

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*

Turn up the Heat

# *Singed*

DESIREE HOLT  
ALLIE STANDIFER

ELLORA'S CAVE *Quickies*®

**Singed**  
*Desiree Holt & Allie Standifer*

*Book 3 in the Turn Up the Heat series.*

River Brody knows love exists, but every woman he dates seems to be lacking that special spark. Until he attends an engagement party for his brothers and sees the woman of his dreams.

Kendra Jacobs is coming out of a bad relationship. When she sees River, Kendra thinks he may just be the guy to try her new wiles on. As long as she leaves before he does.

After spending one memorable night together, River knows he's found the one person he's meant to spend the rest of his life with. However, convincing Kendra proves far from easy.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Singed

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# ***SINGED***

**Desiree Holt & Allie Standifer**

### *Dedications*

To Tammie. Because you love animals, curse other drivers and in general make me laugh.

~Allie

To Cerise Deland, who somehow manages to keep me sane.

~Desiree

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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Barbie: Mattel Corporation

Coke: The Coca-Cola Corporation

Godiva: Godiva Brands, Inc.

Lone Star: Lone Star Brewing Corporation

## Chapter One

So many women, so little interest, River Brody thought as he slowly sipped from his bottle of Lone Star beer. If he hadn't known the exact source of his disinterest River would have been worried. As it stood he knew exactly who to blame for his nonexistent sex life.

His brothers Skyler and Reed along with their fiancées danced by his table, secretive smiles on all four of their faces. Ever since his two older brothers met the loves of their lives nothing had been the same in the Brody household. And River wanted the same chaos and devotion he saw mirrored in his brothers' eyes every time they looked at their chosen ladies.

He wanted that connection. The bone-deep awareness that another person would always have your back. Someone to depend on and trust, someone he didn't have to play games with or hide away from after a bad day at work.

Fuck, just watching them made him ache with loneliness he'd never been aware of until now. *My damn brothers*, he mentally cursed. *They couldn't leave well enough alone*. As happy as he was for them, River still wished things had remained as they'd had been.

A quick slap to the back of his head jolted River out of his pool of self-pity. He flicked a dark look over his shoulder to find his only cousin, Grant Havers standing there smirking at him.

"What do you want?" River growled while his hands itched to repay the hit.

Grant kept a tiny smile hovering at the edge of his lips as he casually tucked his hands into the pocket of his black slacks and rocked back on his heels. "Nothing. You just looked like you needed a good jolt back to reality."

No hitting at a formal event, River reminded himself. Sky, Reed and the girls would never forgive him for starting a brawl at their engagement party. Especially in the private room at this upscale hotel where all their friends and relatives were gathered.

He let out a deep breath. "Grant, you are lucky I like my soon-to-be sisters-in-law or else I'd take your superior ass down here and now."

Instead of acting afraid, the dumb ass threw back his head and laughed. "Man, you must scare confessions out of all your suspects with a look like that."

As hard as he tried River couldn't hold onto his temper with Grant around. "You are an idiot, you know that, right?"

Grant nodded his shaggy head. "Yep," he saluted with his beer, "but I'm a rich, retired idiot."

Yeah, he remembered. At the ripe old age of thirty-eight Grant had been on top of the finance world until a heart attack brought him back down to earth. Within six months Grant sold out his shares of the company, put his condo on the market and moved down South to live with the only family he had left.

With too much time and money on his hands, his cousin had turned into a real meddler. "At least you admit that much of the truth."

"Hey, I figured out how much energy and time it took to think up lies and then remember them and let me tell you, it's not worth it."

"Grant, we've got to find you a hobby or a girlfriend. You've got way too much time on your hands." River mentally flipped through the faces of women he knew and came up with a few that might pique his cousin's interest.

"Oh, don't worry about that. After tonight I think I've got the girlfriend thing covered." His blue eyes narrowed to a singular spot with so much intensity River wondered if the object of this rigid gaze might burst into flames.

"What are you..." His voice trailed off as he finally spied the woman who'd managed to capture Grant's attention. His head started shaking before he found the words to object. "Oh no, Grant, hell no. That's not a woman. That's Kasey's sister."

"Kasey's sister, hmm." Those dangerous blue eyes never left the woman's smiling face as she laughed with her sister and his brother. "Her name is Kira, right?"

"Grant, buddy, I don't think she's the one for you. I've got several women more your style. Why don't we get together for dinner later this week and talk about it?"

"Thanks, but no thanks. I've found the one who interests me." He took another slow sip of his beer before he spoke again. "Keep your ladies to yourself. Now introduce me."

River wanted to do many things right at that moment, but none of them included introducing his soon-to-be sister-in-law's sister to his love-'em-and-leave-'em cousin.

Making the decision to introduce them then take Kira aside later to warn her, River gave a short nod. "Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Grant finally took his eyes off Kira long enough to cast a look of distrust at his cousin. "Why should you warn me?"

"Because if by some miracle she actually goes out with you, you'll have sex and never call her again. She'll tell Kasey. Kasey will complain to Sky and Sky will come whining to Reed and me. Then we'll have to come kick your ass for making us put up with the unholy terror of hearing details of your sex life."

Whatever Grant said next River didn't hear. Not when his every sleeping and waking fantasy walked across the room. He swallowed thickly as his once loose pants grew tighter by the second.

"Go introduce yourself, Grant. I've got other plans." He shoved his cousin away and dodged people in his effort to reach the paragon of perfection before the crowd swallowed her up.



Curves, curves and more curves. River's mouth watered just thinking about getting his hands and tongue all over that body. He loved nothing more than a woman with a woman's body. No skin and bones skeleton for him. He wanted to feel a female's softness in bed with him, not to get poked by a stray rib. Those women only made him want to feed them. The woman he spied now inspired fantasies a lot more sensual than food.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kendra Jacobs searched the room for any signs of her cousins. Just her luck, she was over half an hour late, the private dining room now packed with people. Even with her three-inch heels Ken couldn't see over the tops of very many heads.

She had to find Kasey or Kira. At least let them know she'd made an appearance. Of course she could always leave her presents on the gift table. They'd know the gifts were from her and she could slip out before anyone tried to talk to her.

Have mercy on me, she thought. She hated large noisy crowds. The people breathing on her, touching her with hands that hadn't been washed in way too long, not to mention the slight problem she had with meeting new people period.

Sean had done a number on her self-esteem that's for sure. In the two years she stayed with him, her ex managed to dwindle her pride, confidence and awareness until she'd barely been a shadow of her former self.

Thanks to Kira's temper and Kasey's right hook, Ken had shaken loose Sean's destructive hold and forged a new life. So there was no way she could simply drop the presents off and run away. After everything the two of them had done for her the least she could do would be sticking around and sharing bad small talk with strangers she'd never see again.

She grabbed a glass of wine off the tray of a wandering waiter and slid into a dark corner. Maybe she should make a stronger effort to locate her cousins, but for now she'd take the security of a dimly lit wall. After all there were plans she needed to make.

All the books she'd read since leaving Sean urged her to stop and think over her actions before committing to a course. Then her other books, the ones she read huddled under the covers with a book light, suggested she go with the moment. Between the two she was at a loss of what to do.

For now she'd stay in her safe corner and maybe get lucky enough to find a man to fantasize about tonight.

No sooner had the thought flashed through her mind then Kendra spotted her walking wet dream cross the room. Unconsciously she licked her suddenly dry lips and tossed back the rest of her white wine.

His body moved liked poetry in motion. A figure of speech she'd never understood until now. Long, lean with just the right amount of muscle, the sexy stranger reminded her of the baseball players she loved watching at games. With their fluid movements, ropy muscles and intense concentration Kendra nearly passed out from panting by the time the game was over.

