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BRIDGING THE GAP

ANNMARIE MCKENNA

The higher she climbs, the harder he falls...

Carter Malone is usually the first one to make tracks before a woman starts getting any ideas. Permanent relationships don't fit into his personal blueprint. Now, for the first time in his life, he's burning up the sheets with a woman who makes him think about something more permanent...like spending the night. But she's holding something back, something he can't quite pin down.

As a woman in a man's world, Ryan Cooper is used to wearing a target on her back—and hiding her vulnerabilities. She hasn't let anything, not even the ever-present threat of an epileptic seizure, stop her from working her butt off to get the foreman's job with her stepfather's construction company. Then she discovers the guy she's been dating—okay, having the hottest sex of her life with—is the architect who designed the building she'll be overseeing. The last thing she needs is anyone thinking she slept with Carter to get the job.

Or worse, feeling sorry for her.

Before the dust clears, things get a lot more complicated. The previous foreman's injury was no accident, and whoever caused it is taking aim—at the target on Ryan's back.

Warning: This book contains almost fully clothed sex with a little bit o' spanking on an OCD-clean desk inside a construction trailer, a rogue set of pencils that just won't take stay for an answer, and sweet loving in a tub.

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Bridging the Gap

Annmarie McKenna

Dedication

To my critique group, CORE, thank you for your help and support, especially to Shane who let all us women know that sitting on a leather couch post sex wouldn't be the best thing in the world to do...

To my slave driver, Leila Brown, who basically whips me every time I leave my seat—she's worse than a drill sergeant but man, she gets me through it with her timed drills that I can't stand to lose.

To the Life Flight nurse for his information, which totally blew me away—thank you sooo much.

And to my editor, Sasha, for never giving up on me. Thank you!

Chapter One

“Shit. Shit. Don’t stop. Gaaawd.” Ryan Cooper bit her lip and dug her heels into the mattress while the man between her legs continued wreaking havoc on her clit. Carter alternated between stabbing his tongue into her opening and flicking at the taut bundle of nerves. Three times already he’d brought her to the peak only to back off before she crossed over.

No freakin’ way was he going to get away with it this time.

In the dim light, she reached for his head, tangled her fingers in his mussed blond hair and held him to her.

“You stop this time and I swear you’ll have to pull your balls out of your throat.”

He chuckled, but before she could cuff him upside the head, he blew a raspberry against her clit that had her squeezing her eyes shut, her back arching and stars flaring behind her eyelids.

She couldn’t speak. Hell, she couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t do anything but hold her rigid posture as her clit pounded with every quickened heartbeat.

A few minutes ago she hadn’t been able to get the man to finish her. Now she was paralyzed to do anything against his continued assault on her throbbing pussy except try to decapitate him with her thighs.

Moments later when the aftershocks had finally subsided, Carter still lapped at her as if he were a kitten leisurely sipping its milk. Her thighs parted, her knees collapsed to the mattress and slowly but surely, Ryan extracted her fingers from his hair.

If he thought for one second she’d be able to reciprocate anytime soon...

The bed dipped between her legs and Carter’s forearms slipped beneath her knees, lifting them in the crooks of his elbows. She sucked in a breath as the head of his already-covered penis pressed into her, setting off another wave of tingles through her clit.

She bit her lip as the pressure built inside. Her vaginal muscles stretched to accommodate his thickness. Lubrication wasn’t an issue, not after the climax she’d just had, but Carter was no small man. He had big hands, big feet and his cock, well, his cock went the way of the cliché.

“Easy, babe.” Carter held her hips as he worked himself deeper, spreading her to what seemed an impossible width.

She loved the feel of him inside, loved that he seemed to know when to back off and when to push further. His thumbs traced her hipbones, soothing the flare of heat that accompanied his penetration. The

hair on his thighs tickled the backs of hers. His hips moved forward, her pussy sucked another inch in. There couldn't possibly be any more room.

Carter proved her thoughts wrong. He leaned over, bringing her legs up and nearly folding her in half. The act imbedded his penis inside her. His pelvis pressed against her clit.

The moment of bliss. Eyes crossed, Ryan threw her head back. His lips caressed her throat, teased over her collarbone, trailed down between her barely there breasts then centered on one, latching onto the nipple to suckle while he held himself immobile deep in her channel. He drew on the nipple, sucking strongly before releasing it with a pop, and she wondered for an insane second if it were possible to extract milk from a non-lactating woman.

Then all thoughts ceased.

Carter withdrew and Ryan scrambled to keep him from pulling out completely. She reached between her legs to grasp his waist and hold him close.

"Uh-uh," he grunted above her, his eyes glittering with desire. Releasing one leg, he gathered her arms and positioned them over her head, where he held her wrists together. "Leave them, or I stop."

"You do not play fair."

"All's fair in love and war, babe."

"So is this love or war?"

"You don't leave those hands there, it'll be war." A drop of sweat landed on her cheek, just below her eye.

"Gross."

"Sex is sweaty business, sweetheart, just like love and war." He grinned and shifted his hips, pressing in once more, right where she wanted him.

Why in the hell was she arguing with the first man who'd ever made her orgasm without the use of her own hand?

"Staying." The word spat from her lips when the head of his cock hit a particularly sweet spot. She bared her throat to him yet again. "Don't stop."

"Don't move your hands."

"Won't."

Reduced to one-word phrases. He did this to her every time she graced his bed. Or his floor. Or his table.

Had they really only known each other for two weeks? Felt like years the way they'd connected so instantly. Until him she had never jumped into bed with a man she'd only just met, never slept with a man after the very first date.

He rotated his hips, making her body scream in need-to-have-more.

"Please?" And there's the begging.

“Please what?” Damn him for being so calm.

“More.” And the head-spinning-around Exorcist-style growl.

Why in the hell did he bother with her?

When he smiled, his teeth flashed in the soft glow from the cracked-open bathroom door.

“My turn.” At least he’d been reduced to the same gravelly tone she had. Now the fun would begin.

Carter pistoned in and out, somehow managing to hit her clit with every penetration. Ryan fisted her hands and forced herself not to move them. The ass was sadistic enough to stop the second she did. She’d found that out the first night. He’d left her hanging until she’d been reduced to begging and then he’d had the nerve to tie her wrists to the headboard, ensuring she couldn’t move.

She bit her lip. Damn thing would be bloody soon. Her vagina stretched around him, tears sprang from the corners of her eyes and her small breasts miraculously bounced with every thrust.

Who’d have ever thought she’d go for that submissive shit?

She could tell he was close. His eyes slid shut, his lips pursed and his nostrils flared. Every single time. He had ten seconds at most.

Ryan knew just how to retaliate. She flexed her Kegels, effectively squeezing Carter’s cock, and was rewarded with his hiss and a pause in thrusts. He promptly sought revenge by placing his thumb on her clit and rubbing in a tight circle. The bundle of nerves, already so close to rocketing off once more, spasmed.

“Shiiiiit.” Ryan twisted the bedspread in her fingers and arched beneath Carter, burying his cock even further, and all thoughts of forcing his ejaculation flew out the window. Left paralyzed a second time, there was nothing for her to do but succumb to his thrusts and the slick abrasion of his pelvis on her clit.

A moment later he too became rigid, gripping her hips to him as if he were afraid of falling out, and the pulse of his climax beat with her own.

He collapsed on her, both of them breathing heavy.

Aware that he was smashing the beautiful woman beneath him, Carter Malone slowly extracted himself from the tight sheath still gripping his cock and rolled to his side. Ryan groaned with what he hoped was reluctance to let him go. He removed the spent condom, reached for a tissue to wrap it in and dropped it on the floor to deal with later, then fell to his back.

She was consuming him alive. Two weeks into their...dating—is that what she would call their relationship? Because there hadn’t been many *dates*—and he was already more aware of her than he’d ever been about any other woman. And if he knew a lot about anything other than architecture, it was women. Precious, soft, *willing* women. He didn’t get off on forcing them to do his bidding, though tying one up now and then might add to the sexual tension.

He wondered what Ryan would think of the direction his thoughts had gone. Would she run? Profess her undying love? Invite him to seek the advice of a psychologist?

Hell, what was he thinking? Outside of fucking, he didn't know a great deal about her. They'd literally bumped into each other at a charity event he'd attended at his mother's request. He didn't even remember what the hell the event had been held for. Raising money for some affliction or another. From there they'd ended up at her place, something he was sure she'd either A) never done before or B) if she had, rarely. He had the feeling he was her first. Not partner, but taking a man home immediately after meeting him.

Made him feel possessive as all shit.

Carter rubbed a hand over his face as his breathing finally subsided into a more normal rhythm. He must be getting old.

Jesus. Was his clock ticking? Did that happen to men?

"I think I'm dead," she groaned next to him.

He smiled and propped himself on his elbow. Unable to resist, he ran his fingertips over the sweat-slicked skin between her breasts. Her nipples puckered and she shivered. "Nah. If you were dead, we wouldn't be able to do that again, and that would be a damn shame."

She lifted her head and glanced down his torso to find his dick echoing his words and hardening.

"Right this second?"

Carter laughed at the incredulous look on her face. "I'll give you a few minutes recovery time first."

"You're so gracious." She sighed and threw an arm over her eyes. "I have to get up."

"Bathroom?"

"That too."

Thank God the fact her face was covered hid his confusion. What other reason would she have to get up? "You got a hot date?"

"Yep. With my bed." She dragged herself to a sitting position and Carter swallowed.

Why should he care if she wanted to run out on him? He typically led his dates back to their house so he could make the getaway before things got to the point of wanting to stay the night.

"I was kinda thinking you might stay the night." *Pathetic, man. Pathetic.*

"I can't. Have to start a new job tomorrow which requires sleep. Staying the night here might net me an hour, two tops, knowing you." A sly smile split her lips and succeeded in completely renewing his erection.

Carter leaned forward and licked a pert nipple. It shouldn't be too hard to convince her to stay. They definitely had chemistry between them even if they didn't know too many other aspects of each other's lives.

She pushed his head away, giggling. "Don't think you can distract me, Carter."

"Damn it." He trailed his fingers down her abdomen and across her hip when she rose. Sweaty blonde bangs clung to her forehead. The rest of her shoulder-length hair she gathered in one hand while she fanned

her neck with the other. He loved that she didn't try and hide her body from him. The idea was pointless really since he'd more than looked at every millimeter of her skin.

He'd nibbled, tasted, kissed, licked, bit, touched and smelled all of it. She was his addiction and he wanted more.

His fingers itched to pull her tall, slender body back to the bed. He'd kind of shocked himself being attracted to her. He usually gravitated toward women with a little more build, more voluptuous breasts for sure. Ryan's breasts weren't even what he'd call a handful, but damn if they didn't respond to the slightest touch.

She cleared her throat, drawing his attention to her face where her pale blue eyes glittered in mischief.

"You're staring."

"Yep. And they"—he nodded toward her breasts—"would like to play some more."

"They might *want* to but they aren't going to get to."

"Damn it."

She looked back over her shoulder as she headed for the restroom. "You've said that already."

"I mean it. And it's not nice to keep a man hanging like this," he called then collapsed onto his back. Where had he gone wrong? He didn't normally cause women to feel the need to run off the minute he pulled out.

"I hardly see anything *hanging*. Perhaps standing is a better word," she said through the crack of the door.

The toilet flushed and water ran before she returned, naked and swaying her hips.

"If you're wanting to leave, then perhaps you should stop trying to tempt me."

"Me walking is tempting?" She dropped to her hands and knees. "Where the hell is my underwear?"

"Everything you do is tempting, babe." Jesus Christ, didn't she realize what that particular position made him think of?

"Oh yeah?" She shook her ass.

"Son of a bitch." Carter launched himself off the bed and knelt behind that wiggling backside to press his cock against her folds. Little nymph knew exactly what she was doing.

Ryan squealed and jerked in his hands, but he held fast to her hips.

"You better be damn glad there isn't a condom in my hand or you wouldn't be leaving right now."

She lowered her head to the floor, and in the light spilling from the bathroom, he saw her suck her lower lip in. She looked like the perfect little submissive. He ran his index finger down the length of her spine, between the crease of her buttocks, over the rosy aperture and then to her opening. Gathering the wetness there, he slipped further and circled her clit. Ryan moaned and arched her back into his touch.

He had her.

"No." Ryan jerked upright and twisted, shaking a finger at him. "No, no and no. That was just mean."

“Damn it.”

She snorted at him. *Snorted*. “You’re in a rut.”

“No, I want to be in rut.”

She smacked his chest and leaped to her feet when he grabbed for her. “Insatiable.”

“Yes.” He nodded vigorously and crawled toward her.

Son of a bitch. He was on the floor fucking crawling after a woman. Carter slowly gained his feet and palmed his straining and very disappointed dick. The look in Ryan’s eyes said she was trying not to laugh.

“Tell me again what’s so all-fire important you can’t stay the night?”

“Work. New job, mister.”

“I’ll set the alarm.”

“No.”

“I’ll make you breakfast.” Crawling and begging. Is this what pussy-whipped felt like?

“In bed?” She cocked an eyebrow and a hip. He had her.

“Absolutely.”

“No.”

“Damn it.”

This time she did laugh and the sound went straight to his cock. Which he was still friggin’ holding. He crossed his arms over his chest. Ryan had found all her clothing and was calmly dressing as if nothing was wrong.

“There’s someone else isn’t there?”

She glanced up at him from putting her sock on. “Yes.”

Jealousy smacked him between the eyes. “I knew it.”

Ryan straightened and once more he could tell she was trying not to laugh. “My father.”

Well, shit. And then he got concerned. “You’re not...um, I mean, you know...”

“Eww.” He received another smack, this one on his bare shoulder, which stung like hell. “I work for him, stupid.”

“I knew that.”

“Uh-huh.” Her disbelieving tone said it all. “Just when would I have had time to find another lover in the last two weeks? Between your job and mine we’ve spent every free night together. And I haven’t stayed the night yet so what makes this night any different?”

Carter wrapped his arms around her waist, despising the clothes she’d donned, and nuzzled the skin below her left ear. “Because I want you to.”

She leaned back so she could look him in the eye. “Aw. I want to too.” She shoved him away. “Just not tonight. New job, need sleep, not gonna get it here.”

“What is this new job?”

Ryan bent to slip her tennis shoes on. "I'm just helping my dad out for a while. Filling in 'til he gets someone else."

"How 'bout Friday night?" *More begging, Malone?*

Shoes tied, she came over to him and patted his chest. "Friday sounds good. Here or my place?"

