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Tonya Ramagos

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STUD SERVICE 2

Stud Service 2

Strictly Accountable

A grandchild or no trust fund.

Sabrina Gibson thought she was saved when her sister found her stud to fulfill their parents' ultimatum. Then her parents got greedy.

As a practical accountant, Sabrina understands facts and figures. A man to give her a baby is the one thing that isn't computing in her life. Then she meets Brody Holt. Confident, dominant, and sex personified, he sends her on a whirlwind of panty-wetting lust that defies all sensible thoughts or dreams of happily ever after.

He agrees to help her, but his stipulation borders on blackmail. Worse, the cocky cowboy won't divulge his reasons for agreeing to be her "stud." Her only hope lies in the terms they set for the agreement. But how will she be able to walk away then with her heart intact?

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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STRICTLY ACCOUNTABLE

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DEDICATION

To my fellow authors Sandy Sullivan, Missy Lyons, and Cherie Denis, the rest of the STUD Service crew. So this is what happens when the four of us put our heads together.

STRICTLY ACCOUNTABLE

Stud Service 2

TONYA RAMAGOS

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Prologue

They suspended her trust fund.

Sabrina Gibson struggled to keep her jaw from hitting the table. Not just her trust fund, but her three sisters', too. She glanced at Savannah, Serena, and Susannah in turn and saw mirroring expressions of shock on their faces. As much as she wanted to believe she heard her parents' announcement wrong, the sudden tension in the dining room of their family Texas home proved she heard the news exactly right.

"What do you mean?" Serena asked dumbly.

"You can't do that," Sabrina heard herself gasp. Winged beasts of unease fluttered to life in her belly. This couldn't be happening. Not when she stood so close to accomplishing her dreams. Everything she sought to do in the next year hinged on the safety net of her trust fund.

"How are my projects supposed to survive without the funding my trust account is giving them?" Susannah asked, and Sabrina knew much of her sister's career depended on her inheritance, too.

"For how long?" Savannah asked.

Sabrina looked from her father to her mother and back again, half expecting them to grow horns. Certainly only demons could be so cruel. She never thought of them as spawns of the devil before. She

studied them, noting they didn't turn red or sprout tails and wield pitchforks. They remained the same as always. Her father stood tall and stalwart next to her much shorter, more dainty mother. They made the perfect couple in marriage and friendship. Apparently, they made perfect allies and coconspirators, too. Their faces gave nothing away, but her mother's tone when she spoke rang with a finality that put the death nail in Sabrina and her sisters' coffins.

"Until one or all of you give us grandchildren."

Every American cuss word Sabrina ever heard and a few Latino ones her mother muttered on rare occasions ping-ponged in her head. Lucky for them all, she'd been raised a lady and knew how to tame her tongue.

"What?" Serena's face paled.

Susannah shook her head, her dark brown hair flying. "You can't be serious!"

Oh, but they can be, Sabrina thought. The uneasy beasts in her tummy grew claws and fangs as fear settled in and left her queasy. Grandchildren. She should've known. Her parents had nagged all of them for the last several years about producing grandchildren. All four of them were too focused on their careers to even consider a baby at this stage in their lives. She supposed they should've expected their parents to go to extreme measures and force the issue one day.

Her father held up his hand. "We have tried to be patient with all of you." He glanced at Savannah. "You are thirty years old with no prospective husband or children on the way. As the eldest, we expect certain things from you."

"But..." Savannah stammered.

"We realize you are trying to finish medical school so you can practice." His gaze swept the entire group. "We understand all of you have your careers, your pet projects, but it's time to settle down and start raising a family so we have grandchildren to leave this fortune to. Your mother and I would rather you find a nice young man, get

married, and have children in the normal way, but if that's not possible, then you need to do what you need to do to have a child."

Do what they had to do to have a child? Surely he wasn't suggesting...

"Let me get this straight in terms that we all understand, being we were raised around horses, cattle, and oil." Savannah stood and moved to the large window. A moment later she turned around and said with a chuckle, "You want us to use some guy as a stud service?"

Sabrina saw her mother cringe.

"If that's what it takes, then yes," her father said sternly. "Your mother and I would much rather you all be married to a wonderful man, but since you all seem to be so stubborn about it, we have no choice but to force your hand."

"I'm not hearing this," Savannah mumbled.

William Gibson stood and walked to her side. "We didn't want to do this to you or your sisters, but you haven't left us much choice in the matter."

"You would rather I have a child with some guy off the street than have no child at all?"

Savannah's question sent cold chills down Sabrina's spine. Could she really have sex with a guy, any Joe Blow she came across, just to get pregnant? Could any of them? She didn't know everything about her sisters' sexual escapades, but she knew her own. She could count her past sexual partners on the fingers of one hand, and she had known every one of them well and good before allowing anything intimate to happen.

"Somehow I don't think it will come to that, sweetheart. But in essence, I guess you're right. Your trust funds will be released back for your use when we have confirmation of a wedding in the future or a grandchild on the way."

Sabrina stared at her mother and couldn't help but wonder what the sweet, loving woman of Latino heritage who raised four

independent, career-minded daughters would have done if she'd been given the same ultimatum by her parents.

"Father," Maria Gibson said calmly. "I think we should leave the girls alone for awhile to digest what we've said." She chewed her lip for a moment. "We love you girls very much, but your father and I aren't getting any younger, and we need to secure the future of our businesses with grandchildren. Otherwise, all of our hard work has been for nothing." She took his hand and walked out the front door, shutting it softly behind them.

Sabrina knew the soft click the door made as her mother shut it behind them would echo in her memory for months to come.

Chapter One

“Good morning and welcome to Walmart.”

Sabrina stopped at the podium and grinned at the short, plump greeter with gray curls and spectacles perched on the end of her nose. “Betsy, I bet you sure get tired of saying that all day.”

Betsy returned Sabrina’s grin with one of her own. “About as much as you get tired of saying ‘would you like a coupon?’ when business is slow.”

Sabrina let out a dramatic sigh. “I’ve been saying it in my sleep for the last three months.”

“Don’t despair, sweetie. It looks like you will have something else to say for at least a few minutes this morning.” Betsy tipped her head toward Sabrina’s kiosk and leaned closer to whisper, “He’s been waiting for close to an hour. He walked by a couple of times and finally took up post. If I were you, I’d take my time doing that man’s taxes.”

Sabrina laughed and started walking. “I just might,” she shot over her shoulder. She gladly welcomed any client that made even ten minutes of her time go by faster. Still grinning, she turned her head and locked gazes with a pair of dark eyes potent enough to make her step falter as spasms of lust ricocheted through her insides.

Jiminy Cricket, the man is hot!

Shocked by her body’s immediate do-me reaction, she dropped her gaze to his feet. Worn didn’t begin to describe the pair of black boots he wore seemingly held together in places by duct tape, of all things. She chewed the inside of her bottom lip as she skimmed her attention up stupendously tight, well-worn Wranglers and corded

muscles unhidden by a plain cotton T-shirt. The hint of a tattoo peeking from beneath his left sleeve made her tongue tingle. Broad shoulders held a wide neck perfect for latching onto and her palms itched to do just that.

“You’re late.”

Sabrina snapped her gaze back to his face, noting his roughened, handsome features even as his tone set her warning bells chiming. Laughter lines etched the tanned flesh around his mouth and eyes. Strands of straight, dark hair flirted with his shoulders from beneath a black Stetson nearly as worn-looking as his boots and jeans. She stopped short of invading his personal space and knew in an instant even ten feet wouldn’t be a safe distance from this man.

“I beg your pardon?”

The laughter lines did little to make his scowl any more chipper. “You were supposed to be here an hour ago.”

Sabrina glanced at the sign he pointed to attached to the outer wall of her kiosk office and stifled a growl. *Damn it. Damn it. Damn it!* She’d told Rita to change the hours sign before she left the previous evening.

“I apologize for any inconvenience. If you can give me five minutes to get the computers set up, I will be happy assist you.” She reached for the chain closing off the doorway into the two-desk kiosk and her fingers inadvertently brushed his forearm. Awareness, swift and panty-wetting, zinged through her system.

“I don’t have anything with me.” He folded his arms and widened his stance, more effectively blocking her way into her kiosk and making himself look like a poster cowboy for alpha male Wrangler stud.

Sabrina curled her fingers around the hook of the chain like a life line to keep her grounded to the unforgiving concrete of the Walmart floor. Merely being the object of this man’s attention made her imagination soar. Ecstasy, hot and intoxicating, pumped off him in

waves. She wondered if he realized it, if he somehow did it on purpose.

“Then you must have questions you need answered.”

“A truck load of them,” he grumbled.

Sabrina nodded once, both to indicate she could help him and in an attempt to jar her mind from the quick plane to stud-land it seemed insistent on boarding. “That’s not a problem. If you can give me five—”

“You can’t answer them here.”

Sabrina blinked and let her hand fall to her side. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’ve already done that once, darlin’. There’s no need to beg.” He shot a pointed glance around, then pinned her with a stare that put in her mind a vision of sweaty bodies and rumpled sheets. “At least not here in the store. You’ll need to come out to the ranch, go through the office, and tell me what I need to do. Pop died a few months back and left things in a real mess. I’m not even sure how bad yet.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, but—”

“Not much love lost there, sweetheart, and even less these days. The thing is I’m pretty sure everybody’s favorite uncle is going to come after my assets.”

The way those Wranglers hug your assets I can’t blame Uncle Sam a bit. Sabrina felt her cheeks start to heat at the thought and rushed to distract herself from the idea before she got herself into trouble. “I’m sorry, Mr...?”

“Holt. Brody Holt.”

Sabrina nodded. “Of Holt’em Up Ranch.”

“Figured it might ring a bell.”

Oh, the name rang a bell all right. Holt’em Up Ranch laid claim to being one of the largest spreads on the outskirts of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Stories fed the grapevine about the Holt legacy, the four children, and most recently the death of Homer Holt. Amazingly,

none of those stories ever gave a glimpse into the innate sex appeal of the only male Holt heir.

“Mr. Holt, I—”

“Call me Brody. Mr. Holt sounds like my old man.”

Sabrina blew out a breath. “Okay, Brody.” She hesitated. Damn if saying the man’s name didn’t ignite another candle of lust. “I’m bound by contract with Mason Tax Service. It would be a violation of that contract to do a tax return outside of a Mason Tax Service office. I can point you toward several reputable independent—”

“I don’t want some CPA in a suit trampling on my property.”

Sabrina narrowed her eyes. Drool worthy or not, if he interrupted her one more time, she felt liable to stomp her stiletto heel through his duct-taped toe.

“I’m willing to pay you triple your hourly wage. When you get everything straight, you’re welcome to bring the stuff to any Mason Tax Service office you wish to finish it up.”

“I don’t know if...” She lost her train of thought when his gaze dropped farther down to her breasts. Her pulse spiked. Her nipples beaded. *Cripes!* She actually *felt* the look on the sensitized flesh of her breasts.

He dragged his attention up to her face, and she swore his eyes were a full two shades darker. Maybe she wasn’t the only one hiding some serious physical attraction here.

“You’re the manager, right?”

He hadn’t been checking out her chest. He’d been checking the name tag she wore above her left breast, the one that clearly read “office manager” just below her name. The disappointment she felt at that realization chipped at her temper. What was she, sixteen, for crying out loud?

“Yes.” And that meant she should be professional and practical in the face of clients, no matter how mouth-wateringly tempting she found them. “However, I still have a boss and a franchise owner to report to.”

