hope you don't mind getting a little sticky."

"Actually, I do mind. Because what I'd rather do is...oohh!" She broke off with a gasp as he drizzled honey onto her nipples.

"Mmm...you were saying?" he drawled out the lazy question, obviously enjoying her reactions.

"I was saying—" her eyes nearly rolled back in her head when he dropped his mouth to her breast and began to lick the honey off. "For the love of..." she shuddered when he flicked his tongue against the rosy peak.

"What do you feel, Kris?" The question was whispered against her left breast. With long, slow circles of his tongue, he licked the honey that had dripped down the swell of her breast.

All she could do was moan.

"Kris," he prompted, pulling back to sit on his haunches. "What do you feel?"

She stared at him hungrily. "Need. A need so strong it scares me. Overwhelms me even."

His eyes widened. Obviously that wasn't the answer he'd expected. But if he couldn't handle the answer, he shouldn't ask the question. She wasn't about to retract her words. It was the most she'd ever admitted to a man.

One deep breath. Two deep breaths.

Kris watched his chest heave and wondered if he'd respond.

After a minute or two of silence, he smiled and leaned over her once more. "Good."

Good!? That was it? She'd given him the most heartfelt, honest answer of her entire life and all he could say was *good*? Maybe he hadn't understood what she'd meant.

His mouth was ready to descend on her stomach, but she grabbed a fistful of hair to stop him. "Wait a minute. What is that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Good," he repeated calmly.

Frowning, she tried to decipher his look. "No. Not good. You asked me what I feel and when I tell you that's all you can say!?"

He pulled her hands from his hair and held them in his own. "Kris, do you really want me to comment on it? At this point, are you ready to hear what I have to say?"

His earnest admission scared her. Almost as much as her own need did. No, she wasn't ready to hear it. It was bad enough she'd thrown her words out in the open, but if he did too... No, it would be best at this point if he didn't say a word.

"No. I-I guess that's fine." She closed her eyes and missed the pained expression that briefly crossed his features. After a moment, she opened them again. Tugging her hands back, she grabbed his shoulders and pulled him down beside her. "Now where were we?"

Derek bit off an oath.

He shouldn't have pushed her. Now she'd retreated back into her sex kitten shell and he didn't know if he'd be able to coax her out again. Damn, he was getting tired of

the chivalrous knight in shining armor role. Not that he'd done such a great job of it to date, but it wasn't from a lack of effort on his part. Lack of discipline, maybe, but his intentions remained noble. Sort of.

Kris tugged on him again in silent reminder. Knight in shining armor or not, he'd make sure she had no doubt about his romantic intentions by the time he was through. And he'd work on her other doubts in the mean time.

Tipping the honey upside down once more, he covered her most intimate places with the golden liquid. Before he started licking the honey off, he reminded her once more, "My name, Kris. That's all I want to hear you scream."

"Whatever you say, big guy," she purred back, a tad breathless.

With a wicked grin, Derek grabbed the honey and drizzled the golden liquid onto her stomach. Kris was propped up on her elbows, watching him in fascination. He studied her and shook his head. "This won't work."

Alarm flickered in her eyes. "What won't work?"

He carefully pulled on her elbows until she was lying back. He took her hands and placed them under her head so they were supporting her neck. "That's better."

Kris raised her brows questioningly. "Um, Derek, I don't see how this will help anything."

"Just keep your hands right there for me." He wanted them out of the way in case she tried to grab him. His sorely strained control wouldn't be able to handle it.

She shrugged slightly in careless agreement and watched him. Waiting for his next move.

Derek wasn't about to disappoint. Intent on his course of action, he missed the flare of hunger in her brown eyes. He bent his head to her navel and lapped at the sticky sweetness. Kris sucked in a quick breath as he meticulously cleaned the honey from her skin.

A soft laugh huffed past her lips.

Derek looked up at the sound. "Something wrong?"

She was smiling, though her eyes flashed pure heat. "Not a thing, Hon, it's just a little more ticklish than I thought it would be."

Derek couldn't pass up the opportunity to hear her soft giggles as he licked the golden skin around her belly button. She was so silky soft and he couldn't help but press a few tender kisses to her stomach.

Deciding he'd tormented her enough, he sat back and grabbed the honey once more. He moved so he was kneeling between her legs. Using his knees, he nudged her legs to spread them further apart.

Kris moaned low in her throat and watched him through half-closed eyes. With a gentle touch, he stroked her curls, fiercely triumphant to find her very wet and very ready. It was exactly what he wanted.

Very carefully, he spread her folds and drizzled more honey onto her beautiful pink flesh. Her breath hitched as the honey dripped along her clit. Derek was amazed to note his hand shook a bit when he put the honey down. But he shouldn't have been surprised. Kris had that affect on him. Probably always would.

"Derek," his name came out a breathless moan. "God—" her voice broke off on a low cry when his tongue found her folds.

With tender strokes of his tongue, he caught the honey before it could drip to the blanket beneath her. When he was satisfied with that, he moved to her inner thighs. He cleaned off the small bits of honey that had dripped farther than he'd intended.

Eager to feast on her once more, he made his way back to her heat. Derek took a second to inhale her scent. The sweetness of honey mixed with the spicy scent that was purely Kris. His mouth watered with his need to taste her.

