

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*

TURN UP THE HEAT

Scalded
DESIREE HOLT
ALLIE STANDIFER

ELLORA'S CAVE *Quickies*®

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Desiree Holt & Allie Standifer

Book 2 in the Turn Up the Heat series

Reed Brody is head of the geek squad for the local police. At work, he's intense and driven; after hours, he can't help but use that same drive in his sex life. Too bad he can't find a woman interested in a few bondage games.

Halli Wilson is a quiet coffee shop owner who also hosts sex-toy parties on the side. Too bad she can't find a guy man enough to tie her up and take her down.

Halli only bargained for a month. Reed's never wanted forever. Two people determined to keep it light make the biggest mistake of all by falling in love.

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Scalded

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SCALDED

Desiree Holt & Allie Standifer

Dedication

To Kristi who always makes me laugh and is there whenever and wherever.
Having you as a friend is priceless. Having you as sister is a gift beyond measure.

~Allie

To all my readers who said they love my “fun stuff”.

~Desiree

Chapter One

With one last look at her packed cases, Halli knew the successful evening's sales of dildos, cock rings and anal lube would push her profit margin over the top. The money would put her one step closer to buying the house she'd been dreaming about and getting out of the small, cramped apartment over her coffee shop, Jolts. Though the free rent hadn't hurt her savings either. The sex toy parties more than made up for the declining economy. People always, always had time and money for sex or sex toys.

Four years ago she would never have dreamed of making money this way, but back then she hadn't known her dream house really existed. Not until she'd found it while surfing local real estate listings. Now that Halli knew it was out there waiting for her, she'd do whatever it took to make it her own.

Too bad Halli herself didn't understand the fuss over toys. Oh, she could talk the talk, but she'd never walked the walk. Too timid to bring up sex toys to her past lovers and too uptight to try them out by herself, Halli relied on satisfied clients in order to glean the details.

Did it make her a freak that she wanted a little bondage? Wanted to dump the responsibility for her sexual pleasure on a man's lap? She wanted to be teased and touched until she begged for the release only her lover could provide.

Too bad that lover didn't exist. Most men didn't like admitting to needing anything more in the bed besides their cock. Halli didn't think toys took away from their masculinity, only added more intimacy to the joining. It sucked that they needed so much convincing.

"So, how did it go tonight?" Tina Devers, her hostess for the evening, walked back into the room after showing the last guest out.

Halli smiled at the older woman, not able to stop the wide grin forming on her lips. "Who knew tax attorneys could get so kinky?"

Tina laughed, her gray-streaked hair tumbling wildly around her cheery face. "We can party with the best of them, honey. Don't let anyone tell you different."

Fanning a hand in front of her face, Halli laughed with her. "After tonight my lips are sealed."

"Good." Tina gave Halli a friendly pat on the back. "Now, let's get this stuff in your SUV. I can't wait to try out my new toys with Ricky."

A sliver of envy caught her unawares at the mention of Tina's husband. After so many years together they still shared a passion and friendship that made Halli yearn for a connection like that of her own.

Desperate to shut down that mental picture before it could form, Halli grabbed the top case. "Don't you dare grab one, Tina. These things weigh a ton. Plus, it's my only form of exercise today."

"Nonsense. If you won't let me help then I'll yell for Ricky." She put words to action, yelling her husband's name.

Within seconds the barrel-chested retired police detective ran into the room. "Tina, honey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, Ricky, I just wanted you to help Halli lug out these cases. The poor girl's been on her feet all day serving coffee. Then she came straight over here for my party. It's amazing she hasn't fallen over yet."

Heat crept up her cheeks as Halli listened to Tina's exaggerated version of her day. Granted she'd been up early in order to open Jolts, but she hired people to sling the coffee while she normally stayed in her office playing catch-up with paperwork, coming out to help when the rush-hour crowds showed up or spelling an employee for break or lunch.

"She works too hard," Ricky agreed. "Hey, honey, Reed's on his way over. He had some questions about an old case I caught a few years ago."

"Ricky," his wife of thirty-four years whined, "I have plans for us tonight. I opened a bottle of wine and everything."

Rick looked a little confused until Tina jerked her head to the case he carried. A red flush crept up his cheeks as his wife's meaning caught on. "Oh....uh...okay. I'll try and catch Reed before he gets here."

"Good, 'cause you won't be answering the door once the lights go out. You'll be real busy, lamb-pot." Tina purred to her spouse and Halli wanted to dash out of the house with her ears covered.

One major drawback to hosting these parties, people forgot to censor their tongues around her. They said and did things they'd never dream of repeating in public anywhere.

The party tonight had lasted longer than normal, but the women and their open checkbooks more than made up for any tiredness she felt. Still she wanted to go home, crank up her computer and check up on her dream house.

"Sure, honey. Halli, don't tell me you carried these trunks in here all by yourself?" Ricky tugged one bulky plastic container and hefted it into his arms. "These things weigh a ton."

"It's my only form of exercise, Rick. Besides they're not that bad." Grabbing the white handles Halli lifted the next case and followed her friend's husband out the door.

"Not bad, my ass," Rick complained good-naturedly.

The trip from the couple's living room to her small hybrid SUV took only a few minutes. Soon they had the cargo area filled. With the last of her product tucked safely in a smaller plastic case under her arm, Halli said goodbye to her host.

The lighted walkway leading from the door to the driveway lent a sense of safety as she contemplated her future plans. Her dream house crept closer with each party she

gave and the more products she sold. Soon, so very soon, she'd be able to buy a king-size bed and have a place to put it.

Her small cramped place now did double duty as both apartment and storage space for Jolts. Her personal space was crammed in between cases of coffee and creamer and her small twin bed and mini fridge.

One of her favorite pastimes was to click on the little slide show posted on the real estate agency's site. Her dream house was just over twenty-five hundred square feet. She didn't care if it was more room than one person needed. The place had two porches—front and back—a large stone fireplace in the living room, professional chef's kitchen, and a lovely backyard complete with swimming pool and hot tub.

The master bedroom and bath were any female's ultimate fantasy with giant walk-in closets, double sinks, walk-in stone shower with its decadent five showerheads. The tub, almost big enough to swim in, came with massaging jets, heat lamps and a shelf for a flat screen television.

Another couple of parties like this one and she'd be able to put thirty percent down on her dream.

Caught up in her visions of home and leg room, Halli didn't notice the tall figure striding toward her, his form just out of the comforting circle of the security lights.

When hard hands grabbed her shoulders, Halli jerked back, let out of yelp of fear and threw her arms up in an automatic protective gesture. The plastic tub fell to the ground with its lid flying open. Anal beads, wands, lubes, handcuffs, silk scarves and nipple clamps scattered around her feet.

She refused to glance up at the man, knowing at once it must be the mysterious Reed Tina's husband was to call. Mortified at having her products scattered all over the driveway, Halli sank to her knees in a vain attempt to grab everything before Reed could see what he caused her to drop.

"Well, hello, gorgeous," the stranger in her night said in a husky, deep voice. "Where have you been hiding all my life?"

At his words her head shot up and her breath whooshed out. Sexy was the only word to describe him. Tall with golden-brown hair that shone brightly in the house's security lights, he had the lean build of a runner and the watchfulness of a cop.

The husky timbre of his voice instantly wet her underwear and caused her nipples to tighten. What the hell was happening to her? She didn't react to men this way. Other women did. The women she threw parties for grew wet and horny at the sight of a good-looking man, not sensible, possibly frigid, Halli Wilson.

Must be the wine, she thought, scooping toys up with both arms.

"Please, tell me you're single or I'll be forced to use police brutality on your boyfriend." Dimples winked out of his cheeks as he knelt by her side to help her gather her products.

"I don't need any help," she protested as Reed reached for a string of vibrating anal beads. Her cheeks were hot with the flush of embarrassment. "Really, I can handle this on my own."

"You probably could, but my mama raised me to be a gentlemen at all times. No way could I leave a lady alone with her...cunt clip?" The small silver clip glinted in the light as he held it between his long fingers, staring at it.