"Here," he growled, yanking her closer and kissing her deep. "That way I can keep you locked up and not let you out of my bed 'til I'm good and ready."

"I can't wait." The way her pupils dilated proved she couldn't.

Good. He wouldn't be the only one miserable all week. She kissed him this time, slipping her tongue into his mouth and feasting on him like she couldn't get enough.

"Seriously," he said, panting hard. "If you want to leave, you need to stop. Otherwise those clothes are coming off and I'll have you flat on your back."

She sighed. "I'm going, I'm going."

He followed her, naked, to the front door, uncaring about the state of his undress. His home was isolated enough, set back off the road and surrounded on two sides by woods and the third by a lake, that he wasn't worried about being seen even if he paraded around outside in the buff.

With one last peck on his lips, Ryan jogged down the three steps of his porch and headed for her car.

"Be careful driving home, babe."

"I will." She waved to him and got into her sensible little Toyota Corolla.

The car was newer but still, he wished she drove something a tad more safe. Like an Expedition, or a Land Cruiser. A tank would be nice. Maybe he could get her one...

"Jesus, Malone. Two weeks. You've been seeing the woman two weeks," he muttered, slamming the door shut when her taillights disappeared over the rise. "A bit early to be thinking about buying her a car, or marriage, or getting her pregnant, don't you think?"

Carter walked over and gripped the back of the leather sofa gracing his open living room, then dropped his head forward.

He was in so much trouble.

Chapter Two

Carter stepped into his office Monday morning after having slept a total of two hours. Half his brain kept trying to determine why Ryan had practically run out on him, job or no job, while the other half had wondered why he should care. No amount of coffee had perked him up this morning, but the sight of his partner Ridge Casey's wife, Morgan, pregnant and glowing with it, sure the hell did.

He needed a psychiatrist if he was jealous of what his partner had that he didn't.

The closer he got, Carter realized Morgan's cheeks were puffed and rosy, her hair mussed and her clothes in disarray. If it weren't for the prominent bulge of her belly signifying late pregnancy, Carter would say she'd just been thoroughly fucked by her husband in Ridge's office.

"Morg, if you don't go into labor soon, I'm afraid you might pop." He spoke the same words he used every morning upon seeing her.

This particular morning, to his utter dismay, her eyes welled with tears instead of her normal grin and, "Shut the hell up."

Horse's ass. "Shit. I'm sorry, Morg." He strode closer and attempted to give her a gentle hug.

"Don't touch me," she snapped, anger replacing the tears.

Carter reared back. Had he entered an alternate universe? What in the shit had happened to the normally quiet, sweet woman who graced their front office? Maybe he was still asleep. Dreaming? Nightmare, more like it.

"Oh good, you're here." Ridge rushed from his office, papers a jumbled mess in his hands, some of them falling to the floor behind him.

Definitely not awake. His partner never acted this way unless there was an emer...gency— He swung back to Morgan. "Are you in labor?"

"Yes." Ridge barked his answer at the same time Morgan gave a terrified nod, one hand going to her belly.

"What the hell are you doing here then?" Carter snatched the pile of papers from Ridge's hands and slapped them down on Morgan's desk.

"We're leaving. Her water broke about ten minutes ago, and I'm running around here trying to get this shit in order for you."

"For God's sake, Ridge, they invented cell phones a few years back. Use it and get the hell out of here."

"I am, I, we—"

"What he means," Morgan said, calmly reaching for her purse and the carryall they'd packed and brought to the office just in case something happened at work, "is that we were just getting ready to head out the door." Her sedate attitude had both men looking at her.

Tears, pissed off, serene in the space of two minutes. Were all women in labor like this? Would Ryan be?

Shit! Stop thinking about her.

He blinked as Morgan took a deep breath, closed her eyes and smiled at some inner secret apparently only she was privy to. The strangeness had him thinking of the music from the *X-Files*—*doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo...*

"Right. What she said." Ridge patted every pocket on his body, twice. Morgan cleared her throat and held out the keys between her forefinger and thumb. Ridge grabbed them. "I knew you had them."

Morgan hummed in response. Carter had never seen his best friend so flustered. He kind of enjoyed it. He'd enjoy razzing him later even more.

Settling himself against Morgan's desk, he crossed his arms over his chest and sat back to watch the man disintegrate.

Ridge ushered his lovely wife across the room, mumbling something that sounded like, "Do we have everything?" He stopped and snapped his fingers as Morgan pushed on the door.

"Damn. I almost forgot. You need to go over to the Wellingby site and meet with the new foreman."

Carter nodded. "Can do."

"I'm supposed to go, but...Ryan Dixon is his name, I think. He's Mr. Dixon's son."

Carter's heart rate shot through the roof at the name Ryan. Ryan Dixon, not Ryan Cooper. Man, not woman. Still, the name made him imagine her creamy skin beneath his fingertips, the way her nipples peaked under his tongue, the way her pussy hugged his cock so tight it made his eyes cross.

"Carter."

"What?" He shook the vision of Ryan's body undulating with his from his mind and forced himself not to adjust his cock beneath the zipper of his khakis.

"Jesus, man, you're more lost than I am."

"Yeah. I don't think that's possible."

Morgan waved. "Hello? Pregnant woman nearly about to birth your child in the office waiting here."

"Shit." Ridge turned again to his wife then once more back to Carter. "Ryan. Foreman. Go. Meet."

"Yes, yes. I will. I'll go now in fact." He pulled his keys from his pocket and followed them out. "Call me the second you know anything. And good luck, Morg. Don't let Ridge flip out on you."

"Too late," she announced over the doorframe before it shut.

Carter laughed and hopped in his SUV, ready to fulfill Ridge's wishes lest he cause the man a coronary on the day of his first child's birth. He tried to remember what he knew about the Wellingby site. The project was one of Ridge's babies, his conception, and while Carter had collaborated on it, he had his own projects going at the same time. He knew the former foreman had broken his leg in an on-site accident, and Ridge had said the owner of the construction company had someone to replace him temporarily until the man was able to come back. And from what Carter could recall, it would be awhile until the other man was able to return to work since his injuries were pretty extensive.

A measure of adrenaline raced through his system. Carter loved going to the job sites, loved seeing their projects come to fruition from the ground up. The Wellingby site would be gorgeous. State-of-the-art facility for patrons of the arts from toddlers to the elderly. It was going to be a welcome addition to the community, graciously donated by the Wellingby family.

Twenty minutes later, Carter pulled onto the gravel entrance. The site was in full swing even this early in the morning, like a beehive of activity with yellow hard-hat-wearing workers crawling all over the infrastructure of steel beams. He turned into a section reserved for the workers' vehicles and sat, watching, window down, still unable to believe what he did for a living had a part in creating the vast building being constructed right before his eyes.

The hum and whirl of machinery combined with the near-constant knocking of hammers, and the buzz of saws almost overrode the shouts and calls of the workers. He missed it. Architecture was his passion but construction was how he'd made his way through college. His father had been a laborer. Carter had practically cut his teeth chewing on his daddy's tools. He loved sitting four stories up and feeling the steel between his legs, no pun intended, as he attached two beams together.

He sighed. Wouldn't happen today. Two trailers were parked to the right of his position. Inside he'd likely find the new foreman, but his fingers itched to get more hands on and join in the fun of building instead of overseeing and planning.

"Hell." He jerked the keys from the ignition and got out. All this wishing. He was beginning to feel like a girl.

As he walked to the back of the SUV to retrieve his hard hat, gravel crunched beneath the steel-toed Redwing boots he always wore in case he was needed at a site. At least he'd get to look a little bit the part with his boots and hat. The khakis, dress shirt and tie threw the rest out of whack. Anyone with half a brain would know he hadn't come there to pound nails.

The door to the trailer opened just as he reached for it and a man stepped out, nodding to him in acknowledgement. Carter stepped back to let him pass and his knees nearly buckled when a sweet, familiar voice rang out.

"And don't forget the dimension change on the south face of—"

"I gotcha, boss," the man said, adjusting his hat on his head.

Carter's cock twitched. He could not have heard her voice. She was at work. A new job. Working for her father. He closed his eyes and swallowed back the rush of unease before stepping up into the brightly lit space to be greeted by the rounded backside of the woman he'd made love to not even twelve hours ago. She spoke on the phone tucked between her shoulder and ear, oblivious to his presence, a white hard hat on her head. A secretary perhaps? He ground his teeth in frustration.

Ryan Dixon, his ass. She'd told him her name was Ryan Cooper. Had Ridge fucked up or had she, for whatever reason, led him astray? Had she known who he was and somehow thought sleeping with him would help her get ahead? And if she'd lied about her name, how many times had she lied to him about other things?

Jesus. Nothing made sense. Sleeping with him wouldn't get her a job. He wasn't even her boss. If anything, she'd answer to the construction owner—apparently her father—and beyond that she'd have to deal with Ridge.

She shifted, wagging that perfect ass in front of him, enticing him to bend her over the OCD clean desk that had a place for everything and everything in its place, and pump his cock in and out of what he knew would be a slick, tight sheath. The other temptation was to throw her facedown over his knee and paddle said perfect ass with his bare hand.

"Yes, Tom." She paused and stuffed a slender hand in her back pocket. "No, I haven't seen him yet. I'll be sure and tell him when I do."

Carter waited not quite so patiently for her to finish her conversation with whoever she spoke to and stayed well on the other side of the trailer from her. If he got too close, no telling what might happen.

"See you then. Bye."

See you then? Like hell she'd see him then. The only man she'd be seeing was Carter. The tips of his ears grew hot as jealousy swam through him. Great. First the car and marriage, and now the great green-eyed monster had taken hold of his body.

He wasn't through with her yet. Deceit or not. He cleared his throat.

"Are you back already, Jason?" She turned, then shrieked, throwing a coffee mug she'd been holding in the air. It dropped to the ground with a thunk, the liquid sloshing out to drown everything in sight, including her shirt. "Carter?" The name gurgled from her mouth as the hot coffee soaked through the cotton fabric of two shirts to singe her abdomen.

"Shit." He crossed the space in about four steps to reach for her.

Ryan plucked at the button-down shirt and T-shirt underneath. "What are you doing here?" And why was she squeaking?

"I think the more important question is what are *you* doing here?" The accusation in his voice threw her.

“Working for my father, remember? It’s why I couldn’t stay the night, you ass. Don’t go all caveman on me.”

“What?” He stepped closer and the warm, male scent of his skin overrode the mocha-sweet smell of the brew she couldn’t function without. She didn’t give a rat’s ass about those who wanted to poison themselves with the caffeinated crap, but the decaf...that was all hers.

Jesus, she was standing here thinking about coffee while a none-too-happy Carter growled down at her.

And oh goodness did he look hot in a hard hat and tie.

“Carter,” she said again, trying to come up with some plausible explanation as to why the man she’d been making love to had known where to find her.

“That’s my name, *Ryan*.”

Eyes wide, she stared at him. He was pissed. At her. “Did you get up on the wrong side of the bed or something, or was it just that I didn’t stay the night?”

“It has nothing to do with you not staying the night. It’s more about you lying to me for the last two weeks.”

She gasped. “Lying? What lie? What are you talking about?”

“What about your name? Ryan Cooper?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s my name. Don’t wear it out.” He had to be stoned. There was no other explanation for the sudden turn in his attitude.

“Then why the fuck did my partner send me here to meet a Ryan Dixon?”

“Dix—oh.” Her eyes crinkled in confusion. “Partner?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

Had she? She was tempted to put a hand on his forehead to see if he had a fever, but touching him would no doubt lead to doing bad things on her desk. So she did the next best thing.

“Are you feeling all right?”

“Answer the question.” His nose almost bumped hers as he leaned in menacingly. The only thing preventing it was their hard hats. He couldn’t get that close to her. The plastic rim of his hat clipped hers. Bastard didn’t even say sorry, but at least he backed off half an inch, leaving her wondering if her eyes were still crossed from having to look at his face while he was practically inside her.

She could hardly breathe from wanting his lips on hers. All this accusing and not even a, “Hi, honey, I’m home.”

“What were we talking about?” Ryan swallowed and stared at his mouth, unashamed at how husky her voice sounded.

“Dixon.”

“Oh, right. Tom Dixon is my father.”

"You told me your name was Cooper."

She nodded. "It is. Tom is my stepfather. I'm not sure why your...partner said my name was Dixon. Who is he by the way? Partner in what, and why, exactly, are you here again?"

A light seemed to go off in his head and a muscle ticked on the side of his face. Made that square jaw so cute. She wanted to nibble on it.

The band in her hard hat must be way too tight.

"Damn it."

She hid her smile at his favorite curse. "What?"

Carter sucked in a breath and rubbed at the back of his neck, a gesture she'd seen him do often. "My partner is Ridge Casey. His wife went into labor this morning so perhaps, in his flustered state of mind, he got the name wrong."

"Wait a minute." Ridge Casey. Carter Malone. Malone and...

She frowned at him. "No. No, no and no. Please don't tell me you're *that* Carter Malone? From Malone and Casey? The firm that designed this building?" *Please don't tell me I'm that unlucky.*

"Got it in one." He sounded a tad disgusted which only served to confuse her more. Somebody had to have spit in his eggs this morning. Although if she'd been a waitress and he'd come into her restaurant all pissy like he was right now, she'd have done the same.

In hindsight, sleeping with one of the architects did look *really* bad. "Ah hell." Why in the fig hadn't she connected his name? There couldn't possibly be that many Carter Malones in the area. Stupid didn't even begin to encompass the depth of her dumbness.

To keep busy, and hopefully to look less flustered than she felt, Ryan went about setting her hat on the desk and unbuttoning her shirt.

"What are you doing?" He yanked her hands off the buttons.

She pursed her lips. "Changing my shirt. In case you hadn't noticed, you made me ruin this one. I can't very well run around outside soaked in coffee, now can I?" Although she wouldn't mind taking it off and doing other things inside. But since Carter looked like he'd rather do anything than be cooped up with her in the trailer, she went for simply changing.

"Sorry," he mumbled, thumbing the pulse at her wrist for a moment before letting her go.

"It's fine. I've got extras here. Lots to get into out there, ya know?" She stripped off the button-down and blew out a breath at the long-sleeve shirt underneath. It would have to go too. There were extras in the bottom drawer of the desk, ones she'd only placed there this morning. She was suddenly glad she'd come prepared.

After taking the clothing from her stash, she stood to remove the T-shirt. Carter was on her again. This time he grabbed her wrist and held it up for inspection. Ryan licked her lips and prayed he wouldn't ask her about the bracelet.