His head swiveled back and forth as he looked for someone or something. What she wouldn't give to be the sole object of his intense curiosity. It would never happen. Men who looked like him never glanced twice at women who looked like her. Too many curves and not enough willpower to resist the lure of a glazed donut.

This man had everything she'd admired. Tawny-colored hair a bit too long in the back, just enough to touch the back of his stark white dress shirt. She couldn't see the color of his eyes, but from the color of his thick hair she'd guess brown or hazel.

When he lifted a hand to greet someone Kendra felt her panties dampen. His hands! Oh great Godiva, his hands were large and tanned, perfect for reaching and stroking all the hot spots a woman had.

Hands had always been her weakness when it came to men. With Sean she should have known they were doomed from the start. His hands were pale, neatly clipped and soft from his regular weekly manicures. Somehow she doubted her walking fantasy bothered with the fuss of having his nails waxed.

*Surrendering To Your Inner Slut*, Kendra's latest self-help guide urged her leave her safety spot and introduce herself, but then what? Ask a perfect stranger to fuck her in the coat closet? Offer to pay for some no-tell motel? How did women manage to have active sex lives when there were so many details?

While the need to assert herself pushed against her natural shyness, Kendra tapped her foot with indecision. Making a blatant fool out of herself at her cousin's rehearsal dinner didn't top her to-do list, but letting the opportunity get away from her didn't feel right either.

Time to play or pay, she thought. Then squaring her shoulders, jutting her chin out, Ken left the safety of the dark and stepped into the light. Determined to break the last of Sean's treacherous chains on her.

As long as she looked like a confident, sexy, self-assured woman, maybe no one would notice the shaking of her hands or her quaking knees.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I think they'll take the title this year."

River nodded while subtly searching the room for his mystery woman. And what a mystery she was. Most of the people invited tonight were familiar faces to him. The cops outnumbered the civilians at the party, but it was expected with the both grooms working in different departments in the police force.

The few non-government employees were easy to identify. Kasey's writer friends absorbed everything and everyone in the room. No doubt the guests would prove to be fodder for future books.

Halli invited few friends, but those in attendance melted from one group to another easily. As artists, business owners and various other careers, Halli's crew could fit in anywhere with anyone. Jolt, her coffee shop, catered to so many walks of life River was surprised she hadn't invited cross-dressers. It would have livened up the joint for sure.

He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and forgot all about every other person in the room. There she was, finally. With her red dress, black hair and light eyes his lady stood out like a flame in an ice house.

Making a quick, probably incoherent excuse to the other detective he was half talking to, River quickly closed the distance between them. The closer she drew the quicker his heart raced. Nervous sweat dampened his palms and his cock went rock-hard in the time it took him to draw his next breath.

When they stood face to face, River opened his mouth to introduce himself, trying not to moan at the erotic smell of her subtle perfume. "I think I love you," he heard himself say instead and wanted to find the nearest hole to crawl into until the world ended.

Kendra stared at him, her entire body in the grip of some mysterious heat wave. Had she heard him right? Had he actually uttered those words?

He gave her a little boy grin. "I guess I should introduce myself before we take this any further. River Brody. Brother of the grooms-to-be." He stuck out his hand.

Transfixed in some kind of daze, Kendra shook his hand, sizzled by the electric charge that passed between them. "K-Kendra Jacobs."

"Kendra. Great name. Will you dance with me? I have this uncontrollable urge to hold you next to me."

"O-Okay." She let him pull her into his arms as the band segued into a slow, bluesy number. The moment they touched shoulder to shoulder and knee to knee, and all the intimate parts in between, a rush of cream soaked her thong and the muscles in her cunt began a quivering shout, "Touch me! Fill me!" What on earth was happening to her?

"You smell so good," River murmured, his lips against her hair. "Is this a goddess scent? Because you sure look like a goddess."

Kendra wanted to pinch herself. She'd listened to her friends talk about men they'd had this kind of fun with, men who paid them this kind of compliment. But no one had ever said anything more to her than "You look pretty nice tonight" or from her mother, "I think that dress is a little too tight for you to wear in public."

So she wasn't as thin as a screwdriver with all bones and no ass. She liked the way she looked and always believed there was a man out there who'd like it, too. Apparently tonight he'd drifted into her life. And to think she almost hadn't come to this party.

"No goddess," she finally managed. "Just an ordinary woman."

"Sweetheart, there's nothing the least bit ordinary about you. Trust me."

He tucked both her hands against his chest and in a smooth move slid his hands down to cup her ass. When he squeezed it gently she automatically pressed against him, stunned to feel the thick, hard length of his erection burning into her through the layers of their clothes. Holy Hannah!

"You smell good, too." Ohmigod! Was that her? She never said things like that.

"Are you obligated to stay long at this shindig?" One hand moved up to thread into her hair and hold her head against this shoulder.

"K-Kasey's my cousin," she told him. Lordy, would she never stop stammering? It must have something to do with the waves of lust sweeping through her, firing her nerves and ratcheting up her pulse beat to the level of jungle war drums.

"Kasey's very busy with my brother," he pointed out. "I don't think she'll miss you. I think we should cut out of here and go someplace much more private."

Kendra caught her breath. "Where did you have in mind?"

"How about if we pretend we met on vacation and I invite you up to my room?"

"Your room?" She raised her eyes to look at him, saw the heat reflected in his hazel eyes. Holy Hannah! So much for staying in her corner.

*Get on with it or get over it.*

But what if he turned out to be arrogant and abusive like Sean?

*What if he turns out to be the man of my dreams?*

"I assure you I'm not an escaped serial killer." He seemed to sense her reluctance. "I assure you my credentials are of the very best kind. I'm a cop, like my brothers, with a spotless record." He nodded at the men in question, dancing with their fiancées, and chuckled. "I promise they'll vouch for me."

*Do it, her inner self said. Take the chance.*

"I don't usually –"

"Take off with strange men right after you meet them? I get that." His hand was moving on her ass again. "But can you please make an exception this time or I might have to kill myself."

"So, do you really have a room here?"

"I can get one in less than five minutes, but only if it will have you in it."

Kendra took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay. All right. Sure."

He brushed his lips over her forehead. "Good. Give me five and then meet me by the elevators."

As she slipped out to the ladies' room, all she could think was, *I have lost my everlovin' mind.*

## **Chapter Two**

They stood looking at each other in the hotel room. River had removed his jacket and tie, and kicked off his shoes. When Kendra didn't move, he flicked on the radio and found some slow music.

"Let's keep dancing," he said, opening his arms to her. "We'll pretend we're at a party all by ourselves." As he folded her against him, he added, "And that's what this is."

The music relaxed her and she leaned into him, loving the feel of his hard body and his warm hands stroking her back, her shoulders, her ass. Her nipples tingled and the throbbing in her pussy became more and more insistent as they moved to the music. A warm hand reached down and gathered the fabric of her dress, bunching it and pulling it up until she felt cool air on bare skin. Fingers slipped into the crevice of her buttocks and his other hand tightened against her.

"No pantyhose," he breathed. "Nothing but bare Kendra under this dress. I love it."

He stroked her ass and teased at the cleft over and over, while her cunt quivered and her nipples hardened. When he pulled away from her she felt as if she'd lost something but he just smiled at her, his hazel eyes darkening to a smoky gray.

"I think we may be wearing too many clothes, sugar." He unbuttoned his shirt, tugged it out of his slacks and tossed it to the side. Then he pulled her back against him. "I want to feel your skin on mine."

His voice had the same soft feeling as warm hot chocolate syrup dripping over ice cream. Seductive. Tempting. He reached behind her and tugged at the zipper of her dress, sliding it down in a slow, even movement. When the fabric fell apart he simply brushed it off her shoulders until her arms were free before whispering it down her

body and nudging her to step out of it. One easy flick of his fingers and the bra was history.