Ignoring him and the device in his hand Halli grabbed everything near her, stuffed the merchandise back into the container and jumped to her feet.

"Um...I should be going now. Anyway, Tina has already turned in for the night but I think Rick's waiting for you."

He stepped closer as she backed away, clutching the plastic tub tightly to her chest.

"Don't go," he whispered, his eyes reflecting the light from the house as he moved deeper into her personal space. "Tell me who you are."

"Really there's no need. I've got to get out of here," she protested again, ducking under his arm in order to escape to her vehicle. A bead of sweat ran down her temple. The man put off enough heat to melt the polar icecaps all by himself.

He didn't move from the spot where he'd been standing, but his soft voice still carried through the inky darkness. "You never told me you're if you're single. In fact you never even told me your name."

"I'm nobody."

And that was the truth. In meetings with hot, sexy men she wasn't even a small blip on their radar. Not willing to risk heartache, Halli chose to leave it that way.

Her life was perfect or at least getting closer to it every day. The last thing she wanted in her life was a man mucking up her plans and goals. No matter how badly she ached to have him pound his way inside her.

* * * * *

The slamming of a screen door snapped her back to the present.

"Reed? Is that you?" Tina stood on the porch, staring out into the darkness. "I was just trying to call you. Why are you standing out there in the driveway?"

"I'm trying to get this good-looking woman to tell me her name," the hunk answered.

Tina's silvery laugh floated out into the air. "That's Halli. She's my friend. We just finished up a, um, party here. Oh, listen." She clattered down the stairs on the four-inch heels she always wore. When she reached Reed she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I tried to catch you but Rick got, um, tied up and wants to know if tomorrow night's just as good."

Reed Whateverhisnamewas gave a nonchalant shrug. "Sure. No problem. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine. But as long as you're here, would you do me a huge favor? Halli's got all these huge cases she lugged here. I'd feel better if someone followed her home and carried them up the stairs for her."

"Tina!" Halli's jaw dropped. "I don't need a stranger to tote my cases for me. I'm perfectly capable of doing it myself." She was waiting for Reed to comment on the

contents of the tub that had spilled out, but he just kept looking at her with amusement dancing in his eyes. She wondered if it was really possible for the ground to open up and swallow someone, because if so, now would be a good time.

"Hush. I know how heavy they are. I was just getting Rick to do it, but this is so much better." She flashed a grin. "You'd better give in 'cause it's going to happen."

"My pleasure." He winked at Halli. "Just lead the way."

"Listen—" she started.

"Haven't you learned not to argue with Tina? Just give me your address in case I lose you along the way."

Halli kept looking in her rearview mirror on the drive to Jolt, torn between trying to ditch the guy with the maple syrup voice and getting a better look at him. How had she gotten into this situation, anyway? She had barely met this guy. But if Tina sent him off with her he had to be okay, right? Right?

She parked her car in the space by Jolt's back door and climbed out, thankful once again for the two big lights the owner of the building had erected back there. Lordy, she couldn't wait to get out of here and into her dream house.

Soon! Soon! Soon!

As she unlocked the trunk of her car headlights swept over her, a car pulled in two slots down from her, and the hunk ambled toward her.

"Looks like I got here right on time." He reached to take the first case from her, his warm hand closing over hers.

Halli was completely unprepared for the flash of awareness that shot through her. She quickly snatched her hand away and dug into her purse for her keys.

"I could really do this myself," she insisted.

"And give up my chance to play white knight?" he joked. "Lead the way."

Sighing, Halli climbed the outside stairs to her second floor apartment, Reed right behind her.

"You live over a store?" The curiosity in his voice was evident.

She nodded. "The apartment came with the lease. It's my store. A coffee shop. Sort of."

"I closed your trunk," he went on as he waited on the landing for her to unlock her door. "Not that I think anyone could easily run away with one of these things but I'd hate to have to chase anyone down, just the same. And arrest them."

"Arrest?" She pushed open the door and stood aside for him to enter. "Oh, right. If you were coming to see Rick about an old case you must be a cop."

Duh!

"Reed Brody, at your service." He made a sweeping mock bow in front of her.

"Are you robbery like Rick was?" she asked.

"No. Cybercrimes." He grinned. "The geek squad. But there's a possibility one of his unsolved cases touches on something I'm working on. Okay. Where shall I put the, uh, goodies?"

Goodies. Could I just die right now and get it over with? Tina, Tina, why did you do this to me?

She pointed to the corner of the living room where she kept the cases. "Um, you can just leave it right over there."

"No problem." He grinned at her as he straightened up. "You carry a large supply of this stuff?"

Her face had to be flaming red if the degree of heat was any indication. "Those are my samples."

"Samples?" His eyes lit up.

Uh-oh. Wrong word.

"To demonstrate." No, that wasn't right, either. Could she just keep her mouth shut?

"I'll just get the rest of your stuff," he said, chuckling.

Halli stashed the smaller tub of items on a shelf when Reed came in with the second case, her keys jingling in his hand. As he parked it on the floor beside the first one, she had a chance to get her first good look at him. Maybe six feet, but all muscle, as she could see outlined by his knit shirt and soft denim jeans. When he bent down the denim stretched taut across what she was sure was the finest ass she'd ever seen.

Not that she'd seen that many.

When he unbent and turned to face her, the first thing she noticed were his eyes, hazel with flecks of blue and green. His short sandy hair was a shade lighter than his eyebrows and lashes, and he had — Oh, wait, were those —

"You have dimples! I'm a sucker for dimples."

Halli clamped a hand over her mouth. Did she really blurt that out?

He was barely two inches away from her now, and when he smiled those dimples flashed again. Damn! Dimples just did it to her. Made her nipples peak and her panties dampen and her body sit up and take notice.

"Well. Thank you very much. I'll tell Tina you completed your assignment."

But Reed didn't seem to be in any hurry to leave. Shoving his hands in his pockets he let his gaze travel over everything. Comfortable but inexpensive couch and chairs, ditto dining room set. The small kitchen against one wall divided from the rest of the space by an island counter. Against the wall her one extravagance—a state of the art television.

"So you live here," he said in a casual tone.

"Yes." She tried not to sound defensive. "Saves on renting someplace else."

"I assume you have a bed someplace?"

A bed! Oh, he wanted to know if she had a bed.

Her thighs trembled and her pussy pulsed.

Wait, was she nuts? She'd known the guy for five minutes, but apparently he had some kind of sexual karma that was insistently wrapping itself around her.

"Halli?"

"What? Oh, yeah. A bed. I mean, um, yes, I have a bedroom. Through that door." She pointed.

"What's the other door?"

"My, um, storage room. Where I keep supplies for the shop." God. Could she sound any more idiotic?

"Interesting arrangement," he observed.

"Economical," she reminded him. "So, um, don't you have to get going?"

The dimples flashed again. "Trying to get rid of me so quickly? I swear Rick and Tina will vouch for my sterling character." He moved a step closer. "I haven't gotten a proper thank-you for lugging those cases up the stairs."

Halli's pulse raced. "T-Thank you?"

"Uh-huh. All delivery men get a tip, and this is mine."

She couldn't move as he pulled her close enough to him that they were touching from shoulders to knees. One hand splayed across her back while the other cupped her head and held it still as his mouth descended. His lips were warm and smooth, infusing their heat into hers. She didn't think just the touching of mouths could produce such instant sexual arousal, but Reed Brody brought a whole new meaning to kissing.

His lips brushed back and forth against hers, like the whisper of velvet, teasing without really touching. The tip of his tongue flicked out and traced the seam of her mouth, tasting, tasting, before his teeth nibbled at her lower lip. She moaned softly, and when her mouth opened his tongue slipped inside, moving easily through that warm, wet cavern.

Halli clutched at Reed's shoulders, lightning-hot sensations zinging through her. The muscles in her cunt quivered as the tiny bundles of nerves woke up and fired. She pressed harder against Reed's muscular body, all rational thought having fled at the first touch of his mouth.

When the hand on her back moved around to slide up her ribs and cup her breast, she arched into his touch, her nipple pressing into the hollow of his palm, tiny pinpricks of heat lancing through it. And all the while Reed's tongue continued its sensuous dance in her mouth, coaxing her to higher and higher levels of heat.