Her sweet, pink lips were still spread for him, so he indulged his craving. Derek tongued his way along her perfect, pouty folds, stopping to lightly nip at the quivering flesh. His mouth found its way to her hot little clit and he leisurely sucked on the succulent bud. Her hips jerked against him. She was getting closer.

"Derek." Her moan was sharp with desire.

"Mmm," he hummed against her. It had the desired effect. She cried out loudly and twisted her fingers in his hair to hold him against her.

Derek moved lower and stabbed his tongue inside her, making sure to get every last drop of honey. When he'd satisfied his need to feast on her inner heat, he moved back to her clit. She was so responsive he could do this all day simply to watch her reaction. But he still hadn't heard what he wanted.

One hand moved to tease her, two fingers pushing inside her warmth. As he set a steady rhythm with his fingers, his mouth closed around her clit. He wanted to hear her scream his name and he wanted to hear it now. Her hips were moving against his mouth and he could feel her muscles tightening as she came closer to that peak. His fingers continued to plunge into her, seeking, retreating. Derek flicked her clit with his tongue once, twice, and then he suckled hard.

Kris bucked beneath him. "Derek!"

Many minutes later, when she finally came down from her crest, she found Derek watching her with pure satisfaction. Only then did she realize she'd screamed his name just as he'd wanted. Again.

Chapter Eleven

Kris woke before her alarm the next morning. Derek had opted not to stay the night and she had been relieved and at the same time disappointed. Last night had been amazing. And more intimate than she was used to. Wild and kinky sex was one thing, but taking pleasure in touch, talking and just being in Derek's company was getting too close to what she would term "commitment".

Maybe even love.

Which was why she was sitting in her kitchen, staring at her coffee pot and wondering if the bitter brew would really help to make her feel better this morning. Not that she was feeling bad, merely a bit...uneasy.

She feared he was beginning to do exactly what he'd set out to do. Romance her.

Was she ready for a relationship? It had been so long since she'd tried one. And considering the fact her track record was far less than perfect...

Sighing, she got up to measure some coffee grounds. A jolt of caffeine couldn't hurt right now.

For the moment, she'd simply try to enjoy their time together. Until the word "relationship" was actually spoken, it wasn't an issue, right?

"That's what I'll keep telling myself," she muttered, as she poured water into her coffee maker. "Ignorance is bliss." And to hell with the nagging little voice that wanted her to believe otherwise. There was no reason to ruin perfectly good...foreplay...at this stage of the game. She was positive if emotions entered the equation, it would be all over. And that was something she really didn't want.

Three cups of coffee later, she was feeling much more like her old self. Unfortunately her old self was doing a great job of reminding her she'd been negligent in her healthy habits. At least the few she had.

She'd been diligently ignoring the treadmill and figured it was time to at least hit the gym. Anything to avoid looking in the living room where memories of the previous night made her want to...

She quickly put a halt to those dangerous thoughts. If she was going to work up a lather, she might as well have a valid excuse for it. One that didn't involve a blue-eyed hunk who spelled trouble.

Before she could change her mind, she grabbed her gym bag and her keys and headed out the door. She could work out her frustrations with the weight equipment. Heading straight to the weight room, she had to wonder if ogling a few hotties while lifting weights would restore her mood. Bulging biceps and rippling pectorals always got her humming with pleasure.

To her left she spotted a fifty-something man going to town on the leg-lift machine. She watched the weights clang with every movement and had to shake her head. The poor guy was obviously in the midst of a midlife crisis. Why else would he wear spandex and a muscle top that was a size too small? In purple. She debated going over to give him a little friendly advice. Purple, spandex and middle-aged men just didn't work. Ever.

Just then, he looked over and caught her perusal. Kris offered a wan smile while he began to pump his legs in earnest, grunting with exertion. Yikes. She quickly looked away, hoping he wouldn't pop too many blood vessels in the purple spandex. What an unpleasant sight that would be.

To her right, the only hottie in sight at the moment was Alan. In all his hard-bodied glory. Kris waited a heartbeat...two heartbeats...ten heartbeats...for the quick surge of lust. But what she felt was...nothing. She tapped on her stomach in the vicinity of her ovaries.

"What's wrong with you? Aren't you supposed to be kicking out some serious hormones right about now? Maybe a few butterflies or something?" she muttered.

When nothing happened, she sighed. It was with mixed emotions she realized the sight of the golden Adonis wasn't going to do a thing for her. Not now and maybe not ever again. She couldn't decide if that was a bad thing or not. Lost in thought, she moved to the nearest machine and bent over to set the weights.

"Hey, baby. I was wondering when you'd show up."

Alan's languid drawl grated on her nerves. What was wrong with her? She never backed away from a willing, gorgeous man. Especially when his rippling muscles caused a rippling action in her. At least they had a few weeks ago. Maybe her engine just needed a little kick-start.

Forcing a smile on her face, she straightened. "Alan. I didn't know you'd be here."

Flexing his biceps in her face, he smiled. "I'm always here, babe."

Kris fought the urge to roll her eyes. "Right, of course you are." Since when had flirtatious banter been so difficult? And flexing biceps so ho-hum?

She gave it another try. "So...what have you been up to?" Yes, that was about as flirtatious as those stupid granny panties, she thought with a mental groan. If Maddie and Ash caught wind of this, they'd wonder if the panties had done irreversible damage to her libido.