She stood before him in a thong and her shoes, and a painful awareness of being completely exposed. When she raised her hands to cover her breasts he pushed them away. His eyes ate her up, devouring every inch of her. Did he like what he saw? Was he aroused? Disappointed? For a brief moment Sean's critical words flashed back at her, but one look at this man's face and she had her answer. River Brody looked as if he could eat her up with a spoon.

His hands cupped her breasts, thumbs brushing back and forth over the now-sensitive nipples. When he bent his head to capture one stiff nipple in his mouth, she boldly stretched out her hands and undid the button and zipper of his slacks. Without even lifting his mouth from her body he gave a little twist with his hips, let his slacks fall to the floor and kicked them away.

Kendra reached through the fly of his boxers to grasp his cock, hot and hard beneath her touch. She closed her fingers over it, feeling the soft skin over the steel core. Holy Hannah, he was huge. Really huge! Beneath her slim fingers she felt the pulsing of the blood in the vein that wound along the underside of the shaft.

"Like that, sugar?" he asked, his lips against her skin.

"Uh-huh." She could hardly form a word, mesmerized as she was by the sheer size of him.

He lifted his head and placed his mouth over hers, thrusting his tongue inside and tasting every inch of her. She met his tongue with her own, lost in the possessiveness of the kiss, her lips fused to his as she continued to stroke his shaft and his magical hands fondled and kneaded her breasts.

The kiss went on and on, taking and giving at the same time. She'd never had a man kiss her this way, as if the pleasure should be as much hers as it was his. He flicked his tongue over hers, slid it across the inner surfaces of her cheeks, tasted the inside of



her lips. His lips were like coarse velvet, smooth and rough at the same time, a seductive sensation that she never wanted to end.

Kendra pressed her hands against the wall of his chest, feeling the hard muscle beneath the soft pelt of golden brown hair curled in rich abundance. Her fingertips searched until they found his flat nipples and she scraped her fingernails over them, humming a small sound of satisfaction at the tiny groan he emitted that vibrated against her. She did it again, testing his response, and each time she did he made the same sound and tightened his fingers on her breasts. He caught her nipples between his second and third fingers and pinched them until hot streaks of pleasure raced through her. Over and over they teased each other until they were both shaking with desire.

By the time River lifted his head Kendra was wrapped in such a fog she could barely remember where she was. He stepped away from her only long enough to strip the covers back from the bed and his boxers from his body. She widened her eyes as she took in the full sight of him—lean, muscle-packed body, narrow hips and the tawny nest of curls framing an erection that could only be called glorious. She salivated just looking at it.

River's grin was slow and sexy. "Like what you see, sugar? Because I sure do. I could spend hours just looking at this delicious body."

Hooking his thumbs into the elastic of her thong, he pulled it slowly down past her hips to her ankles, lowering his body as he did until he was kneeling in front of her. With infinite care he lifted each foot, one at a time, to slide off the thong and remove her shoes. But instead of rising to his feet, he stayed where he was and buried his face in the curls covering her pussy. His tongue flicked out, probing, finding the clit hidden beneath its little hood and stroking it over and over.

Kendra shook as her nerves fired and her muscles melted, clinging to River's broad shoulder for support because she sure couldn't stand upright herself. He closed his lips over that hot, swollen nub and she was sure she'd melt into a puddle on the floor. At the moment the intensity of sensation was almost more than she could stand, he rose,

lifted her and placed her on the bed as gently as if she were a porcelain doll. Pausing only to fish a condom from his wallet and toss it onto the nightstand, he knelt between her legs and stared at her body. She would have sold her soul to see that look in his eyes for the rest of her life, a look that said she fulfilled every dream, every fantasy he'd ever had.

River leaned down, his thick hair brushing the inside of her thighs, and closed his mouth over her clit again. Fire streaked through her and she fisted her hands in the sheet just to anchor herself.

River had to work hard to control himself. From the moment he'd stripped the dress from her body and bared her to his eyes, all he could think about was those lush curves, the sweet, rounded ass, the plump breasts and that tempting pussy teasing at him from beneath its shroud of curls. He didn't think he'd ever get enough of sinking his fingers into the delicious cheeks of her ass, reveling in the feel of those nicely rounded globes. The feel of her cool fingers on his cock hadn't helped his control. And when he'd dropped to his knees and taken the first taste of her pussy he almost came right there on the rug.

Now, positioned between her legs on the bed, he wanted to devour every inch of her. Spreading the lips of her pussy, he stared at the glistening pink flesh, licking his lips to capture the taste of her that still lingered there. When he clamped his lips over her cunt again his cock hardened to a point where it was almost painful. God, he wanted to be inside her in the worst way but he couldn't stop tasting her.

He licked the slickness of her, rolling the tip of his tongue around her clit and up and down the length of her slit. It was honey. No, it was strawberries. No, it was truly ambrosia, sweeter than anything he'd ever tasted before. He wanted her to come in his mouth before he fucked her with his cock. Pressing her silken thighs apart with his shoulders he licked and sucked until she was trembling in his grasp, little moans of pleasure vibrating through her body.

She was close, he could tell. Real close. His cock was demanding satisfaction but he was determined to do this first. Stiffening his tongue, he thrust it inside her and worked it in and out, rubbing her clit at the same time. The intensity of her trembling rose as the fluttering in her pussy grew to small spasms.

This was it! A little more, a little more. His own blood was racing as he worked her and worked her. The little scream bursting from her signaled the fall over the edge. The climax shook her, the walls of her vagina grasping at his tongue as she poured into his mouth. He continued to lick and suck until the spasms began to abate. Then he reached for the condom, quickly rolled it on and, lifting her to him plunged into her hot, wet channel until his balls slapped the curve of her ass.

Holy hell! River Brody knew his way around women but he'd never felt anything like this before. Sucking in a deep breath, he began the dance, pistoning his hips to thrust his cock in and out of the heavenly grasp. In seconds the dying flutters in her pussy roared to life, her walls tightening around him, pulling at him.

Gritting his teeth to hang onto his fraying control, River evened his thrusts as he waited for her to catch up to him again. When the clasping of her walls grew tighter and the tremors in her body more intense, he picked up speed and drove into her, hard and fast.

There! She was there! He could feel it in the hot pull of her flesh and the cream that bathed him. Again and again he drove into her. Now! Come now!

And she did, destroying his control so he came with ferocious spurts, his balls tight, jolts of lightning streaking up his back and down his thighs. They shuddered together, caught up in a climax of such proportions that he couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything except shake and shudder and hope he survived.

And then it was done, all but the little aftershocks that reminded them of the cataclysmic joining. When he could move, River slid from the clasp of her body and took care of the condom. Flicking off the radio, he climbed into bed next to her and

pulled the covers over them both. She settled sleepily against him as his arm banded around her and held her close.

“Don’t think we’re done, sugar,” he whispered against her flushed cheek. “And do *not* think you’re getting away from me after tonight. Oh, no. We’re just getting started.”

\* \* \* \* \*

When her kitchen door closed firmly behind her Kendra let out the breath she’d been holding. Then a surprised giggle tumbled out of her lips.

She’d done it. Kendra Jacobs, living doormat, had walked away from a handsome, sexual god. Well, technically she’d snuck out while River was in the shower. Still, she felt pride in the past evening. Something Sean had systematically stolen away from her.

Sex without strings felt better than committed sex with a selfish asshole. Maybe her friends were right. She placed too high a value on meaningful sex. Ken needed to learn to keep her emotions out of the bedroom. If she could accomplish that, her world would be so much simpler.

From the corner of her eye she caught the red blinking light on the answering machine. Ken sighed, knowing her fantasy time was up. Real life knocked on her door and demanded she answer. Kicking off her shoes she punched the button to hear the messages. As the machine geared up, Kendra grabbed a can of Diet Coke, poured the liquid over vanilla and ice and waited to hear who had called and why.