"I've never been to bed with a woman who sold sex toys before."

"Huh?" Her brain was lost in a thick fog. "Bed?"

His hand moved up to open the buttons on her blouse, popping them through the buttonholes one at a time, slowly.

"Uh-huh. Bed. Because I think that's where we ought to take this. Pretty quick, as a matter of fact."

"Wait." She gulped in air, trying to clear her head, but he had her blouse open now and was tracing the upper swell of her breasts with the tip of one finger.

"I don't think we can wait much longer," he crooned.

"B-But I hardly know you. I don't just fall into bed like that." Except for him she'd be happy to make an exception.

His mouth was just touching hers now, and his finger had dipped into the cup of her bra, searching out the hardened nipple. "I'm Detective Reed Brody. Thirty-five. No priors. No wives or old girlfriends hanging around. I do have two brothers who are a pain in this ass but they aren't here at the moment. Thank God. Okay? Now we know each other. And you don't have to fall into bed. I'm going to carry you."

"B-But you don't know me. Ohhh. I can't think when you do that."

He pinched her nipple again. "That's the idea. And you can tell me all about yourself. Afterward." Before she could say anything else, he lifted her in his arms. "Which door?"

Completely undone, she pointed to the one leading to her bedroom. He managed to open the door and carry her to the bed. The light from the living room spilled inside,

the only illumination in the room. When Reed placed her on the bed he found the switch for the bedside lamp and flicked it on.

“I want to see what you look like. Every bit of you.”

How was it possible that just his voice made the cream gather in her pussy and her womb contract? She’d never been with a man who had that effect on her before. She sat on the edge of the bed, the look in his eyes heating her blood and making her pulse drum erratically. With infinite slowness he removed her blouse and her bra, pausing after he did to kiss each breast then pull each nipple into his mouth. His tongue teased each pebble until she thought they would burst.

When he lifted her to her feet she rose, boneless, shimmering with anticipation. He popped open the button on her slacks, lowered the zipper and slid the fabric down her legs, his thumbs caressing the sides of her thighs, making her shiver. He hooked his fingers into the elastic of her tiny thong and, as he pulled it down to her ankles, he dropped to his knees, burying his face in the softness of her pubic curls.

“You smell like ten kinds of heaven,” he whispered, lifting each of her feet so he could toss the thong aside. “More. A hundred kinds.”

Nudging her thighs apart, he peeled open her labia and ran his tongue the length of her slit. New freshets of honey streamed onto his tongue as it slipped through her folds. The sounds of satisfaction he made strummed through her.

Halli braced herself on his shoulders as he continued to lick and nip, pulling at her clit with his teeth. When he released her thighs and stood up she wanted to cry in frustration.

“Gotta get my clothes off, sugar,” he rasped. “This doesn’t work too well if only one of us is naked.”

When his clothes lay in a heap on the floor, he yanked back the coverlet on her bed, nudged her backward and lay down full length beside her. The moment his fingers probed at her hungry cunt shock waves rocketed through her. She squeezed her thighs together, trapping his hand, her hips jerking as his fingers curled and found her G-spot.

His breath fanned over her face as he leaned close to her. "Do your toys feel this good? I think we should try them next time."

"N-Next time?" God. She wasn't sure she'd survive this time, the way he was rubbing his thumb over her clit and stroking his fingers in and out of her pussy.

"Uh-huh. I'd try them this time but I don't think I'm going to last long enough to get them out of their cases."

He bent his head and pulled one of her nipples into his mouth. His cock pressed against her thigh, long and thick and hot. She wanted it inside her. Now. Right now. But she didn't want him to move his hand either.

He took the choice away from her, moving to kneel between her thighs, trailing kisses through the valley between her breasts, nipping at her navel before pulling her clit into his mouth and sucking on it.

"Ohhhhhh." The long, drawn-out sigh rolled up from somewhere in the back of her throat.

"I know what you want, sugar," his thick, hot voice said. "And you're getting it. Right now."

He reached for the condom he'd tossed onto the bed, stripped away the foil and rolled it on with hands that she noticed were trembling. Bending her knees back to her chest, he paused for a moment at her waiting opening, resting the head of his cock on the wet flesh before pushing forward. He rocked his hips, easing himself inside her. A good thing, she thought with some working part of her brain, because he was long and thick and stretched her to capacity.

When he was fully seated he paused and drew in a long breath.

"Look at me," he commanded.

Halli forced her heavy eyelids open and looked into eyes that burned with hot, sexual need.

"Please," she said, the only word she could manage.

"Right now, sugar."

He set up a steady rhythm, in and out, moving one hand so his thumb rubbed her clit in tempo with his cock. Halli felt the climax rise within her, a needy beast raging through her body, spreading out, out, out.

"Now, Halli," Reed gasped as he drove into her, hard and fast.

"Now," she panted.

They exploded together, his cock pulsing inside her contracting pussy, her muscles gripping, gripping, gripping that wonderful cock. Her fingers dragged through his silken hair, holding on for dear life, pulling his head to her as they tumbled through space together.

Halli had no idea how long they lay together, lungs dragging in air, hearts hammering, neither able to move or say a word. After a long time Reed slid carefully from her body and went to dispose of the condom. Then he was back, sliding into bed beside her and yanking the coverlet over them. He cuddled her against him, his chin on her head, his hand stroking her arm.

"Sleep, sugar. You're gonna need your rest."

Chapter Two

Like most mistakes she'd made in her life, Halli didn't think of the consequences until much, much later. Like when she woke with a large hand cupping her breast and a hard thigh tucked neatly between her legs.

How had her life come to this? Sex with a stranger? Granted it'd been really amazing, earth-shattering, mind-blowing, rocket-launching sex, but still with a person she hadn't known this time yesterday. Damn Tina and her matchmaking mouth. As knee-melting as the bedroom bingo had been Halli didn't want a man in her life telling her what to do. She liked having sole control of the remote and never consulting someone else if she wanted to stay late somewhere.

Men, she knew from somewhat limited experience, liked to keep tabs on their women under the guise of concerned protection. Ha, Halli thought with a smirk, men liked to gossip as much as women and were twice as nosy.

Still she couldn't pretend to sleep all day. Sooner or later Reed would wake up and demand some sort of action from her. Probably wanted her to make him breakfast, she grimaced with a mental snort. Besides her bladder wouldn't allow her to play opossum much longer.

Feeling like a thief in the night, Halli slowly slid one leg off the bed. She followed the successful action with an arm, the other leg, her torso, until finally she slithered the rest of her parts off the mattress and onto the floor. Refusing to look at the man responsible for giving her so many orgasms, she grabbed her robe from the back of the door and slipped out of the room.

"Fuck," she cursed softly after taking care of her immediate needs. What the hell was she supposed to do now? A few careful steps brought her to a decision.

"Coffee and shower," she decided. The coffee would provide the life-giving caffeine jolt she desperately needed to clear up her sex-muddled brain. The shower would rinse away the lingering pleasant smell of sex and man. She didn't need to go through the rest of her day smelling Reed. Her memories were more than vivid. They were 3-D images plastered into her brain for all time.

With practiced ease Halli had the coffee brewing in no time. She carried her favorite oversized mug into the bathroom and quietly shut the door. Waking the sleeping bear next door didn't top her list of things to do at the moment. She needed to get her own head on straight before trying to explain her thoughts to another human being.

Being as soundless as possible, Halli turned the shower on, sipped her coffee while the water warmed then stepped beneath the pulsing stream with a sigh of relief.

Maybe she'd get lucky and Reed would disappear while she cleaned up. It wouldn't bother her in the least if she found him gone when she got out. Even as the thoughts raced through her mind Halli ignored the small pang of sorrow at the thought of never seeing him again. What did it matter? Clearly this could just be another notch in his bedpost, a one-night stand that ended when the sun came up.

As quickly as the pang came she dismissed it. Sex was sex was sex. A long sexual drought caused these feelings. It had nothing to do with the man and everything to do with his penis. Yep, she agreed with herself as she dumped shampoo on her wet head, any man, any cock would have scratched her itch last night. It had been too long since she'd felt the hard planes of a man's body pressed into her own.