“All right.” He shifted, but rather than move out of the way of the kiosk opening, he ducked beneath the chain and snagged a sticky note and pen that had been left out on one of the desktops. “Give me their names and numbers. I’ll get you clearance.”

Sabrina stiffened. Now that he’d straightened his stance, she had to tip her head farther back to hold his gaze. “I can get my own clearance, Mr. Holt.”

“I told you to call me Brody.” He scribbled on the sticky note, tore off the top sheet, and held it out for her. “When is your next day off?”

“Tomorrow,” she answered without thinking. Curiosity won. She took the sticky note and gave it a quick read.

“Good. Get whatever permission you need, and be at the ranch at eight. Do you know where it is?”

“Yes.”

“Call if you have any trouble.”

“E-eight in the morning?” she asked stupidly. Her attention fell to his assets as he shifted his weight again and started to walk away. A conversation that lasted all of five minutes and consisted solely of business and still, the man managed to seduce her into a stuttering oblivion!

He lifted his brows as he gave her another once-over look that turned her blood to a flaming flow of wicked need. “Holt’em Up is a working ranch, ma’am. We get started early around there, even on a Saturday.”

* * * *

Sabrina dropped the half-rinsed plate in the bottom rack of the dishwasher with enough force to break the thing had it been glass rather than plastic. A couple of plastic glasses, a few plastic bowls, and a sauce pan landed on the top rack with the same amount of energy.

“You’re fuming.”

The amusement in Kirk's voice didn't help to calm her a bit. "I'm angry."

"I know. It's been a while since I've seen you chewing on a mad."

Sabrina wrenched off the faucet and slammed the dishwasher shut. "You would've seen it more often lately if you'd been around."

"I know." The amusement instantly gave way to apology. "I'm sorry, Bri. I really thought I had something going with Shane, you know?"

Sabrina braced her hands on the edge of the sink, hung her head, and sighed. "I know, sweetie." She straightened, turned, and gave her best friend the most comfortingly understanding smile she could muster. "I thought you did, too."

Kirk moved to the wine rack on the far end of the counter, popped the cork on a bottle of Merlot, and poured them each a glass. "Spill it," he told her as he passed one of the glasses to her.

"But red wine makes such a mess." She couldn't help but crack up at the look he angled her way. "I know. You weren't talking about the wine. You want to know why I'm so mad."

"Well, duh." He took her free hand in his and led her to the table where he pulled out a chair for her and waited for her to sit. "Start from the beginning. You got up, slipped into something sexy, and topped it off with the conservative executive style you've got going on, had your morning bowl of chocolate Cheerios, and then..." He stopped as he took the seat at the table across from her and cocked an eyebrow. "Unless you had a guy over here last night that I don't yet know about, I'm pretty sure no one pissed in your Cheerios."

Sabrina sipped her wine and studied Kirk. Blond, trim, flawless complexion, perfect cheekbones, and amazingly straight, white teeth, her gay buddy was prettier than she was. "The guy came once I got to work."

Too late, she realized what a bad choice of words she made. Visions of Brody Holt naked and sprawled beneath her while she straddled his hips and prepared to lower herself on his erect cock

made the tips of her ears, among many other things, heat. Kirk, being the ever-observant guy he was, didn't miss it.

"My, my, looks like you wouldn't mind making him come in other places and a variety of ways, too. Do tell, babycakes."

"What I wouldn't mind is if I could push that flower pot out the window sill knowing he's standing right beneath it." She tipped her glass toward the window behind the sink where a pot of tulips sat on the ledge, then took another sip. "Of course, as hard as his head is, it would do more damage to the pot than his skull."

Kirk's grin spread from ear to ear. "Sounds like true love to me."

Sabrina rolled her eyes. "Oh, what do you know about true love? Lust is more like it." And damn if it didn't make her angry every time she thought about the way her body reacted to him that morning. "He's exactly what I don't need right now."

Kirk pursed his lips. "Are you sure about that?"

"I'm positive! He called Lucille. Forget that I told him I would do it myself. Ornery freaking cowboy went over my head and calls my boss anyway. Ugh, Vannah was right about cowboys. They're nothing but arrogant, overbearing, controlling jackasses, and women should stay away from them."

"Yeah." The twinkle in Kirk's green eyes betrayed his solemn nod. "Savannah did a good job of following her own advice, didn't she, seeing as how she married a cowboy a little over a month ago?"

"Oh, shut up." Sabrina scowled into her wine glass, surprised to find it over half-empty already.

Kirk snickered and stood to snag the bottle from the counter. "So why did he call Lucille?" he asked as he topped off their glasses.

"He wants me to come out to his ranch, go through his father's office, and, I don't know, straighten out his papers and files so I can do his tax return." She leaned back in her chair, idly spinning the stem of her glass in her fingers and watching the play of light reflecting in the red liquid. "You know Homer Holt passed away several months back."

“Yeah, seems I remember reading about that in the paper or something.”

“Well, apparently he left his finances in a real mess. Brody didn’t go into details. He just said he needed me to straighten it all out for him.”

“I’m still not getting what this has to do with Lucille.”

“I told Brody I couldn’t do a tax return away from the Mason Tax Service office. My employment contract binds me to the company.”

“Ah, so he called Lucille to get permission for you to do it so you won’t get fired. At least he’s considerate enough to think about your job first.”

“Considerate? Ha! More like self-serving. Of course, once I get everything together, I have his permission to bring it all to a Mason Tax Service office to finish it.”

“What did Lucille say?”

Sabrina blew out a breath. “She was no help. She agreed it is unorthodox business, but she said we would take the clients however we could get them. She’s supposed to be on my side!” She stopped, pondered that statement for a moment and had to concede. “I guess when I think about it, in a way, she is. Doing business with Brody Holt will be a good connection for Mason Tax Service and for me, for that matter, if I can ever get my plans off the ground.”

“So you’re going to do it?”

“I guess so. Lucille told him I would, and he’s offered to pay me triple time.”

Kirk whistled. “You could certainly use the extra money, sweetie.”

“Yeah, I know.” She couldn’t deny the *cha-ching* sound she heard every time she thought about triple pay for a few hours of sorting through the Holt family’s yearly finances.

“He’s single, isn’t he?”

“Don’t go there.”

“I’m just thinking...”

"I know exactly what you're thinking."

"How are your parents anyway?"

"Irrational and loving as always," Sabrina grumbled. "Mom called this afternoon just before I left the office, as a matter of fact."

"Which I'm guessing is leading to the second part of your mad."

"Intuitive as always." She reached across the table and clanked the rim of her glass to the side of his.

"Still after you and your sisters to settle down and give them more grandchildren, huh?"

"Vannah's marriage was supposed to fix all of this. She's given them one grandchild already and has another one on the way. I can't believe they decided now that all four of us have to give them a grandchild before they will release our trust funds. How did I never realize my parents were so greedy?"

"Not greedy, Bri. They love you and want to see you happy."

"They love me and want to see me pulling my hair out is more like it."

"Are there any studly prospects for Susannah or Serena to take the heat off you for awhile?"

"I don't know. Susannah is on a research trip in the Caribbean. It's not likely she'll meet a sexy fish in the deep blue sea."

"Hmm, it worked for Ariel."

"No, Ariel was the fish. She met the prince on dry land."

Kirk waved that away. "Details, details."

"Important ones in this case. As for Serena, she's so caught up in her charity work with underprivileged kids that I doubt she's managed to look at a man over the age of consent in the last year."

"Too bad she can't just adopt one of those kids to satisfy your parents."

"I doubt that would fly, but I'll pass the idea along." Sabrina slapped the table between them with her palm. "Besides, one of them getting pregnant isn't going to help me a bit. The rules of the trust fund suspension were apparently subject to change without notice."

We *each* have to give my parents a grandchild or we don't get our trust fund. You need to be helping me here, not my sisters."

"Okay, take off your clothes and bend over."

"Kirk!" Sabrina laughed her astonishment. "I can't believe you."

"What?" Kirk batted his eyelashes, a picture of pure innocence. "You've got a great body, Bri. I could swing your way a time or twelve until we make a baby. You're the one always looking for the practical solution to problems. It's the best one I can give you."

Touched beyond measure, Sabrina's eyes filled. "I love you."

"I know you do," he said sweetly, soberly. "That's the problem. You're holding out for love."

"Is that so wrong? I've never been one for a one-night stand, Kirk. I want more than sex. I want conversation, cuddling, and a promise of a future. One would think my parents would want the same for me." Sabrina sighed. "This ultimatum is really putting me in a pickle. I'd wanted to take the rest of the year off after tax season to focus on my studies for the CPA exam and get the ball rolling for my own private firm. Never once did it cross my mind I would have to focus on finding love or, God help me, a stud muffin to give me a baby. They aren't leaving me any choice. Without the trust fund, my plans are on hold. To get the trust fund I have to have a baby as soon as possible. And to have that baby I'll have to put my silly fairy-tale dream of love aside because there's none of that in sight."

"Many a fairy-tale love has begun with lust," Kirk pointed out.

"Not true," Sabrina wholeheartedly disagreed. "Fairy-tale love is always at first sight. Half of the time they don't even know each other's name before their hearts are going all wonky over each other."

"I don't know, Bri. I've seen Brody Holt a time or two." Kirk pursed his lips. "It might be pretty practical to set love aside to make a baby with that man. Think of the genes he could produce."

"I saw his jeans well and fine this morning."

Kirk's lips unfolded in a slow, appreciative grin. "Wrong genes, sweetie."

“You wouldn’t be thinking of any other kind if you’d seen them.”

“Well, when you get him out of those jeans you be sure to call and tell me all about it. In the meantime, what’s the contention between you and your employee?”

“Ah, so we move on to mad number three.” Sabrina lifted her wine glass and drained the last drop. “In a word, authority. That’s what it all boils down to. I’m younger. I’ve been in the business longer. She can’t stand taking orders from me. Simple as pie.”

“Fire her ass.” Kirk said it so simply that Sabrina chuckled. “What? That sounds simple as pie to me.”

“Oh, it would be. Believe me, I wish I could. Unfortunately, it’s too late in the season. No way would I be able to find someone to replace her now, and there isn’t anyone at the other locations who can be reassigned to take up the slack in my office. I can’t, no, I won’t work all the hours myself. I’d be no better than roadkill by April fifteenth if I did.”

“It sounds to me like you should take flowers to romance the cowboy, then swing by the office and hit her over the head with the pot.”

Sabrina blinked as the image of her presenting Mr. Alpha-Male-Do-Me-Cowboy Brody Holt with yellow tulips formed in her mind’s eye. It made her laugh so hard she cried.

Chapter Two

Brody settled his six-month-old niece on his shoulder and gently patted her back. “Shush, now,” he said softly as he paced the living room floor of the ranch house. “Uncle Brody’s got you.”

“She’s cranky.” Lyle Wisk eased back on the leather sofa, stretching an arm along the back and resting one ankle on his opposite knee.

Brody regarded his brother-in-law and wondered, not for the first time, what his middle sister saw in this suit. The man was too clean-cut with an attitude that came off as far too highfalutin for Brody’s taste. But Lyle made Gabrielle happy. Brody supposed that’s all that mattered.

“She’s got a tummy ache,” Brody told the other man and then nuzzled the baby’s ear with his nose. “Don’t you, Rella?”

“Do you think Dad was planning to turn himself in?” Gabrielle paced right alongside Brody, half her attention on the shocking news Brody just gave her and the other half on her child in his arms.

Brody wondered the same thing since he found the evidence of his father’s apparent misdealing several days ago. It kept him up more nights than he wanted to admit and pissed him off even more. “It appears that way. Hell, it’s probably what brought on his heart attack.”