"Oh, I bought this new supplement that's really starting to improve my lifting. I was able to put up..."

Kris watched his mouth move but couldn't focus on his words to save her life. While Alan droned on and on about supplements and bench presses and who knew what else, Kris was remembering the way Derek's eyes had darkened to the most beautiful shade of midnight blue. And the way his smile had turned a bit wicked as he'd applied drop after drop of the sweet, sticky honey...

“...so how does six-ish sound tonight?”

Blinking back to reality, Kris looked at Alan. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I said, how does around six sound for dinner tonight?”

A few weeks ago all she’d wanted was a piece of his rock-hard...assets. But now, the thought of a night out—or in—with him got her as excited as the prospect of a weekend spent on that stupid treadmill sitting in her living room. Ugh.

At her continued silence, Alan leaned over, took a long leisurely look at her cleavage and whispered, “Remember, you still owe me.”

Kris waited for his gaze to meet hers, but he seemed particularly interested in talking to her breasts. Not that she didn’t think they were up to par. However, they usually weren’t much for conversation. But it gave her the easy out she was looking for.

“I guess that depends. If you’re talking to my breasts, they’re booked for the next three months solid. But if you’re talking to me, I’m just plain not interested.” And she was surprised to find that she wasn’t. Neither was her cleavage.

Had he been this sleazy the other day? She really couldn’t remember. The rock-hard physique might have slightly hampered her ability to judge his character. Then again, at the time, character hadn’t mattered all that much.

Alan didn’t bother to raise his eyes when he said, “Come on, babe. You know we’d have a great time together.”

A great time? She wondered if it would involve honey. Or bad seats at a bad movie and lots of caressing. Or what about...

Irritated with her wayward thoughts and even more irritated that he couldn’t manage to address her to her face, she crouched down so her face was eye level with his crotch. She looked closely before speaking near the vicinity of his fly, “Listen, *babe*, I don’t owe you a damn thing. I said I’m not interested, which means no. No to the date, no to the great time you think we’d have, and a big—or should I say little—no to your boys here.” She shook her head and tsked in dismay. “Poor little things. Steroids will get them every time. Just say no to drugs. And all those other weird supplements you take,” she wagged her finger for emphasis.

Straightening, she didn’t even bother to see his reaction before she walked off. Alan needed to brush up on his romance skills. Badly. Talking to breasts would only get a guy so far. Okay, it wouldn’t get a guy far at all, but that was the point.

Kris walked back into the locker room and grabbed her bag. So much for staring at any hotties. Then again, it didn’t do much good to look at other men when one man in particular was filling a girl’s every thought. And not just the wonderfully erotic thoughts, either.

Resisting the urge to smack her forehead, Kris slid into her car and dropped her head back on the headrest. What had just happened? She’d turned down the offer of a date—and sex—with a bodybuilder. A bodybuilder! Sex! Two things that usually—okay, almost always—made a very nice combination.

Why? Could it be attributed to too long of a dry spell? Maybe she really was rusty. And seriously out of practice. Maybe it was because...because...now she was more tempted by the offer of romance than casual sex.

"Oh, god," she moaned. "He's ruined me for life. Now I'll have to go out and stock up on granny panties and starched, virginal night gowns." Just the thought had her shuddering.

Romance. Funny how such a simple concept had become so complicated in such a short amount of time. And how one man—one man in a sea of millions—had so effortlessly turned her world upside down with a few simple touches. And words.

If ever there was a man who didn't need to worry about his romance skills, it was Derek. The guy had it down to a fine science. Obviously, since she'd just turned down sex. Sex! With a bodybuilder!

It was the principle of the thing. Romance was all well and good, but once she admitted defeat to Derek, then what? He'd collect his winnings and be out of her life. Why did that thought hurt so much?

It was time to get real. She might be feeling more than lust for Derek, but what about in two weeks, or two months down the road? It would be the same old story. He'd want to get serious, she'd freeze up, he'd accuse her of being an ice princess, heartless and unfeeling. It would just be one more relationship she'd screwed up. Then where would she be? Sitting at home in her stupid granny panties talking to her fifty cats, her hair in rollers and her virginal nightgown stained with cat food.

No.

No way in hell would it come to that. She was a seductress, dammit. She could tease and tempt with the best of them. There was no way she would let it come to stained nightgowns and cat food. Or heartbreak.

Derek had asked her on a date for the following weekend and Kris was bound and determined to prove she could have him. Sex was the name of the game. She'd get her man one way or another. And then if he wanted to leave, so be it. Her emotions were tightly in check.

As she drove home, she resolutely ignored the pain in the vicinity of her heart.

Chapter Twelve

A foolish man went into battle unprepared. Though Derek felt a bit foolish at the moment, he certainly wasn't unprepared. Tonight was it. The ultimate night of romance for Kris. The ultimate night of pleasure for them both. And hopefully, a night full of wonderful memories as well.

He waited before her door, dressed in a tux. Looking down at the impeccably tailored clothing, he hoped like hell she'd appreciate it. It had been a little risky to plan something so traditional, but he'd wanted to give her a taste of it all. So there he stood red roses in hand and nerves shot to pieces.

"Here goes nothing," he mumbled to himself as he knocked on the door.