Maybe she'd have to take one of her toys out for a test run. Anything to keep from jumping back into bed with Reed Brody.

A sigh of relief escaped Reed's lips when Halli slipped silently out of bed. She'd given him the perfect opportunity to sneak out without involving a big scene. He hated those. Women crying or screaming or blaming him for leading them on when he'd made his feelings known plainly the night before.

God love 'em, the fairer sex was a constant mystery to him and he loved the challenge of trying to understand their mercurial moods and nature. Too bad so many of them were looking to him to find their happily ever after.

Reed didn't know what it was about fairy tales, but they gave women the wrong idea. He wanted a female who didn't need him to make her happy or complete. If he ever got ready to settle down, his lady would be already satisfied with her life. Just as he was with his.

The sound of the shower reached his ears. He could always take the coward's way out and leave while she cleaned up. Write a note saying...he didn't know what. Besides he didn't like the thought of never seeing her again. Aside from the best orgasm of his life, Reed didn't know much about the woman he'd spent the better part of last night inside of.

From the look of her merchandise he knew she might be interested in playing a few of the games he liked. A little bondage, a few toys and the right woman would be like a dream come true for him. Maybe he should take the time to find out more about Halli. In order to do that he needed them to be out in public and away from any flat surface.

Yeah, he made up his mind, grabbed his clothes and followed the scent of fresh coffee to the kitchen. He'd offer to take her out to dinner, get to know her and lay the truth out for her.

He'd take sex, but no relationship. If she went for it then he'd go into more details about what he wanted to do with her and her suitcase full of fun.

With a grin stretching his lips, Reed sat down at her small kitchen table with a large mug of coffee and planned his next move.

* * * * *

The bed was empty, but Halli could still feel his presence in the house. With economical movements she pulled on a pair of worn jeans and her old college

sweatshirt. Leaving her feet bare she padded silently into her tiny sunny breakfast nook and found Reed sitting at the table with a satisfied grin on his smug face.

"Help yourself," she grumbled, not feeling very gracious as she refilled her own mug.

"I did, thanks." His voice caressed her as his golden brown eyes traveled over her baggy clothed body. "I want to take you to dinner tonight."

"Do what?" She stumbled on her way to the table and grabbed the counter for support. She assumed, incorrectly it seemed, that he would tell her last night had been great, but he had to go.

His eyes gleamed with humor. "I want you to go to dinner with me tonight. I'll pick you up at seven."

Trying to regain her mental and verbal footing, Halli sank into the chair across from him. "Ever thought of asking?"

He gave a shrug. "Why would I do that? You might say no."

His reasoning left her baffled but determined. "Look, you don't owe me dinner. Last night was what it was. We both enjoyed ourselves. There's no reason to make more of it."

"One thing has nothing to do with the other. Look," he said, leaning forward, his low voice determined. "Do you have plans for this evening?"

"No, but—"

"Good. Now you do."

Wearily she rubbed her forehead. "Why do you want to do this?"

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. "I think there's some things we need to discuss. Plus, we both need to eat. Why not kill two birds with one stone?"

"What things? Why can't we talk now?"

"Because we're alone and when we're alone all I want to do is find the quickest way to strip you naked and fuck you. Dinner in a public place will at least offer me some respite."

Halli shook her head, feeling the wet strands of hair clinging to her neck. "You are a confusing man."

He stood quickly, leaned over pressed a quick, but thorough kiss on her lips and walked out the door whistling.

* * * * *

By seven-thirty that evening Halli's butterflies had finally settled down into a comfortable holding pattern. She sipped her glass of very good white wine and listened to the handsome and captivating man sitting across from her. He'd told her about his cybercrimes job, about his two brothers who were also cops, and about his older brother's recent romantic adventures.

"Then Sky finally pulls his head out of his ass and tells Kasey everything." He finished the funny story of his oldest brother's recent engagement. The tale warmed her heart and lent Reed a more normal tone he'd been lacking, at least in her own mind.

She laughed at both the ending and her own weird musings. "He really thought he could hide his job from her?"

Reed shot her cocky grin that made her grateful to be sitting down. The full wattage smile made her knees weak. "My brother was and is ass over heels in love. In his mind he equated being a cop with losing the girl."

"But they're together now?"

"Oh yeah, Sky hasn't let Kasey out of his sight since they made up. Plus, he says she needs his help with research."

"Research? I thought you told me Kasey worked as a bookkeeper." What possible research would a number cruncher need?

"Ah... Kasey quit her day job. She's now writing full-time." A red flush rose over Reed's tanned cheeks and Halli's interest rose. Whatever this Kasey wrote must be something to cause a grown sexually active man to blush.

So she did what any sane woman would do in her position. She taunted him mercilessly. "And what does Kasey write now? Kids' books?"

His horrified look answered her question before his lips moved. "Hell, no."

Having way too much fun at his expense, Halli continued to tease him. "Cookbooks? How to? Self-help?"

With a quick glance around the elegant restaurant, Reed leaned over the table. "She writes erotic romance. Or at least that's what she calls it. Seems to make a decent living with it and keeps Sky happy. Other than that it's so not my business."

She couldn't stop the laughter from spilling out of her lips. Slapping her hand over her mouth to stifle the worst of the giggles, Halli sent him an unrepentant shrug. What the hell did the man expect from her? A saint she was not.

"Laugh it up, yuckles. Let's see how you'd feel if you read one of her books and then had to picture your big brother 'researching' the sex with her." He gave a manly shiver and drained his own glass.

"Poor baby, it must be hell being the perfect middle child."

"Perfect I'm not." He leaned over the table, all humor suddenly drained out of the situation. He looked dark, lean and predatory. With that one hot glance her underwear needed changing.

"What," she demanded, not trusting this new side of him.

"We've talked about *my* family, *my* job and *my* life. I want to hear about *you* now." Before she could evade it Reed captured her hand and gently clasped it within his own. "Let's hear it, Halli. How and why do you have those *tools*? Do you make them, sell them or just use them? If the latter can I schedule a private showing? You never answered me about it last night."

"Perv," she said without heat, knowing any man in his seat would have thought and asked the same questions without bothering to be polite. "I sell them. It's a good business with no overhead for me. The parties are fun. The women are entertaining and the sales great. I make enough to tuck away every month for my house fund."

Instead of making some mocking comment or a leering gesture, Reed simply stroked his thumb over her knuckles. "This is all to buy a house?"

"It's not just a house," she defended her dream staunchly. "It's the perfect house. Another month with good sales and it will finally be mine." Talking about it just made her ache all the more for what she didn't have. Yet. "No more living in cramped spaces over the coffee shop. I'll be able to buy a huge bed, shower for at least half an hour without the hot water going out on me and take a genuine bath. I can't wait to sit, bundled up on the back porch, in the middle of winter and drink hot cocoa while a fire blazes in my fire pit."

"Wow," he looked impressed at her plans. "So this house actually exists somewhere outside your mind?"

"Yep, I've made a deal with the real estate agent. If someone else bids on the house before I get my money together she'll call me with the heads-up. With the economy what it is, I doubt a house that size is going anywhere, but I've got my fingers crossed, anyway."

"That's why all the parties? One almost every night except for tonight, right?"

"How did you know that? I never said a word about my schedule." She thought furiously, but could recall no conversation in which her parties came up.

His shoulder lifted in an unrepentant shrug. She was really starting to hate the gesture when he spoke. "I looked through the planner in the kitchen this morning. Sue me, I'm a cop. We're paid to be nosy."

"You arrogant jackass." All the laughter fled. "What gave you the right to go through my personal papers? How would you feel if I breached your privacy that way?"

“Go ahead. I have a feeling it’s not going to matter in the long run. Damn Sky anyway.”

The last was muttered in a strange tone that didn’t leave itself open to questions, even as she desperately wanted to know what the hell he was talking about.

He didn’t say anything for a matter of minutes. Just sat there, looking at her with a strange intensity in his golden-brown eyes, his lean runner’s build completely at ease in the formal setting. A thick strand of mocha-colored hair fell over one eye.