*“Ken, it’s me. Call me the minute you get back home. I want all the details.”*

Her friend Madison, sounding way too eager to hear the details of a night that should have ended by 10 p.m. And calling at six in the morning to find out. Sheesh! Her friend needed to get a life.

*“Okay, I know you were there last night. Halli and I both got our presents and may I say WOW. You make me sick with the whole talent thing. Anyway, call me asap because I know something weird is going on. River almost broke down our front door this morning demanding to know who you were and where you lived. I, being the kind and generous cousin I am, sicced*

*him on you. He's got your number and being a cop and sneaky, he'll have your address in no time. I want to know what you did, when and who was on top."*

Another call with the sun barely up. Didn't anyone ever sleep?

And of course, nothing like having your cousin marrying into her one-night stand family.

What the hell did Kasey mean he'd have her address? That wasn't part of the fling deal. Flings were supposed to end when the sun came up, both parties walked away with their legs wobbly and their libidos satisfied.

Before she could commit to really freaking out her machine beeped again.

*"Ken, what have you done?" her other cousin, Kira's voice demanded. "I've got Sky's nutso cousin trailing me around like a demented puppy all last night. Then I wake up to a very pissed-off cop at my door this morning before I've even got my eyes open, demanding to know where you are. I didn't say anything, being the soul of discretion I am, but this will cost you. I'm thinking something for my mantel. Something very large and expensive. Call me."*

Well shit. The man was stalking her through her relatives. This was not in the playbook of one-night stands. Hadn't she grabbed her clothes and slipped out while River made the convenient excuse of taking a shower? If he hadn't been done with her the man would have asked her to get wet with him. Since no hide-the-soap invitation came, Kendra did what any sensible woman in her position would do. She snatched her clothes and ran like hell as quietly as she could.

Now her cousin had an early morning visit from her supposed one-night stand. Where were his manners? Didn't he know the rules for these encounters? Surely there was a Mr. Manners book out there he could read.

*"Kendra, pick up." River's rough, dark voice dampened her thighs and had her nipples tightening. "Damn it, at least tell me why you ran out on me. Come on, honey, you're killing me here. Call me, please. Let me know you got home safe. I want to take you to dinner or breakfast or...shit, a cup of coffee. Just call me, please."*

The second “please” almost brought her to her knees. No man had wanted her enough to beg for anything, much less a few hours of her company. Now this gorgeous sex god wanted to take her to dinner. Just thinking about spending more time with River caused her pulse to spike and her traitorous hoochie to spasm in need.

Feeling like a fool, Kendra spoke to the juncture between her thighs. “You are not getting any more of him. He’s bad for us. We are wild, free, with ties to no one. We’ll take bankers, bikers and...billionaires to our bed. River was just a test run to see if we could put up with another man touching us. The test was passed with flying colors. So we’re done there.”

Straightening up, Ken yanked off her dress, briefly toyed with the idea of having it bronzed then tossed it into the dry cleaning basket. As much as she enjoyed last night, no way in hell would she risk her heart on a man who gave his so easily.

Stepping into the shower she enjoyed the blast of heat and the hard pressure of the various showerheads. Lost in the drumming of the water, Kendra didn’t hear the persistent ringing of her phone or the rapid knocking on her door. Pouring shampoo into her hand, she hummed along with the shower radio and contemplated a nap before getting some work done.

Kira hadn’t been kidding about the piece. Then again, Kendra planned to make her cousin something for Christmas, so she might as well make it now. Designs and colors ran through her mind as she continued to erase last night’s activities from her body.

If only she could wash away the memories so easily.

She’d left him. Snuck out while he’d been in the shower making plans for the day, the week and, hell, the next fifty years of their lives.

Too bad Kendra hadn’t stuck around to hear them. River had been sure she’d felt the same connection, the same awareness, the click of rightness. Instead the woman he’d fallen head over ass in love with ran out as soon as his back was turned.

He leaned his head wearily against her front door, wondering what to do next. He didn't want to leave without seeing her. Hearing from her own lips why she'd run out on him. On them.

The one-story house looked plain and unassuming with its redbrick exterior. The enclosed garage hid any signs of her car. Maybe she hadn't come straight home. Maybe she'd run to her family or a friend.

He'd thought about their conversation throughout the night and remembered Kendra saying Kasey and Kira were cousins. If anyone could help him find the answers Kasey would. So he'd been there, dragged the information out of Kasey about where to find his missing date, and now here he was.

*Ready or not, here I come.*

Frustration pouring through him, River beat on the door one last time. He turned to walk away when the solid oak door swung open to reveal his every fantasy come true. Kendra stood there glowing, a pale green towel wrapped around her head, a silky blue robe highlighting all her glorious curves. His cock jumped to attention at the sight.

"River?" Her eyes widened in shock as her sweet pink lips parted in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Her question shot down his lust a notch or two. Not enough to keep his pants from tenting, but enough for his brain to resume a semi-normal thinking process.

"You walked out on me." He pushed his way into the dark interior of the house, barely taking notice of the smooth wood floors beneath his feet or the warm golden tones of the walls. "I get out of the shower to find you gone. What the hell, Kendra?"

Looking resigned she closed the door. "Come on." She gestured him down the hall. "I can't have an intelligent conversation without more caffeine in my system."

He followed her silently, his nose picking up the light peppermint scent of her skin. Damn, she smelled good and tasted even better. His mouth watered at the thought of pushing aside the flimsy material of her robe and eating her for breakfast.

Her kitchen was bright with swirls of blues, greens and reds, colorful like her personality. Warm, like her. It had outdated appliances, but a state of the art coffee maker.

She glanced over at him. "How do you like your coffee?"

"Black."

He sat at the small two-seater table and wondered if it would be strong enough to hold their combined weight. He felt a desperate need to get back inside her. To get back to the woman he'd left smiling sweetly at him this morning before she'd dumped him.

"Coming right up."

He watched as she flipped a switch and coffee poured steadily out of the drip. "You still haven't told me why you left."

"I still haven't had another shot of caffeine yet, either."

She responded in a smooth, even tone that had his nerves brisling. The woman in front on him acted like they hadn't spent the better part of the past twelve hours glued together, bodies locked by sweat and desire. So he waited in silence as the coffee finally finished and she poured them each a cup.

Instead of taking the small seat next to him Kendra leaned against the kitchen counter. She looked at him over the top of her steaming mug. Her eyes wary and watchful.

"What's this all about, River?" Her calm tone made him want to yell. To do something, anything to stir her up.

"It's about common courtesy, Kendra." He sipped from his own cup to give his brain more time to adjust to the woman standing in front on him. A woman he didn't recognize. "You left...no you snuck out on me without a word. No note, no thanks it's been fun. You just fucking left."

She lifted one silky shoulder in a casual shrug. "I thought we were done. Isn't that how these things work? Someone makes an excuse to leave the room and the other



person is obligated to do the same. I've been told it helps to avoid nasty morning after discussions, such as this one."

"You thought we were done? Oh, honey, I'm so not done with you. It would take days, weeks, years for me to even get through half the things I've got planned for you. In fact the shower was just an excuse to give you recovery time." River made sure he kept his voice low and matter-of-fact. No sense in letting her see the depth of his hurt or anger.

"Years..." Her mouth opened and closed, but no other sound emerged. "That's not possible."

"Oh I assure you it is." He stood now and closed the small distance between them.

"But that doesn't make any sense."

"Then let me remind you again of how good we are together." With that said River set both their mugs on the counter behind her and covered her lips with his own, pouring all his needs, passion and desire for her into that one cock-throbbing kiss.

## **Chapter Three**

His fill of her. Exactly what did that mean? Just because Kasey had found happily ever after with the oldest Brody brother, and the owner of Jolt had snared the middle one, didn't mean that everyone got a happy ever after. Noooo, she knew all about that. Sex was sex and she just kept it that way. Then, when they took off, she was ready for it. Prepared. "No emotional involvement" that was her mantra. So why was she letting River Brody into her place when she knew it was a mistake?