“I can’t believe he would do such a thing!”

Brody leveled a look at his sister that made her sigh and shake her head.

“Okay, I can believe it.” She fisted her hands in her hair on either side of her temples and moaned. “So what do we do about it now that he’s gone?”

“I’m not sure yet.” If he knew, he wouldn’t have spent those sleepless nights tossing and turning, worrying about the impact his findings would have on the ranch and the people they employed. “I’ve got someone coming at eight to start looking into things.”

Gabrielle dropped her hands. “You’re not using Lawson then?”

Brody shook his head. “Lawson has been in Dad’s pocket since the man was in diapers. Dad did what he wanted with the finances, but Lawson knew much of it. I wouldn’t be surprised to find out he knows everything. I want someone from the outside, Gabby, someone Dad didn’t manage to corrupt before he died.”

She nodded, immediate acceptance in her expression. He didn’t expect her to argue with him. The workings of the ranch fell to him when their father died as they had all known it would. His sisters branched away from ranch life long ago, finding their own way in careers they each loved.

“I could call in a favor or two for you.” Lyle plucked imaginary lint from his pant leg. “I’ve got some connections at Beck and Associates among other places.”

Not a chance. “Thanks but, like I said, I’ve already got someone coming out.” Brody glanced at the red oak grandfather clock in the foyer outside the living room doors. “She should be getting here any time.”

“Who is she?” Gabrielle might not argue with his decisions, but she liked to stay informed.

“Sabrina Gibson.” A woman who reminded him a lot of his sisters, as long as he didn’t start thinking about her long dark hair and how it would look falling around her face as she settled her mouth over his rigid cock.

Brody silently swore and paced a new path across the living room floor. His niece stirred on his shoulder, whimpering softly, and took a

deep breath that gave every indication of her intent to return to an ear-piercing cry. He soothed her with a gentle palm on her tiny back and nonsensical whispers in her ear.

“Sabrina Gibson,” Gabrielle repeated and narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. “I’ve never heard of her.”

“What firm is she with?” Lyle wanted to know.

“Mason Tax Service.”

Lyle attempted to disguise a scoff with a cough. He failed. “Brody, I don’t want to tell you how to handle your family affairs...”

“Then don’t.” Brody didn’t bother to glance his brother-in-law’s way, but he saw the other man shift and sit up straighter out of the corner of his eye. He also caught the look Gabrielle shot him, a warning that clearly read for him to play nice.

“Don’t you think you need someone with a little more training and knowledge?” Lyle apparently missed the cautious exchange between brother and sister as well as Brody’s simple but subtle hint to stay out of his business. “You need someone with more *experience* than a tax preparer?”

And you need to learn to keep her nose where it belongs. Rather than let the words fly, Brody turned to Gabrielle. If she needed reassurance of how he intended to handle the situation, he would gladly give it to her. Lyle, on the other hand, could go suck on a turnip.

“I’ve checked her out,” he told Gabrielle. “Christy’s checked her out, too.” He reckoned knowing their oldest sister ran a background on Sabrina would elevate any questions from Gabrielle’s mind. “Sabrina has a bachelor’s in accounting. She’s preparing for the CPA exam. She’s a manager with Mason and works on the side with fledgling companies to straighten out their accounts and get them back on their feet for far less fees than these local big wig firms. She’s also the second oldest daughter of William and Maria Gibson from Destiny, Texas.”

Recognition showed in Gabrielle's expression. "They're oil money."

Brody nodded. "That's right, but they're cattle ranchers first, though."

"She'll know how a ranch operates, what to look for, and be able to spot the problems."

"Which is exactly why I went looking for her," Brody agreed. "I've got this itch that's telling me this doesn't stop with taxes. I want someone who's going to know where to look and how to spot it."

"You know best, brother." Gabrielle stepped to him and lightly ran her hand over the back of her baby's head now lying on Brody's shoulder.

"Is she asleep?" Brody couldn't tell, but the even breathing and lack of whimpering made him think so.

Gabrielle nodded. "No surprise there. You comfort her when no one else can." She stepped back, angling her head thoughtfully. "This Sabrina, didn't her oldest sister get married last month? I remember seeing something about it in the Nashville papers. Very pretty."

Leave it to Gabrielle not to miss an opening. Pretty didn't come close to describing Sabrina, but Brody didn't bother to correct his sister. He knew exactly where she thought to go with that comment and reckoned he better nip it in the bud fast. "I asked her out here to advise us on the situation, not for a date."

"Awe, come on, Brody. Expel a little charm. You know that's all it takes to have women drooling on you."

Brody opened his mouth to retort but closed it again when the doorbell chimed. At the same moment, he heard his niece let out a loud, juicy burp and felt the wetness on his shoulder. Tongue in cheek, he carefully shifted the baby in his arm and passed her off to his sister before assessing the damage to his shirt.

"That's not drool," he said dryly.

Gabrielle did a horrible job at stifling her laughter. "She's not a woman yet, either."

Brody gathered his shirt in his hands, careful not to spread the yuck, and pulled the shirt over his head as he went to answer the front door.

* * * *

Sabrina took a step back, folded her hands in front of her, unfolded her hands, straightened her knee-length pencil skirt, tugged the hem of her fuchsia blouse, and puffed out an irritated breath.

“Stop fidgeting, for pity’s sake.”

She squared her shoulders and rang the bell again. She heard the sharp beat of boot soles on hard floor a nanosecond before the front door of the Holt ranch house swung open, and her IQ plummeted to single digits. Brody stood before her in his duct-taped boots, worn Wranglers, and not a stitch else.

“Christ on a pogo stick.” One sexy brow arched over eyes glinting with amusement, and she realized she inadvertently said that out loud.

“Well, now, I reckon the Almighty could use some form of recreation now and then.” Brody leaned forward slightly and cast a pointed look toward the cloudless morning sky. “I never thought about him having pogo sticks up there, though.”

“Do you always walk around the house without a shirt?” *And please, if you do, be sure to invite me over more often.* The man’s body gave new meaning to sculpted perfection. Corded muscles, fine ridges, and etched lines accented by flesh that spent a lot of time in the sun made her head feel a bit woozy.

“Will it bother you if I do?” His deep baritone drawl hinted with the amusement she saw dancing in his eyes.

Nope, I’m a multitasker. A little imagination, a few calculations, and surely I can figure out how to do taxes and have an orgasm at the same time.

Professional. She could do this. She could ignore the electric desire sparking in her head, sizzling through her body in a mad rush to be pleased, and focus on her job. Couldn't she?

"We're supposed to have a business meeting this morning, Mr. Holt."

"Now, darlin', what am I going to have to do to get the right name rolling from your lips?"

Oh, no way, no how am I going to respond to that.

"I told you to call me Brody."

"Brody." Must the man's name feel as good on her tongue as she imagined how all that tempting, tanned flesh would taste? Her mouth watered, forcing the need to swallow before she could speak again. "Could you please put on a shirt so we can get started with this meeting? I have another engagement today."

Mentally, she pulled out her datebook and scribbled an entry to spend time with George and a bottle of wine tonight. She lovingly thought of her green vibrator as George of the Jungle because on the right setting it could be a real wild king. Last night's date with George had nothing on the impending fun this vision would bring on later.

"Sure thing." He glanced at the balled-up material in his fist and grimaced. "After I go upstairs and fetch a clean one. Come inside."

He moved a half step to his right, and Sabrina stepped through the doorway. She tried not to absorb the heat of his torso when her arm grazed over it as she passed him. She tried to ignore the embers of white-hot need that rained through her at the contact. She tried to focus on the true meaning of those two words, come and inside, rather than the far more wickedly exciting meaning her mind gave them. She failed miserably on all counts.

She wanted to touch more, to explore his flesh with her hands and mouth until the hunger for him subsided. She wanted to feel his hands on her, wanted to surrender to the hard-edged dominance she spotted in the deepest depths of his eyes and see exactly where he might take

her. God, she never felt these viperous tugs to be so naughty with a man and certainly never battled the urge to give in so easily.

Sabrina stopped a few feet inside the foyer and started to turn. The warmth of the solid wall of muscle at her back made her freeze. His breath fanned the fine hairs on the side of her neck as he dipped his head. His voice sent curls of heat whipping through her womb before they struck her clit and her nipples.

“Why don’t you let your hair down while I’m gone, Sabrina?”

Startled by her body’s continued betrayal and his suggestion, she stepped away from him and turned quickly. “I will not.”

He shrugged as if her reaction to his request didn’t make a hill of beans to him. “Suit yourself. Come to think of it, I like it up better anyway. It shows off that pretty neck.”

Before she could think of a thing to say in response to that, his hand snaked around her waist, flattened on the small of her back, and he propelled her toward an arched doorway to their left. “You can wait in here with my sister and her husband. I’ll be right back.”

Sabrina couldn’t help but watch as he walked away. No doubt about it, the man looked as good from the back as he did from the front. Moist tugs of arousal stirred between her legs, causing her inner thighs to tingle with the desire to feel his narrow hips between them as he readied his cock to thrust inside her sodden channel.

Okay, maybe you can’t do this. Jesus, did she really lose all sensibility when she met him? What the hell happened to her strength and self-control?

“Hi, I’m Gabrielle, Brody’s middle sister.”

Sabrina snapped out of her reverie and turned to find a woman about the same age and height as she, smiling warmly. Though blonde with fairer skin, the resemblance between sister and brother couldn’t be missed. She decided the eyes spoke volumes about the genes passed down to these two members of the Holt family. Gabrielle looked at her through a set of eyes as darkly inquisitive as her

brother's. They currently danced with a secret amusement the same as Brody's had when he opened the front door.

"Sabrina Gibson." She shook the hand Gabrielle extended, then pulled the cloth tie binding her hair and slid it onto her wrist as a makeshift fashion accessory. Her hair fell in a loose wave around her shoulders, hiding her neck.

"We really appreciate you coming out all this way." Gabrielle sank to her knees, finished changing the infant on the blanket spread over the rug, and stood with the baby in her arms. "And on a Saturday, too. I hope my brother is paying you extra." She giggled as the baby twisted, then lunged for Sabrina.

Reflex more than thought made Sabrina reach for the infant. The little girl settled in Sabrina's hold and immediately went for her hair. "Hey there."

"Looks like her nap is over for the moment. She likes you," Gabrielle said approvingly.

Sabrina grinned and tickled the baby's chin. "She likes my hair."

"So do I." Brody's announcement sent a fiery lace of sensations caressing through her system.

One glance his way and she realized she'd fallen right into his trap by taking down her hair.

"Do you have any kids?" Gabrielle asked, folding her arms loosely beneath her breasts as she watched Sabrina with her daughter.

"No. Not yet." The baby chose that moment to bundle a handful of Sabrina's hair in her tiny fist and give it a very strong tug. "All right, pretty girl. Get your own hair. Mine isn't removable."

"Do you want kids?" Gabrielle persisted.

"I—" Sabrina started to speak, but Brody interrupted her.

"Why would she want a pesky varmint like Rella that upchucks on perfectly clean shirts all the time?"

Shocked, Sabrina stared at him as he moved into her line of vision. He'd put on a shirt as she'd requested, this one a tan Dickie's work shirt, and left it un-tucked from his jeans. He didn't button it,

however, leaving all those muscles and springy dark chest hair visible to taunt her. Interestingly enough, the sight lost temptation after his comment sank in.

Gabrielle laughed and waved a hand in his direction. “Don’t mind Mr. Grumpy, Sabrina. He’s kidding.”