When Kris opened it, he could have sworn he heard his heart fall at her feet with a distinct *thunk*.

She was dressed in a simple black dress that was anything but simple on her. Barely there straps held up the front of her gown, which dipped dangerously low. It fit her like a second skin, hugging her curves and showing off her finest assets. Which was pretty much all of her. The skirt swirled out delicately at her knees, falling in soft waves around her ankles. And the back...when she turned around Derek sucked in a quick breath. There was no back. The only thing showing was her beautiful skin. And a hint—the barest peek—of her *derrière*.

He was a dead man.

She'd dusted a shimmery powder over her skin, allowing it to glow with a stunning iridescent quality. Her hair was pulled back in a simple chignon while a few loose strands teased the nape of her neck. She was beyond breathtaking. She was beyond sexy. And Derek was so hot for her it nearly brought him to his knees.

His mouth worked as he tried to form words. She looked pointedly at the flowers. Stupidly, he did too. A moment passed as he tried to collect his scattered thoughts.

Realization finally dawned. Holding out the snow white roses for her to take, he said simply. "These are for you. Kris, you...ah...you take my breath away."

"Thank you," she replied softly. Inhaling the fragrant blossoms, she closed her eyes.

Derek stood there, completely mesmerized by the sight.

When she finally looked at him, he saw desire reflected in her gaze. A surge of triumph ran through him. Yes, tonight was the night.

Kris drank in the sight of Derek like a woman dying of thirst. He was gorgeous. Sexier than any man had the right to be in his well-fitting tux. Yum.

His reaction to her dress had been gratifying. Exactly what she'd planned, as a matter of fact. Kris went through her mental check list. Speechless, check. Jaw dropping,

check. Her eyes flicked down to his fly. A small smile of victory curved her lips. Extremely hot and bothered, check.

There was a very, very good chance tonight would turn out well for them both. No, it definitely would. She was going to make sure of it.

"Thanks for the flowers, big guy."

He brought a hand up to her cheek for a small caress. "You're welcome."

Her eyelashes drifted down to hide her sudden confusion. Damn the man for making this harder than it needed to be. *Keep it physical*, she reminded herself.

"So what's on the agenda tonight? I assume you have big plans for the tux."

He flashed a rueful grin and looked down at his attire. "You were supposed to be suitably impressed with it. Most women would kill to get a guy dressed up like this."

"Derek, you should know by now I'm not most women," she winked at him.

His gaze softened. "Believe me, I know that. I just wanted to give you one night of traditional romance. So far I haven't done a very good job at it."

Kris barely repressed a snort. He actually believed that? At this point she didn't want to tell him otherwise. It would make it even harder after the evening was over.

Putting the flowers on the coffee table, she held out her left arm for him to take. "Show me how it's done then, Hon."

"My pleasure, love. First I thought we could get a bite to eat," he placed her hand in the crook of his arm and led her to the street.

She couldn't hide her gasp of surprise. Parked in front of her house was a beautiful horse-drawn carriage. How had she missed seeing that? She turned to ask Derek, when she realized—her entire focus had been on him. Which shouldn't have come as a surprise.

"What's all this?" she asked.

"Romance."

"But I don't—" she began.

Derek cut her off. "Kris, I want tonight to be magical for you. Sit back and enjoy for once, okay? For me?" His tone was light, but his eyes asked for her cooperation.

The slight edge of desperation began to ride her. This wasn't how tonight was supposed to go. It was supposed to be about sex. Not flowers and horse-drawn carriages and men who made her think of happily ever after. Not romance or magical evenings.

The look in his eyes was the only thing that stopped her from jumping ship. Instead she merely said, "Okay, Derek. For you."

Derek smiled in satisfaction and helped her up into the carriage. Once they were settled, the driver snapped the reins and the carriage jerked forward. Kris tried to focus on the rhythmic clip-clop of the horses' hooves instead of the sexy scent of Derek's

aftershave. Or the perfect cut of his tux over his broad shoulders. Or the lips that could do such wonderfully wicked things.

Sighing, she shook her head. Derek looked at her questioningly. She shook her head again at him and settled back into the seat. He put his arm around her and pulled her close. Kris let go for a moment and simply enjoyed the intimate act.

Conflicting emotions ran through her. Was this still just a game to him? Was he only out to prove that romance was better than sex? Or was this real for him? Because she was afraid it had become all too real for her. That particular thought had haunted her all week long. She only wondered how long she'd feel this exhilaration with him. Was it merely the novelty of a budding relationship? How could she know it was the real deal?

As they neared the restaurant, Derek slipped his arm from her shoulder and took her hand. The driver came around to help them down and Derek escorted her to the doors.

He'd brought her back to Catalina's.

Kris looked around. "This place looks familiar."

Derek pulled her close for a quick hug. "Ever since I first brought you here, this place has had special meaning."

Kris tried desperately to ignore the pounding of her heart. Oh, this was not good.

The maître d' led them to their table. It was the same one they'd first dined at. The same piano player was at the keys, coaxing a soft melody out of the baby grand. Oh, this was really not good.

She was silent as she slid into the booth. When he'd seated himself, she finally said, "Okay, I admit it. I'm suitably impressed."

He raised a brow in mock surprise. "So the key to your heart isn't a tux or horse-drawn carriage, but a great menu?"