Damn her cousins anyway. She'd plan something particularly wicked for them in return.

In the meantime she had to do something about the butterflies doing the tarantella in her stomach and the liquid that had pooled instantly between her thighs. She was unprepared for the wave of lust that had swept over her at the sight of River on her doorstep, or the hot pulse that threatened to beat its way out of her body.

"You have to leave," she told him, backing away from him.

"Leave?" His crooked grin had such an endearing quality she wanted to shut her eyes against its effect.

"Yes, leave. If Kasey gave you my name and number I might have to sock her a big one." She had run out of space to back into so she just glared at him.

"Why?" River advanced on her, his hands warm on her arms. "Why can't I know who you are? And why did you feel you had to leave, anyway? Is there some weird problem I don't know about?"

She wet her lips and tried to pull her frazzled thoughts together, but River's touch seemed to short-circuit her brain.

"It's what everyone does. Have sex and leave. Lots of fun, on to the next one."

Now he was so close she could feel his warm breath on her face.

"If that's how you feel then you've been having sex with the wrong people." His grin disappeared. "And I don't like being lumped in with people I don't know."

"You're a man, aren't you?" she snarked. "Same plumbing, same selfish brain, same asshole attitude."

His hands tightened on her arms. "Now I'm *really* getting pissed off. Condemned before I even commit a crime. That's not very fair."

"Oh?" She tried to hold herself motionless. "Then what's fair?"

"This is." His hands cupped her face and his mouth brushed against hers, just a whisper at first, then harder and harder until the kiss began to blossom.

Kendra reached up to grab his wrists and tug his hands away but she seemed to have lost all will to act. River's tongue stroked over her bottom lip, back and forth like a feathery pendulum. She was melting, damn it, and without any ability to stop herself. When his tongue slipped inside, her own thrust forward to meet it, engaging in a sinful dance that made her bones turn liquid.

River adjusted his mouth to give him better access, his tongue tasting every inch of her inner surface. Again her tongue met his in a sexual ballet that sent heat straight to her nipples and her cunt. The folds of her pussy lips quivered and the inner walls flexed in hungry need. Just that easily her resolve disappeared.

She sighed into the kiss, opening her mouth wider for River's onslaught and he took full advantage. He fucked her mouth with his tongue, thrusting it in and out, now slow, now fast, until all she wanted was for him to rip off her robe and run his mouth over her naked body.

"Where's the bedroom?" he asked, his lips still touching hers.

"W-What?" She raised her eyelids a fraction of an inch.

"The bedroom. You know. The room with a bed in it."

"T-There." She pointed to a short hallway off the kitchen. "Second door."

He swung her up into his arms his mouth still fused to hers, and strode the few steps to the bedroom door. Nudging it open, he carried her inside. The towel had long since fallen from her head, and as he walked River deftly flicked open the narrow belt of her robe. Sitting down on the bed, he placed her on his lap and cupped one breast. His hand felt hot against her skin, her nipples so sensitive to the slow back and forth motion of his thumb that she could almost feel every ridge and whorl. Her breast ached and she pressed it harder against his touch.

River was still kissing her, still plundering her mouth, still using his tongue like a torch to ignite the inside of that hot cavern. She moaned again and his hand tightened on her breast. Beneath her buttocks she felt the swell of his cock through the fabric of his slacks, thick and hard and long. Oh, god, she remembered how it had felt inside her, stroking in and out then hammering her to a level of paradise she hadn't known existed.

"Please." She tried to form the word but the pressure of his mouth on hers made it come out garbled.

But River understood. "Please, what? Kendra? What is it you want?"

"Mmm." It was the only sound she could manage as his hand left her breast and drifted down low over her tummy.

Clever fingers drifted through the muff of fur covering her mound and the tip of one just barely brushed her clit. She squirmed on his lap, trying to hitch her hips to his touch, force him to drag his finger through her wet slit, but as easily as he touched her, that quickly the finger moved away.

River chuckled, a thick sound that betrayed his own rising lust, and whispered his finger over that swollen knot again.

"You're wet." His voice was a low rasp. "I knew you would be. You can't tell me I don't make you hot, Kendra. Or that we don't react to each other. Feel my cock beneath you? It's about to push through my slacks. I'm so hard I could pound nails."

"No talking." Talking was bad. Emotions got involved. "No more talking."

His hands tightened on her and for an instant his body tensed. Then he relaxed and nudged her thighs apart with his fingers. Kendra clung to his neck as he massaged her labia and delved into her wet folds. His fingers tap danced the length of her slit, rubbing the slick surfaces, pausing each time he reached it to tantalize her clit.

Kendra wriggled and tried to push herself onto his fingers, but he seemed determined to tease her out of her mind. And he was doing it so very successfully. Her body was humming with need, the walls of her pussy flexing and her nipples hard almost to the point of bursting. When he finally slipped two fingers inside her wet heat she clamped down on them, trapping them inside her.

One hand was still molded around a breast, the thumb still abrading the nipple. A flood of sensations consumed her, sending sparks to every nerve in her body. She wanted to ride his hand but the way he had her on his lap she didn't have much flexibility to do it. She bit her lip in frustration as the thread of desire grew and grew until her body was poised on the very edge of that wonderful chasm.

And then he pressed his thumb hard against her clit, pinched her nipple and she flooded his hand, her cunt quivering around his fingers as tremor after tremor rocked her. She buried her face in River's neck, little whimpers of fulfillment low in her throat, hands clutching at him as she rode his fingers and rode them and rode them.

She was still in the grip of aftershocks when he rose, placed her carefully on the bed and stripped off his clothes. Through a haze of lust she saw him frantically digging in his wallet and extracting a lone condom, then tossing it onto the bed before he climbed up and knelt between her thighs.

"Inside me," she whispered. She wanted to feel his thick cock invading her and lose herself in the riptide of a climax. *Sex*, she told herself. *Lose yourself in the sex. While you can. Before he's gone.*

"Not yet." His voice was guttural.

Straddling her body he leaned forward until his swollen cock rested in the valley between her breasts.

"Open your mouth," he commanded, hoarsely. When she did he wrapped his hand around his erection and eased it onto her lips. "Suck me, Kendra. Let me feel those sweet, sweet lips around my dick."

Obediently she closed her mouth over him and he slid forward into her greedy mouth. He captured both wrists in one hand and held them on the pillow over her head while the other hand kept his cock in place. Very gently he rocked himself in and out of the clasp of her lips, his balls rubbing against her skin with each movement.

Between her thighs the cream from her ravenous pussy seeped onto her thighs and the combined scent of their musk filled the room. Kendra tilted her head back slightly to take River deeper into her mouth, rubbing her tongue against the underside of his shaft and teasing the thick, ropy vein pulsing with his racing blood. The velvety softness of the broad, flat head was smooth on the surface of her tongue and the drops of pre-cum spilling from the slit were salty-sweet to her taste buds.

Closing her eyes, Kendra lost herself in the rhythm of his movements, the fullness of her mouth with his swollen cock, the taste of him that seemed to fill every crevice of her body. Wrapped in an erotic haze, thoughts of "what comes after" were blanked from her mind. She was enjoying the moment, and what a great moment it was.

She was startled when River moved back on her body. There was a soft *plop* when his cock slipped from the tight grasp of her lips and her eyes flew open.

"I want to come inside you," he growled. "I'll come in your mouth later."

*Later?*

But then her mind shut off again. River expertly rolled on the latex and then lifted her legs so they rested on his shoulders. She watched his eyes widen with hunger as they took in her fully exposed pussy, wide open to him. Then he wrapped one hand around his cock, pressed the head to her opening and began the slow glide inside her warmth.