“I’ll show you Mr. Grumpy,” Brody grumbled and reached for the baby. Sabrina hesitated, not wanting to hand the sweet girl over to him, uncle or not. He didn’t give her a choice. “You know I’m not grumpy, don’t you, Rella? Yes, that’s right. You can puke on me anytime you want, princess.”

“She doesn’t know yet how privileged she is,” Gabrielle told Sabrina. “She’s the only woman alive who can get away with making a mess on her uncle like that.”

“Her name is Rella?” Sabrina watched in awe as Brody cooed and held the baby up high, baring her tummy and making raspberry sounds on her flesh.

“Isabella,” a male voice corrected from the sofa. The man didn’t bother to stand but nodded his greeting and introduced himself. “I’m Lyle. The father.”

Gabrielle grimaced and shot him an apologetic look. “Sorry, honey. I’m a terrible hostess.”

“You were busy with Bella.” Mother and father shared a smile and Gabrielle turned her attention back to Sabrina.

“We call her Bella for short, but we can’t seem to convince Brody of that.”

Brody looked at her. “Have you ever heard the tale of *Cinderbella*?”

Sabrina laughed, instantly understanding. “No, I don’t suppose I have.”

“Well, there you go. That’s because there’s no such princess. Now *Cinderella* existed, and she’s still the bell of the ball ’til this day. That’s a lady fit for a shiny slipper.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, but her smile spread from ear to ear. “He bought her a pair, too. Where he found a set of size zero silver slippers I’ll never know.”

“And I’ll never tell. Can’t give away our little secrets, now can we?” he asked Isabella then wrinkled his nose. “That’s one secret a lady is supposed to keep.”

“I just changed her.”

Brody passed the baby on to his sister. “And you can change her again.”

“Why don’t you do it, Uncle Not Grumpy?”

“No can do. Sabrina here has already reminded me once she’s here for a business meeting.” He leaned closer to his sister and lowered his voice conspiratorially. “She’s got a hot date this evening.”

Sabrina felt her cheeks flame, but she didn’t say anything. Little did he know exactly what kind of hot date she planned and who would be the star.

“Come on.” His hand found the small of her back once more and he guided her out of the living room. “Everything you need is in the office.”

Everything she needed. As the potency of his touch seeped into her flesh through the material of her shirt, she wondered if that everything included handcuffs, lube, and a bed with him naked between the sheets.

Chapter Three

“You’re sure you’ve given me everything?” Sabrina looked up at Brody from beneath long lashes, one red-tipped fingernail tapping idly on the desk as she waited for him to answer.

The red nails gave him a moment’s surprise. At first glance, she didn’t strike him as a woman with wicked needs and siren thoughts, things kept secret but exhibited subtly by red nail polish and sexy lingerie. A slightly deeper look revealed the truth, however. He caught the veiled hunger in her eyes, the simmering inner shock and awareness of needs taking form inside, of the want to explore.

Damn, but he wanted to explore them with her. He wanted to spread her naked over the desk she sat behind and manipulate her lithe body until she begged and screamed for him to fuck her.

She cleared her throat. The sharp, feminine sound yanked him from his sexual bliss to the here and now.

“Yes. No.” Brody raked a hand through his hair. He wasn’t sure of shit anymore, except that he wanted to feel this woman’s nails digging into his flesh as he buried his aching cock in her pussy. Said cock did a decided jerk when she lifted a brow, her lips curving in a hint of amusement that transformed her face from merely beautiful to downright wicked. He stifled a frustrated growl. “I’m sure I’ve given you everything I’ve managed to find so far.” He went digging everywhere he suspected his father would stash records of the ranch finances and discovered a few places he hadn’t known existed.

“You’ve given me the current books as well as financial accounts and 1040s that date back to 2005.” Sabrina shuffled through a few pages on the top of the nearest stack. “Page one and two of the tax

returns are here, but without the Schedule Cs, As, and depreciation reports I can't tell how he came up with the figures reported or how many of them are correct."

Brody let his hand fall to his side and leveled a glare at her. "You lost me with all this A, B, C stuff, darlin'. I watched Sesame Street growing up, and Big Bird never said anything about reporting the alphabet on my taxes."

"Hardy har har, Brody." Her sarcasm coupled with the tempting little frown that etched itself between her brows almost made him laugh.

She had stayed on his mind yesterday and last night far more than he expected. He knew women, beautiful and hot and ready for the taking, and none of them penetrated his thoughts and stuck like a virus starting to spawn the way Sabrina had. It made it hard to concentrate on anything but fucking her. Couple that with the realization he came to around four o'clock this morning that her nonsense act hid a sex kitten dying to purr, and any chance of rational thought kept slipping from his grasp.

"They're tax forms." She held up the top sheet of paper as an exhibit. "They give a breakdown of business deductions and income, itemized deductions, and so on. Those forms are used to calculate the numbers reported on these lines." She pointed to an amount he couldn't read from his distance across the office.

"That makes only a grain of salt more sense than it did before." Brody rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head. "I'm a rancher, Sabrina. Tell me about the amount of feed we have in the barn and how many livestock we have chomping on it, and I'll tell you whether it'll last or not. You start talking to me about schedules and alphabets and itemized depreciations, and I'm dumb as a fence post."

Sabrina made a sound of part laugh and the other half a sigh. "Itemized *deductions*. Depreciation is entirely different." When she leaned back in his father's swivel chair and pursed her lips, he

instantly envisioned them closing around the head of his cock as he buried his length in her luscious mouth. “And that’s why you hired me.”

“Now you’re catching on.” And he would do good to remember that, too. He hired her to do exactly what she appeared to be focused on doing, making heads and tails out of the Holt’em Up Ranch finances and taxes. He didn’t bring her here to make her his sex slave, no matter how many truly appealing images the thought provoked.

Her gaze dropped to the desk and danced over the stacks of papers he’d set there for her. “I suppose the forms I’m looking for could be buried in all this somewhere. I went for the most obvious first. I don’t see anything here prior to 2005, though. The IRS Voluntary Disclosure Initiative covers from 2003 to now.”

Brody shook his head. “Mom died in 2005. She took care of everything until then. She never lived a dishonest day in her life. Pop took over after her death, and that’s apparently when everything went to shit. I looked through the stuff you’ve got there myself, Sabrina. Even I could see from the bank statements and paperwork that the numbers aren’t jiving.”

She regarded him with an expression of mixed humor and understanding. “Then you aren’t as dumb as a fence post after all.”

“He was stashing. Even a fence post could figure that out. It looks like 2005 was the year he started. He didn’t even wait for the dirt to harden in Mom’s grave.”

“Where is the money now?”

“Still in the accounts. I haven’t touched a penny.” Brody laughed scornfully. “Hell, I’m not even sure how to access money in an offshore account.”

“Same as you would any other, with a few extra security measures, I’m sure.”

Brody held her gaze for a long moment. Anger at his father collided with a demonic need to possess the woman staring back at him. Trouble came in the sense that it didn’t stop there, not the anger

or the need. Both ran deep in his system. He could handle the anger and find other avenues to let it out. Taking Sabrina, possessing her and showing her all the dark pleasures forming in his mind wouldn't be done in a night.

"Bottom-line it for me," he finally said. "Can you get it straight?" Damned if he could. He understood the desire in his cock, but the tightness in his chest didn't make a damned bit of sense.

"Oh, I can straighten it out." Her steady tone only added more weight to her obvious confidence. "It's going to take some time, but yeah, I can do it."

"Do what you've got to do. I offered you triple time and I'll keep my end. I can pay you however many hours it takes. I think," he added because, damn, what if Holt'em Up Ranch wasn't as well off as he thought?

Sabrina's grin spread and his world shifted. "You're not broke, Brody."

"Well, that's a hell of a relief. Are we talking not broke *now*? Because I knew that much. Or are we talking about after Uncle Sam snatches whatever is rightfully his plus some?"

"Hmm." The way she chewed her bottom lip as she sat up straighter and began shuffling through the statements and returns he'd laid out for her made his dick whimper for attention. "The IRS is going to attach some hefty penalties. The size of the offset will determine exactly how much. I've got to do some more digging, but my understanding so far is there will be a twenty percent penalty for each tax year we amend. The amount of that penalty is determined by the amount of the underpayment for each year. Then there is the tax itself and the interest accrued."

Brody pushed out a hard breath. "At this rate I might have to find another way to pay you." Something moved through her eyes, a quick suggestive flash he knew he wouldn't have seen if he hadn't been looking right at her. Heat rapidly followed the flash, and he couldn't decide if he sparked her temper or stroked her sexual curiosity. She

wanted him. He knew women, recognized the signs, and didn't doubt for a second she had been entertaining some wild and wicked thoughts about him. He also guessed that the depths of those thoughts and wants scared her. Because he didn't want her to run away with her tail tucked between her amazing legs, he added, "That might have come out wrong."

"Might have?"

Oh, yeah, curiosity got her along with a prod to her temper. He decided not to press too hard just yet. "You're saving my ass, Sabrina."

"Maybe I happen to think your ass is worth saving."

Brody couldn't stop the slow grin that curved his lips. "Do you, now?"

Sabrina rolled her eyes. "Down boy." Her chiding hinted with a promising confession he didn't miss but chose to let slide.

She rubbed the back of her neck and glanced at her wristwatch. "Wow! It's after noon already. I need to get going." She pushed back from the desk and paused, her gaze sweeping over the paperwork cluttering the top. "Is it okay to leave everything here like this?"

"Yeah, I'll close off the room. It'll be just like this when you come back."

"Thanks." She shouldered her purse as she stood and walked around the desk.

"Any idea when that will be?"

She drew her lip between her teeth, chewed thoughtfully, and sent his cock on a tantrum of fits and barely bridled needs. "I can come by tomorrow afternoon for a while if that's good for you."

It would be better for him if she never left. The idea of her hanging around for an indefinite period of time came from so far out of left field that he rocked back on his heels. He managed to turn the shocked move into one of nonchalance and gave her a quick nod. "That'll be fine. If you shoot me a text before you head out I'll make sure I've got on a shirt when you get here."

“That isn’t n...uh, okay, I’ll do that.”

Brody didn’t think he ever heard a woman put the brakes on a statement so fast. Necessary. That’s what she started to say. The tinge of pink that came to her cheeks as she glanced at him and then quickly looked away confirmed it.

He reacted, temptation and need coming together to test his control to the end of its current limits. He caught her arm when she started to walk past him and steered her until she stood facing him with barely a breath of air between them. He kept her that way, letting the tension build, staring into her eyes and discovering secrets he figured she didn’t even know she hid. “You’re sure you’ve got to get going?”

She swallowed visibly, and his attention locked on her throat. The vein pulsed in her neck, beckoning his tongue, his teeth. “I, uh, yes.”

“You don’t sound so sure.” He dragged his hand up her arm, skimmed over her shoulder, and cupped her nape. “You could stay for dinner. I could massage away this tension for you.”

Desire burned hot and ready in her eyes. A primitive possession roiled through his mind as he quit resisting and slowly dipped his head. He drew out the moment, letting her see his intent, drowning in the plea he felt radiating from her before he lightly brushed his lips to hers.

“Uh-oh.” Her breath drifted over his lips in a warm wave of minty temptation.

Brody lifted a brow and pulled away slightly. “Uh-oh, what?”

Sabrina shook her head, an infinitesimal gesture he felt more than saw. “Just uh-oh.”

“I’m going to kiss you, Sabrina.” He would destroy himself if he didn’t now. Holding her this way was making him high, making the blood pound in his head, pushing him to an edge he didn’t know existed. “Really kiss you.”