“What?” She tried tugging her hand back, but the man managed to keep his grip tight without hurting her. “We’re in the middle of a fight.”

“Good,” he stated with irritating calmness. “Fighting means we get to have make-up sex. I hear it’s the best kind.”

“You want to fight with me in order to have sex?” Men really were from another planet.

“I think it’s time I got a better look at those toys of yours.” His low voice sent shivers of need down her spine and straight between her thighs. Without looking away Reed raised his free hand in the air. “Check, please.”

Halli wondered what the hell she’d gotten herself into and why she looked forward to getting into even more.

* * * * *

Reed had to force himself to concentrate on driving on the way back to Halli’s. His cock was so hard he was afraid if he bumped into something it would break. What was it with this woman that he couldn’t get enough of her? Every other woman he’d known had been just a really good fuck buddy – fun, enjoyable, hot in bed and then *adios*.

But not this woman. The more time he spent with her, the more he wanted to spend.

Dangerous, Reed! Very dangerous!

But he was obsessed now with seeing the toys she sold and finding out how they worked. Oh, he'd played before with some of his women who had a toy or two. He loved watching them pleasure themselves with vibrators as much as he enjoyed using them on them. One of his playmates had a thing for his handcuffs, and he'd finally bought her a pair of soft, fleece-lined ones to keep from hurting her wrists. Then there were the nipples clamps his most recent fun friend had loved. When he sucked on her engorged nipples, the tight clamps surrounding them, he almost came from that act alone.

But now he was fascinated to see what some of the things were that had fallen from the plastic container in Rick's driveway.

"You're not saying much," he told Halli as he followed her up the stairs.

"I thought we already talked." She unlocked the door and pushed it open. "What you want now is action, right?"

Well, okay. Yeah. That's what he wanted. But even when his women knew this was a relationship going nowhere there was always a little play, a little slap and tickle, some joking. It occurred to him—and not so pleasantly—that Halli might be the female version of himself. Fuck 'em and leave 'em. Why did he find that so disturbing?

"Take off your jacket and tie," she called as she headed for her bedroom. "Get comfortable. I'll be right back."

Reed dropped his tie and jacket on a chair and loosened the collar of his shirt. Once again he looked around the main area of her apartment. Everything was pretty basic but Halli had added some colorful and whimsical touches in throw pillows and framed prints and little odd pieces of statuary. He was about to head into the bedroom to see what she was doing when she reappeared wearing only a short satin robe.

"How about some wine? I always like wine with sex."

"Wine? Yeah, sure. That would be great."

She pulled a bottle of white from the fridge, filled two goblets and handed him one. Touching her glass to his lightly, she said, "To fun with toys."

He nodded. "I'll drink to that."

Halli studied him over the rim of her glass. "Did you have some idea where you wanted to start?"

Reed shrugged. "How about a better look at some of the things that fell out in Rick's driveway?"

"Okay." Her lips curved in a mischievous smile. "I have just the thing to start with, too. But first you have to take off your clothes. No fair being dressed. Come on."

She grabbed the plastic tub with her free hand and beckoned him to follow her into the bedroom. Placing the tub on the bed and her wine on the bedside table, she turned to him and began unbuttoning his shirt.

"I can do that." He reached for a button but Halli brushed his hands away.

"Uh-uh. My toys. My rules."

Reed stood there, his cock pulsing, while she slowly removed his shirt and tossed it aside. Her fingers danced through the curls of hair on his chest. When she found his nipples and scraped her fingernails over them his entire body tensed, fighting the heat rushing through him. And when she closed her lips over one nipple and sucked he had to pull her head away.

"Careful, sugar. I want this show to last for more than one act."

"Oh, it will." She looked up at him, carnal heat flashing in her eyes. "Trust me on that."

With the same careful deliberation Halli undid the button on his slacks and lowered the zipper, pushing the fabric down his thighs along with his boxers.

"Lose the shoes," she whispered.

He toed off his shoes and kicked away slacks, boxers and socks. Halli's eyes fastened on his cock. She licked her lips and his legs trembled. When she dropped to her knees, took his shaft in one hand and ran the tip of her tongue over the swollen

head he groaned. Then her other hand cupped his sac and played her fingers over its surface his heartbeat altered to an erratic syncopation.

"Halli," he begged. "Be merciful."

"I am, honey. Don't you worry. Just give me a minute here."

She stroked his cock from root to tip, lapping at the sensitive head as she did so. At the moment he feared he'd lose it altogether she rose gracefully to her feet, reached for the tub and flipped it open. What she pulled out looked like either a very tiny dog collar or a very small bracelet.

"What's that?"

"This," she grinned, the heat in her eyes all but burning him, "is a cock ring."

Reed's eyes widened. "A what?"

"It's to help you, um, stay erect for a longer period of time."

She was down on her knees again, this time fitting the strip of leather around the base of his cock, threading it through the buckle and pulling it tight. He was afraid for a moment it would hurt, but the minimal amount of pain produced an incredible sensation of pleasure. And he suddenly felt as if he could stay hard until the next morning.

Halli rose to her feet and gave him a feathery kiss. "Slows down the blood flow to your magnificent cock so it stays hard longer. Now I get to play in the game."

She shrugged off the robe, tossing it to the side, and pulled three items from the tub. Pulling back the covers, she moved the tub to the far side of the bed before sprawling in the center, the three items resting on her stomach.

"Time for the next demonstration," she announced.

Halli was equal parts of nervousness and arousal. She'd used a couple of her toys with men a few times but somehow it had all seemed more mechanical than what was

happening here. There was some kind of connection between her and Reed that she didn't understand, and wasn't sure she wanted to.

"This," she held up her best-selling vibrator, "is supposed to feel as good inside me as you do."

His eyebrows shot up. "Supposed to? You have these amazing toys and you don't play with them, all night every night?"

She tried to make her shoulders do a casual shrug, but it came out more like a full body jerk. "I have a few control issues." Then hurried on to the next item. Anything to change the course of this way-too-personal conversation.

She picked up the next item and held it up. "The butterfly." And the final toy. "A mechanical feather."

"Feather?" His eyes were curious. "What do you do with it?"

"When I'm good and wet, and really ready, you run it up and down either side of my clit." Her pulse was racing now as she recalled how her clients boasted about its effects. "People say it will drive me nuts."

"Oh, it does? Well, we'll definitely have to use it. But let's see how ready you are for anything."

Ready, ready, ready. She was dripping cream and the tiny nerves inside her cunt were firing in rapid sequence.

Reed knelt between her legs, bent them so her feet were planted flat and bent down. His mouth closed over her clit, jolting her, and tiny tremors vibrated inside her channel. He sucked on her hard, drawing that very sensitive bud between his lips until she cried out with pleasure.

"Now," he said, sitting back on his heels and picking up the butterfly. "Tell me what this is all about."

"You put it right here," she touched her clitoris, "and push the little knob on its body. It has a miniature battery inside that makes it vibrate."

His eyes darkened as he looked at the little toy. "What I'd like, sugar, is to put this on you in just the right place and then watch you enjoy yourself with that almost real-looking dildo." He leaned forward and pinched her nipples. "Will you do that for me?"

Halli had never done this before, much less with an audience but with Reed she was willing to try anything. Tamping down her sudden nervousness she nodded and reached for the toy, clutching it in both hands while Reed licked every inch of her slit and swirled his tongue around the hard knot of sensation. God! If he kept this up much longer she wouldn't need the dildo. She might not even need him.

But just as she was ready to close her eyes and give herself over to the feeling, Reed pulled at her clit and carefully put the butterfly in place. In a moment it began to hum, the vibrations rocketing through her.

"Now, Halli." His voice was so thick with carnal need she almost didn't recognize it. "But don't make yourself come. Do not come, you hear me?"

"No. I mean, yes, I hear you. Don't come."