“What the hell is this?”

God must have been busy. She tried to wiggle out of his grasp, but he held fast.

“Ryan?” His gaze flicked to hers, a million questions flitting through his eyes and making her squirm.

His eyes slid shut as though he was searching for patience. Then he opened them and calmly flipped the small, football-shaped, stainless-steel medallion over and discovered all of her secrets.

“Epilepsy.” His lips moved but there wasn’t much sound to be heard.

She jerked her hand out of his. Silence reigned while she finished switching shirts. Only when she had herself situated did she finally look at him again. His jaw ticked away with what most likely amounted to anger, but there was sadness on his face. She hated that pity. Had since she was a kid.

“Did you think that was something I didn’t need to know about?” he asked quietly.

“No.” Dang it, she did not need to defend herself. “It’s just not something I broadcast. The bracelet was with me all along. *If* something had happened, and that’s a big if since I’m on medication and haven’t had an episode in almost two years, then the bracelet and my entire life’s information is right in my wallet.”

You weren’t going to defend yourself, dummy.

His eyes flashed and his nostrils flared. “But that’s not something I would have known, is it?”

She rounded on him. “In case of an emergency you wouldn’t have handed over my wallet to the police or paramedics?”

“You should have told me.”

“Do you know what happened the last time I told a man I was an epileptic on our first date? He gave me the hairy eyeball, his entire body shivered like I’d told him I had a penis as well as a vagina, he gulped down the beer he’d just ordered, and he ran as fast as his cowardly legs could carry him, so no, I don’t tell everyone what I have. Excuse the hell out of me.”

Carter shoved his fingers through his hair, making the short strands stand on end. “Is this a job you should be working with this condition?”

“Oh. Oh, don’t even go there, buster. Do not think for one minute you can tell me what not to do because you’ve fucked me.”

He pushed into her space, nose to nose once more, this time succeeding because he yanked his hat off and she didn’t have hers as protection anymore. “Maybe I just don’t want to get called one day saying the woman I’ve been *making love* to had a seizure four stories up and is now hanging by her lifeline.”

Well hell. Since he put it that way...

Chapter Three

The door opening behind him kept Carter from saying what he really wanted to, that he couldn't even come close to imagining how he would feel should he get a call one day telling him she'd fallen or gotten hurt.

"Hey, cuz." A tall, lanky man entered the trailer, a goofy grin on his face.

Ryan swiped at her shirt and cleared her throat. She narrowed her eyes at Carter before turning her attention to the new arrival. "Tad." She acknowledged him with a semi-smile, nothing like the one *Tad* graced her with.

Carter ground his teeth together to keep from punching the man in the nose when he kissed Ryan's cheek. Cousin or not, Carter didn't like the sight of another man so close to his woman.

Shit. There you go again, Car.

"Your dad coming in today?" Tad asked, swiping the hard hat from his head and using the long sleeve of his shirt to wipe the sweat from his brow. He moved to the coffee and poured himself a cup.

"Yes." Ryan busied herself folding the coffee-drenched shirt. "He's looking for you actually. I told him I'd tell you to stay put so he could talk to you when he gets here. So, stay put."

Tad flashed another grin over his shoulder as he doctored his coffee. "Yes, ma'am."

"You better not be drinking my decaf, boy."

"Trust me. I value my balls enough not to touch your shit, dear cousin."

Irritation threatened to strangle Carter. If he threw her cousin out the door, would he piss her off?

"Who's he?" Tad thumbed over his shoulder in Carter's direction.

"He's the man who designed the building you're working on." Ryan peeked at Carter from beneath her long lashes. The same way she looked at him after she'd come in his mouth.

His dick hardened despite the gravity of the situation. Fucking *epilepsy*. And she was working at a construction site. Granted, he didn't know shit about epilepsy except that it caused seizures, but he did know seizures and heavy equipment didn't go hand in hand.

Maybe Tad could fill him in. Might as well ask. Ryan couldn't get any angrier than she'd been a few minutes ago. Although he could see her point about not telling him, it still pissed him off. What the hell would he have done if anything had happened?

"How do you feel about your cousin working here?"

Tad spun around and Carter could tell that the question had thrown him. "Who? Ryan?"

“Unless you got another cousin running around.”

“Nope.” He crossed his arms over his chest, and Carter decided maybe the man wasn’t really lanky after all. He had some bulk on him. “What exactly are you trying to insinuate?”

“Insinuate nothing. I want to know what you think about her working here.”

Ryan stepped in front of Tad and glared at Carter. “I don’t think it’s any of your damn business. This is my job. If you can’t handle it, then get the hell out.”

Now wait a minute. Get the hell out of the trailer or get the hell out of her life? Because neither choice was going to happen. He shook his head. Her mouth dropped open.

“Not gonna happen, sweetheart.”

“Sweetheart?” Tad asked at the same time Ryan gasped.

“Stay out of it, Tad.” Ryan didn’t bother glancing at her cousin, but kept her focus—the one shooting daggers—on Carter.

“You have the audacity to call me sweetheart after all you’ve said to me this morning?”

Her outrage had him raising his eyebrows. “Do you think the things I said were uncalled for?”

“What did he say to you?” Tad’s voice took on a threatening tone.

“How would you feel if you’d just learned about me what I just learned about you?” Carter questioned, ignoring Tad’s sudden defensive stance.

Ryan’s mouth opened and closed. Her hands went to her hips.

“What the heck are we talking about?” Tad scratched his head and looked back and forth between them.

“Nothing,” Ryan snapped at the same time Carter said, “Epilepsy.”

“Ah.” Tad’s one word was filled with understanding. “She just tell you about that, did she?”

“No.” Ryan appeared ready to stamp her foot in a mini tantrum.

So damn cute.

“Out, Tad.” Ryan pointed to the door.

Tad’s forehead wrinkled. “You told me to stay put.” He turned to Carter. “How’d you know about her condition if she didn’t tell you?”

“The bracelet.”

“Right. I keep telling her it’s stupid to keep it in the dark, but what do I know?”

“Move.” She pushed him toward the exit.

Tad resisted. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think this is the best place for her either. Too dangerous. Look what happened to Eric.” He shrugged. “Tom has other ideas though.”

“If you don’t shut up, I’m going to kick your ass.” This time she shoved at Tad’s back with both arms. The man didn’t budge.

“Who’s Eric?” Carter fumed. How many men did she have in her life, for God’s sake?

"The foreman. He broke his leg last week in an accident. Pretty bad too. Coulda been her."

"But it wasn't me," Ryan growled. This time she succeeded in forcing Tad forward with the toe of her boot to the back of his knee. "Eric's accident was just that. A freak thing."

"And you don't think having a seizure on site will be considered a freak thing?" Tad said what Carter wanted to yell.

"Jesus H. Christ," she shouted. "You know as well as I do that I haven't had an episode in two years. It's why I'm allowed to drive. Do I operate the heavy machinery? No. Do I use the I-beams as my personal balance beam? No. Am I standing in the presence of the bright, flashing welder? No. So get the hell off my back. Tom trusts in my abilities or he wouldn't have put me here."

"No, he wouldn't have." Tad nodded in agreement. "He would have put me here."

"Exactly. So until I'm flopping around on the ground like you two seem to have me doing every five minutes the way you're talking, let me do my job. I went to school and worked my tail off the same as you, Tad. Give me a chance to prove I'm not going to let you down, would you?"

Crap. Shit. The woman knew how to make a man feel the size of a pea. Carter swallowed. He had to give her credit. She knew which buttons to push. Perhaps he wasn't being fair.

"Leave. Now." Ryan didn't lift her gaze from the floor. She looked dejected and it tore at Carter's heart to know he was responsible for dousing the light in her eyes.

"Fine. Going." Tad grudgingly walked to the door, yanked it open and disappeared, slapping the door shut behind him.

Carter followed Tad to make sure the man had really gone away. He needed the privacy for a few minutes.

"You too." Her voice was firm.

"What?" Carter pretended not to understand. No way was she going to throw him out now. Not before he'd groveled at her feet for forgiveness for being a total ass.

She sucked in a breath and finally raised her face to his. "You heard me. I have work to do."

"And I have other things in mind," Carter said, standing his ground.

"Are you kidding me? If you think for even one second I'm going to let you—"

He stepped over to her and grabbed her hands, holding tight when she tried to wiggle loose. "Forgive me."

He smiled at her confusion.

He would have to touch her, wouldn't he? Ryan fought her body's response to him. She would not give in. She would not be swayed by the heat shimmering in his eyes. She would not let the tingle in her clit rule her brain.

She would not, she would not, she would not.

“Forgive me?” He tilted her face up to his with a crooked finger under her chin.

His lips were so close. Close enough to kiss. Three inches max. She knew what they would taste like. Two inches. Slow motion. What the hell was he waiting for?

“For you to forgive me.” He whispered the words.

Had she said that out loud? One inch. One more inch...

His lips landed on hers, soft when she would have sworn he was angry enough to take her with a vengeance. But who gave a crap how he kissed when all she wanted to do was strip her jeans off and crawl onto the rock-hard dick currently pressed against her belly.

Ryan opened to him, accepted his tongue in her mouth, tangled hers with his and lifted a leg to his hip. One large hand, calloused she knew, gripped her ass cheek, squeezing. His fingertips grazed her pussy through thick denim and she wanted to cry out at the almost-nonexistent touch. It wasn't enough. She wiggled in his hold, trying to get closer when his feet started moving them backward.

His lips traveled away from her mouth, across her jaw and to her ear. “Does this mean I'm forgiven?”

The velvet silk of his words sent a shiver through her body. If he didn't fuck her soon...

“Forgiven?” What had they been talking about?

“Mmm-hmm. For being a jerk. Though I'm not sure whether to paddle your ass for worrying me or just fuck you into submission.”

Her butt hit the desk behind her as his teeth raked along her neck. “I don't care which.” She gasped and jerked her head up so fast she nailed his nose with her forehead. “I didn't say that.”

A wicked grin transformed his face. “You did.” With both hands on her hips, he lifted her to sit on the desk, spread her thighs and situated himself between them. Then he paused, his eyes creasing as if in thought.

“Is it...safe?”

The man was a puzzle. “Is what safe?”

Carter sighed and took her cheek in one palm. “To, you know, have sex.”

“Oh my God.” She would have jumped off the table but he had her pinned so she opted for slapping him instead. The blow, meant to be harsh, was. It cracked against his shoulder, making him wince. “You are an unbelievable bastard, you know that? We've been going at each other for two weeks. Has anything happened? No. I hardly think you knowing about it is likely to cause me to go into spasms.”

“I seem to recall many times I've caused you to spasm.” He brushed a fingertip over one of her nipples straining against her shirt, and she sucked in a breath.

“Exactly. The good kind of spasms.” She groped for the tails of his shirt and pulled them free from his pants so she could feel the softness of his satiny skin. Her palms traced a path up his sides, lifting his shirt until she reached his pecs.

“Turnabout is fair play.” He stepped back out of her reach and stripped the T-shirt off her torso before she could take another breath, then stared at her chest.

If she were at all self-conscious, she would cover herself from his gaze. Instead she arched her back and did her small breasts proud. “Not thinking about epilepsy now, are you?”

“Don’t be a smart ass, sweetheart.” He moved in again and pushed the straps of her bra off her shoulders to reveal pert nipples. With a flick of his thumb and forefinger he undid the clasp between her breasts. “I never get tired of looking at you.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” She wanted to tear through the buttons of his shirt but tackled them one by one, exposing his abs inch by tan inch. He had a tickle spot right below his left armpit which she found without error.

He jerked in response and reached for her wandering fingers. “Not this time.”

“What?”

“The innocent card won’t fly.”

She pouted and fluttered her lashes.

“That won’t work either.”

“Why I just don’t know what you’re referring to, Carter,” she cooed in her best *Gone with the Wind* imitation.

He grunted and left her sitting there, boobs hanging out—as much as it was possible for little boobs to hang—and her clit ringing with need.

“Hey. Where are you going? I wasn’t done yet.”

He turned and walked backward, looking devilishly sexy with his shirt open to the top button and red tie swinging over his naked chest, pointing at her reward.

“You want Tad to walk in on us?”

Ryan’s cheeks heated. She’d been ready to have sex on her desk without once thinking about the fact that anyone could have walked in. First day on the job and she’d get caught screwing around. Literally. The thought had her leaping from the desktop.

“Right. We can’t do this.”

“The hell we can’t.” The lock clicked decisively with a flick of his wrist, and Ryan licked her lips.

Jeez the man had some kind of effect on her libido, making her forget everything except wanting to partake of his body. If the gleam in his eye meant anything, he didn’t have any qualms about fucking her on her desk.

She noticed her nipples and clit had no qualms either.

“Jeans down to your knees, bend over the desk.”

“Excuse me?” Her heart raced. She’d never heard that particular tone from his mouth before and couldn’t decide if it scared her or excited her.

“You heard me.”

He tugged on his tie, loosening the red silk enough to slip it over his head. Wouldn't want to retie it now would he? He pulled it off and tossed it somewhere behind him. With one hand, he unbuttoned the last remaining button and with the other, unbuckled the black belt threaded through his khakis. Watching as he stalked her from across the small trailer, Ryan swallowed. The next thing to go was the zipper on his pants, revealing blue plaid boxers, his cock a hard ridge straining to escape, the broad, smooth head poking out from the opening.

She was so going to get fired.

Chapter Four

He wanted to smile at the unsure look that crossed her beautiful features. Her blue eyes sparkled with a mixture of uncertainty and desire and her bra clung to her elbows where it had fallen earlier. A beautiful flush stole over her chest, telling him the one thing he needed to know.

She wanted to be naughty. Her eyes flashed to the door at his rear. Making sure he'd locked it?

Carter decided to give her another chance to do his bidding before he did it for her. "Jeans down, bend over, sweetheart."

That pink tongue of hers darted out again to moisten her lips, and if her nipples could speak, they'd be screaming, "Take me, take me!"

Eyes wide as he divested himself of his shirt, she shrugged out of the bra and reached for her fly. Then her chin lifted and she caught his gaze as if in challenge. She quickly yanked the denim to her knees. Red panties flaunted themselves, practically taunting him to remove them from her slender legs and stuff them in his pocket as a memento for later. He may have to do just that.

He twirled his finger in the air, waiting not quite so patiently for her to finish what he'd requested of her.

"You will pay for this," she mumbled, turning to face the desk before slowly and provocatively bending at the waist. Ryan glanced over her shoulder at him, her lips pursed, nostrils flared.

She definitely wanted this.