Grabbing a menu, she opened it. "You've got it, big guy." Why, oh why, did she feel like crying?

He laughed and picked up the menu before him.

They placed their order and drank wine. They teased and flirted, desire simmering slowly between them as the evening progressed. Somehow she managed to hide her growing confusion.

By the time they'd finished the main course, Kris sat back with a pained expression. "Wow. That was even better than I remembered. But for once I didn't manage to save room for dessert."

"Good."

"Good!? That's not good. What kind of woman am I to forgo dessert?" she bemoaned, dropping her head in her hands.

Smiling, he replied, "I have dessert already planned. I was thinking we could share the tiramisu."

He watched as his words slowly sank in. Eyes widening, she looked up at him. "Tiramisu."

Derek nodded.

A slow smile curved her mouth. "Hon, that's the most romantic thing I've heard you say all evening."

He took care of the check then led her back to the carriage. Once they were settled, he leaned over and murmured against her hair, "I hope you don't mind, but we're going to take the long way home."

Normally she would have minded. She'd wanted this man for what seemed like forever. But at the same time, she wanted to prolong the evening because this was it. Even if it wasn't their last night together, it was certainly the beginning of the end. Just like always.

Sliding her hand into his, she smiled up at him. "Sounds great to me. I need to let my food settle anyway. Wouldn't want to miss even a drop of that dessert."

Stars were just beginning to light the night sky when they eventually made their way down her street. Derek tipped the driver and they stood, watching the carriage pull away. Finally he turned to her. Sweeping his arm, he asked, "Shall we?"

As Kris closed her door behind them, she took a deep breath. It was time to turn up the heat.

She placed her body flush against his, pulling his head down for a kiss. With her tongue she traced his lips lightly, before nibbling at the corners of his mouth. His arms came around her waist to rest lightly on her hips. Kris drew his lower lip in her mouth, sucking gently.

His hands slipped up her arms, drawing her closer still.

When Kris continued to tease him with light kisses and nips, Derek growled low in his throat and took over, plunging his tongue into her mouth. Devouring her. A million sensations cascaded through her, each one more intense than the next. It had never been like this.

His lips made a trail from her mouth down along her jaw. Finally he reached her ear, where he nibbled on the delicate lobe. She shivered and tilted her head to the side to allow him better access. Derek pressed soft kisses along her neck, where he could feel her pulse jumping wildly with desire. A perfect match to his own racing heartbeat.

As his lips continued to explore her neck his hands came up to stroke the soft skin of her back.

"Did I tell you how much I love this dress?" he whispered.

Her only answer was a faint moan.

He huffed out a laugh. "What little there is of it. You have a beautiful back. Very sexy. Very elegant." His hands dipped down to caress the top curve of her ass. "Very arousing."

She pushed against his chest. For a moment, he refused to let her go. Forcing his arms to relax, he watched as she stepped away. She pulled on the straps and let the slinky black dress slither slowly to the floor.

"It's even better when it's off," she murmured in a throaty voice.

His gulp was audible in the silence of the room.

Kris wasn't wearing anything underneath. Nothing except for her perfect, golden skin.

"Ah..." he nearly choked on his tongue.

Her smile was slow and deliberate.

When he continued to stare at her, she moved close enough to start undoing the buttons on his shirt. Heart racing, blood thrumming, he could only watch her through heavy-lidded eyes. His hands were fisted at his sides.

Off came his shirt and next she set to work on his pants. His erection jerked in response when she pulled his pants down to the floor where her dress lay.

"Mmm...like that, do you?"

His voice was hoarse with desire. "You have no idea just how much."

Soon she had him standing naked in front of her. Her appreciative gaze heated his already burning skin. Her tongue darted out to lick her suddenly parched lips as she eyed him. "Derek, you are the most gorgeous man I've ever seen." Beguiling brown eyes met his with an expression he'd feared he'd never see. "And I've never, ever wanted anyone as much as I want you."

There it was. The sign he'd been looking for.

In swift movements, he scooped her up and stalked down the hallway. "Which one?" his voice came out much harsher than he'd intended, but lust was riding him hard. And that's what he planned to do to Kris.

"First door on the left," her voice was a bit breathless.

He nudged the door open with his foot and carried her to the bed.

"Wow. If carrying me across the threshold isn't romantic, I don't know what is," she teased, in an effort to calm her sudden case of nervousness.

But the comment caused him to still. Then very gently, he laid her on the bed.

"What? What is it?" she asked, confusion evident on her face.

Instead of speaking, he cupped her cheek, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. His other hand came up to her breast, where he gently flicked her nipple. She gasped in surprise. Why did it seem as if she were experiencing everything for the first time with him?

Pushing her onto her back, Derek followed, covering her with his warm body, and continued making love to her mouth. The warm palm on her breast was making circular motions against her rosy flesh. The delicious friction made her legs move restlessly.

He must have noticed, because he immediately lowered his hand to her curls and his mouth to her nipple. Once there he laved her hardened peak until she was arching into his lips. His fingers toyed with her clitoris in teasing strokes.

Her eyes were squeezed tightly shut against the sensations. It was too much. It wasn't enough.

When he slid a finger inside her heat, she bucked her hips in invitation. "God, Derek—"

"Easy, love. We've got all night," he murmured against the other nipple, giving it the same loving attention as the first.