She turned on the dildo and began to move it around her inner and outer cunt lips, trying to time her movements somehow with the vibrations of the butterfly. Usually when she did this she closed her eyes to lose herself in the enjoyment, but she seemed unable to tear her gaze away from Reed's. She watched him grasp his cock and slowly stroke himself from the edge of the cock ring to the dark head and back again. A dark flush of passion stained his cheeks and his breathing took on an erratic rhythm.

Whenever Halli felt her orgasm begin to rise she backed off, ran the dildo up and down the inside of her thighs or across her tummy. But it was getting much more difficult with each hum of the butterfly, each pass of the dildo. When Reed picked up the feather she nearly opened her mouth to beg him not to. She was so close it was getting harder and harder to hold back.

He stroked it up and down her pussy lips, almost purring with satisfaction as he watched her move the dildo and saw her liquid spilling from her.

"Your cunt is so pretty," he breathed. "Dark pink and soaking wet."

He dropped the feather, slid one finger inside her and withdrew it, her honey glistening on the skin. Very slowly and deliberately, still stroking himself, he licked every bit of moisture from it.

"You taste like peaches, Halli. I've always been partial to peaches." He dipped his finger and licked it again.

"Please, Reed," Halli begged. "I need to come." Her hips were moving as her body sought relief.

He bent low and lapped at her again, taking the dildo from her and pushing it to the side. Fingers not quite steady he unbuckled the cock ring and dropped it, also.

"Condom," he growled.

"In the tub." She reached for the plastic tub at her side, tugging it over in her haste and fishing a foil packet from it. She held it out to Reed. "Ribbed. They're great." She squeezed her eyes shut. "Please hurry."

He left the butterfly on as he pressed inside her, moving in barely an inch at a time until she screamed, "Reed! Now!"

One heavy roll of his hips and he was home, the head of his cock touching the mouth of her womb. Halli wrapped her legs around him and locked herself to him. The little ribs on the condom teased the inner flesh of her pussy as Reed hammered into her again and again, the butterfly sending waves of shivers through her.

They pitched over the edge together, the climax reaching up and grabbing them both at the same time with unexpected hunger. One minute they were caught up in the rhythm, the next spasms ripped through them, shaking them with incredible force. They tumbled through space together, clutching each other, Reed's cock throbbing inside her, her hot liquid bathing her as the walls of her cunt squeezed him again and again.

At last, spent, they collapsed in each other's arms. Reed's warm breath whispered over her neck as he nuzzled her. When she could make her muscles work, she unlocked

her legs from around his body and let them fall limply to the bed. Reaching between them, she managed to shut off the butterfly.

Reed pushed himself up and slid slowly from the hot grasp of her vaginal walls. Carefully easing from the bed, he went to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. Halli heard water running, then he was back. She barely had strength to move, so she was glad when he just knocked the tub to the side, tumbling its contents to the floor, and climbed into bed beside her.

Wrapping his arms around her he kissed her temple and her cheek before resting his chin on her head.

"Halli?"

"Mm?" She was almost asleep.

"Don't think the night is over."

Chapter Three

Halli didn't ever remember feeling so thoroughly well used as she climbed out of bed two weeks later. Reed, who had been there every night since that first one, slept on while she showered and pulled on a t-shirt and shorts. And no wonder. They'd made love—no, Halli, fucked, don't let it get personal—against every wall and on every surface in her tiny apartment, trying out different toys. Reed was like a kid in a candy store, wanting to use this thing and that since the first night he'd opened her case. Finally they'd passed out from sheer exhaustion.

Grateful it was Sunday and her shop was closed for the day, Halli hit the button for her coffee and impatiently waited for the dark nectar to appear. Her brain whirled all the while, confusion gripping her in its painful claws as her stomach churned with nerves.

What the hell was going on between them? Sure, they both swore up and down that they weren't in a relationship, but this thing they had sure felt like one.

Reed called her if he was going to be late. She'd text him about dinner. They both took turns cleaning the kitchen. More and more of his stuff found its way into her tiny cramped closet and drawers. Granted she'd never been to his place, but she knew he lived with his brother and couldn't fault him for grabbing whatever privacy her tiny space afforded them.

Why did Reed keep coming home with her and to her? Sure she had a ready supply of fun sex toys, but so what? Any woman could get her hands on them, Halli would be happy to make sure of that.

Maybe he'd just been horny and knew Halli was a sure thing. Not that she liked to think of herself as easy, but after the amazing sex of the past couple weeks she couldn't find it in her to say no.

And she needed to. Needed to learn to say no to Reed Brody before her emotions became any more tangled up in him. Halli didn't want her heart broken. She didn't want to suffer, scream and cry over a man's betrayal or disinterest. She'd lived the movie, a home video she didn't need.

So the only smart sensible thing to do would be to break things off with Reed. Tell him, "It's been fun, but so long." Do it now and there would be less pain later. All the nights spent lost in his arms would comfort her years down the road. As would the walls of her dream home. A fair exchange, right?

Overwhelmed with the need to seek out her private sanctuary, Halli grabbed her keys, shoved her feet in a pair of old sneakers and almost made it to the door when his voice stopped her.

"Honey, have you seen the new blades for my razor? I swore I left the in the bathroom yesterday." His voice sounded cheerily confused and amazingly right coming from behind the door of her small bedroom.

Maybe it would be better this way. Maybe he'd be relieved she walked away first. Maybe she should quit thinking about everything else and just get it over with it.

First she needed him out of the bedroom. Granted no wall had gone unmolested in her tiny space, but the bed screamed, "Do me!" Halli didn't need any more temptations when it came to Reed.

Get it over now, she urged herself. "Reed, I need to talk with you a minute."

His dark sexy head poked out the door, a sleepy smile curving his too-tempting lips. "What's up, Hal?" Noticing her dressed state and the keys jingling nervously in her hands, one brown brow shot up. "Give me five minutes and I'll be ready to go, honey."

Without giving her a chance to reply Reed's head disappeared behind the now open door. He'd given her little choice but to wait.

She couldn't imagine having this conversation through the bathroom door. So she waited and her heart raced and her mind collected all the plausible reasons they would never work as a couple.

"Okay, sexy, I'm all yours." The fiend pressed smattering kisses along the back of her neck scattering her already shaky nerves.

"Reed, stop." She cursed mentally as her voice came out low and husky instead of firm and steady.

With a last lingering touch of his lips, he stepped away. "What's the matter, sexy? You look a little sick."

Great, she thought with a touch of disgust with herself, from this moment on Reed would remember her as the woman with the sickly face. "I'm fine, but we need to talk."

"I'm all ears," he promised, snagging her small hand in his large one. He pulled her down on his lap as he sat in one of the kitchen chairs.

"I need up, Reed."

He must have seen something in her face, because he let her go without another word.

"Halli, you're starting to freak me out." He laughed out the words, but his eyes went flat and serious.

"Look, it's no big deal." She spat the words out. "I just don't think we should see each other anymore."

Silence filled the room except for the tick, tick, of her wall clock and Halli twisted her fingers together in nervous anticipation. Why didn't he say something? Surely he had to agree with her. Neither one of them were in this for the long haul. He knew it had to end, she'd just been the first one to say so.

"I see." His quiet voice startled her after the long stretch of silence. "No."

"No? No what?" He could just say no, could he?

He stood in one swift graceful movement, strong hands clasped her shoulders in a firm, but unyielding grip. "No, I don't think we should stop seeing each other."

"You're being unreasonable, Reed. Is this because I said it first?" She couldn't believe the man she'd come to know would be so childish. "Fine, I'll let you break things off with me. Keep your macho image intact and all that."

Her generous offer was met with a snarl so primitive Halli expected to see hair sprouting out of the palms of his hands. "What part of no, don't you understand? I'm not done with you yet. Hell, woman, there's two whole cases of toys we haven't even gotten to try. Nope, I'm nowhere near done with you."

Just like that Reed dismissed her, their argument and the choice to walk away. Halli hated being tossed aside like some forgotten toy. The tether keeping her temper contained snapped.

"Just wait a damn minute, Reed Brody." Halli grabbed his thick biceps and shook him for all she was worth. He didn't move, but her arms certainly got a workout. "We are not done with this discussion. *I* am not done with this discussion. You will not walk away until I'm ready for you to leave. Do you understand me?"