The jeans prevented her legs from spreading and provided him with a gorgeous view of her ass. He'd take her there someday, he decided, show her how he could make her feel the bite of painful pleasure.

As it was, she wiggled the delectable cheeks of her bottom, tempting him at a time when she shouldn't be messing with him. Didn't she realize how nervous she made him now? How he wouldn't be able to work without wondering if she was all right. He envisioned a long night of research to find out exactly what he was dealing with.

Drawing his cock out for her to see, Carter stroked himself. "I'm going to take you from behind, sweetheart. The way you're standing there, there won't be much you can do to stop me. It'll be tight between your thighs. Will feel so good with you squeezing me. Then when I'm deep inside you, stroking your channel until you beg for it, I'm going to spank your ass."

Ryan's burst of confidence seemed to slip. He touched a rounded butt cheek with the weeping head of his cock, spreading pre-come over the soft skin. She shivered, and her eyes closed and her teeth came out to bite her lower lip.

Carter dug in his back pocket for the condom stored in his wallet. He dropped the leather to the ground, tore the packet with his teeth and rolled the rubber over his erection. Teasing the taut ring of her anus with one hand, he pressed the other between her shoulder blades and urged her further over the desk.

"Grab the other side and don't let go." He traced the length of her spine as she complied with what appeared to be nervous fingers. Following the line of her hip around to her belly, Carter wedged his free hand into the space between her thighs and sought the bundle of nerves hidden there. He knew he'd found it when Ryan bucked with a squeak.

"Shh," he soothed, lining his cock up with her vagina. By the slickness gathered at her clit, he could tell she was ready to take him.

Ryan grunted at his initial penetration, contracting her muscles against his length as he tried to push in. The entry was like nothing he'd ever experienced before. He watched his cock disappear into her sheath and for the first time wondered what it would be like not to wear a condom. He wanted to feel the slick, wet heat of her body as he thrust inside her, wanted to spill his seed inside her womb.

Carter shook his head. A glance up her torso and down her outstretched arms showed white knuckles gripping the edge. She liked the position just as much as he did.

Her inner walls clutched his dick, threatening to cause him to come with the first lunge as if he were seventeen not thirty-eight. She wiggled her ass, making things worse for him. A drop of sweat trickled off his forehead. Son of a bitch. He had to grit his teeth to keep from going at her. But then the pale skin of her bottom glared up at him, fairly begging for his hand to turn it pink. If she thought to entice him, to get him to move before he was ready, he would just have to punish her. He'd threatened to already, why not make good on it?

He brought his left hand down on the smooth, creamy pad of flesh with a thwack.

Ryan took offense, but holy shit the immediate response of her pussy on his dick was more than enough to make up for her initial incense.

"What the shit? You said I'd be begging for you to spank me." She glared at him over her shoulder. "There weren't no beggin' goin' on, mister."

In response, Carter grinned, sucked his thumb into his mouth and pressed the wet digit into her anus to the first knuckle. Leaving her clit for the moment, he smacked her again.

Her head hit the desktop with a thunk, and if her butt hadn't constricted around him, he might have believed her indignation. She liked it.

Carter withdrew his cock and heard her swift intake of breath.

She groaned and rolled her head back and forth. "Shit. Anytime you're ready, bucko."

“Is that begging I hear?”

“Just move, you cocky bastard.”

“I like cocky.” He swiveled his hips and Ryan’s back arched.

Her fingers fisted and one hand left the edge to lift in menace. He swatted her behind again, his eyeballs rolling when the action had direct impact on his dick. Perhaps he’d just discovered a way to fuck without ever moving.

“Put the hand down.”

She lifted it higher.

His hand hovered over her butt. “I can stand here all day, my partner’s wife is having a baby so there’s no one to answer to back at the office. You, however, will probably have need of this trailer, especially if your father is coming.”

“Shit.”

“I believe you said that already,” he said, mocking her with the words she’d thrown at him last night.

The hand slowly lowered and curled over the edge once more. He had to move. Not that he had a choice. His balls were drawn up impossibly tight and his eyes were crossed. He was likely to pass out from pleasure sooner rather than later.

“Jesus. Move.” Her bark had the right affect.

Carter withdrew his thumb from her hole so he could grab her hip for leverage. The finger at her clit slipped and slid in a circle on the tiny bead.

Then he moved. In and out of the precious woman who’d somehow managed to possess his mind and heart with her smile and wit and now her vulnerability. His balls slapped against her and it was only then he realized that in the fog of lust he hadn’t even taken his own pants off. Talk about a quickie on the boss’s desk.

The fire built inside him, sizzling a pathway down his spine. Ryan stiffened beneath him, her back undulating. He felt the coil of her climax ready to strike.

“Don’t stop.”

As if he could. “Nope.”

He hammered into her, working toward wringing every ounce of orgasm he could get from both of them. She straightened and Carter caught her with an arm around her waist. Her hand seized his where it met her sex, grinding his fingers into her clit.

With a shout, Carter slammed his cock deep and held her back to his chest. Wave after wave of come spilled into the condom.

“No, no.” She shook her head, her words almost a sob. “Not done...”

Carter pressed on her clit using the friction of her own rotating hips to finish her off.

She came with a gasp of surrender, her clit throbbing under his fingertips, her body unbendable in his hold, and as he glanced down her torso he saw that her nipples were hard pebbles. He ached to take them in his mouth, to torture her further, but since he was no contortionist he'd have to lavish them with attention later.

Apart from the constant muted noise of the construction site outside, their heavy breathing was the only thing breaking the silence inside the trailer. Ryan reached for the back of his neck and raked her nails along the skin there.

Ryan sighed in the afterglow of good sex. Carter made her body sing in a way no other man ever had. He knew how to play, that was for sure.

He also had the ability to turn her brain to mush with one look. She had a feeling if he said *drop to your knees and suck my cock right now*, she'd do it. And lap it up like it was her last meal on Earth.

Carter plucked at a nipple and suddenly Ryan flashed into the present dimension. Surely she'd been in an alternate one for the past fifteen or twenty minutes. A shiver raced over her skin, leaving goose bumps in its wake. She dropped her hands to her sides, dislodging Carter's where it still played with her quivering clit.

It was a sad, ugly truth that she missed his touch when he wasn't around. After two weeks of their being together. What did that make her?

She looked over the desk she'd been ravished on. The normally pristine surface with its pencils and papers in their proper place was now completely discombobulated. It was a wonder she hadn't stabbed herself to death on one of the sharpened-to-a-pinpoint pencils.

"Umm...that was...wow."

"Yeah." His lips teased the side of her throat and down across her collarbone, and his hands smoothed up her abdomen to her breasts.

The phone rang, scaring the shit out of her. She leapt out of his arms, nearly falling to her face. Thank God she'd gotten her hands beneath her or she would have. Laughing, Carter helped her stand.

"This would be a whole lot easier if I'd taken the stupid things off, bucko."

"Maybe, but not nearly as fun."

"So says the man not on his hands and knees."

"Yet another position I'm going to take you in."

She swiped her bra off the floor before reaching for the phone. Damn thing wouldn't shut up.

"Ryan Cooper." She shot him a look to make sure he'd heard her name. He had and smiled while shrugging back into his shirt and buttoning the thing. What a shame to cover up such a god-like set of abs. The construction business had done him well.

"Is he in yet?" the gruff voice on the other end of the line asked.

“Who?” Ryan searched for her shirt and yanked her jeans over her sore ass. She curled her lip in Carter’s direction. The jerk smirked.

“Your cousin, Ryan. Is Tad in?”

“Tad?” Was Tad in? Was her brain in? The alternate dimension had really done a number on her. “Yes. Yes, I saw him a few minutes ago.” Give or take twenty.

“I’m on my way. Are you okay? You sound a little stressed.”

“No. Not stressed.” Her ass stung like hell, but stressed? No, she could honestly say she’d had the stress fucked right out of her.

“Things are running smoothly then?”

“Tom. It’s only been three hours since I arrived. Did you expect things to fall apart the second I stepped on the lot?”

“No, *I* didn’t. I know what you’re capable of. But your mother worries about you. She made me ask.”

“Uh-huh.” If it were up to her mother, Ryan would still be in a playpen with only her blankie to keep her company. Overprotective didn’t even begin to describe Carol Dixon.

“Actually.” She eyed Carter stuffing his parts back into his boxers and pants after discarding the spent condom in some tissue. “Carter Malone is standing in the trailer with me at this precise moment.”

His head popped up and she stuck her tongue out at him.

“Carter Malone?”

“Yep.”

“As in Carter Malone of Malone and Casey, Carter Malone.”

“Yes, Tom. The Carter Malone.” Was she in a déjà vu or what? Tom seemed as surprised as she had. Of course, her stepfather hadn’t been sleeping with the architect for the last two weeks.

“Great. Make him stay there too. I should probably talk to him at the same time.”

The grim tone in his voice snagged her attention away from where she stared, transfixed, as Carter put his tie back on.

“Tom?”

“I’ll explain everything when I get there. Trust me. Ten minutes. Bye.”

The line disconnected before she could get a word in edgewise. What in the world?

“Something wrong?” Carter retrieved the phone from her hand and placed it on the table then proceeded to dress her like he would a toddler. Bra on, clasped in front, tugging to make sure her breasts were snuggled correctly, shirt over her head, arms in the holes, jeans zipped and snapped. All while she stood wondering what was going on with Tom. It wasn’t like him to be secretive.

“I’m not sure. But my stepfather has requested to meet you. He’ll be here in ten.”

Ten minutes. Or less, more likely. And damn. They'd fucked on her desk. Anyone walking in would know exactly what they'd done. The area screamed, "I got fucked on my desk and lived to tell about it." Complete with sweaty body imprint across the top.

"Ten minutes," she whispered.

Reading her thoughts, Carter swung into action. He collected the papers and stacked them while Ryan grabbed for the rogue pencils and dumped them back in their holder. One set of blueprints had hit the floor, come unrolled and lay curled at the base of the desk. Carter dealt with it. Ryan snagged the lamp from the floor and set it upright.

Had they really done that much thrashing around?

"Is that it?" She turned in an arc, sweeping the room to make sure they'd gotten rid of all the evidence. Everything except the scent of sex that permeated the space. She snapped her fingers. "Bless the last foreman and his bizarre need for air fresheners." She remembered seeing them in the drawer where she'd stashed her clothes and grabbed one.

"I think we've hidden all the evidence, sweetheart." Carter leaned a hip against the desk, and knocked over the pencils yet again. With a calm she was glad one of them felt, he reached back and picked them up.

She could only imagine what Tom would think if he found out she was sleeping with the architect. Damn it, she'd worked too hard to get to this position, no way would she screw things up now. Nor would she let Carter.

"I'd appreciate you not saying anything to Tom about this."

One eyebrow rose. "About this? Or about us?"

"Both."

The other one lifted to meet the first. "Are you ashamed of me, Ryan? I am totally insulted." He put a hand over his heart and tried to look wounded.

Ryan snorted.

"Not right now at least, okay?" She could handle them telling Tom someday. Like maybe five years after the project was finished, but not today.

"Will he think me not good enough for you?" He clasped her hand in his and entwined their fingers. Probably to keep her from smacking him again.

"It's not that." The man was exasperating.

"I know, I know. You worked very hard to get here and you don't want me to ruin it for you. I get it." He zipped his lips shut. "Not one word."

How in the hell had he gotten that from her? She stared at him, not sure what to say.

"I can read you like an open book."

The doorknob rattled behind her and she whipped her head around to look. Why didn't he come in? The knock on the door clued her in.

“We forgot to unlock it. Damn it.” She stormed over to the door, her face on fire. If their quick tidy-up job didn’t do the trick, having a locked door sure the hell would.

Tom’s hand lifted to knock again just as she opened it. His eyes narrowed and she knew she’d been busted.

“Why is the door locked?” Tom stepped into the trailer.

“My fault entirely, sir.” Carter crossed the room and offered his hand to her stepfather who took it immediately and gave it three generous pumps. “I’m afraid it’s become habit since our office was robbed a couple years back. Have no idea why I still lock doors behind me. You’ll have to excuse me.”

Ryan held her breath at the not-quite-white lie. As explanations went, that one was pretty good. Tom took Carter in, clearly trying to decide whether or not to believe him and then nodded.

“Had a run-in with burglars a time back myself. I can totally understand.”

Holy crap. He’d bought it. Ryan was shoved from the back.

“Move outta the way, cuz.” Tad pushed past them all and headed for one of the two chairs in the trailer then dropped into one. “So what’s up, Uncle Tom?”

Apparently Ryan wasn’t the only person curious about Tom’s strange attitude.

Tom sighed and put his hands on his hips. “I’ve just been with Eric, our last foreman,” he said for Carter’s benefit. “He claims what happened to him wasn’t an accident.”

Chapter Five

Carter's entire being went on alert. "What do you mean, it wasn't an accident?"

"Eric slipped while walking on a beam ten feet up. The slip was an accident, sure, but the fact that his harness failed to hold him was not. The material had been cut and since I know Eric is fastidious about checking his equipment every day, I know he would never have used a defective lifeline. He's one of the best foremen I have."

Carter nodded. Not many men would. Only those with a death wish and deep-rooted hatred of OSHA.

"Anyway. Eric said he'd left his harness in the back of his truck when he went to lunch and that it looked the same when he got back. Since he'd already checked it in the morning he didn't think he needed to a second time."

"Seems normal." Carter leaned back on the desk and rolled his eyes at the clatter of the pencils behind him.

"Jesus, Malone. How many times you gonna knock that over?" Ryan stomped over and cleaned up the mess, otherwise you could have heard a pin drop in the silence.

It wasn't until she finished and looked up that she realized everyone was looking at her. Carter smiled at the way her cheeks reddened.

"What? Damn things have been on the floor this morning more than they've been in the holder."

"I'm concerned about you working here now, Ryan. As is your mother." Tom put his hands on her shoulders.

Carter itched to take his place. Tom wasn't the only one concerned. If there were *accidents* on site, he didn't want Ryan in the crosshairs. Especially if it hadn't been Eric-the-man who'd been targeted but Eric-the-foreman. A title which Ryan now held.

"As am I." Carter crossed his arms over his chest. She had the ability to make him wilt but on this he would stand strong.

"Oh come on. Maybe someone here hated Eric. You know as well as I do he had his enemies. He could be a dick."

"This is true," interjected Tad, who'd been quiet until then.

"Okay so someone had it out for him. Let's not ask for trouble."