Unable to lie still, she wrapped her hand around his erection. His growl of approval made her smile. Two could play at this game. And so far he'd been the seducer tonight. She needed to even the odds.

With a firm grip, she began to stroke his shaft. The fingers inside her began to move faster, in time with her strokes. She cried out when he bit down lightly on her nipple. The scrape of his teeth against her sensitive flesh brought more moisture between her legs.

"Kris, you're more than wet enough for me." He moved to spread her legs, but she stopped him.

"I'm not done playing yet, Derek." There was a promise in her words. The look in her eyes was unmistakable. He allowed her to push him onto his back.

Straddling his thighs, Kris ran her hands up and down his sides. Derek didn't have the physique of a bodybuilder, but his lean muscles were more drool-worthy than any man she'd ever seen. Perfect, even.

Kris leaned over to run her tongue across his chest, licking first one nipple, then the other. She could feel his dick, hot and hard against her thigh. Moving her mouth down his navel, she pressed soft kisses around his stomach.

His hands were on her shoulders, gently rubbing as she moved lower. Taking both hands, she wrapped them around him. The bead of come on the tip of him beckoned to her. She caught his gaze and held it as she lowered her mouth to gently suck it from him. His hips jerked as she took him deep in her throat. Once...twice... Derek dropped his head back onto the pillow.

He could feel her licking his shaft, from the top down to the base. Her hands cupped his balls, as her mouth descended yet again. She took a long, wonderful moment to suck gently on each testicle. A groan was torn from him at the deliberately sensual act.

She sat back on her heels and looked at him, her breasts swaying slightly in provocative movements as she, too, fought for breath. "Derek, I could taste you all night."

His control shattered. Before she could draw another breath, she found herself pinned beneath his weight.

Grabbing a condom from the nightstand, she wordlessly handed it to him. In a swift motion, he sheathed the rubber over his dick and spread her legs. She could feel the hard tip of him probing as he settled his weight on his arms.

She lifted her hips, rubbing her clit against him enticingly. The breath hissed between his clenched teeth.

"Damn, woman. Give me a second here."

Smiling wickedly, she continued to rub against him. He let his weight sink, effectively stilling her hips.

"Kris," he said her name in warning.

"Derek, please, *please* don't tell me you're going to start talking about no sex at a time like this!"

"No. But I need to hear you say it."

"Say what?" She asked the question already knowing the answer. She only hoped the fear wasn't evident in her voice. It must have been, because he simply stared down at her.

"I love you Kris. I know this started out as a challenge for us both, but the time I've spent with you has been incredible. You're incredible. I need to know you feel the same."

Oh God, oh God, oh God! Not now! Her mind froze up. She couldn't think, let alone speak. What did he want her to say? What could she say? She'd never uttered those three little words in her life. In her life! And here they were, about to have mind-blowing sex, and he wanted to talk about feelings!? Feelings she'd never been able to trust?

"Um..." was all she managed.

He sat back and gripped her shoulders. "Say it, Kris. I know you care about me. You knew where this was headed. I want a relationship. Not just sex. I want you *and* the romance. And everything that comes with it."

"I didn't...I'm not..." she stuttered. Where was her sharp wit and clever tongue now? They must have gone out the window right along with her spine. What could she say? "Derek...I...I..."

"I love you Kris," he whispered. "I want you in my life. I want you to be a part of my life."

To her utter shock, tears filled her eyes. She blinked rapidly, refusing to let them fall. Her heart was in her throat, choking back any words she could have said at the moment. The words he wanted to hear.

She watched the light in his eyes dim as she remained silent. But no matter how hard she tried, the words wouldn't come.

Slowly, he stood and moved away from the bed, grabbing his clothes as he went. "I guess I didn't do such a great job at this romance thing after all. At least not with you." His laughter was bitter as he walked to the door. "You maintained all along that you

only wanted sex. I believe you now. Sorry to disappoint you, but what you got instead was my heart."

And then he was gone. The door slammed a minute later, making her cringe. Lying there in the dark, she heard his words echoing in her head. Only then was she able to speak. "I love you too..."

Chapter Thirteen

Maddie sat on the couch cross-legged and watched as Kris paced around. She barely managed to repress her amusement. Never had she seen her friend so worked up before. Not over anything, let alone a man. All she could think was that it was about darn time. She'd known Derek was different from the first time she'd seen him and Kris together. Maddie took a careful sip of her water and finally said, "So, is something bothering you?"

"Bothering me?" Kris snapped. "Of course not. Why would you say that?" She stopped in front of Maddie and placed her hands on her hips. "What could possibly be wrong? It certainly wouldn't be the fact that the man I was having great non-sex with finally decided to have sex with me because he said he loved me. It couldn't be the fact that I freaked out at the mention of love and commitment and all that jazz. And it's definitely not because the jerk actually had the gall to believe I didn't love him back and just walked out of my door and left because I wouldn't say anything. I couldn't say anything!"

By the time Kris had finished her impassioned denial, her chest was heaving and her eyes were filled with—horror of horrors—tears. She had never cried over a man. Not once in her life. Well, except the time Davy Maxwell had refused to kiss her and called her a "cootie-infested girl" in the fifth grade. But that had been the one and only time.

Maddie held open her arms as Kris sank onto the couch and cried on her shoulder.