Just as the night before, he was so thick her inner walls had to stretch to accommodate him, but she was still so fresh from the orgasm he'd given her, her cunt

still aching for something more, that this time it was much easier. When she felt the head of his cock bump up against the mouth of her womb her eyes flew open and she drew in a breath at the look on his face. In his eyes.

Hungry.

Lustful.

Hot.

Desperate.

*Desperate?*

Yes, something more than the usual *I want to fuck you right now* she was used to in the eyes of her few lovers. Usually followed by *Great. You're hot. Call you sometime.*

Kendra blinked, forcing her inner brain to shut off and giving herself over to pure sensation. That's what she wanted. *All* she wanted. And oh god, was she getting it.

The ride took her to the top of the mountain, River driving in and out while his thumb manipulated her clit and his eyes ate her up. Oh, oh, oh, it was so good. She clutched at him, hanging on for dear life as the heat in her belly blossomed into a raging inferno, spreading out to ignite every part of her body.

River tensed, every muscle in his body tight as he hammered into her.

When the orgasm crested and exploded she was flung into space upside down, cartwheeling into a freefall. She shook and shuddered, River crying out her name as he pulsed into her. The thin latex couldn't conceal the hot thickness of his semen as it jetted from his cock.

She had no idea when all the spasms finally subsided, only that River collapsed forward, his hot skin welded to hers, his breath dusting her like a desert wind. Their hearts were beating so loudly she wasn't sure where hers left off and his began.

After a long time, he rose up on his arms and very slowly pulled from the clasp of her cunt. She felt the tremors still racing over his body as he lifted his body away from hers and slid off the bed to dispose of the condom.

*I have to put a stop to this now. Before I start to hope again.*

She was sitting up in bed, the sheet pulled up to cover her breasts when he came back into the room.

His eyes widened. "Protecting yourself from something?"

Kendra wet her lips. "Not at all. I thought I'd make us some more coffee before you leave."

He stared at her. "Leave? Why do I want to leave?"

She sighed. "River. I had a reason for not telling you my last name. We had stupendous sex last night but that's all it was, right?"

"All it was?" he parroted.

Kendra nodded. "And okay, we had more stupendous sex this morning. But that's all, right? Isn't that the way the game is played? Especially with women like me?"

Ohmigod. Had she actually said that out loud? Let those words escape from her mouth?

River stood there like an immovable mountain still staring at her for a long minute. Kendra clutched the top of the sheet, wishing he'd just say something so they could get this over with. His hands curled into fists.

"Women like you?" he repeated. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

She gave him her practiced, artificial laugh. "I know the drill. I wasn't born yesterday. I'm an...anomaly. Men like to find out what it's like to feel all that flesh beneath the clothing. Then, when they're satisfied, they go right back to Barbie and life goes on."

Again River didn't say anything, just stared at her as if she'd been speaking a foreign language.

"So," he said at last. "You've stuck me in the same category with the other assholes you've apparently hooked up with and decide to kick me to the curb before I could walk. Did I get that right?"



She gripped the sheet harder to keep her hands from trembling. "I think that's the sensible thing to do, don't you?" She forced a smile that felt like a grimace. "I'll be happy to make you a cup of coffee to celebrate the...the..."

"Off-the-charts sex we just had?" he ground out.

"Why, yes. A perfect way to put it."

"Perfect, my ass," he spat, and yanked on his clothes. "Forget the coffee. I can get my own."

He stormed out of the bedroom, shirt unbuttoned, shoes in his hand, jacket over his arm. She flinched when she heard the door slam hard enough to rattle the pictures on the walls.

*Okay, then. That certainly went well.*

She wanted him gone, right? Didn't want to give him the chance to destroy her the way Sean had? So why, if that was what she wanted, did she feel so empty and sick? Feel as if she'd just made the biggest mistake of her life?

Biting her lip, she picked up the phone to call in reinforcements.

## **Chapter Four**

"You threw River out of your house?" Kasey's eyes went wide at the information Kendra shared.

"Look." Kendra poured herself another cup of coffee. "I invited you here for moral support. Not to give a blow-by-blow report of this morning's activities."

She leaned against the counter, her soft cotton pants and t-shirt rubbing over her way-too-sensitive skin. Damn that River anyway. Before him she'd never noticed the way her clothes touched her body.

"There was blowing involved?" Kira asked, looking very interested for a supposed celibate.

"I am not going to talk about anything River and I did last night...or this morning."

Her cousins hooted with laughter over their coffee and muffins. Kendra just stood there, foot tapping, waiting for the hilarity to die down.

"You two through?" Why had she ever thought these two would be anything but a pain in her ass? When she called Kasey this morning, her older cousin sounded concerned and sympathetic. Now Kendra felt like a 1-900 phone sex operator.

Wiping a tear from her eye Kira stood up and crossed the floor. She gave Kendra a supportive hug before topping off her mug. "I guess I wouldn't think it was so funny if this was happening to me. Which is why I'm never having sex again. The whole born-again virgin thing has a lot going for it. For one thing I don't ever have to put up with this shit again."

Ken wanted to argue, but couldn't think of a negative word to say against the plan. If she'd kept her legs crossed none of this would be happening. Then again she never would have had the out-of-this-world experience of being in River's arms.

A little pain was worth the thrill and perfection of the single night and this morning.

"It's not River's fault."

Kira raised a single brow. "Then who do we blame?"

"Crap." She rubbed the ache in her forehead. "Do we have to blame someone?"

"Yes, we must place the blame in order to plan revenge." Kasey carelessly tossed back the rest of her coffee and joined the other two women at the sink.

"This is crazy," Ken protested. "I just want to find a way to stop the insanity. You two are here digging for ways to make it worse. This is not helpful."

"You said you wanted to talk when you called," Kasey pointed out with a bland expression on her pretty face. "You said nothing about wanting help. Help is something totally different from regular conversation."

Ken's gut churned and she knew those two were up to something, but she couldn't figure out what. "Look, here it is in a nutshell. I hooked up with River last night. We had sex. I left. He followed me home. We had sex again. We fought and he stormed out of the house. Somehow that turned out to be a big mistake. Maybe he's not like the other idiots I dated. So now help me fix it. Okay?"

Kira and Kasey turned their heads to stare at each other then back at her.

"I'm not sure what there is to fix. You wanted River gone. He's gone. The only thing left is to shoot him and I really don't want to piss Sky off that badly before we're even married." Kasey nibbled her lip as she slid her shoe back and forth across the wooden floor.

"Kase, get a grip." Kira shoved her sister in the arm. "No one wants to kill River. No one is planning on killing the poor man. Geez, you write too many romances. Get your head out of your books and join us here in planet reality."

"What?" Kasey stumbled from the push, but righted herself quickly. "I'm just saying Ken got what she wanted. River's gone end of story. Is it time for cake yet?"

"But I didn't get what I wanted or at least I don't feel good about what I had." The more she talked about it the more confused she grew. River looked and sounded mad when she'd mentioned the whole bed-hopping thing. She was pretty sure steam had been coming from his ears when she'd mentioned the "rare fat chick" type comment.

"I need chocolate," she wailed out loud as her brain continued to circle around everything that had happened since she'd met River last night. "How can it be less than twenty-four hours since we met? I have to date most men months before they drive me this crazy."

A soft hand against her shoulder stopped Kendra's agitated movements. "Ken, have you ever thought that all this stuff with River is bothering you so much because he means so much? You've never lost sleep or your cool over any man, but River's in your life for a day and you've already hopped in bed with him twice. Not to mention hitting your stash of chocolate pretty hard."

Was Kasey right? She thought back to her first glimpse of River's sexy muscled body and her underwear dampened. Shit, she really did have it bad for him. Did it matter? Should she let it matter? Sean had acted in love with her at first too and that certainly hadn't led to a happily ever after.