“Yeah, I’m figuring that out.” The vixen licked her lips daringly.

“You’re not stopping me.” He would scream if she tried. Hell, he might even start begging himself.

“I will in a minute.”

“Then I guess I better hurry before the minute is up.” Her lips twitched in the start of a smile he didn’t let form. He didn’t hurry. It surprised him that he didn’t want to. Taking it easy, going slow, didn’t usually fall in his nature of loving a woman. He preferred hard possession over tenderness no matter how much compassion he showed a woman. But this woman, this kiss, he found himself relishing. He brushed his lips to hers again in the softest caress that drew a sigh from her, low in her throat. The sound moved over him like satin, soft and tantalizing, and damned if he could pull away. He pushed his tongue between her slightly parted lips, found hers, and felt himself start to spiral. Doom never tasted sweeter.

Sabrina melted against him. Her arms wound around his neck as she gave herself over to the kiss he controlled. He slid his tongue over hers then bit it lightly. The sound she made ignited a firestorm within him that raced through his bloodstream. Her fingers delved into the hairs at his nape, fisted, and he took the kiss deeper, harder. Somewhere in the sex-frenzied fog of his brain he heard Dierks Bentley start to sing about feeling that fire. Brody felt it, all right. He felt the flames start to die as she pulled her hands from around his neck and flattened them on his chest between their bodies.

“That’s my phone,” she said breathlessly. “Brody, it’s work. I have to answer it.”

Brody growled as he let her go. “Appropriate ring tone,” he muttered and saw amusement twinkle through the darkened arousal in her eyes as she met his gaze and dug for her cell phone.

“Hello.” Pause. “What are you talking about?” She sighed heavy and rolled her eyes.

Brody let his hands fall away from her and took a voluntary step back to give her space as she continued the call.

"I'm headed out the door now. Nothing came through. We've got to do something about this, Lucille. I'll be there in twenty."

"Trouble?" Brody hooked his thumbs in his pockets to keep from reaching for her again.

Sabrina's answer came in the form of a dry, humorless laugh as she shoved her phone back in her purse. "I'll text you tomorrow before I head out," she told him as she made a beeline for the door.

Brody followed her out into the hall, silently cursing with every step the stupid ass who invented cell phones. The woman had gone from flaming-hot to iceberg-pissed with a call. He stopped in the doorway, leaned a shoulder against the frame, and watched as she stalked right out the front door. As much as he hated to see her go, he couldn't help but admit how flat-out sexy a pissed off woman could be.

"Did she puke on you, too?"

Brody slowly turned his head to find his sister poking her head through the kitchen doorway, lips spread in a wide, teasing smile. He gave her the hard scowl he perfected at times like this when they were kids, stalked into the office for his Stetson, and slammed it on his head as he headed for the back door. His sister's gleeful laughter followed him all the way out.

* * * *

Sabrina didn't know what possessed her to swing by her kiosk on Sunday before heading out to Holt'em Up Ranch. Premonition, she decided as she rounded the corner at the entrance to find the office swamped. Rita sat at one of the two desks with a client while another couple waited on the bench and still another family of four stood nearby looking none too happy. Taking a deep breath for patience, she pasted on her best smile and greeted the waiting customers.

"Hello and thanks for coming to Mason Tax Service. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

The hefty gentleman on the bench with swinging jowls and stern beady eyes got to his feet. He pointedly looked at his wristwatch. "We've been here nearly a half hour. The lady there said it would only be ten or fifteen minutes."

Sabrina seethed inwardly. "I'm sorry for any inconvenience, sir, but if you will join me at the desk over here, I will be happy to get started on your return now." She turned to the family of four and beamed another professionally sweet smile. "Rita is finishing up her current client now and will assist you as soon as she obtains their signatures."

The wife nodded and muttered a "thank-you" as Sabrina walked to the empty kiosk desk. She didn't so much as glance in Rita's direction. She didn't need to. She sensed the tension in her employee and heard the anger simmering in her tone as she bid her client good day and invited the family of four to take a seat.

Less than twenty minutes later, Sabrina shook hands with the stern gentleman and his wife, pleased by her abilities to soothe his ruffled feathers and earn an obviously heartfelt "thank-you" from them both as they left. She tucked the flap into their envelope file and spun in her chair to put the tax return in the file drawer with the others awaiting IRS acknowledgement. The kiosk design put the desks back to back with the filing cabinet between the two. Rita sat at the opposite desk, her lips set in a thin line and her eyes throwing sparks.

Sabrina ignored her as she mulled over the various ways to handle the situation. The woman knew her job, had been versed on what was expected of her as a Mason Tax Service employee, and defied almost every ounce of that training at any given turn. Letting her slide didn't fall into the category of options. Chastising her in the middle of Walmart, while extremely appealing at that moment, didn't work either.

"I didn't need you to jump in." The sarcasm in Rita's tone hit Sabrina with an almost tangible force. "I had everything under control."

Control, Sabrina thought and figured it to be the operative word of the day. She waited, making sure she held a firm grasp on her restraint before she answered in the calmest voice she could muster. "Mason Tax Service prides itself on our clients' wait time being as short as humanly possible. Those customers had already been waiting too long when I got here. I'm less than ten minutes away, Rita. You were instructed to call me if you got more than one customer in line when you had another at the desk."

"I saw no need to call you." Rita's voice got louder. "I was minutes from finishing with the customer I had when you showed up. I was handling everything fine."

Sabrina stared at the other woman, half astonished Rita was beginning to yell at her in the middle of an open kiosk. She spotted the Walmart day manager headed their direction and stood, moving into the traffic lane to intercept his path.

"Todd."

"Sabrina, it's always good to see you. I've been meaning to get with you on the times of our employee meetings so you can chat with them about the discounts for last-minute filing we discussed. Time has gotten away from me this week."

"It happens to us all," she said with forced joviality. "I wondered if you would mind if my employee and I borrow your office for a few minutes. We have some private business to discuss and our office is a bit in the open out here."

Todd unhooked a key ring from his belt. "I don't mind at all. You can leave the keys at the customer service desk if you don't see me when you're through."

"Thank you." Sabrina stepped back to the kiosk, pulled open the center file drawer, and withdrew the "back in five minutes" sign they used when they left the kiosk unattended. She gave Rita only a cursory glance as she hung the sign and said, "Follow me, please." She waited until they were securely inside Todd's office, the door

closed behind them, before she spoke again. “You and I seem to have a problem.”

“I don’t have—” Rita began hotly, but Sabrina held up a hand and talked right over her.

“I’m not finished.” To her surprise, Rita sputtered to a halt. “I’m not sure what the problem is exactly, but the fact is that I am the manager of this location. When I ask you to do something, I expect it to be done. Those customers waited for twenty minutes longer than necessary this morning. A simple phone call would have prevented that, whether you thought you had it covered or not. Some returns take longer than others to complete. I shouldn’t need to point that out.”

Rita crossed her arms and squared her shoulders as if preparing to launch into a defense. Sabrina didn’t give her the chance.

“This is two days in a row that I have walked into this store and found you with more clients than you can handle. You didn’t call me yesterday, though you told Lucille you did. I would’ve known. My phone was, and is always, on me the whole time. You didn’t call this morning either, and we could’ve lost a client, possibly two if I hadn’t showed up when I did. It’s rare for us to be this busy at this time of the season. Hence the reason we are not both scheduled to be here for the whole shift. However, when it becomes necessary for two of us to be here, we should be.”

This time, Rita opened her mouth to speak, but again Sabrina bulldozed over her. “I’ve done nothing to earn your disrespect and I will not tolerate it any further, especially out there in the middle of that kiosk where anyone walking by can hear. If you can’t handle working for me for whatever reason, let me know now, and I’ll find a replacement. Perhaps Lucille can put you to work at the main office a few days a week.”

Rita’s jaw dropped and Sabrina knew the other woman never expected to be called on her behavior, much less threatened the way she was now. Well, that was just too bad.

"I don't want to work at the main office." The sarcasm remained in Rita's voice, but she toned down the volume to a reasonable level.

Sabrina nodded once. "Fine, then I'll trust we won't have any more trouble between us. I'm late for an appointment. If you get backed up again, *call me*." She opened the office door, waited for Rita to exit, and closed and locked the door. With no Todd in immediate sight, she took the keys to the customer service desk as he'd requested and left. Betsy was the greeter on duty today, but a serious line to her lips replaced the warm smile she usually wore.

"It's about time you took care of that," she whispered conspiratorially.

Horried, Sabrina gasped. "You heard?"

Betsy shook her head. "I saw the two of you disappear into Todd's office. I guessed you were finally putting her in her place."

Sabrina shrugged. She silently hoped no one else realized what just transpired. "A girl can only take so much. I'll see you later, Betsy." She tossed back a wave and a smile as she dug in her purse for her cell phone with her free hand. She touched Lucille's speed dial as she stepped into the parking lot and headed for her car.

"Mason Tax Service. This is Lucille speaking. How can I help you?" Her boss's chipper mood resonated through the wireless line.

"I just called to give you a heads-up," Sabrina said in lieu of hello.

"Uh-oh, I don't like heads-ups. They usually mean trouble."

"And this one is no different, especially in reference to my office these days." Sabrina pushed out a breath.

Lucille's slightly teasing tone instantly sobered. "Do I need to call her and talk to her?"

"No, that's part of the problem now." Sabrina swapped her phone to her other ear as she pulled her keys from her purse and unlocked her car door. "I'm younger, more experienced, and I'm her immediate boss. If this is going to work out at all, I've got to handle it myself, which is precisely what I did this morning." She proceeded to fill Lucille in on her conversation with Rita.

“Sounds like you handled it okay to me.” Lucille had her back. She never doubted she would have issues there. “And how are things going with Mr. Holt?”

Sabrina slid behind the wheel of her car, started the engine, and exchanged her cell phone for her Bluetooth. “I’m headed there now.” She glanced over her shoulder, and, seeing the lane was clear, backed out of the parking space. “I’m late.”

She heard her call-waiting beep just as Lucille said, “I won’t keep you then. But you keep me posted on what’s going on with Rita and Mr. Holt.”

“Will do.” Sabrina pushed the button on her Bluetooth to swap wireless lines and said a silent prayer she didn’t drop the waiting call. She did a happy bounce in her seat when her mother’s voice flooded the line. “Hi, Mom. What’s up?”

“Did you call last night, sweetheart?”

“I did. And where were you? On a hot date?” she teased. Her mother’s giggle made her smile.

“As a matter of fact, your father took me dancing.”

“Ooo, lucky you.” Sabrina looked both ways as she crossed into traffic then settled back in her seat for the drive to Holt’em Up Ranch. “Did you have fun?”

“We had a blast.” The hesitation in Maria’s voice should’ve been Sabrina’s first clue of alarm. She didn’t catch it in time to divert the conversation. “We ran into Jake. You remember him, don’t you, darling? He’s such a nice young man. He asked about you. Of course, he always does every time we see him. He said he saw you when you and your sisters were here last year.”

Sabrina wrinkled her nose at the memory. Overweight and needy to the ick power, seeing him hadn’t been one of the highlights of her trip home. Then again, that particular trip when her parents dropped their happy-grandchildren bombshell really didn’t produce any highlights at all.

“He works for Hertz Rent-a-Car. Savannah and I got a car from him when we arrived at the airport.”

“That’s what he said last night. He really likes you, you know. You could do a lot worse.”