While the bright light in his gorgeous eyes might have been humor, his voice came out steady and serious. "Yes, Halli."

"Good." Nervous now, she ran her damp palms up and down her shorts. "I appreciate the compliment, really I do. However we both knew going into this that nothing lasts forever. We've been having great sex. That's what we agreed to, but not the rest of it."

"Rest of what?" For the first time since walking out of the bedroom Reed looked genuinely confused.

Not sure where or how to start without sounding like a paranoid idiot, Halli waved a hand in the air. "You know, calling each other when we're running late. Asking about dinner while we're having breakfast and making plans for the weekend on a Monday." The last came out somewhere between a whine and shout.

She needed out of there before whatever was left of her pride slithered to the floor.

"Let me get this straight, Halli. You're trashing the best thing that ever happened to either one of us because you don't like being polite?"

"Polite has nothing to do with it. If we were only about the sex you wouldn't be spending the night. You wouldn't have dinner over here every night. And your damn clothes wouldn't be taking up space in my tiny closet."

Anger darkened his cheeks as his eyes flashed temper. "Why are you so worried about my stuff being here? Scared some other guy might see? Is that it, Halli? You're getting rid of me to make way for the new flavor of the week?"

"How can you think that much less say it?" Hurt colored her world as his words slammed home. He really didn't have any respect for her if he'd think any of that.

"Fuck," he cursed and tugged both hands through his already disheveled hair. "How am I supposed to know what to think? When I got up this morning the only thing I had planned was breakfast with you and the game this afternoon. Now you hit me with all this bullshit. Forgive me if I haven't dealt with it as neatly as you like." The last words were bitten off as his temper came riding back.

"See," she accused and pointed a finger. "This is why I wanted it over. We're fighting."

"Halli, we're fighting over fighting to break up. If you hadn't said anything we'd be eating right now and planning the rest of our day." His laugh was anything but humorous. "God, if this wasn't so unbelievable it would be funny."

"So now it's all my fault?" Logic fled under the pressure of intense emotions. She knew she didn't make any sense to him. She didn't understand herself right now.

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to leave before you break my heart, dumb ass." She slapped a hand over her mouth as the words tumbled from her mouth. Stupid, stupid, stupid she mentally cursed herself. How could she say the one thing she'd sworn never to say?

Instantly his face softened and his arms reached out to hold her.

She jumped back. "Stay back, Reed."

"Halli, we need to talk about this. I want to tell you—" The determined ring of his cell phone cut him off. "Shit, I have to take that. I'm on call this weekend."

She knew that. Just like she knew he'd have the next three weekends free if he didn't swap out with one of the other guys in his unit. He liked Mexican food more than Italian, but seafood was his favorite. He watched football, but followed basketball. He slept in the middle of the bed, but kept her tucked against him.

Too many things she knew about him to keep her heart safe. She needed out of there and needed it now. "Go answer your phone. This will keep," she assured him and crossed her fingers behind her back.

"Don't move, Halli. I mean it." He ran into the other room.

When she heard the sound of his low voice Halli darted out of the apartment, down the stairs and out the door before he could let loose with his first bellow of rage. She was in the car and halfway down the street before her pulse dropped down from one hundred. It was important to leave before she caved in to him. She needed to go someplace safe, somewhere Reed had never been and knew nothing about. A secret place he'd have no way of tracking.

The perfect spot sprang to mind and for the first time that morning a smile curved her lips.

* * * * *

The red of her taillights gleamed brightly in the morning sun as Reed watched Halli's car disappear down the street.

"Son of a fucking bitch," he yelled and stamped his bare foot on the already hot concrete. She'd run away from him. Halli had really left him.

He didn't know what to think or do. His mind spun uselessly out of control as he made his way slowly back into her small apartment. Everything she'd said had been

true. Fuck buddies didn't call, they didn't discuss dinner or leave personal items at each other's places. Yet Reed had done all those things and more. All without thinking about it. He'd been making space in Halli's life and apartment for himself without even realizing it. It could only mean one thing.

Reed snatched the phone clipped to his belt and flipped it open. Punching one number, he waited impatiently while it rang. When it was finally answered on the other end, Reed's heart pounded behind his chest in an unsteady beat.

"Sky, I think I'm in love and I've fucked it up royally."

* * * * *

Halli had driven by the house so many times her car almost knew the way by heart. Hours later, after driving around in a fog, she'd wondered if coming here would be the right thing to do, but it represented so much to her. Her entire life. Everything she dreamed about. And soon it would be hers. Just this week she'd added up the figures again. Two more big parties and she'd have the down payment plus all the closing costs. Not much left for furnishings but she didn't need much to start. She'd furnish the house one piece at a time.

But you have no one to share it with.

The voice seemed to come out of nowhere and take up residence in her head. So what? she wanted to say. I don't need anyone. People leave you. Houses stay. Forever. Jolt was doing well enough to cover the additional monthly expenses. Maybe she'd even think about enlarging the place. Put a private room upstairs for parties and stuff.

Whoa! Maybe she could have her sex toy parties there and include refreshments in the costs.

But you have no one to share it with.

Shut up! Get out of my head.

And out of her heart. She knew she was lying to herself about her feelings for Reed. He'd made her break all her ironclad rules about emotional involvement. For the first

time more than her body was involved and it scared the shit out of her. Not just because she didn't know how to handle it. She was sure Reed hadn't a clue what to do with a relationship, either. So she needed to dump him before her heart bled too badly and he rode off into the wind.

The house. Think about the house.

As she turned into the neighborhood where it was located, she rolled down the windows. The soft breeze blew the clean air through, bringing with it the scent of fresh-cut grass, blooming flowers and burgeoning oak trees. A lot better than smelling concrete and dust, she thought. She was caught up on the edge of excitement as she drew closer to it.

But when she pulled into the driveway she saw the real estate agent's car in the driveway and her stomach lurched. Surely there couldn't be a buyer today. The real estate market sucked so badly no one was buying and no one was selling. She checked with the agent at least twice a week to make sure. The woman was very nice to her, promising to let her know if anyone showed serious interest.

Yet why would the woman be here today if not to show the place?

Halli parked at the curb and sat in the car for a few moments gathering herself together. She couldn't lose this house. She just couldn't. Maybe she could work something out with the bank if she had to.

Or maybe not.

Sighing, she climbed out of the car, rubbed her numb butt and walked up the driveway. She hadn't seen any other cars here, so maybe this was just a routine stop, to check that the house was okay. She hoped.

The front door was unlocked so she walked in, stopping for a moment to stand in the open foyer and look left and right into the spacious rooms. She drew in a deep breath, inhaling the perfume of the house, sucking it deep inside her to carry her over to the next time.

"Hello?" she called, wondering where the agent was. "Anyone here?"

"Oh. Oh, yes." Lida Mondrian, the agent, came bustling from the kitchen. She took Halli's hands in hers and squeezed them. "I'm just so glad to see you."

"Um, thank you." Halli managed to retrieve her hands, wondering at the effusive reception. Sure she'd been working on this a long time, but Lida had never been more than barely cordial. What was going on here?

"I'm, uh, just going to look around again, okay?"

"Of course, of course." Lida looked around. "Well, everything's ready." Then she unexpectedly leaned forward and kissed Halli on the cheek. "Good luck, dear. I'm so pleased."

Halli stood there with her mouth opening, wondering what in hell the woman was talking about. And how was she supposed to lock up?

"Hey!" She ran to the front door and pulled it open. "Hey, Mrs. Mondrian. I don't have a key."

"Yes, you do." The deep voice came from behind her and a warm hand closed over her arm.

Halli turned, every muscle in her body quivering. Reed smiled at her, his eyes dancing.

"W-What...What are you doing here? How did you get here?" Was this a dream? Had she fallen asleep in her car?

"I'm buying a house." He pushed the front door closed. "Isn't that what people do when they get married?"

"M-Married?" She was shaking so badly she didn't think her legs would hold her up. She clutched at Reed's arms for support.

"Married." He brushed his lips against hers. "And look. I can even say it without stammering. Can you?"