"Sweetie, it's all a matter of trust. No one can tell you what to do or how to feel. This time everything's in your hands." Kasey patted her on the back and stepped away.

"What if I've ruined it already? You didn't see his face when he stormed out of here. I've never seen anyone look that pissed." The more she thought about it the more giving River time to cool off looked to be the best idea. But what if he didn't want anything to do with her after that?

"I'll take care of River. You take care of yourself, and Ken," Kasey said, her smooth tone dropping to a low pitch, "don't fuck him over. River's actually one of the last few decent men around and I'd hate to see him change because my cousin turned into a wimp."

"And that's round three folks," Kira cheerfully jumped in her arms outstretched. "Kasey, why don't you head out? Go find River and see where his head's at. I'll take yellowbelly here and beat some courage into her. Have your man call for a date or something. She'll be ready by tonight."

Kasey said nothing for several long minutes. Finally she gave a short nod and turned on her heel and left.

The two remaining women let out a long breath.

"You know that present I wanted?"

Suspicious, Ken nodded her head. "Yes, you mentioned it on the answering machine this morning."

"After defusing that little bomb I want to double my order."

"Come on, I need a donut." Kendra grabbed her keys and hustled out the door. Even if her world were falling apart, chocolate and cake could at least make her feel better about the destruction.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't want to talk about it, Kasey," River said, stepping through the doorway of his home. A home that felt empty now that Reed had moved out and in with Halli.

The Brody family homestead was built for a family. Without one the halls echoed and the living room felt empty. Maybe he should think about getting a dog. Dogs were great company. They never talked back, never worried about water weight and most important never asked their owners if a pair of jeans made their ass look fat.

Like a spastic puppy Sky's fiancé trailed after River. Her mouth never stopped moving.

"Look. I know Ken seemed like a bitch, but she's really not that bad. She had a rough breakup and the guy was a complete asshole. He'd beaten her down—"

River whirled around fury sparking off him like live wires. "He touched her?" Such a thing went beyond his imagining. He might get mad, maybe hit a wall or two, but he'd never, ever touch a woman with that kind of anger sizzling through his veins.

"What?" Kasey stepped back from whatever she must have seen on his face. "No, I mean he mentally kicked her down until there was barely anything left. Kira and I finally stepped in when Sean demanded she change her will leaving him as the sole beneficiary."

"What the hell?" River stared.

"Not that she had that much to leave him anyway. But we got her away, picked her back up and have pretty much bullied her into living ever since. But trust me on this." Kasey narrowed her usually sparkling green eyes until only slits were visible. "If that bastard had laid a finger on her you'd never find a trace of him."

At her venomous words River felt the anger boiling inside him settle to a low simmer. "Fine, but she doesn't want me in her life, Kase. Kendra pretty much threw me out of her door this morning."

And didn't that just eat away at him. He'd fallen head over heels in love with this impossibly beautiful woman and she couldn't stand to be around him.

"Look. I know it's not any of my business, except Kendra's my favorite cousin and you're going to be my brother-in-law, so yep, I guess it is my business."

River looked down at the mouthy redhead. "Is there a point to this or are you torturing me for shits and giggles?"

He pretended to wince when she punched his arm then Kasey got on with her agenda. "Kendra's been hurt more and deeper than anything you and I could understand. So here's the deal. If you want her, really want her, with rings, kids and the minivan, then you need to fight face to face."

He could picture Kasey's words so easily. Coming home after his shift to find Kendra with a baby on her hip, a smile on her face and takeout on the counter. Yeah, he wanted it fucking complications and all.

No one ever said falling in love would be easy, right?

"What do I need to do?" he asked, resignation and determination filling his voice.

Kasey gleefully rubbed her hands together like a demented evil minion. "Leave it all to me, River. All I need you to do is call Ken up for dinner. Tell her you'll pick her up at six thirty. Dress in a suit and tie."

"Kasey, suddenly I'm feeling a little bit uneasy with this."

"Why?"

"Because you're in charge."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kendra carefully flipped her cell phone closed. "I agreed to have dinner with him."

"That's good, right?" Kira asked, cleaning up the donut evidence from the table and counters. "We talked about this, Ken. If you don't let go of the past, Sean's going to own and dominate your future. He was an asshole. It's time to get over it and him."

"You'd think it'd be easier, huh? I mean logically I know everything he said was crap, but I still can't help but feel maybe he was right on some points."

"Then you're stupid and you don't deserve River. Cut him loose and let him find some other woman who won't be afraid to open her future to him." Kira stuffed boxes into the black trashcan with an angry shove.

"Whoa, don't get all warrior woman on me." Kendra backed up in an act of mock fear, her hands raised, palms out. "I'm just thinking out loud anyway. It helps me sound the crap from the truth. Crap always sounds stupid aloud and truth never changes, right?"

"Something like that, I'd guess. Now let's talk about clothes. What are you wearing? How slutty and will underwear be involved?"

Kendra looked over at her cousin with her curly brown hair and whiskey colored eyes. "You know, for someone on a sexual high horse you sure are pushy with my love life."

Kira only laughed and maneuvered Kendra down the hall to the bedroom. "You know what they say, 'Those that can, do. Those that can't teach.' So call me Yoda and follow my wisdom, grasshopper."

Kendra giggled and allowed herself to be prodded and pushed by a cousin who danced too close to the insanity branch in their family tree.

Maybe her family was right. Sean had controlled her life too often and too long. River deserved a chance and she owed it to them both to give him one.

\* \* \* \* \*

Low music played through a discreet sound system as River toyed with his glass of white wine. The empty dinner plates had been taken away, dessert refused and now an awkward lull fell over the table.

He couldn't believe this was him sitting across from a beautiful woman with his tongue tangled in knots and his brain scrambled with need and desire. He never had trouble wooing women, then again no other woman had ever mattered as much as this one.

"Thanks for agreeing to come tonight." His voice sounded too stiff and formal.

"Thank you for asking me." Kendra sounded just as uncomfortable as he did.

Crap, why wasn't this working?

"Kendra, I feel like an idiot sitting here walking a verbal minefield. Let's get our cards on the table." He signaled for another bottle of wine and turned back to his date.

"The first time I saw your face my heart stopped. I couldn't breathe, my pulse went all freaky and black spots danced in front of my eyes." He reached across the white linen tablecloth and clasped her hand in his. "You had me even before hello, Kendra. I love everything about you without even knowing what it all is. You smile at me and I feel like the most important man on earth. A single touch from you has me going from zero to sixty in half a second."



She opened her mouth to speak, but River plodded ahead, his words riding over her. "I know you're a glass artist, Kasey told me. She also showed me the website and I think your work is amazing and a little scary. But it doesn't matter because I admire it. I respect you and your art. You are the one person I want to come home to. The one I want to bitch, laugh and moan over my day or my cases or even my family. With you in my life I can face anything. With you in my arms I can conquer everything."

Kendra hadn't bolted from the table and River took that as a good sign. He slowly let the air out of his lungs and laid all the rest of his cards on the table.

"I fell in love with you before I even knew your name, Kendra. Please let me into your life. Lean on me when things get crazy, I'll hold you close and keep you safe. I see my future in your eyes so please don't turn away from me."

He finally stopped for a breath, poured wine for both of them and took a healthy gulp of his. Her face gave nothing away. He had absolutely no idea what she was thinking or what would happen next. But he couldn't have opened his heart any more than he did. Now it was up to her.

The tension eased slightly when a slow smile curved her lips.

"Do they let you take the rest of the wine bottle with you?"

His heart finally started beating again and he knew he was grinning like an idiot. He raised one hand to signal for the check. "They will this time."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kendra had taken two wineglasses from the cupboard, hands trembling, legs shaky, but she smiled when she held them out to River. He poured from the bottle into each of them, then touched the rim of his to hers.