“Oh, please, Mom. I know you’re going bonkers for more grandchildren, but surely you want them to come from a better gene pool than that.” Like a pair of drool-over-me Wranglers encasing one spectacular cowboy by the name of Brody Holt.

Down girl, Sabrina silently scolded herself. The minute she started thinking about gene pools, she’d start remembering that kiss, the one that rocked her world two ways from Sunday and very nearly stole her soul.

Nope, not a good idea to think about that right now. Or to remember how George did little to calm the need that kiss instilled inside her. George was apparently losing his jungle powers. Or maybe he simply needed fresh batteries.

“What I want are grandchildren,” her mother stated, drawing her back from her reverie. “And I’m starting to wonder if you even know how to get a man out of his jeans.”

Sabrina’s jaw dropped, and she swerved. The tires skidded onto the soft dirt shoulder of the back country road before she righted the steering once more. “Mother!” No way would she comment on that further. It was time to change the subject, and fast. “This is not the reason I called last night. I needed to talk to you or Daddy about ranch business and Generator’s Charmer.”

“Why would you want to talk about your father’s horse?” Maria’s confusion came thick through the line. “William bought that horse two years ago because he simply fell in love with it. You know that, sweetheart.”

“Yes. I do.” It was one of the few times in her life she’d seen her father act total ga-ga over something. Kindred spirits, she’d thought as she’d watched him with the horse, listened to him boast about what a fantastic animal the horse was and how he absolutely had to have

him. "I wondered if you could look through the records and see how much he paid for it."

"I don't need to look it up. I know exactly what he paid."

When her mother rattled off the number, Sabrina very nearly swerved again. "You're sure?" No way. That was triple the horse's worth!"

"Positive. It's not often your father will agree to such an exorbitant price for an animal, but he wanted it that badly. Why would you ask about Generator's Charmer, Brina?"

"Brody Holt has hired me to take care of the Holt family income taxes. There's some, um, curious things that I can't discuss."

"What is it about a person's death that tends to make you see them in a different light?" her mother wondered.

Sabrina guessed rumors were starting to spread through the ranch vines, but she didn't ask. "Irony, isn't it?"

"And what about the youngest Holt, this Brody? Is there any curiosity there?"

Sabrina heard the question her mother left unasked and thought she had far more curiosities about the man than she was willing to share. "He's a client, Mother."

"That's how many people meet their true love, darling."

"So I've heard. Listen, I'm almost to Holt'em Up Ranch. I love you, Mom. And tell Daddy I love him, too." She turned off her Bluetooth, severing the connection as she pulled into the long drive of the Holt ranch. It didn't occur to her until she brought her car to a stop in front of the main house that she forgot to send Brody a text before heading out here.

With an apology on the tip of her tongue, she walked up the front steps and rang the doorbell. No one answered. She rang it twice more with the same results then typed a quick text into her phone.

Where are you? She tapped her foot on the porch as she waited for his response. It came after a minute and a half delay.

Dipping behind barn.

Sabrina stepped off the porch and turned, spotting the barn in the distance behind and to the side of the house. She shoved her phone in her purse as she made her way toward it. "I'm sorry I forgot to text before..." she began, raising her voice to be heard as she cornered the barn and froze. "Jumpin' jelly beans."

Narrow hips disappeared beneath the surface of a shimmering pond. Sabrina dragged her startled gaze up an abdomen of outrageously toned muscles, a chest speckled with dark curls, and shoulders of pure latch-on-to-me-while-you-ride-me perfection.

Brody turned his upper body, tossing the phone he held onto the bank, and pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Yeah, I guess they better jump seeing as how they're likely to get squished by a pogo stick otherwise."

Sabrina blinked her confusion. All that deliciously tanned, stupendously corded flesh made her brain fizzle like a fried vegetable. "What?"

He grinned, pure devil temptation and male amusement, and shook his head. "Never mind. I do enjoy your sayings though, darlin'."

"What?" She shook her head, focused on the trees high above his head, and did her damndest to find her scruples among the lust clogging her head. To his credit, he gave her time to regain her composure before he chuckled.

"Something wrong, Sabrina?"

"I thought I told you no surprises today." She dared to look at him again, but didn't dare to let her attention move from his face. It was devastating enough to a woman's senses.

"I thought I told you to text before coming out," he countered smoothly.

"I did."

Brody lifted a brow. "I've got a lead foot, darlin', and a mean sports car in the shed to use it in, and I still can't make it from town to here in a minute and a half. I doubt seriously that Saturn I saw you driving yesterday could do it either. Where were you when you sent that text?"

Sabrina chewed her bottom lip, knowing he had her. "On the front porch."

"Well, now," he drawled. "You could've said that in your text."

"You could've said you were naked!"

"I told you I was dipping behind the barn. What did you think I meant?" His eyes flashed with a riot of amused fireworks, and his grin spread from ear to ear. "Did you think I was hiding out dipping snuff like some teenager? I'm too smart for that. I wouldn't stand a chance of getting my mouth on you again if I did that."

Every ounce of her being dictated she not respond to that comment. "Shouldn't you be working?" she fired instead.

"It's Sunday. People aren't supposed to work on Sundays."

"You expected me to."

"No," he said slowly. "That was your choice. Of course, you could always take the day off and come for a dip with me."

Chapter Four

Brody watched the indecision wage a war in Sabrina's expression and knew he was sunk even before she made up her mind to join him. He should let her do what he hired her to do and send her home. He should be keeping a nice, professional distance between them because the fact was he already figured out the cause of the tightness in his chest and his uncharacteristic lack of self-control around her. He was already half-crazy about her.

It should've scared him spitless.

It didn't.

"I'm here because you hired me to take care of your tax situation." She sounded like she needed more reminding of that than he did.

"Is the IRS open on Sundays?" He could be reasonable about the whole thing, even rational. And if doing so got her naked and in this water with him where he could eventually work his way around to having his wicked way with her delectable body, then so be it.

She half-snorted at his question. "I doubt it."

"Then clock out for a while, Sabrina. You work too hard."

"I do what has to be done."

"Days off have to be done, too. When is the last day you had one?"

"Yesterday."

"No, you worked here then headed straight for the office."

"I didn't bring a suit."

Her swift change in the subject told him just how tempting she found his invitation. Good. Now to up the ante. "Neither did I."

Her eyes flashed a molten desire he couldn't wait to dive into. "I shouldn't."

"Why? Are you afraid I'm going to bite?" He couldn't deny her fears would be warranted. His teeth ached with the need to sink into the sensitized flesh of her neck, to close around the hardened points of her breasts.

"Among other things," she admitted with a sly smile that did devious things to his cock and balls.

"How about if I promise to keep my teeth to myself?" He could keep that promise, as long as he didn't add hands and lips to the list of things to keep to himself. "I'll even be a gentleman and turn around while you undress."

"The water isn't very deep."

Despite her arguments to the contrary, Brody could tell she wanted to be in the pond with him, naked with him, and, if he were lucky, enclosed around him.

"It's deeper than it looks." He stood flat-footed on the sandy bottom, and the waterline reached his upper hipbones. Given her shorter height, it would cover her tummy.

And leave her breasts above the surface.

The thought tightened his cock and sent a zing of pulsing electric hormones straight through his nuts. "I'm just taller than you are."

Damn, but the way she constantly gnawed on her bottom lip when she fell into deep thought drove him one step closer to insanity. He wanted to take over the task for her, nip her lips with his teeth and then lick away the sting.

"This isn't a natural pond."

"Actually, it is. The water is fed from an underground spring. I added the mountain rocks around the bank and the rail and steps over there for my sisters when they were girls." He rolled his eyes, remembering how Megan, Gabrielle, and Kayla ragged him for an entire winter to install the stairs and safety rail for them by summer.

Sabrina grinned. “Something tells me there isn’t much big brother won’t do for his little sisters.”

“Yeah, they know it, too. It’s ridiculous.”

“It’s admirable. Now, if you will, um,” Sabrina lifted a finger and twirled it in the air.

Brody complied without comment. For quite possibly the first time in his life, he understood what it meant to have all his other senses kick in when his vision was taken away. He actually heard her undressing on the bank of the pond. The faint swish of material as she removed her white blouse, shucked off her black pants, and kicked her shoes aside were sounds to push him another full notch up the ladder to his doom.

He took a deep breath and realized he could smell her, a tantalizing mix of fruits and flowers that permeated his already growing hunger for her. He sensed when she stepped into the pond, felt the gentle wave of the water on his hips. He held himself still until he heard her contented sigh.

The sight that greeted him when he turned drew a sound from low in the gut he never heard himself make before. Sabrina sank beneath the water, leaving only her shoulders and head visible above the surface. Her face settled into an expression of pure, sultry bliss.

“It feels good, huh?” Brody back-stepped to the side of the pond, leaned against the cool mountain rock, and stretched his arms along the edge.

“Like heaven.” Sabrina tilted her head back and closed her eyes.

Brody watched her, his gaze transfixed on the slender column of her neck, the delicate dip of her throat, the play of water flirting with the swells of her breasts. “Now you know my favorite place to be after a long day of work.”

She opened one eye. “It’s early afternoon on a non-work day.”

“Favorite place to be after a terminally long night, too.”

Her lips twitched, and she lifted her head right along with one inquisitive brow. “Did you have a few too many beers and a bottle of Jack?”

Brody snorted. He wished. “Try a few too many cries and several warm bottles of formula laced with castor oil.”

“I take it Rella stayed the night.”

“Gabrielle and Lyle had some kind of business party.”

“So the princess kept Uncle Brody up half the night.”

“She did that.” Hungry thoughts of another princess currently taking over reign of his kingdom a few arm lengths away kept him awake the remainder of the night...again. “What took you so long to get here today? I expected you sooner.”

“I planned to be here sooner.” She sighed, held up a finger signaling him to wait, and dunked under the water. She came up a nanosecond later, hands pushing her hair back from her face and eyes slowly opening. “That’s better. I had employee problems again. Then I got on the phone with my boss.”

“Lucille?” Brody felt like a teenager with ADHD. He tried to focus on the conversation, but his attention kept getting derailed by the way her lips moved when she spoke, the droplets of water sliding down her face. He wanted to follow those droplets of water with his tongue until he found her mouth and dipped inside. The memory of that one kiss in the office haunted him last night. Her taste lingered on his tongue, tempting him, torturing him until his hunger for her grew to animalistic proportions. “I like her. She’s a nice woman.”

“I’m not surprised you think so,” Sabrina said dryly.

“So that’s why you didn’t text until you got here.”

“Partly. While I was on the phone with Lucille, my mother beeped in. I suddenly remembered last night that my father bought a horse from your father a few years ago.”

Brody nodded. He knew the horse. “Generator’s Charm.”

Sabrina blinked in obvious surprise. “You knew?”

"I know who you are, Sabrina. Your parents are William and Maria Gibson from Destiny, Texas. That's why I came to you. You know taxes. You know ranching."

"Well, you could've clued me in."

"I didn't reckon I'd need to. It seemed to me like you would already know who you are."

"Ha ha." Damned if the frown that etched itself between her brows didn't make her even more beautiful.

"Your father went crazy over that horse."

Sabrina scoffed. "I'll say, crazy enough to pay almost triple what it was worth."

That didn't sound right. "I thought he got a hell of a deal."

"Six thousand is not a deal on a Tennessee Walker."

"He paid twenty-five hundred."

Sabrina shook her head. "My mother confirmed the price this morning. My father paid your father six thousand for Generator's Charm, Brody."

Brody hung his head, his mind reeling as he thought back. He distinctly remembered the exchange, could see in his mind's eye William Gibson handing over the check to his father while Brody stood holding the horse's reins mere feet away.