Carter wanted to grind his teeth at her seemingly nonchalant attitude. Someone had cut the fucking lifeline of the last foreman and she wanted to push it under the rug. To him, cutting a lifeline might as well be called attempted murder.

He held his tongue and spoke to her stepfather instead. "I'll have my security team look into this, Tom. I appreciate you including me in this."

Tom shrugged. "You would have found out about it sooner or later. I'm sure Eric will be pressing charges when the culprit is found."

"As well he should." Carter threaded his fingers through his hair. "Until then, count on there being at least some kind of security on site to keep an eye on things. Max Jensen is good. I'll see if he's available."

"Hello, I am the foreman now. Don't I have any say in the matter?"

"Stubborn, stubborn girl." Tom shook his head and hugged her to him. "We all know how hard you worked to get this. No one's going to take away your shot."

That's what she was afraid of. Someone seeing her weakness and trying to oust her for it. When she was more qualified than most men for the job. But in a *man's* world she now had two things against her. Boobs and epilepsy.

Ryan blew out a breath. "The last thing we need is some bystander getting hurt, Tom." She was trying her best to win her case but from the sound of things she was going to lose no matter what. Damn men thinking they were always doing what was best for her.

Carter bit his lip and looked down at the floor. She could tell he was trying not to smile. Since he didn't know how much she wanted this job, she'd give him a tiny bit of slack, but if he didn't get it through his thick skull pretty damn quick that she wasn't going to back down, she was going to have to brain him. He wouldn't look so high and mighty flat on his ass would he?

Then again, she knew exactly how he looked flat on his ass. Of course, he'd been naked at the time, which made the view so much nicer.

"I'll keep an eye on her too." Tad's words almost made Ryan groan.

She gritted her teeth. "I don't need a keeper."

Tad snorted. "You've needed one since you were born."

Ryan turned on him, ready to punch him in the eye. Wouldn't be the first time the two of them had gone a few rounds. They'd spent a ton of time together growing up because their fathers had been so close. Although Tom wasn't her biological father, he'd stepped up to the plate when she was still a baby. Tom's brother, her step-uncle, Chris, had been part of her life from the beginning, and no one had ever treated her like an outsider. Except for the epilepsy. The men in her family were definitely an overprotective lot and to this day still tended to coddle her.

All except Tad who did his best to antagonize the shit out of her.

“Children.” Tom stepped between them. “It wouldn’t matter if you were a man, Ryan. The truth is someone sabotaged Eric’s equipment. If it could happen to him, it could happen to anyone. Especially a more vulnerable target. Got it?”

Tom had a fairly decent way of blowing the wind right out of her sails. He was correct. She did make a more vulnerable target. She was grown up enough now to admit her faults.

“Fine, Carter. Send your babysitters.”

“I will.” The way Carter said so made her think the alternative had never been in question.

She scowled at him, despite how it made her feel petty and childish. “Don’t you have work to do?”

Tom cleared his throat. “We do work for Mr. Malone, Ryan.”

“I have a feeling he’s gone beyond *Mr. Malone* with her.” Tad stood, a wicked gleam in his eye, and Ryan couldn’t resist. She stomped on his toe with the heel of her boot.

The desired effect was not forthcoming. Instead he laughed, pulled her into the crook of his arm and proceeded to give her a noogie. Fucking humiliating her in front of her *boss*. She decided she would maim her cousin later when there were no witnesses.

“Ryan?” Tom was eyeing both her and Carter dubiously.

When she finally managed to break free of the schmuck’s hold, she found herself being stared down by the older man.

“We didn’t know who we were.” Yeah, that sounded coherent.

“Sir.” Carter lifted his hand for another shake from Tom. “Your daughter and I have been seeing each other for a couple of weeks now. It wasn’t until this morning that we discovered the work connection.”

The statement made Tom’s eyes widen. “Seeing each other?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Guess you know why the door was locked now, huh, Uncle Tom?” Tad danced out of the way of Ryan’s reach.

“I guess so.” Her stepdad smiled and she wondered about it before turning her quickly-rising-to-the-boiling-point anger at Tad.

“Asshole.”

“Get lost, nephew, before I let her loose to destruct you piece by piece.”

“As if,” Tad murmured, heading out the door.

“So. You’re seeing someone?”

“Oh my God.” How on Earth could the man do this to her? Hello? Was she still in high school?

“Your mother will be pleased.”

“I’ll bet.” She wished the floor would swallow her up.

“I expect you to call her.”

“She will.” Carter gripped her hand, threading her fingers through his. “I’ll make sure.”

Tom's smile nearly blinded her. The man was in heaven. Thankful no doubt that he could report back to her mother that all was well in Ryansville and by golly, the girl had even gone and gotten herself a man. She wondered if he would tell her mother that she'd fucked said man on her desk too.

Ryan knew she should go ahead and X out this Sunday afternoon because it was a sure bet her mother would call her before noon today and invite them for Sunday brunch. A brunch that would include a grilling of momentous proportions, and she wasn't talking barbecue.

~ * ~

The men were finally gone, off to inspect the site. It had taken Ryan promising she would talk *and* listen to Max Jensen the super-spy PI-guy whatever-he-was to make Carter go. She wiped a hand over her face and slumped in her chair. What a damn morning. She'd come to work pumped to do the job her stepfather had entrusted her to do, fought with then fucked her lover of two weeks, been caught by her family after having engaged in such an act and now here she sat waiting on some security hero to come and save the day. Like she was a girl.

"God save me from men." She groaned and laid her head on the desk. If she didn't know it would hurt like hell, she'd bang it a few times to clear her head. And since her head was already pounding...

Or was that the door? "Ms. Cooper?" Her eyes narrowed at the gruff male voice on the other side of it.

She wasn't done being a baby. A little more alone time would have been nice. Ryan yanked open the door to find a stranger. Her heart thumped.

"I'm Max Jensen, ma'am."

Sheesh. All their freaking warnings. She was losing her mind. Since when had a stranger thrown her for a loop? Especially one as good-looking as this one. He epitomized yum. Lots of muscles, military-short cropped hair, tall, tan, green eyes...

Hello, you have a man already. Doesn't the smell of sex shrouded with floral air freshener in an enclosed space remind you of that fact?

"Ma'am?"

"Ugh." She would kill Carter later for tying her all in a knot. "Come in."

His face brightened with a hundred-watt smile. He must have women hanging all over him. Somewhere out in the world were no doubt a whole bunch of drooling females. "What can I do for you, Mr. Jensen?"

"Max, please. Carter sent me to check into some things. Just wanted you to know I was here in case you saw me out there wandering around and wondered who the hell I was."

"Right." She could only imagine. Good thing most of the construction crew were men. Otherwise the project would come to a standstill while Max made his inquiries. The few women they did have were sure

to take up a good portion of his time just so they could keep looking at him. On the other hand, there were two or three gay men on the payroll. Perhaps she should warn him?

He pushed his hands into his pockets. The action revealed the butt end of a nasty-looking gun at his hip.

“Are you planning on shooting someone?”

He smiled again. “Nope. But I don’t leave my house without it. I’ve had it for so long it’s kind of an extra appendage. Besides, if someone points a nail gun at me, I want to be prepared.”

“Uh-huh. Mr. Jensen, if any one of my workers points a nail gun at you for any reason other than to protect themselves from your weapon, then they’ll be fired on the spot.”

“Then I can use it to help escort them from the lot, yeah?”

“Whatever floats your boat. Can I get you anything to drink? There’s water, coffee, a few sodas left over from Eric...” She turned and retrieved her decaf pitcher from its maker and poured herself a cup.

“That looks great, thanks.”

“Oh no, this one is mine. Decaf. Sorry. Me no share.” She took a long sip, loving the warm, chocolate-tasting feel of it sliding down her throat and moaned.

Max laughed. “Does the caffeine mess with your epilepsy?”

She narrowed her eyes. “How did you know about that already?”

“You’re dating Carter. He’s a very protective sort of man. Always handles his women with care. But even if he hadn’t told me, I’d have dug into your background and found it before I got here.”

If her eyes were any narrower she wouldn’t be able to see anymore. “Great. I’m so glad it’s so easy. By the way, that kind of shit could get him dumped real quick.”

Those pearly whites showed themselves again. The man must have permanent laugh lines in his face. “I don’t think you can get rid of him quite that easily.”

“How would you know? You slept with him too?”

He snorted. “Hell no. He’s not my type.”

“What? Egotistical, overbearing, know-it-all doesn’t do it for you?”

“No, but apparently he does it for you.”

“What can I say?” She poured him a cup from the regular coffee pot and handed it to him before drinking from her own again. She was a sucker for the brown-eyed blondie. Carter revved her engine so to speak. And until this morning when he’d weirded out about her epilepsy, things had been going along so smoothly.

Even though he’d freaked, like she knew he would, Ryan didn’t want to lose him.

The man fucked you on your desk post news, idiot. He didn’t look ready to fuck and run either. Not to mention he told Tom outright that you were dating.

“So you never answered the question. Does caffeine screw with your epilepsy?”

Ryan took a long, hot swallow before answering. She hated people prying into her personal life. Made her feel like a bug under a microscope, and since she'd spent the majority of her childhood that way, she was going to live her adult life the way she wanted to. Not the way anyone else did.

However, the truth wasn't going to hurt here. Max needed to know anything pertinent to investigate what was happening at the site, and if she was going to be a so-called target, then she might as well divulge.

"Yes it does. Along with a few other things. Flashing lights, migraines, certain medicines, sex."

Max spewed the mouthful of coffee he'd sipped, choking and coughing until the spasms subsided.

"Just kidding."

"Good one." He wiped up his mess with a tissue from the desk and tossed it in the trash.

"I take it though, from the fact you drive and work here, that it's under control."

"Yes. Haven't had a seizure in two years. I'm very careful, Mr...Max. I think you'll find that what happened to Eric is someone taking their vengeance out on a man who, although he did a fantastic job as foreman, wasn't the most personable man in the world. I'm sure this has nothing to do with this particular job but Eric himself."

Max nodded and set his half-empty coffee cup down. "Maybe. I still have to look into all angles. Whether or not it was Eric who was targeted, or the leadership, someone caused another man to fall and get injured."

"And for that he...or she, should pay. I'll stand behind you one hundred percent either way."

"All right then. Mind showing me around?"

"Nope." Ryan grabbed her jacket from the coat tree in the corner and shrugged into it.

"Any ideas on who might have hated Eric enough to want to do him harm? Cutting a man's safety harness isn't really a prank. There's no way to know when the harness would fail. Eric could have been four stories up, not ten feet."

Ryan locked the door behind them. "I know." When she turned and surveyed the site, she saw Carter and Tom hovering over the plans. Carter held a hammer in both hands and he was...caressing it almost. She smiled. It was obvious he wanted to dive in and help out with the building portion of construction. The way he stared at the steel beams in front of him made her think of a little boy in front of the most rad BMX bike in the world. One he wasn't allowed to touch.

Her knee buckled when she stepped toward him.

"Whoa." Max grasped her elbow to keep her from going down. "You all right?"

"Yeah. Musta stepped on something." She turned in a circle to search the ground. There wasn't anything that would have made her stumble.

"No harm no foul. Carter's watching you, better not do that again." He chuckled and let go.

"Yeah." Her knees both felt shaky now. As did her hands. What the hell?

She straightened, a sudden thought smacking her between the eyes, and searched for the aura that always, without fail, preceded one of her seizures. Panic stole over her. She hadn't had one in so long! Had she conjured one simply by talking about it so much this morning? Would she never be free of the stigma? Taking a deep breath, she searched inward for the aura. It was nowhere to be found. So no seizure. Going from warmth to chill? Getting up too fast? Come to think of it, her head *was* a little swimmy.

"Are you sure you're okay?" The concern in Max's voice jerked her out of her musings.

"Yes. I'm sure. Guess the cold got to me."

His concern lightened. "You're one of those people who are always cold even if it's warm, aren't you?"

"No." Why was he asking stupid questions? They were halfway across to the area where Carter and Tom stood when another wave of dizziness hit her. She stumbled again.

"Shit." She heard Max from a distance and then a shout. Strong arms caught her around her waist and the world spun. Blue sky greeted her as she opened her eyes.

"What happened?" She was so tired. And... "Cold."

"Get a blanket," Max barked, hurting her ears.

Heavy warmth ensconced her, fighting to win over the nausea stirring in her belly.

"Ryan. Ryan." Carter was there above her, frantically peering down at her, his face a war of confusion and worry.

"What?" They needed to give her some space, let her get up. She didn't want her men to see her this way. They might think she couldn't handle the job. "Need to...get up." She pushed on whatever held her down to no avail. It held her tight like a heavy weight settling on her chest. Her teeth chattered she was so cold.

"I called nine-one-one," someone said.

"Why?" There wasn't anything wrong. She'd tripped, for God's sake, and they were treating her as if she were made of spun glass. A pain shot through her stomach and for a second she thought she might vomit.

"Roll her on her side." Tom's voice soothed her. He knew how to handle things.

"Aren't you supposed to put something in her mouth?" she heard another voice ask.

God no, she thought to whoever had spoken. The last time someone had done that she'd practically bitten off her tongue *and* choked to death.

"No," Tom snapped.

"A seizure?" This from Carter. God he was seeing her at her best. If she hadn't run him off before, this would do the trick. She'd wake up later with no memory of what had happened and no Carter to comfort her. The mere thought was enough to make her puke even if she hadn't already been feeling sick.

The shaking started in her right leg and moved across her hips and up her side. Her teeth slammed together, her spine arched sharply. She felt it all, begged it to go away and leave her alone. Except something was wrong. Different. This was not one of her seizures. She had to tell them. But the voices were drowning her out. The yelling, the sirens, the constant banging. How could she get a word in edgewise? Her brain was sluggish, not allowing her thoughts to coalesce into words, and the noise wouldn't shut up.

Tom would never let her back on the site again.

Chapter Six

Jesus Christ he'd never been so scared in his entire life. It was a scene he never wanted to see again for as long as he lived. One minute he'd been watching her progress toward him, the next her legs had buckled and she'd fallen to the ground. Thank God Max had been there to soften the impact. He'd managed to catch her before her face kissed the earth.

How had she lived like this?

Carter flipped an errant clump of hair from Ryan's forehead as he watched her rest. After being transported by ambulance to the hospital, doctors had stabilized her condition and given her a room to recover in. He'd been shocked when Tom told him her seizures didn't normally require any kind of medical intervention. They typically let the seizure run its course and offered comfort when it was over. This one had been different from normal.

As if epilepsy could ever be considered normal.