After a moment, Kris sat back and wiped her eyes. "Hon, this is exactly why I've avoided commitment with men. It's too complicated. Sex isn't. You just go in, have fun, and when it's all said and done everyone is smiling." She paused. "Well, everyone should be smiling. Especially if the guy knows what he's doing. And if everyone's not smiling—"

"Kris," her friend groaned, cutting her off.

"Sorry." Kris sniffled for a minute, then said, "You know what the worst thing about this whole mess is?"

"What's that?" Maddie asked, with her eyes full of sympathy.

"We didn't even get to have sex."

Silence descended.

Then Maddie began yelling. "Kristine Jeffries, I don't believe you! How can you sit here and think about sex when you were just crying your eyes out and talking about love!?"

Kris opened her mouth but Maddie stopped her. "No, you just be quiet for a minute. Is that all you're worried about? That you didn't get to have sex with him?!"

She slowly shook her head. Her eyes filled with tears once more, and Kris replied in a quiet voice, "No, I'm upset because we never made love. And that made all the difference in the world."

"Well I—" Maddie stopped mid-tirade and looked at her. Finally she smiled. "Kris, that's the most wonderful thing I've ever heard you say."

"Yeah, it's so wonderful, I'm in tears about the whole stupid thing," she replied with no small amount of sarcasm.

Her friend shook her head and tsked. "I can't believe it. I just can't believe it. The great Kris Jeffries, a woman who's never let a man get the better of her, a woman who's never let the world get her down before, is sitting here feeling sorry for herself."

For a moment, Kris was too shocked to reply. Let a man get the better of her!? Feeling sorry for herself!?

"I don't think so. I was just sitting here letting off some steam. That happens to a girl when she's gone without sex for awhile. Need to let off a little steam because it's not good for the ovaries."

"Not good for the... What are you talking about?"

Kris spared her an exasperated glance. "Ovaries, Hon. You know, each woman has two and they...oh, never mind. Anyhow, I just needed to get that off my chest, okay. I'm *not* feeling sorry for myself. Not in the slightest." She sniffled.

Maddie raised an eyebrow. "That's sure what it looked like to me. I seem to remember a certain someone getting on my case about my love life not so long ago."

"And now you're returning the favor, so consider the debt paid," Kris grumbled.

Maddie sat back down on the couch and put an arm around her. "So what are you going to do?"

She drew in a deep breath. "I need to figure out a way to get his attention. And I should probably tell him how I feel."

Maddie nodded in understanding, hiding her smile. A second later she gave in and chuckled.

"What?" Kris asked.

"I was just thinking about how the two of you met. I still can't get over the Panty Episode." She looked at Kris with a grin. "You *do* know that one will have to be retold to children and grandchildren someday, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah the Panty Episode, whatever you say — Wait a minute! That's it!"

Kris gave Maddie a quick hug then jumped up and left the room.

"What? What did I miss?" Maddie asked the empty room.

Hands full of panties, Kris ran back into the room. "So which pair is more suitable for public?"

* * * * *

They were about ten minutes from quitting time, but for Derek it might as well have been ten hours. Ever since he'd walked out of Kris' house last weekend, he'd thrown himself into work. Relishing the long hours and hard labor. Going home to an empty house and an emptier bed had only served to rip his already shattered heart into smaller pieces.

Kris.

That damn woman drove him insane. He was still head over heels crazy in love with her, and probably would be for the rest of his sorry life. Too bad she didn't feel the same way about him.

He threw his toolbox into the back of his company pickup with greater force than necessary, banging the tools around. Dammit, he'd been sure—absolutely sure—that she was in love with him. He'd picked a rotten time to find out he was wrong. Actually, he knew she felt the same way, but getting her to admit it out loud was the problem.

He was pretty sure tighty-whities would become the next big fashion trend before that ever happened. But she'd made her decision. Now he'd just have to live with it. So much for romance and happily ever after.

Shaking his head, he walked around to open the driver's door. It was time to head home and crack open a cold one. Suddenly, repeated honking caught his attention. Damn. Didn't people understand this was a construction zone?

Muttering under his breath, he turned around. Heading toward the aggravating driver, he hoped he could keep a rein on his temper long enough to get them on their merry little way. So he could get on his.

By the time he reached the driver's door, the horn had stopped. Wanting to nip the problem in the bud, he politely tapped on the driver's window, unable to see through the tinting.

When the window came down, so did his jaw.

"Hiya, handsome. I was wondering if you might be able to help me out."

"K-Kris?!" he managed to stutter, taking in the vision before him.

Sitting in her car, calm as you please, was the very woman he couldn't get out of his head. And once again, she was having a panty problem. Only this time, instead of finding them down around her ankles, she was surrounded by them. Buried under them. Panties in various shades and materials were strewn across the interior of her car.

Derek swung his gaze back to her, wondering what she was up to.

It was interesting to note the way she nervously licked her lips before saying, "One and the same. Um...I'm in need of a little help."

Derek shook his head, hoping to clear some of the fog. What in the hell was going on? It was time to take a step back. Mentally, emotionally and physically. He crossed his arms over his chest and peered down at her. "You need help. With what?"

"Well...I, ah..." she faltered for a minute under his scrutiny. So much for the panty approach. Kris figured she might as well go for broke. Thrusting a pair of panties at him, she said, "Here. These are for you."