And he remembered William Gibson smiling widely and announcing the horse was worth every penny.

"Son of a bitch." Brody pushed a hard breath from his lungs. "You're not kidding."

"I think he was padding the books, Brody. I'll have to dig further into the financial records, but I'm betting your father was making sales at higher prices and only reporting a portion of the income."

"I had a feeling this would go deeper than I realized."

"That's why you came to me."

"I'm in over my head here, Sabrina." He hated admitting that, loathed knowing his father had been scamming decent people, the IRS, his fucking family for close to six years.

“I’ll do what I can to help you get it straightened out.”

He believed her, trusted her, and *wanted* her. The last came instantly and unexpectedly. He’d known before she showed up at the kiosk on Friday that she was a beautiful woman. He’d seen pictures of the Gibson sisters, knew all four of them to be real lookers. Beautiful women weren’t a dime a dozen in the Chattanooga area, but he never failed to find his fair share when he wanted one. None of them ever managed to get beneath the skin, to seep into his system, and rock his soul as quickly as Sabrina Gibson did.

Sabrina rotated her head and closed her eyes, the move one of an obvious stiffness. He remembered her doing the same yesterday in the office. His sudden ADHD didn’t need more of a green light than that. Business talk succumbed to his need to touch her, and he didn’t bother fighting it. He pushed off from the side of the pond and covered the distance between them in a single swim stroke.

Her gaze settled on him, careful and cautious, as he moved behind her. The sound she made as he closed his large hands over her delicate shoulders nearly made him whimper. “I told you that you work too hard.”

“I’ve spent too much time at the computer lately.” Her words came on a breathless sigh of pleasure that drifted over him like black velvet. “My shoulders get stiff when I do that.”

She fell silent but for the tiny moans that tormented his cock now and then. After a few long moments, he felt her start to relax.

“Brody?” she said sleepily.

“Yeah?” Brody rested his chin on the top of her head as he continued to massage her shoulders.

“You’re, umm, well...” She wiggled, the small of her back grinding against the erection he half-hoped she wouldn’t notice even as the desire to plunge inside her sweet heat mounted.

“You could pretend you don’t feel that.”

“It’s kind of hard.”

Kind of, hell! His cock was so hard it hurt. The instant she rounded the barn his cock started to swell. He'd been walking around with a raging erection since he caught the spark of heated awareness in her eyes the day they met.

"Or you could acknowledge that you do. But if you're waiting for an apology it's gonna take a while."

"Actually, I'm waiting for your hands to move lower."

* * * *

Brody's hands hesitated on her shoulders, and Sabrina held her breath. She couldn't believe she said that, couldn't believe how badly she wanted it, how badly she wanted *him*.

"I can't promise my hands will come back up if I let them drop." Arousal turned his voice gravelly. It grated over her sensitive flesh, teasing nerve endings and exciting erogenous zones she didn't know she possessed.

Sabrina angled her head, tilted it back to look at him, and met his gaze. His dark eyes swam with a predatory desire that thrilled her to her toes. "I'm counting on it."

Still, his hands stayed put, his fingers working her tight muscles in slow circles as he stared back at her. Another full minute that felt like an eternity passed before his hands began to slide. His calloused palms rasped over the bare flesh of her chest on a direct course to her breasts. He paused, his fingertips touching the surface of the water, the swell of her breasts, and hesitated there for so long she thought he might change his mind after all.

"You're sure?" The potent need swirling in his eyes made her surprised he gave her a choice.

Breath lodged in her throat, Sabrina could only nod her answer. She licked her lips, tried to speak, but lost the urge when his hands made that final slide down beneath the water to cup her breasts.

“Mmm,” she purred as his hands covered her fully. He squeezed and then continued the massage he had been giving her shoulders, only now to the sensitive orbs burning for his attention.

Sabrina rocked her lower body back, wanting to feel the hardness of his erection against her flesh, delighting in the low growl that rumbled from his throat. His eyes sparked, the animal she sensed inside him realizing he caught his prey, and she didn’t get another second to think before he crushed his mouth to hers.

Unlike the kiss they shared in the office of the main house yesterday, there was nothing tender or coaxing about the way he took her mouth this time. White-hot hunger seared through her as he devoured her, controlled her, and stole her sanity through her mouth. One hand stayed to torment her breast as the other skimmed lower.

Sabrina moaned into his mouth when his hand closed over her pussy, one finger inching between her folds. He raked that fingertip over her clit, and she bucked her hips, groped for something to hold onto, and found his thighs. He broke the kiss in favor of licking his way over her jaw, nipping her jawbone, and continuing on to the side of her neck. She couldn’t keep up. The sensations ricocheting through her proved too much. His mouth worked her neck, teeth grazing and biting. His hand weighed and caressed her breast, the thumb and forefinger finding her nipple to add further torture. His finger pushed on her clit, a delicious pressure that set her boiling, and abandoned the aching bud to thrust inside her weeping channel.

“Oh, God, Brody, yes.” A second finger joined the first and she rocked her hips in time with his thrusts, wanting it deeper, needing to feel the rigid erection pressing against her back inside her body. “Please.”

“Jesus, you’re wet.” His hot breath against her neck sent excited shivers raining through her. “I figured the water would keep you from getting wet for me. Your pussy is so tight, Sabrina. It’s primed and ready. Your muscles are gripping my fingers.”

He thrust his fingers deeper, lifting her and pulling her more firmly against him. Her knees went weak, but it didn't matter. He held her, controlled her, and possessed her. His teeth raked the sensitized flesh where her neck and shoulder met, and she sucked in a breath as slivers of demonic lust spiked to her core.

"Brody." Her head fell back on his chest and whipped from side to side as she fought to breathe. Her body yielded to his manipulations. Pressure built in her womb. She wanted more, needed to be filled by the thick shaft resting against her back.

"Come for me, Sabrina." The order came in a gruff whisper that bordered an animalistic growl as he raked his thumb over her clit in time with the thrusts of his fingers inside her channel. "I want to feel you shatter."

She couldn't refuse him if she dared. The pleasurable pain of his calloused fingers to her throbbing nipple and engorged clit, the width of the fingers he spread inside her cunt demanded she obey. She panted for air, gasping in the inferno he created until the orgasm burst from her in a sharp wave that left her shaking. She crumpled in his embrace as her body rocked inside and out from the force of her release.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, that's amazing."

She barely heard him over the drumming of her own pulse.

"Do it again."

Before his words could register, he turned her in his arms and lifted her off her feet. Her quivering legs wound around his waist more out of reflex than thought. His hands splayed her bottom, cupping her cheeks and holding her steady. Then he kissed her, his mouth taking hers with a domination that bruised even as it aroused. His tongue plunged between her lips as, between her legs, his cock drove into her channel in a single thrust that drew a strangled scream from her throat.

Intense, red-hot pleasure swamped her as her inner muscles made room for his thick shaft. He filled her, igniting a firestorm that spread

through her soul. Practical thought fled in a maelstrom of passion and heady lust. Only when he wrenched his mouth from hers, his grip tightening on her ass cheeks as she felt him begin to pull out, did she snag hold of some semblance of rational thought, just enough to utter a protest.

“No, don’t stop.” She wriggled in his embrace, locking her ankles behind his back.

“Holy shit, Sabrina. You’ve got to let me pull out, darlin’.”

“To hell I do.” No way would she let him stop this now. Dying ranked a high possibility if he didn’t finish what he started.

“Sabrina.” He said her name again as if doing so might make her listen to reason. The only reason she knew in that moment belonged to the orgasm dangling on the precipice. “I’m not wearing a condom.”

Sabrina shook her head wildly and bucked her hips, trying to find even a modicum of the friction he started but now denied her. “Can’t let go. Can’t stop,” she panted. *I can’t think either.* She knew if she did she would likely go scurrying for the mountains. She never did anything so wild in her life. No way could she go back now. “Harder, Brody. Take me harder.”

“Christ almighty,” he growled through gritted teeth. He stared at her, the position he held her putting them almost at perfect eye level. “I’m not taking the blame for this when the heat settles.”

“No, but you’re going to take the blame for it now if you don’t finish what you started.” Sabrina flattened her hands on his shoulders, dug in her nails and watched a lightning bolt of pure male supremacy flash in the dark depths of his eyes.

“You asked for it, princess.” His grip on her ass tightened, fingertips pinching into flesh as he pistoned his cock inside her channel and reached a depth he hadn’t moments before.

Sabrina’s head fell back on her shoulders as fireworks of bliss exploded in her very being. The water sloshed around them as he fucked her. He took her with a primitive, forceful, mind-altering invasion of his cock into her sodden cunt that revealed things within

her she hadn't known were there. Wicked, wanton feelings erupted in her bloodstream, ideas forming in her mind that breached all practical realms.

"I'm not going to last, Sabrina. You feel too good. Too hot. Too tight. Do it again for me. Let me feel your body milk my cock as you come."

His words, the crudeness coupled with the rough way he claimed her, sent her over the edge a second time. She screamed with the power of the orgasm that tore from her body. She lifted her head, only to freeze in the act of lowering it once more as she locked gazes with him. The unreadable pits his eyes became stole her breath. She fell under some sort of spell as she stared at him, as her own orgasm continued to rack her body, as she felt the vicious jets of semen spew into her when he finally lost control.

Seconds turned to minutes as they stayed that way, locked together, drenched from both the pond and their own sweat, entranced in the reckless moment they just shared. Spent and dizzy with a confused rightness to her world, Sabrina let her forehead fall to rest on his chest. She felt his head turn, closed her eyes on the tender brush of his lips to her temple. When he spoke, an icy chill made her shiver to her toes.

"You want to tell me what that was all about?"

Chapter Five

Sabrina dug down deep, groping for some kind of internal shield, something she could use to guard herself as she lifted her head and met Brody's hard stare. She didn't regret what they just did. She wouldn't allow herself to feel ashamed or embarrassed. She felt a cavernous desire to do it again. She knew instantly that she put more than her body on the line by getting this close to him. That awareness sparked her temper and gave her the strength to hide the emotions swamping her now.

"I thought it was sex." She answered him flippantly, adding a little wicked curve to her lips as she said, "Great sex."

"It was that, darlin'," he drawled. He still held her, hands secure on her bottom, cock going soft in her channel. "Not very safe sex either."

Sabrina blew a breath up her face. "I'm clean, Brody. If it makes you feel better, there's no reason to worry about STDs or anything."

"I wasn't worried. I'm surprised you weren't, though." His jaw tightened as he chewed over his next words. "You're a sensible woman. Words like reckless and spontaneous don't come to mind when I think about you."

You think about me? She stopped the question cold. She didn't need him seeing too much, especially when she didn't even know what he might see if she opened herself up for him to look. "I'm not usually reckless or spontaneous. My instincts are usually pretty good, though, and I try to follow them whenever possible."

Brody nodded slowly, his gaze on her never wavering, never softening. “Did those instincts tell you that you’re not going to get pregnant, too, or are you on the pill?”

Sabrina swallowed. She considered lying for all of a half a second, but she couldn’t do it. What would be the point? She shook her head. “I stopped taking the pill years ago. My doctor tried me on all the different contraceptives, and each one produced some sort of side effect that didn’t set well with my system. Condoms proved the best alternative.”

“Condoms work fine,” Brody agreed. “Funny thing about them is they don’t do a bit of good when they aren’t used.”