He didn't care if it was normal or not, seeing her eyes roll back in her head had nearly made him piss himself.

Tonight, while he watched her sleep—because he for damn sure wouldn't leave her side—he'd bone up on the disease and learn everything he could so he'd be ready for the next time.

As if things weren't bad enough, Tom had told him her driver's license would likely be stripped and worse, he wasn't sure how he could keep her as foreman. The reason he'd taken a chance was because she'd gone so long without an episode.

Tom had given him a little background on Ryan's seizures since Carter knew less than nothing. They had always followed a certain pattern. She'd see an aura, which in essence warned her of an upcoming seizure, she would zone out for a short time period and then the seizure would begin. Normally by that point they would've already gotten her to the ground, or she would have done it herself. Never had one come on so suddenly.

The doctors weren't clear as to why her symptoms had changed, but they'd done a series of blood work and were waiting on the results. For now, Tom had left Carter to wait for Ryan to wake up while he drove home to pick up Carol, her mother, who was frantic wondering what was happening. Carter was glad that Tom had talked her into not driving while she was in such a state or she'd likely be occupying the bed next to Ryan's.

The door opened behind him and Carter stood, eager to hear what the doctor had to say.

“How’s she doing?” The doctor wasn’t someone Carter recognized from the emergency room.

“I have no idea.” No clue whatsoever. He wondered if he really knew anything about anything at the moment. Carter slipped his hands in his back pockets and waited while the doctor read Ryan’s chart. After a few minutes and couple of nods the man looked up.

“I’m Doctor Kinney. I presume you’re the fiancé, Carter?”

What the shit? Fiancé? He shook hands with the doctor’s outstretched one.

“Yes I am.” He might be surprised as hell, but he wasn’t stupid. He wasn’t family. Carter was going to owe Tom some huge favors. If he hadn’t told Dr. Kinney that he and Ryan were engaged, then the most likely scenario would have been the doc giving Carter the brush-off based on privacy laws.

“I talked to her father a few minutes ago. He said you’d likely be here until Ryan went home.” Kinney laid her chart at the foot of her bed and moved to the side. “So here’s the deal. While I’m sure, based on what the paramedics and Tom all said, that Ryan had a seizure, I’m not convinced it had anything to do with her epilepsy.”

“What?”

“Yep.” Kinney grabbed Ryan’s wrist and checked her pulse, then whipped out a penlight and searched her eyes. “I suspect something other than the epilepsy caused her to have a seizure.”

“What?” This time Carter shouted. Ryan never stirred. He scooped up her hand and held it tight. The fucking thing with Eric had nothing to do with Eric but was instead someone after the foreman. Apparently it didn’t matter to their asshole suspect who he hurt, male or female. Carter yanked his phone out of his pocket and flipped it open, thumb poised to contact Max and give him the heads up.

“She came in with a low body temperature. Epilepsy does not cause a drop in temp. Her breathing was labored, thus the oxygen, again not a sign she’s ever shown before. Her belly was tender, something she couldn’t tell us while unconscious, but her body could. And she vomited twice in the ER. While vomiting can occur with some patients, again, that’s not a symptom typical to Ryan. So unless her epilepsy has changed over the last couple of years and is manifesting itself differently, I’d have to say something else was at fault.”

Carter was sick to his stomach. Had someone deliberately drugged Ryan in order to cause her to have a seizure? “I have security on the site right now. I’ll have him look into it.” He lifted the phone and punched the speed dial for Max, who was discussing the harness situation with the police who’d stayed at the site after Ryan collapsed.

“You do that. In the meantime, her vitals have stabilized for now and it should only be a matter of time before she wakes up. I know it sometimes takes hours for her to rouse after a normal seizure. There’s no way to tell how long it’ll be if this was drug induced.”

“Yeah, Max, hang a sec, would you?” Carter took the phone from his ear. “Can’t you find whatever it is in her blood?”

Kinney shook his head. “Sadly, no. There are any number of things out there that might cause a seizure, including something as simple as flashing lights. Regardless, the labs aren’t always equipped to pick up trace amounts of a foreign substance. If she’d taken in a large amount, then maybe, but we didn’t find anything in her blood workup today.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a few other patients to see. I’ll be back in to check on her later.”

“Okay. Thank you for letting me know.”

“You’ll pass it along to Tom and Carol? They’ll be worried.”

“Yes.”

The door clicked shut behind the doctor, leaving Carter alone in the room. He stroked Ryan’s arm then heard Max saying, “Hello?”

“Max, I’m here.”

“They think she was drugged?”

“He does. I’m guessing I don’t even need to tell you what to do.”

“Hell no. I’m on it. See if you can get anything from her when she wakes up and give me a call. Did she see anything suspicious, talk to anyone she didn’t know, drink something someone else gave her?”

“She was at work, Max, not a bar.”

“Doesn’t matter, people bring coffee and sweets to all kinds of jobs. Someone might have brought something in for her this morning. And I drank the same coffee and I didn’t get... Son of a bitch.”

Carter’s heart thumped against his rib cage and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. “What?”

There was a rustling on the other end of the phone suggesting that Max was on the move. “I was going to say I drank the same coffee this morning that she did, but I didn’t. She wouldn’t let me have any.”

“Wouldn’t let you?” Ryan didn’t seem to Carter like the hard-ass type who didn’t share.

“No. She said, my decaf, me no share. She gave me the regular from a different pot and slurped down the fake crap. So either she drank regular when she thought it was decaf or someone could have tampered with it. I’ll let you know what I find.”

Max disconnected before Carter could speak. He stared at the phone, his temper rising to the boiling point. If Max found one shred of evidence that Ryan’s drink had been tampered with, Carter would hunt the bastard down who’d done it and not stop until the asshole was drawn and quartered.

~ * ~

There was cotton in her mouth and some weird shit blowing in her nose and tickling it. She felt hung over—or what she imagined hung over would feel like since she didn’t ever drink. Random thoughts filtered through the fog along with whispered voices.

Ryan struggled to turn in the direction of the sound. Her head had to have been weighed down with lead for all the good it did her. Even her hands seemed tied down.

Was that her mother talking? What in the hell? And Tom and...Carter? Shit. Had she flaked out at Sunday brunch? Taken a nap? Where the heck was she?

She opened her eyes to a cloud of blur. Blinking them helped relieve the problem but left her facing a white ceiling.

"Mom?" Her voice croaked and she wasn't sure if anything had come out at all or if she only imagined speaking aloud.

"Oh, right here, honey." Her mother's face came into view. Then Tom's and Carter's. "You're going to be just fine."

"What happened?" She hoped one of them would fill her in because the strain of wondering was giving her a headache.

"You had a seizure." Her mother was crying. Damn. Ryan hated making her mother cry. Someone touched her leg, soothing her rapidly fraying nerves.

She'd been drinking coffee with...Max, right, super-spy-PI-guy Max. Then what? They'd gone outside so she could show him around. Tom and Carter had been there, watching the construction. Odd. She didn't normally remember shit about her episodes. *But this wasn't a normal episode.*

"Not a seizure." She yawned as the pressure of whatever had happened tried to drag her under again. Ryan caught her stepfather and Carter eyeing each other. They knew something.

"What do you mean, sweetheart?"

Ryan smiled. She loved when Carter called her sweetheart. No one else ever had.

"Wasn't the same. No aura. No warning," she murmured, letting the sleepiness invade.

"But it's been a long time since you had one. Perhaps they're changing?" Tom sounded sympathetic, which perked her up.

"No." No, she was certain whatever had occurred was not her epilepsy. "Not the same." She did her best to be adamant but had a feeling she came out more unsure than anything. "Knees were shaky, sick...lightheaded."

"Okay, okay, sweetheart." Carter's murmur calmed her a bit. "Just rest. Go back to sleep. I'll be here when you wake up. I promise."

She wanted to cry. She remembered now. Remembered worrying about him seeing her in the throes of a seizure and having him disappear on her. That when she finally woke up, he'd be gone instead of having his fingers laced with hers, comforting and not letting go.

Carter's frustration mounted. Ryan was too out of it to tell them anything more, like who might have wanted to drug her.

Tom laid a hand on Carter's shoulder. "We're going to go down to the cafeteria. You should come too."

"No. I want to be here when she wakes up again. I promised her I would be."

"Bless you. You're a good man." Tears pooled in Carol's eyes. She hugged him close, squeezing the breath out of him. "You'll be good for my daughter."

Yeah, if she'd keep him around long enough for him to show her how good he could be. Her epilepsy had made her gun shy, he knew, and he couldn't begin to think about how many times she might have been hurt in the past. Perhaps she'd never even tried for something permanent.

Carter had news for her. He wasn't going to go away so easily. She was stuck with him whether she wanted to be or not.

His phone rang. Carter glanced at the number before flipping it open and answering it. Jesus, he'd completely forgotten about Morgan and Ridge.

"Good news, I hope." He sure as hell needed some.

"It's a boy. Seven pounds four ounces, looks like his momma."

Carter sorta doubted that since from his recollection newborns tended to look more like shriveled-up pink raisins, but whatever. He was glad the baby was healthy. "Congratulations, man. How is momma?"

"She's good. Not sure she'll ever do this again, but she's holding him right now and happy as hell to have him out. We named him Brandon Michael. She's in room eight forty-two."

"I'll have to run up and see him in a few." Whenever Ryan woke up and he was sure she was fine.

"Run up?"

Oops. Figured his partner would catch on to the slip. "Uh, yeah. I'm here with Ryan."

"Who's Ryan?"

"Ryan Dixon to you, Ryan Cooper to me."

"I am so confused."

Carter smiled. "I've heard giving birth can do that to you."

"Malone."

"Ryan Dixon is the foreman you sent me to see today. Only he's not Ryan Dixon, *she's* Ryan Cooper, the woman I've been seeing. She works for her father. The previous foreman's accident wasn't an accident, we discovered, so I had Max come out to do some digging. But then Ryan had a seizure which had nothing to do with her epilepsy which I wasn't aware of her having, and now we're here in room six twelve while she recovers from a possible poisoning." How was that for a sixty-second rundown?

"What in the shit? I leave you to do one thing and all that happened?"

"Pretty much. It's really Morgan's fault, I think, because she's the one who normally keeps us altogether and sane."

"I'll tell her you said that." Ridge's voice was dry.

"You don't need to. I tell her every day." The phone beeped in his ear indicating another call. Max. "I gotta go, that's Max on the other line." He disconnected before Ridge could speak.

"Tell me you found something, Max," Carter said as his greeting.

"I did. You aren't going to like it though."

Carter's insides twisted. "Tell me."

"When I suspected the coffee, I returned to the trailer. Thought maybe I could send the pot of coffee off to the lab for testing. But when I got there someone else was already there throwing away the evidence."

"Who?" Carter gritted his teeth so hard he was sure they would crack. He wanted to punch someone. Ryan was laying here in bed, unable to defend herself, and the asshole who'd done this to her was wiping away his traces.

"Tad Dixon."

Carter exploded. "That son of a bitch."

"He denies having anything to do with either of the circumstances, but his answers were a little too smarmy for me so I let the police take over."

"Good." Here's to hoping the dick spent a great deal of time rotting in jail. "Let me know how it goes. I'll talk to Tom." He flipped the phone off and pocketed it.

Ryan twisted in her sleep with a moan, oblivious to the fact her cousin may have been the one to cause her grief. He grabbed her hand and sat next to the bed again.

Carter hadn't once suspected there was anything the least bit off about her cousin. Had anything Tad said earlier been a clue to his true feelings? He tried to recall. Tad had seemed quite the charmer to Carter at first. Easy to do, he guessed, while trying to hide the fact that you'd almost killed one man and were about to try and bring down your cousin. Christ, he'd been protective of her even, standing up for her during their conversation about the epilepsy.

Perhaps the only thing that might have been a clue was his stance on Eric. The job was dangerous, he'd said, "I don't think this is the best place for her either. Look what happened to Eric. Tom has other ideas though."

"Shit." Was that what this was all about? His need to be the foreman? Had Tad tried to knock off Eric, thinking he would replace him? Then gotten pissed enough to take out Ryan when she got the job instead of him?

Now he had to tell Tom his nephew was being questioned by the police for what would probably amount to attempted murder.

He punched in the number of Tom's cell and told the older man everything he'd learned and what he suspected. Tom was just as shocked as Carter had been. Not to mention hurt and angry as hell.

Chapter Seven

Ryan sank back in Carter's oversized tub and luxuriated in the feel of the warm bubbles swirling around her skin. She'd been released that morning from the hospital a day after her seizure, and no amount of talking had gotten Carter to let her out of his sight. Instead he'd brought her to his house and asked someone to go to hers and pick up a few things. She'd barely gotten him to leave her alone so she could chill out for a few minutes without him hovering.

Although she had to admit his form of hovering was much different than her family's version had been growing up. They tended to wrap her in a plastic bubble. She much preferred Carter's method of distraction—showering her with naughty kisses, and teasing the crap out of her until she was good and horny. There was definitely something to be said about horny. A girl could indubitably get used to it. And since she was spending the night...

God help Carter if he decided to go easy on her. The doctor had said she was fine after her run-in with Visine-laced coffee. The effects could have been worse. Much worse. Dead kind of worse. But she'd only had about a mug's worth of coffee the entire morning, what with Carter making her spill her first cup and Max disrupting the second in order to investigate. Those things combined prevented her from finishing her normal three-cup routine.

She really needed to shake the coffee anyway. It wasn't like the decaf was doing a damn thing for her.

Ryan still couldn't believe Tad had conspired to take out the foreman so he could have the job. When she'd finally woken up yesterday and Tom had been standing there so grief-stricken, she'd thought for a crazy moment they were going to tell her she had some incurable brain tumor or something.

What had come out of his mouth was the last thing she'd expected. Tad had been furious with Ryan's appointment to the job. Just when he'd thought he'd secured it by causing Eric to break his leg, Tom gave it to a girl. Naturally, her epilepsy had played right into his hands.

One small Google search later and Tad stupidly thought he could get rid of her by causing her to have a seizure. He was sure no one would allow her to stay if she was susceptible to her condition. The thought had never crossed his mind he might actually cause her death with eye drops. Apparently his Google search gave him only the bare minimum of facts.

She wondered if he liked men, since he was about to spend a few years surrounded by them. Even if she could forgive him for his lack in morality, Eric could not. He was ready to prosecute to the full extent of the law.

All because Tad felt with his dad's passing, he should have, by rights, been the foreman.

"Are you a prune yet?"

Ryan looked up at Carter's smiling face and smiled back. "Nope. I'm just getting nice and toasty."