"To us, Kendra. To our being together forever."

"To us." She gave him a tremulous smile. She still had a hard time believing all the things he'd said to her, but when she looked in his eyes she knew he was being honest with her.

They locked their gazes while they sipped the wine. Then River took both glasses, placed them on the counter and pulled her into his arms. "I don't want to trample all over you, but is it too soon for us to take off our clothes?"

Kendra burst out laughing. "Are you in a big hurry?"

"Only to get you in the bedroom." He kissed her lightly, a ghost of a touch, and traced the edge of her mouth with his tongue. "After that I plan to take my time."

She wound her arms around his neck, pressing herself against him, feeling the hard wall of his chest against her throbbing nipples. River lifted her in his arms and carried her into the bedroom, standing her beside the bed and sweeping back the covers. She felt the trembling in his fingers as he untied the bow of the halter top dress and peeled the fabric down. His eyes darkened when her breasts sprang free, unhindered by a bra.

"Naked," he whispered. "I love to see every part of you naked."

He bent his head and almost reverently closed his mouth over one nipple and pulled it into his mouth. Fingers of pleasure streaked straight to her pussy, setting up tiny flutters in her inner walls. His very educated mouth sucked and pulled until her nipple was so hard she was sure it would burst. Then he turned his attention to the other one. Kendra forked her fingers through his hair, holding his head in place as she arched into his touch.

When he finally lifted his head she unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it from the waistband of his slacks and pushed it away so she could run her fingers through the lightly curled soft pelt on his chest. Her fingers found his flat nipples and she leaned forward to torment them with her mouth as he had done to her. River's fingers tightened their grasp on her arms and a low moan vibrated in his throat.

Kendra smoothed her hands up and down his back, feeling the warm skin over rock-hard muscles and tracing the length of his spine. As she sucked on his nipples she inhaled the wonderful scent of him, breathing it in deeply. God, she loved the way he smelled, so earthy and masculine. Her cunt quivered and cream soaked the crotch of her thong.

River reached behind her to slide down the zipper below the bare back of the dress and in seconds the fabric whispered down her legs to the floor. She kicked it away along with her shoes and reached immediately for the button on River's slacks. Popping it through the buttonhole, she slowly lowered the zipper. Her eyes widened when her hand encountered bare skin. *Commando!*

"Doing away with unnecessary items?" she teased.

"Yeah." She heard the smile in his voice. "Like you did away with your bra."

Kendra pushed his slacks past his hips and they dropped to the floor. Like her, he kicked them away along with his shoes and socks. Then they were both naked except for the tiny thong she still wore.

River stepped back, his hands still on her shoulders but his eyes taking in every inch of her. She shivered beneath his gaze. Not critical, the way Sean's had often been. Not cold, as Sean's usually was. No, River's eyes were hot with approval and desire and...something else. More emotion than she'd ever seen from anyone before.

"Beautiful," he whispered. "Just beautiful. And all mine."

He dropped to his knees and pressed his face to her mound, licking at her slit through the damp fabric of the silk. Then, impatiently, he tugged it away, yanking it down and lifting her feet to step out of it. Now his mouth was pressed to naked flesh, his tongue searching out the hot nub of her throbbing clit. His lips closed over it, pulling it from its protective little hood, his tongue flicking against it.

Kendra's legs were so wobbly she had to brace herself on his shoulders. The silk of his hair tickled the insides of her thighs as he bent to his task. The lash of his tongue was a whisper of flame against her already heated skin, sending streaks of fire racing through her. He ate at her with a need that was almost desperate, as if he'd never quite get enough of her taste. When he lifted his head his lips were glossy with the sheen of her juices.

"I don't know what I want more." His voice was hoarse and thick. "To make you come in my mouth or to sink my cock into you so deep I may never get it out."

"Do I get a choice?" She wanted him so badly she was afraid she'd self-combust if he didn't fuck her soon.

"Always." He rose and cupped her face between his warm hands. "Your pleasure is more important to me than anything else."

Kendra reached between them to find his thick erection. She ran her thumb over the broad head, feeling the drop of pre-cum at the slit and spreading it over the velvety skin. He flexed in her hand and a groan rumbled in his chest.

She smiled, amazed at the power she had over this man. "Then I want you inside me. Right now. We have all night for everything else."

River placed her on the bed as if she were a prize package, then reached for his slacks to dig a condom from his wallet. When he knelt between her thighs, Kendra took the foil from his shaking hands.

"Let me," she said in a soft voice.

Ripping the packet open, she unrolled the latex over his hot penis, smoothing it with her hands that were only a little more steady than his. When he was fully sheathed, she lay back against the pillows and smiled at him.

"Take me, River." She never thought she'd say that to a man. Ever again. But with him everything was suddenly so good. So right. So wonderful. "Make me yours."

"You are mine, Kendra. All mine."

He lifted her legs and bent them back, giving him full access to her well lubricated pussy. His eyes flared with desire before he took his cock in one hand and guided it to her entrance. The head nudged her opening, pressing against the sensitive skin. More. Harder. Then, with a roll of his hips, he thrust into her completely, the head of his dick bumping up against the mouth of her womb.

He braced his hands on either side of her head, his eyes locked on hers. And in them she saw everything she ever wanted in life.

"Mine," he whispered. "All mine. I love you, Kendra, woman of my dreams."

"I love you, too," she murmured, winding her legs around him and locking her heels at the base of his spine.

He held her gaze as he set up a tempo for their sensuous movements. His hips moved, slowly at first, then faster and faster, in and out. With each hard drive of his body the coil of need that was so tight inside her began to unwind. Pleasure rocketed through her body and the tight muscles of her cunt clamped down on his wonderful cock.

River moved one hand between them, found her clit and massaged it in rhythm with his strokes in and out of her body. Faster. Faster.

His body tensed and he held himself still for just a moment, watching her, reading her, his chest heaving. He pulled back until his cock was almost completely out, then with a whoosh of breath drove back into her and rode her up the slope of the roller coaster until they crested and crashed together. Time spun out as shudders gripped her body. River pulsed inside her, heavy spurts of his hot cum jetting into the latex, the walls of her cunt convulsing around him, milking every last drop from him.

The only sound in the room was the rasping of their labored breathing, although her heart was thudding so hard Kendra was sure it was booming into the still air.

River let out a long breath and slumped forward, careful not to let the full weight of his body fall onto her. He kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her lips, the hollow of her throat. She rubbed her hands over the warm skin of his arms and shoulders and back, loving the feel of him.

Finally he looked into her eyes again and smiled.

"Mine," he told her.

She smiled back and nodded. "Yours. Forever."

## 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](http://www.ellorascave.com).

#### *Tell Us What You Think*

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).

Also by Desiree Holt & Allie Standifer

Kidnapping the Groom

Turn up the Heat 1: Scorched

Turn up the Heat 2: Scalded

Seductive Illusion

Also by Allie Standifer

Pleasure Me in Petra

Tease Me in Tunisia

Twenty-Four Hours



Also by Desiree Holt

Cougar Challenge: Hot to Trot

Cupid's Shaft

Dancing With Danger

Diamond Lady

Double Entry

Driven by Hunger

Eagle's Run

Ellora's Cavemen: Flavors of Ecstasy I *anthology*

Mistletoe Magic: Elven Magic *with Regina Carlisle & Cindy Spencer Pape*

Mistletoe Magic: Touch of Magic

Emerald Green

Escape the Night

Hot Moon Rising

Hot, Wicked and Wild

I Dare You

Journey to the Pearl

Just Say Yes

Letting Go

Line of Sight

Lust Unleashed

Night Heat

Once Burned

Once Upon a Wedding

Riding Out the Storm

Rodeo Heat

Switched

Teaching Molly

Trouble in Cowboy Boots

Until the Dawn *with Cerise DeLand*

Where Danger Hides



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