Gingerly accepting the cream-colored satin thong, he looked at it and shook his head, his expression unreadable. "Sorry, but those just aren't my style." He peered at the tag. "They're not my size, either."

Smiling uncertainly, she replied, "I know. They're mine." She held up a hand when he would have said something. "Hear me out. Please Derek."

He closed his mouth and waited.

Taking a deep breath, her words tumbled out. "You were right. Spending that time with you helped me to realize what I've been missing."

Not daring to hope, Derek waited a beat before saying, "And what's that?"

"You," she said simply.

"Me," he repeated slowly.

"Derek, I love you. I haven't been missing romance in my life, I've been missing you. And while I can agree that sex isn't an integral part of a relationship, I do think that making love is."

His mind was whirling. She loved him? He couldn't get past that particular fact.

He didn't realize he was still standing there staring until she blew out a breath. "Um, Derek? I've never said that to a man before and I'm about ready to pass out from the effort. Could you maybe, maybe help me out?"

Gaping at her, he could only ask, "You love me?"

The tremulous smile she flashed nearly undid him. "Absolutely. More than anything."

He took them both by surprise when he leaned into her car and kissed her long and hard. When he eventually pulled back, they were both smiling.

"Took you long enough to figure that out."

"Hey, give me a break. This is new territory for me. And you'll have to forgive me for not falling for your charm when we first met." Her sarcasm was tempered with a half smile.

Derek rocked back on his heels. "Speaking of which...I have another proposition for you."

Kris groaned and dropped her head back against her seat. "Hon, if you propose no sex I might just have to run you over." She held out her hand. "But I want the panties back first. They're one of my favorite pairs."

Derek laughed. "No, love, this proposal is much more satisfactory."

She blew out a noisy breath, but the excited gleam in her eyes gave her away. "Okay, hit me with it."

Those compelling blue eyes held hers. "Let's move in together, Kris."

"M-move in together?" she stuttered. She hadn't expected that one. Saying those three little words had been hard enough, but sharing the same space? At the same time? Kris swallowed hard.

"Yeah, I want it all from you, but I know you're not ready for that. So I figure we take it day by day. We can start by..." he leaned over and whispered so many naughty suggestions he had Kris flushing with desire.

"Well, when you ask like that, how can a girl refuse?"

"Say it," he demanded quietly.

Smiling up at him, she didn't hesitate this time before saying, "Derek, I love you."

Whooping with joy, he opened her door and pulled her out to whirl her around the street. The cars behind them began honking. Laughing Derek waved and bent her over for a long, languorous kiss.

When he finally let her up for air, her voice was breathless. "Little bit of an exhibitionist, are we? We'll definitely have to explore this side of you later on."

Wagging his brows, Derek gave her a quick peck on the cheek and said, "You can bet on that."

Helping her back into the car, he walked around to the passenger side and slid in. But he still had one more question for her.

"Kris?" He dangled the scrap of satin in her face and asked, "What are these for?"

The glint in her eye was decidedly mischievous as she replied, "Motivation."

Derek reared back, the perfect picture of an affronted male. "You think I need motivation?"

"No, I do."

His look turned incredulous. "Since when did you need motivation?"

"Hon, you did such a great job proving to me that there's more to life than sex, it might take a bit of work to ease me back into it."

The smile he turned on her was one so charged with potent sexuality, Kris nearly swallowed her tongue. His purred words sent shivers down her spine. "Well, love, we'll have to get you right home and get to work, won't we?"

Returning the smile with one of her own, she looked around pointedly and replied, "Heck, there's no need to wait until we get home. My windows are tinted."

With a big sigh, Derek took her hand and kissed her palm. "Sweetheart, will you never learn?"

She blinked at his serious tone. "Learn what?"

Leaning over her, he pushed the button on her door and closed the driver's side window. Then he looked at her with a grin. "I love you, and there's no way in hell I'm letting any of my crew in on one of your amazing peep shows." He gestured to the panties. "Or any of these babies. Any chance you want to model these for me?"

Kris had to chuckle. "Sorry, big guy. You're out of luck this time. I think I'll wait until we get home. I have no desire to repeat the Panty Episode either."

"The Panty Episode," he repeated with a grin. "Feel free to repeat that as often as you like. Provided we're home and alone," he hastened to add. "With the shades drawn."

Kris merely rolled her eyes. "Don't worry about me. I'm a reformed woman."

"Is that right?" Derek sat back and regarded her with interest, a small smile playing on his lips.

"Mmm-hmm. No more wild sex-capades for me. You've put me on the straight and narrow."

"Now wait a minute—" he started to protest.

"Nope, sorry big guy," she shook her head and winked at him. "I much prefer romance. Guess I'm old-fashioned that way."

Catching on, Derek nodded sagely in agreement. "I suppose you're right. And you do know that all old-fashioned women wear granny panties, right?"

Barely repressing a shudder, Kris replied, "Not this one. I'll be the only eighty-year-old on the block wearing a leopard-print thong."

Derek leaned back in his seat, a wide smile across his face. Life with this woman would never get boring. And he was pretty sure that she'd be the hottest eighty-year-old in a leopard-print thong around. He only hoped he could get her to wear pants over them when they were in public.

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