"Are you hungry?"

She was hungry, but not for food. "What are you having?"

"That's a loaded question."

"So give me a loaded answer."

His eyes narrowed. "That would require me joining you."

"Then by all means..."

"Are you sure?"

Oh jeez, here it goes. The one thing she'd hoped wouldn't happen, for him to go all soft on her. "Either get in here or get out."

Carter leaned back in shock.

"I'm not going to break, Carter. I'm fine. Remember, the doctor said no restrictions? I'm sure sex is included in those directions."

"All right. Don't get your panties in a twist."

"If I were wearing any, that might be a problem, but since I'm not..."

She watched as he stripped to the skin, loving the play and ripple of tan skin over muscle. Scooting forward, she allowed him to sit behind her, his cock beautifully erect and ready for action. She'd never done it in the tub before. There was a time for everything, right? His fingers caressed her back, gently massaging the kinks. Perhaps she had been in the tub a bit too long.

Ryan relaxed into his chest and dropped her head on his shoulder. "God that feels good."

"I was worried about you," he admitted softly in her ear.

She sighed. "I know. I tend to have that effect on people. Everyone feels sorry for me."

"I didn't say I felt sorry for you." His arms came around her midsection, wrapping her in his own heat that had nothing to do with the warmth of the water. "You make it hard to feel sorry for you. What I said was, I was worried about you. There's a difference, see?"

She drew away and looked over her shoulder at him. "Do you think Tad's okay?"

"The man could have killed you. Why do you care?"

Ryan shrugged. "He had a moment of insanity. I'm not ready to forgive him for what he did, but he is still my cousin. I grew up with him. It's really hard to see what he's become."

Carter cupped her breasts in his palms and thumbed her nipples, causing her to suck in a breath. "I know. I'm sure he's fine. He did make his bed after all."

"You're right."

"I'm always right." She heard the grin in his words.

“Oh yeah?” With his cock nestled at the small of her back it was getting hard to remember what they were talking about. All she knew was her need for him. She turned in his hold. “A little less talk?”

“And a lot more action.”

“Please?”

He tapped her nose with a wet finger, traced it over her lips, down her chin and throat, then between her breasts before settling on the peak of one. “Begging already, sweetheart?”

“If it’ll get me what I want.” She would not be ashamed of how breathless she sounded. Her skin itched to have him drive inside her.

“Begging’s not necessary right now. Later? Maybe. For now, I’m good with simple asking.”

“Would you please fuck me?”

“No.”

She was sure her eyes popped out of her head. Ryan came to her knees between his outstretched legs and crossed her arms over her chest. “Excuse me?”

“No fucking. Loving. I will make love to you.” He gripped her hips and pulled her close to kiss her.

His tongue pushed into her mouth. It seemed like forever ago she’d kissed him, tasted him. She wanted to taste more of him but unless she wanted to drown, the act of swallowing his cock would have to wait until they were out of the water.

“Straddle me.”

She did, putting her knees on either side of his thighs. His erection grazed her pussy and she nearly bent to impale herself on his length.

“Wait, sweetheart.” His fingers found her pussy. Two of them slid into her while his thumb circled her clit.

“It’s not enough, Carter. Please.”

He kissed a nipple, sucking it into his mouth with a firm tongue. Little flames of desire licked across her skin.

“I’ll take care of you.” His murmured words barely penetrated the lust-filled fog controlling her mind.

She whipped her head up and stared at him. Surely he’d lost his mind. Here she was, craving his possession of her and he wanted to *take care* of her? While she’d normally love for him to take care of her, right now she wanted his cock inside her.

“No condom.” He looked agonized.

“Oh. So what.”

He grinned and scissored his fingers inside her, somehow nicking an ultra-sensitive spot, nearly causing her to jump.

“I hardly think you’re ready for a baby, sweetheart, much as I’d love to see your belly round with my child.”

“Pregnant?” How was she supposed to think with him doing what he was doing? She was lucky her eyes weren’t crossed.

He added a third finger, stretching her wide, preparing her. “Yes, you know the thing that happens when a man leaves his sperm inside a woman?”

She smacked him, then bit her lip when he withdrew his fingers and stabbed them back in.

“Pill. I’m on the pill.” Time to take matters into her own hands. Ryan lifted off his hand and settled herself where she wanted to be more than anything. She sank down on him, groaning in sync with Carter, whose eyes closed.

“You don’t play fair.”

“Nope. Never said I did.” She moved on him, rising and falling until the water sloshed over the sides. She needed just a little more...

He added a thumb to the mix, zeroing in on her clit and pushing her over the edge. She held herself rigid against his chest. Apparently he’d primed her well because she’d come but he hadn’t.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” He gripped her hips to hold her down and drove upward. Her clit throbbed with each thrust, prolonging her orgasm. Again and again he filled her. Just as she thought she might miraculously come again, Carter stiffened beneath her. Even through the heat of the water she felt him pour into her, and for the first time wondered what it would be like if she weren’t on the pill. He’d opened her eyes to the possibility. Was that really what he wanted?

He must have sensed that she was close because instead of basking in his own glory he pressed a thumb to her clit once more. The cylinders were all still firing, sending an arrow of tingling sensation straight to her womb.

“Come for me one more time, Ryan.”

She tried, sought the release sitting so close she could taste it. The kicker that sent her over the edge was his mouth on her nipple, his teeth biting gently on the nub and wringing the orgasm from her. Ryan arched into it, urging the throbbing pulse at her clit to keep going.

But alas, climaxes were not made to last. She sank into his chest to catch her breath, loving the way his arms came around her and held her tight. She loved him.

The realization hit her like a ton of bricks. She loved Carter Malone. Never before had she ever loved someone to the point where she couldn’t imagine life without them. She swallowed, almost afraid to find out what he felt.

“Carter?” Ryan drew a heart on his pec.

“Hmm?” He’d settled farther down into the water, keeping them both warm.

“Were you serious...about the baby thing?”

“What baby thing?”

Shit. He didn’t even remember. Damn men and what they say in the heat of passion.

“Never mind.”

His chest rumbled against her cheek but she couldn’t bring herself to look at him. Her ears were hot with embarrassment.

“Do you mean the part about me wanting to see you round with my child?”

Ryan perked but said cautiously, “Uh-huh.”

He tilted her face to his with a finger under her chin. “Most definitely.” His lips touched hers tenderly. “At least three or four times.”

She laughed. “Are you sure you’re a man?”

He flexed his hips, making her groan. His cock was still hard inside her. Or getting hard again. “Pretty sure.”

“So...what are you saying?” *Fish much, Ryan?*

“I think my biological clock is ticking. Meeting you changed something inside me. Then seeing my partner Ridge and his wife with their new baby made me jealous as all hell. I want that. With you. If you’ll have me.”

Ryan sat up. “Why, Carter Malone, are you proposing to me?”

“Yes.” He grabbed her knuckles and kissed them. “Marry me. You have to.”

“Why is that?”

“Your mother said so.”

“What?”

“Mmm-hmm. Her words were, ‘You’ll be good for my daughter.’ Yesterday she told me to make sure I have you at her house for brunch on Sunday promptly at ten.”

“Oh geez. The woman is relentless. If we don’t show, there will be hell to pay.”

Carter leaned over and licked a circle around her nipple. “We could tell her we were busy making her a grandchild.”

“I haven’t said yes.”

“You will.”

“What makes you so sure?” She gripped his hair and pulled his head back so she could see into his eyes.

“Because I will never feel sorry for your sorry ass.”

Ryan laughed out loud and ground herself on his erection. More water went over the edge to splash on the tile floor.

“So?” he asked, holding her in his lap so she couldn’t wiggle anymore.

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes. I love you.” She’d never been so happy.

“I love you too, Ryan Cooper Dixon Malone.”

She cradled his face in her hands and kissed him, long and deep. “Malone will suffice, thank you very much.”

About the Author

Annmarie McKenna lives in Missouri where she stays busy writing, shuffling four kids to various activities, and training for triathlons. She loves to hear from readers and can be reached at annmarmck@yahoo.com. To learn more about Annmarie, please visit www.annmariemckenna.com or join her Yahoo! group for updates on her latest releases or other information. http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Annmarie_McKenna/.

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They're craving something sweet. She likes it spicy.

Glutton for Pleasure

© 2009 Alisha Rai

Devi Malik knows how to heat things up. She does it every night as head chef in her family's Indian restaurant. Her love life, though, is stuck in the subzero freezer. Now, with a chance to fulfill a secret fantasy with her long-time crush and his brother, it's time to put her desire on the front *two* burners.

For Marcus Callahan, a love-'em-and-leave-'em attitude isn't only a necessary evil of their kink. It's a protective device. Lately, though, his brother Jace has been making noises about craving something more.

Jace's dissatisfaction with their lifestyle grows with every glimpse of sweet little Devi. Yet Marcus is too haunted by the pain of their shared past to give love a chance.

Despite their reputation for vanishing with the dawn, they discover one night with Devi isn't nearly enough. And Devi finds herself falling in love with two very different men.

It'll take more than explosive sex to light up the shadows surrounding the Callahan brothers' secrets. But Devi's never been afraid of the dark...

Warning: This title contains two sizzling men for the price of one, ménage a trois, oral sex, anal sex, fun toys, great food, and creative uses for syrup and dressing rooms.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Glutton for Pleasure:

"I didn't hear you knock."

Devi spun around, her hand pressed against her chest. "Oh. Marcus. You startled me."

"I was in the garage."

He stood in the kitchen doorway in only a pair of unsnapped jeans. A sexy smear of grease highlighted his rock-hard abs. Involuntarily, her gaze slid over his bare chest, the arrow of hair that trailed into his open jeans. She was suddenly all too aware of the little toy she wore, forgotten while she'd toured the house.

"Um, Jace told me to just come on in. He's upstairs, showering. I hope that's okay." He didn't say anything. "I like your house. Or what I've seen of it."

"Take off your clothes."

She blinked. "Wow, you're not one for social niceties, are you?"

"Are you hungry?"

"Not really."

"Do you want a drink?"

Devi slicked her tongue over her lips. "No. I'm good."

"Good. Take off your clothes."

“Marcus.” She frowned, though she really wanted to laugh.

“I want to see if you’re wearing the stimulator.”

“I said I would, and I am.”

“You wore it from the minute we dropped you off?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Devi stared at him, confused. “What?”

He grinned and slid his hand into his pocket. The first gentle vibration had her legs stiffening in shock. The little box came alive, rubbing against her already-stiffened clit like the finger Jace had likened it to. She relaxed and allowed the slow pleasure to sink into her bones. Marcus didn’t allow her time to appreciate it, and he must have turned a dial up somewhere, because the vibrations against her over-stimulated clit increased in their intensity. She moaned and leaned against the couch, her legs boneless and incapable of supporting her weight.

A low male chuckle reached her. “I think we can believe her.”

She opened her eyes to find Jace standing in the room as well. Clad only in a sexy pair of black boxer briefs, water still glistening on his chest and hair, he watched her with a small smile and narrowed eyes already heated with lust.

Just as her climax yawned before her, the soundless stimulation ended. “What are you doing? Turn that back on, this instant.”

Marcus tsked and walked forward until he stood right in front of her. “Didn’t we discuss you giving us orders?”

Heat rose from his body. All of the relentless unappeased desire from the day welled up inside of her. She frowned at him. “I was about to come.”

“We don’t want you to, yet.”

“I don’t care,” she said waspishly. “Turn that damn thing on again or one of you fuck me here.” Amazing how a couple of days of ceaseless pleasure could lower her inhibitions—she felt no hesitation in making the demand.

“No.” With that simple announcement, Marcus startled Devi by scooping her off her feet.

She shrieked and grabbed on to his shoulders. No one had carried her since she’d been a small child. Pudginess had crept up on her at a young age, so even her father had declined picking her up. “I’m too heavy for you. Put me down.”

He ignored her and spoke to his brother. “Where are the supplies?”

Supplies?

Jace studied her with predatory interest. If she hadn’t already been soaked, that look would have done it. “In my room.”

“Did you hear me? I’m too fat to be carried around like this.”

Marcus walked out of the room and back into the grand entryway. He glanced over his shoulder. “I think the toys were a bad idea. They’ve made her way too contrary.” He jostled her until she tightened her arms around his neck in reaction.

“Stop talking about me like I’m not here. Wreck your back, see if I care. And the toy doesn’t make me contrary. Hours of sexual deprivation make me contrary.”

“Then you should be nicer to the men who are going to end that deprivation,” Marcus explained patiently. “In the meantime, why don’t you pretend your hero is carrying you off to be properly ravished instead of worrying about your damned weight?”

Devi paused. He had a point. Once she thought past her sexual frustration, of course. She relaxed into his arms. “Sorry. I’m not a very good heroine, I guess.”

He handled the dark stairs with ease, not even breathless. He turned right at the top of the stairs and entered a tidy bedroom lit by soft track lighting. Peripherally, she got the impression of heavy wooden furnishings and a huge four-poster bed. Marcus looked down at her, his face cast in shadows. “That’s okay. I’m no hero.”

She slid her palm over his jaw, the slight stubble catching on her skin. “I think you’re doing a pretty good job.”

Devi caught the hardening of Marcus’s jaw under her hand. “Then your judgment sucks.” With that harsh pronouncement, he dropped her on her feet. She stumbled back. The backs of her knees hit the mattress behind her, and she sat down.

Since they were both underdressed to begin with, it didn’t take more than a minute for Marcus to kick off his jeans and Jace to skim his boxer briefs down his legs. After viewing them in the buff so many times now, Devi could make out differences in their physiques that were easier to overlook when they were decent. Jace was an inch or two shorter, his muscles lean while Marcus was bulkier.

In the package department, the twins had been blessed with equally beautiful penises. Man, when she got lucky, she really hit the jackpot. For a second, Devi was overwhelmed with the knowledge that she didn’t just get one of these excellent specimens, she got two.

On loan.

Yeah, yeah, whatever.

“Like what you see?” Jace’s tone was amused and indulgent.

Devi managed to tear her gaze away from his huge member and smiled teasingly. “Always.”

“Take off. Your. Clothes.” Marcus’s hands clenched and unclenched at his side.

She responded to the heat in his gaze and stood up from the bed with a seductive little shimmy. Her shirt and bra she tossed in the same direction as their clothes. Their eyes tracked over the swell of her full breasts, and she tossed her hair. She had damn good boobs.

When her fingers stroked down to the snap of her jeans, though, she hesitated. *Cellulite. Love handles. Dimples.* Her bottom and thighs were not her friends.