She tilted her head back and looked him straight in the eye. "You want to marry me?"

"Uh-huh." He blew out a breath, looking her straight in the eye. Everything he felt left bare for her to see. "Halli, I was like you. Just in it for sex and fun. But somewhere along the way, in two very short weeks, I fell in love with you. I don't want to break it off or let you go. The thought of you with another man makes me want to kill someone."

"B-But how did you get here? How did you know about this place?"

"I snooped in your computer. I figured if you had a specific place picked out you'd be looking at it a lot. And I was pretty sure this was where you were headed. At least that's what my brother said."

Her eyebrows flew up. "Your *brother*?"

"Uh-huh. I called him up and confessed my stupidity. To the brother that's getting married," he explained. "Not the one who's still a dipshit. And he told me what to do."

"And?"

"All I had to do after that was call the real estate agent and set it up." He grinned. "She thought it was all very romantic."

Halli's head was spinning. "Thought *what* was very romantic?"

"That I wanted to buy this house for my bride-to-be. Come on." He linked his fingers through hers. "I'll show you." Suddenly he stopped, and for the first time she saw uncertainty in his eyes. "You *are* going to marry me, right? Right, Halli? Because I love you like crazy and despite what you said, I'm pretty sure you feel the same way about me."

Did she? She exhaled. Damn right she did.

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"Then come on."

He led her upstairs to the master bedroom. It was empty except for an airbed on the floor with a bucket of ice next to it chilling a bottle of white wine. And her plastic tub of toys.

Halli stopped in the doorway. "You did all this?"

"Yes, ma'am. Now come on in. The nice real estate agent helped me do this after I gave her a check for earnest money."

"Reed, I know what this house costs. Even in today's depressed market I've had to scrape and save for a down payment."

"Well, see? That's the thing. I've lived almost rent-free for ten years and stuck money in the bank every paycheck. So isn't it lucky for you I came along and you don't have to wait anymore."

Halli threw her arms around him. "Oh, Reed. I do love you. I do, I do."

"See how nicely that works out? Now come on. I'm, dying to get you out of your clothes."

Which he did in record time. Halli was pleased to note that his hands weren't quite steady, either. She was glad she'd just pulled on a t-shirt and shorts before leaving the house, so there weren't any buttons or layers to battle with. She stood there, trembling, while Reed shucked his own clothes, all the while eating her up with his eyes.

His cock stood at attention as it sprang free from his jeans and boxers. Halli couldn't help herself. She had to reach out and wrap her fingers around it. Stroke its soft skin over hard steel, and its velvety head.

Reed clamped his fingers around her wrist and moved her hand away.

"This one's for you, Halli. All for you." He grinned. "Well, maybe a little for me, too."

He opened the plastic tub and pulled out a pair of nipple clips that were thin gold bars studded with fake jewels. He bent his head and took each nipple into his mouth in turn, sucking it, nipping it with his teeth and pulling with his lips until each one was swollen and hard. Then, very carefully, he slid first one then the other into the clasp between bars and tightened the clamp enough so her swollen nipples looked like

cherries about to burst. The fine edge of pain heightened her pleasure to the point where she felt her liquid trickling from her cunt onto her naked thighs.

When he was satisfied with them he sucked each one again one more time before leading her to the airbed and laying her down.

Yanking the tub close to the edge of the bed, he pulled out the little butterfly—his personal favorite—and knelt between her thighs.

“Gorgeous,” he breathed as his eyes devoured her body.

He dipped his head down and clamped his lips over her clit, flicking it with his tongue before moving to lap at the length of her slit. Halli was trembling with arousal, her pulse pounding, blood racing.

“You’re so wet, beautiful,” he told her and lapped at her again. “Taste yourself on me, Halli. See how delicious you are.”

He took her mouth in a hungry kiss and she could taste her cream on his lips and tongue. It was one of the most erotic sensations she’d ever felt.

Reed placed the butterfly on her clit with practiced ease and set it to vibrating. Every muscle and nerve in Halli’s body went on high alert, quivering and clenching and firing until she had to scream, “Fuck me, Reed. Please, please, please.”

“My pleasure, darlin’.” His voice was low and heavy with desire. “This one will be quick and I apologize, but I’ve been harder than a railroad spike since you ran out of your place.” He bent to tug at her clit with his mouth again. “We’ve got all afternoon, though. I have the key to the house and big plans for us.” He looked over at the tub. “And a lot of toys to go through.”

He reached into the tub and plucked out a condom. When he tore the foil off Halli saw that it was bright red and couldn’t help the huff of a laugh that escaped.

“Red?”

“Uh-huh,” he grinned. “To celebrate. Tomorrow we’ll shop for something a little more conventional. Like a ring. But for right now...”

He rolled on the latex, bent her knees back and drove into her with one strong, powerful thrust. Halli wrapped her legs around him to pull him in tight. She could already feel her climax rising inside her.

"Hurry, Reed," she urged.

"Just what I was thinking, sexy."

He pounded into her like a maniac, his breath rasping, and Halli could tell from the tension of his body that he was as close as she was. Without warning her body gave up and began clutching around him, her hot cream bathing his cock as spasm after spasm rocked her. Reed was seconds after her, his thick, hard cock pulsing inside her, pleasure rushing to every part of her body.

They tumbled over the edge fast but the spasms went on and on and on as if they'd never stop. At last they lay spent, his forehead touching hers. She could feel his heart pounding in rhythm with hers and hear the raw gasping of breath as he drew air into his lungs.

Finally he kissed her, and it was filled with so much emotion Halli wanted to cry.

"I love you, sexy," he told her, brushing his lips against her again.

"I love you, too." She threaded her fingers through his hair, holding his head so she could look into his eyes.

"And guess what?"

"What?"

"We haven't even begun to work our way through all those toys of yours."

Halli couldn't help it. She burst out laughing. "We're going to be very busy in our marriage."

"Uh-huh." He kissed her again. "But very, very happy."

About the Authors

Desiree Holt: I always wonder what readers really want to know when I write one of these things. Getting to this point in my career has been an interesting journey. I've managed rock and roll bands and organized concerts. Been the only female on the sports staff of a university newspaper. Immersed myself in Nashville peddling a country singer. Lived in five different states. Married two very interesting but totally different men.

I think I must have lived in Texas in another life, because the minute I set foot on Texas soil I knew I was home. Living in Texas Hill Country gives me inspiration for more stories than I'll probably ever be able to tell, what with all the sexy cowboys who surround me and the gorgeous scenery that provides a great setting.

Each day is a new adventure for me, as my characters come to life on the pages of my current work in progress. I'm absolutely compulsive about it when I'm writing and thank all the gods and goddesses that I have such a terrific husband who encourages my writing and puts up with my obsession. As a multi-published author, I love to hear from my readers. Their input keeps my mind fresh and always hunting for new ideas.

Allie Standifer has lived in various places around the world. The gift of travel enables her to create the rhythm and feel of far-off places and feed an overactive imagination. Her life has been one of constant adventure, including growing up in Saudi Arabia, where her brother tried to sell her to Bedouins (for what amounts to less than \$1.50). It's been nonstop; she loves every minute of it.

Ideas, plots, characters and conversations keep her company inside her head and fuel her need to write. And no, they don't tell her to start fires. :) Tired of everyday stories, Allie adds paranormal twists to her tales. They're filled with past lives, chain-email-sending oracles, mythical creatures, magic, sexy gods, and heroines who know exactly what they want—and aren't afraid to go get it.

Free time is spent spoiling two nieces and two nephews, pumping them up on sugar and caffeine and buying very loud toys then sending them back to their parents. The perfect revenge for all the slights of being the youngest child. When not writing or contributing to the delinquency of minors, or trying to outsmart her psycho cat, she spends time with her wonderful and supportive family.

Desiree and Allie welcome comments from readers. You can find their websites and email addresses on their author bio pages at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Desiree Holt & Allie Standifer

Kidnapping the Groom

Scorched

Seductive Illusion

Also by Allie Standifer

Pleasure Me in Petra

Tease Me in Tunisia

Twenty-Four Hours

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