Marcus must have mistaken her hesitation for a tease. "All your clothes."

Devi shot a quick glance to the overhead track lighting, even less forgiving than her bedroom lamp. "I don't guess you'd consider turning off the light this time?"

"Nope."

She sighed. "You two are the contrary ones. If I said I wanted the lights on, you'd snap them off in a heartbeat."

Jace grinned. "Too bad you didn't think of that before, huh?"

Marcus shot her a disbelieving look. "We've seen you naked already, did you forget?"

She squirmed, the air-conditioning cool against her tightened nipples. "I don't like my butt, that's all. It's not attractive."

Jace squinted at her and wrapped his hand around his bobbing cock. "Do you think we get this hard for unattractive asses?"

"Are you serious? I don't understand women at all. I like your butt. In fact, I love your butt," Marcus replied emphatically. "If you take your jeans off, I'll show you how much I love it. I'll love it so much, you won't be able to walk in the morning."

She gulped and unsnapped the top button. "Let's not get too hasty, here."

Marcus walked over until he stood right in front of her. He brushed her hands aside and took over the chore of unzipping the pants. He slid his hands inside the loosened waistband and pushed the jeans down. She wore only the G-string/stimulator. "Too late. You've challenged me. I'll have you loving your ass as much as I do by the end of the night."

Apprehension and anticipation danced along Devi's nerve endings, drowning out the twinge of self-consciousness. As her clothes pooled around her feet, Marcus tightened his hands on her waist, picked her up with little effort and tossed her back on the bed. She bounced once and then settled into the giving mattress.

Marcus crawled up her body like a hungry cat, the muscles in his biceps and chest flexing. She twined her arms around his neck and drew his head down to partake of his passionate kiss.

"So sweet," he breathed against her lips.

Hell hath no fury like a scorned woman—with toys.

On His Knees

© 2009 Beth Williamson

Private Lives, Book 1

Renny Johnson has no idea why her ex-husband broke into her house in the middle of the night. She plans to find out—right after he wakes up from a close encounter with his own baseball bat. As long as she's got him tied up, she might as well make him answer every unanswered question about their divorce.

Nicholas sneaked into the house, hoping to retrieve his precious autographed bat without having to face Renny's wrath. He didn't expect her to knock him out with it. Then again, who can blame her? He left her to take a walk on the wild side, to search for that missing something he thought he couldn't find in his marriage.

Now that he's completely at her mercy, he's about to find out how merciless—and how incredibly sexy—his ex can be. The night becomes a wild roller coaster ride of amazing sex, dominance and submission, and maybe the beginning of a brand new chapter in their lives.

Unless the flames burn out of control...

Warning: This title contains a dominant woman, a sexy submissive man, and lots of nekkid, smokin' hot sex.

Enjoy the following excerpt for On His Knees:

A surge of excitement danced across Nicholas's skin. Renny was different...stronger, firmer, more in control. The very things he hadn't even recognized he needed until he visited Nirvana. Now he knew he was a sub by nature. A sub in need of a Dom, and he hoped like hell Renny was open to the idea. He wouldn't give her too much detail up front, just enough to have a taste of what could be between them.

She picked up the scissors and, to his utter surprise, started cutting his clothes off. Now that was something he'd never expected. The cold steel of the scissors slowly slid up his overheated skin, and he shuddered with longing. Who knew his mousy ex-wife would end up being the woman he wanted so badly his teeth ached? His heart had known all along, had refused to give up on her. Perhaps it wasn't too late.

"What are you doing?"

Renny glanced at him. "Making you naked."

"Why don't you just take my clothes off instead of cutting them off?" His breath caught on the last word when the scissors flicked one nipple.

She stopped immediately. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." He was in danger of blowing another load in his pants though.

She pulled the remnants of his shirt off, then leaned down and bit his hardened nipples. “Mmm, much better.”

Nicholas let out a shaky breath, hoping like hell this wasn't just punishment. He wanted so much more, craved more, needed more.

Shifting down his body, Renny let her breasts press into his thigh. He couldn't stop the moan from escaping. He swore he heard her chuckle.

The scissors started again on his pants and he didn't stop her. Didn't say a damn word or even move. Instead he lay there, getting harder by the minute.

Snip, snip, snip.

Working her way up his pant leg, Renny nibbled and scraped her teeth on the exposed skin. It was the weirdest yet most sensual experience of his life. By the time she'd shredded his pants, he shook with need. Her eyebrows shot up when she discovered he'd gone commando.

“No panties, Nicky?” she mocked him.

A slow flush crept up his cheeks. “It's more comfortable.”

She stared at his erection and licked her lips. “I like it.” As she settled her wet cunt against his cock, he hissed along with her. After a moment of the skin-against-skin sizzle, she placed her hands against his chest and stared into his eyes. “Tell me about the club. Don't make me tie you up again.”

One eyebrow rose. “Maybe later.”

A flash of surprise preceded a vixenish grin. “Is that something you learned at Nirvana?”

“Yes.”

She leaned closer and her newly cropped hair brushed his jaw. “What else did you learn?”

“May I touch you?”

She blinked then nodded. “You may.”

He reached up to cup her ample breasts, the nipples diamond-hard against his hands. His mouth longed to pleasure them, but one step at a time. One small step at a time, even if it killed him.

“That feels good,” she breathed. “Pinch them.”

His heart skipped a beat at the command. God, to hear the love of his life speaking in that tone of voice was a dream come true. Nicholas parted the folds of the bathrobe and placed his hands on her heated skin. He couldn't stop the shiver that traveled straight down his arms to his balls. Rolling the nipples between his fingers, he gently thrust his hips upward, pressing hardness into softness, cock to pussy.

She caught his rhythm and pushed down against him. When he flicked one nipple with his nails, she slapped his hand.

“No. Naughty boy.” She wagged her finger at him.

He was surprised, yet pleased she reacted as she did. Renny certainly showed signs of being a natural dominant.

“May I lick them?”

“No, you may not.”

A test. Definitely a test. He continued pinching and teasing her, never stopping or changing his position. Renny was catching on. Thank God.

“I’m not sure I quite understand what’s happening, but it damn sure feels good,” she said huskily.

Nicholas smiled. “You’re taking control. Do you like it?”

She pushed her breasts against his hands and looked down into his eyes. “The question is, do you?”

A million questions flew through his mind, followed by one answer.

“Yes.”

Renny felt like she was in a different dimension, one where she and Nicholas had never separated, never gone to bed without kissing each other good night, and never ended their relationship with a whimper.

Surges of pure Grade-A arousal raced through her, making every hair on her body stand at attention. Her heart thumped hard and fast, making her a bit lightheaded. This wasn’t the languid arousal that affected her when she used her new sex toys. It was more like turning music on really loud and shocking body and brain into action at once.

Her arousal grew strong and heavy, unlike anything she’d ever experienced. It had to do with the way Nicholas was giving her control, letting her tell him what to do. She felt powerful, sexy and incredibly feminine. At the same time, she felt out of control because she didn’t know what to do. She followed her instincts and his gentle prodding.

As it was, she was on the verge of an orgasm from simply having him touch her breasts.

“What’s next...Mistress?”

The name skipped across her skin like a caress. Mistress.

“Why did you call me that?” She sat back, forcing herself to pull her breasts from his amazing hands.

He stared hard at her ripe nipples before meeting her gaze. “I wanted to. Do you think you can be a Mistress?”

“What does it mean to be a Mistress?” She sure liked the sound of power. It turned her on like she couldn’t believe. Curiosity, arousal and downright naughtiness swirled around inside her.

His hands twitched on her legs, as if he couldn’t sit still, as if he wanted to put them back on her breasts but didn’t want to without permission.

“It means you tell me what to do, what to feel, how to pleasure you. And I obey.”

Obey.

“You do what I tell you to do?”

“Yes.”

“You do nothing without me telling you to do it?”

“Yes.”

“I am Mistress.”

“I am yours.”

A shiver worked its way down her body to land squarely in her pussy, which throbbed and clenched with excitement. She'd never known the very thought of having a man be at her command would engender the most intense feelings of longing she'd ever had.

“Good. Then you may touch my breasts again and this time, use your mouth.”

The eagerness in his eyes almost undid her. He pulled the robe off her shoulders, a soft caress of silk on her overheated body. Fingertips lightly traced a path down her arms to circle her nipples. She held her breath until she grew lightheaded. When his fingers finally reached the sensitive tips, she moaned.

“Does that feel good, Mistress?”

“Mmmmm, yes.” She leaned forward, eager for the next step.

He didn't disappoint her. The first touch of his hot tongue felt like fire on her skin. Then there was a storm of wicked laving, followed by sucking that echoed through her body. Sweet, wet pleasure. She wanted more though. Much more.

Vampire: (noun) Bloodsucker, murderer, bedpost-notcher, God's gift to women, fiend.

Tooth and Claw

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Seth Gramble is a prince among his people. Half vampire, half jaguar, he is one of a rare few who can shift into an animal form. Both his halves have found their mate in a female detective determined to lump all vampires in with the rogue who killed her former lover. He's given her six months to see him differently. He's done waiting.

Paxton Tenor wants nothing to do with a blood-sucking fiend, no matter how much he makes her body sing. Nothing good can come of a vampire. A case she's working on partners her with Seth, and she's forced to reconsider her hatred. He doesn't seem at all like the rogue who sucked the life from her boyfriend in cold blood.

When Seth's kitty comes out to play, Paxton realizes she's been stupid to deny herself this man. And when he puts his life on the line to protect hers? All bets are off.

Warning: Let's be realistic here people; there's sex. Who doesn't want to be coerced into bed by a sexy, God's-gift-to-women vampire? And when they can be undressed and on you before you can blink—hello. Even if said vampire faints at the sight of his own blood...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Tooth and Claw:

Paxton dropped her head to Seth's shoulder. How long had they been in here? Five minutes? Ten? Would Gutiérrez come looking for them? Shit. He would find them half naked and her with a vamp's cock riding snugly in her nicely satiated pussy.

She so should have done this sooner. Why oh why had she listened to her brain and done her best to stay away from Seth? Her next thought? Why on Earth had she done this?

Seth snorted in her ear.

"Okay, dammit, if what we've done just enabled you to talk in my head or...or, read my mind, or whatever, you better just stop right now."

"It's not necessarily sex that makes me able to talk in your head. I just can with certain people. Those open to it. Others are closed up tight. Sex can help open those doorways, though. Frees the mind somehow."

His tongue lapped at her earlobe. She mewled. Mewled! Like a freakin' cat getting her head scratched.

"Meow..."

"Oh, for God's sake." She reared back and smacked her new lover upside the head. Her new lover! A freaking vampire lover. Oh, she had sunk low.

This made him laugh harder. "I am sorry, Princess. You are an open book right now, broadcasting everything. This is so new to you, it will be impossible for me to keep out for a short time. It gets easier."

Something nagged at her, and she thought about what he said for several heartbeats.

"So if sex is one way to open the doors...how is it that you and Cap can talk? Please God, don't tell me you're bi or something, cuz if you're doing the captain—"

He put a hand over her mouth, effectively shutting her up.

"I am not doing your boss, nor am I bi. I told you. Some people are naturally receptive. Quinn happens to be one of them. It's not something he tells anyone, we just sort of happened across it one day and we use it to our advantage. That's all." He grinned and lifted her, which allowed his penis to slip free from her body.

She bit her lip and swore not to protest at the movement, at the sadness of not being filled by him anymore. She was not sad, dang it.

Seth set her on her feet and steadied her with his hands on her shoulders. The cool air of the cage against her skin made her shiver as she looked for her clothes.

"We have to get out of here. Jesus, I am so gonna get talked about," she muttered, thinking about her partner and all the other detectives razzing her. As if that were worse than giving herself to a vampire. Hello, notch on the bedpost.

"No one will know," he said in all seriousness.

"Oh yeah?" Her panties were still stuck in the waist of her pants and she pulled both garments on while Seth zipped his luscious—yes, she admitted to herself, the man was hung nicely—cock back away. She almost said goodbye to the damn thing and watched it longingly as it disappeared behind the denim.

"Yes."

"Are you going to wipe their memories or something?" She reached for the edges of her bra to reconnect them only to have her hands swiped away. Seth did the job, lingering a tad and brushing his thumbs over her still very-sensitive nipples.

"You are beautiful," he murmured.

Paxton swallowed at the heat she saw in his eyes and suddenly hated her job. All she wanted to do was take Seth home and make love to him all night long.

Oh God, she didn't. She didn't want that.

Did she?

He smiled again.

"All right, you bastard, you have to stop that."

"I am sorry." He wrapped his hand around her nape and nuzzled the side of her neck with his nose. She swore he inhaled her.

"Mmm..." he hummed against her throat.

“Oh Jesus. You must have taken too much blood because there is no way I should be enjoying this.”

“Are you weak?”

“N-no. Not yet.” She angled her head for him. “Are you going to bite me again? Cuz then I’m thinking I might like to get a little weak.”

“I won’t let you faint, Princess.”

She stepped back out of his reach, yanking the silk shirt together to cover her breasts. Wasn’t she just a fountain of contradictions? One minute she hated the man, the next she was ready to graciously offer herself as a snack. Fucking vampire mojo making her do things she didn’t want.

“Why do you keep calling me that?” she grumbled, doing her best to get back on level ground.

Seth sighed, which only served to fill her with dread. She wasn’t going to like what he had to say, she knew it.

When she finished buttoning the shirt, he took one of her hands in both of his and kissed each fingertip. “I promised we’d talk about it. But here”—he glanced around the dim cage—“is not the place for it. Besides, we’re late and Luke will be waiting for us. I’m sure you know how impatient he can be.” He grinned once more and Paxton was astonished to see his wicked incisors shrink into regular teeth.

“Fine. Later.” She whipped around, not wanting him to see how he affected her. Not that he couldn’t pick her brain and discover all of her dirty little secrets if he wanted to, apparently. “You still need a vest.”

She shivered at the strange snarl at the back of her neck.

“For you, I will wear one.”

“Christ, you idiot.” She slapped his chest. “You’re going to get me demoted from detective to beat cop if you don’t wear the damn thing. Granted, we’re going into a woman’s house to see the damage done to her underwear drawer, not staking out Al Capone. Do I think you’ll get shot by anything other than a possible errant mothball? No, but too fucking bad cause it’s policy. P-O-L-I-C-Y. Take the fucking thing and shut up or I’ll shoot you myself.” She was steaming. Her face had to be an angry red, based on the heat she felt there. His defiance was pissing her off.



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