“We got carried away.” Sabrina angled her head and studied his handsome face. He didn’t look angry. He didn’t sound it either. It shocked her that he was actually discussing rather than flying off the handle or tossing blame. “Surely that wasn’t the first time you’ve ever let your hormones get in the way of common sense. I’m guessing this right here would be another good example.” She skimmed a finger over his tattoo. “Well, I doubt hormones had anything to do with it. Testosterone is probably more like it.”

He glanced down at the tattoo on his upper shoulder and nodded once. “Yeah, testosterone about sums it up. Friday night poker game with the ranch hands when I was seventeen. Someone got the bright idea it’d be cool to brand me. Later, when it healed, I had it tattooed over. Trust me, it looks better now. As for letting hormones get in the way of rational thought, I’ve done that plenty. The sex we just had, however, wasn’t one of those times.”

Sabrina opened her mouth, but closed it again when she realized he had her there. “No, I guess it wasn’t.” She shrugged. “So I’m guilty as charged. I’ve never done anything like that in my life.”

“I reckoned as much.”

“But I’m finding it hard to regret it.” She wiggled her hips, grinding her pelvis to his, and bit back a giggle at the flicker of desire that moved through his expression.

He tightened his grip on her bottom and stilled her movements. "I don't want you to regret it. Hell, I really want to do it again, especially when you move this sexy ass of yours like you just did."

Sabrina let the giggle loose. "It's good to know I'm not the only one finding it difficult to concentrate on conversation in this position."

"Oh, I'm talking just fine."

Sabrina frowned. Of all the times for a man to decide he wanted to have a serious conversation. She tried to grind her hips again, but only managed to move a fraction of an inch. "Stop holding me so tight and we'll get you ready to go again."

He loosened his grip and shocked her by lowering her to stand on her own feet in front of him. "Not until you tell me what's really going on. You're a successful, single, beautiful woman with goals and dreams and all that jazz. I raised three sisters just like you. I know the signs. I also know women like you don't throw caution to the wind like you just did and act so nonchalant about it when it's over. You're not worried about getting pregnant, and there's a reason. I want to know why."

Sabrina looked up at him and knew she had to tell him the truth. "Tenacity is definitely one of your strong suits. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Yeah, among other things."

She laughed a quick burst of air. "I bet." She breathed deep and let it spill. "My parents are on us girls to make grandchildren. It's nothing new. They've been after us for years to settle down and start families."

"Getting pregnant in a pond out of wedlock with a guy you barely know isn't settling down and starting a family."

Sabrina narrowed her eyes at him even as she bent her knees, sinking her upper body beneath the surface of the water enough to cover her breasts. Having them exposed left her feeling vulnerable

right now. She certainly didn't need that when facing off with Brody Holt. She needed strength and her own tenacity instead.

"It isn't necessary to start being an asshole, Brody."

"I'm just pointing out facts, Sabrina."

"Facts I am well aware of already, thank you very much." She stepped back, suddenly needing distance between them, and fast.

"Finish it." He didn't move, didn't stiffen, and didn't change his easy standing demeanor in any way. His expression stayed hard, though, and his tone left no room for argument or avoidance. It infuriated her beyond belief.

She wanted out of the pond. She wanted her clothes. She wanted to zip back to the last moment when the orgasm he'd given her stole her sanity, to the moment when he'd lost control inside her, and stay there for the rest of the day.

"There's nothing to finish." She started to straighten and step around him, but he seemed to sense her intentions. He shifted to his right, one brow slowly lifting as if to dare her to move. She seethed inwardly but didn't press her luck. "The whole family thing is apparently not as important to my parents as the grandchildren. They want them no matter how they are conceived."

Brody folded his arms over his broad chest. She knew it shouldn't, but somehow the position made him look larger than life and twice as sexy. "Even if it's out of wedlock with a guy you barely know."

"I thought you weren't being an asshole."

"And 'round and 'round we go," he muttered, averting his gaze for the first time since he started the conversation. He looked away, nodded slow, glanced at the sky, then finally leveled his attention on her once more. "You would get pregnant just to satisfy your parents?"

"Not just." She wanted it, too. Fantasies of feeling life moving inside her, of hearing it cry and, later, of being called mommy, kept her up more nights than wet dreams about any random studded hunk. Of course, it hadn't been just any random studded hunk occupying her dreams the last few nights.

“You’re saying you want children, yet you don’t have any.”

“Remember those tight comments you were making not so long ago? That tends to happen when a woman doesn’t have sex in over a year. It also creates a hell of a problem when it comes to conceiving a child considering it seems to require more than a simple want to make that happen.”

“I still don’t get it. I’m a simple man, Sabrina. I need simple answers.”

Simple, my ass.

“Are you telling me that’s where I fit in today?”

“It wasn’t like I planned to hop in this pond and screw you blind so we could make a baby when I got here.” His lips twitched, and she gritted her teeth. “If you so much as crack a smile right now I’ll deck you. I might be a girl, but I can hit like a man.”

“Yeah, being raised on a ranch, I’m betting you can. You did the first two. I reckon only time will tell if you did the third.”

“You, ugh, never mind.” She slapped the surface of the water, splashing them both. “You’ve got good genes.” That got her another raised eyebrow over an eye that glittered in half amusement. She didn’t dare attempt to define the other half of what she glimpsed in the look. “Despite your father’s apparent shady dealings, you come from good stock.”

“Yep, you’ve definitely got ranching in the blood.”

His comment almost made her grin. She bit it back, still too irritated with him to allow an ounce of humor to show. “You’re attractive, seemingly healthy and you’re great with your niece...”

“And?”

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “For Pete sake, Brody, how much do you need your ego stroked?”

“Enough that I’m certain you aren’t holding anything back.”

“I wanted you.” The truth spilled from her lips before she could think to swallow the words. Worse, once the bucket tipped, she didn’t stand a prayer of damming the flood. “It didn’t matter how much I

told myself to be practical. It didn't matter how much I attempted to convince myself you were the last man I needed to touch or let touch me. You tempted me. I gave in. We had sex. Great sex," she added quickly. "If a baby is the result of that recklessness, I'll be completely accountable for it. I'm okay with that."

"You're okay with that." The way his tone dropped to a dangerously low timbre clued her in that she finally pissed him off. "And I'm supposed to, what, walk away and forget you might be carrying my child?"

She didn't want him to. God help her, she wanted more. She shouldn't this soon, but she did. And she didn't just want more spontaneous, meaningless sex. She wanted him, his baby, his love, the whole works. Now that she experienced the earth-rocking ecstasy of having him inside her, of being close to him, she wanted it more than she ever thought she could.

"I didn't plan this, Brody."

"We established that already. Hell, Sabrina, you certainly haven't been in this pond alone this afternoon. I seduced you. In case it slipped your notice, I started doing that in the old man's office yesterday."

More like standing in the doorway of her kiosk on Friday, but she didn't bother to correct him.

"I'm as accountable, as you put it, for what happened here as you are. I'm not walking away if you're pregnant, and you damned well better tell me if you find out you are."

She should've known better than to think he would demand any different. More, knowing he would be there for her, be there with her should've filled her with happiness. Instead, she felt consumed with dread over the idea of Brody being a part of her world only for the child they conceived.

You should've thought about that before you refused to let him pull out.

"Fine." She heaved a heavy sigh. "Okay. I will."

The water really wasn't deep enough to swim, but she managed to do it anyway for the few short strokes it took her to reach the edge of the pond. Keeping her naked flesh concealed beneath the water wasn't an option if she expected to get dressed. Not that it mattered if he saw her now. What he hadn't seen of her body already, he'd touched with his hands and devoured with his mouth and cock.

Still, she kept her back to him as she climbed the steps and pulled on her clothes, drenching them because she didn't have a towel to dry off first. She turned and found him exactly the way she left him in the pond.

"Do you mind if I take some of the files out of the office home with me? I would like to work on them from my apartment."

"The house is unlocked. Take what you need."

"I probably won't make it back for a few days."

"Everything else will be here when you get back."

More uncomfortable than she ever felt in her life, she shuffled her weight from foot to foot, nodded, and swallowed. "All right, then I'll see you later."

"Sabrina."

She stopped at the sound of her name and looked back at him over her shoulder.

"It won't do you a lick of good to run from me. I promise I'll catch you."

* * * *

Not pregnant.

The two words ping-ponged in Sabrina's head as she shuffled to the kitchen for a glass of water and the bottle of Midol she kept in the cabinet by the sink. She leaned against the counter, tossed back two of the pills with a swallow of tepid tap water, and groaned when the doorbell chimed.

“No visitors. Not today.” She turned her upper body, set the glass in the sink, and splayed a hand on her aching belly as she pushed away from the counter and started to head for the living room sofa. She was halfway there when she realized she couldn’t pretend not to be home. Anyone with half a set of ears would hear the television Kirk left set to half-volume even through the closed apartment door.

The doorbell rang again and she diverted her course, grumbling under her breath as she yanked open the door. She knew that hard wall of muscle despite its current disguise of a truly hideous plaid Western-style button shirt. A slow climb of her gaze confirmed it still belonged to the one man she would rather not face at this particular moment.

She blinked up at him, the sunlight spilling around him making it difficult to focus. She figured she should probably consider that a good thing. “How did you know where I live?”

“I called Lucille.”

Sabrina sighed dramatically. “I really need to have a talk with that woman.”

Brody hooked his thumbs in his pockets and studied her. “I told you not to run.”

“I’m not running,” she snapped. “I feel awful.” She barely restrained the whine that wanted to accompany her statement.

His gaze fell down her front and did a leisurely climb back up that any other time would’ve had her hormones jumping to hit the sack. “You are looking rough today, darlin’.”

“Gee, thanks.” Sabrina scowled and left the door open as she walked away. In the living room, she grabbed the remote control and a throw pillow and cuddled the latter in her lap as she started flipping through the channels. She heard the front door close, followed by the clunk of his booted feet on her hardwood floor. Of course he would decide to stay. Whatever made her think he would leave her alone?

“Should I offer to fix you some chicken soup?”

Sabrina shot him an intrigued look as he stopped just inside the living room archway and leaned a shoulder against the wall. He took off his Stetson and held it loosely by the brim at his side. "You can cook?"

"Better than most of the women I've dated. It's another of my strong suits, right up there with tenacity."

"Hmm, well, maybe some other time." The mere idea of food made her stomach churn worse. "I'll be fine as soon as the Midol kicks in." She tossed the remote aside, giving up on finding anything worth watching on a weekday afternoon.

"Midol," Brody repeated slowly.

"It's a medicine women take for cramps. Seeing as you apparently put a good hand in raising your three sisters, I'm sure you've heard of it."

"Then you're not pregnant."

"Apparently not." She shifted, trying to get comfortable and failing. Finally, she gave up and looked at him. She expected to see relief shining in his expression. The disappointment evident in his eyes shocked her.

"Well, now, I guess that means we'll have to try again."

Sabrina gaped at him, her cramps momentarily forgotten. "Why in the blazes would we do that? I thought you were pissed the last time."

"It pissed me off the way you handled it. The way you apparently believed I wouldn't give a rat's ass if I got your pregnant or not really stuck in my craw, too."

"You're a better man than that, Brody," she admitted with a sigh.

"Glad you managed to figure it out." He pushed away from the doorway, moved to the opposite end of the sofa, and sat on the edge. He rested his forearms on his thighs as he leaned forward, his head turned her way, eyes watchful.

Sabrina wanted him to hold her. She wanted to crawl into his lap, lay her cheek on the solid warmth of his chest, and sink into the comfort she knew she would find there. The desire to be in his arms

again started to grow to an almost desperate, nearly unbearable need over the last two weeks since they had sex in the pond. Every inch of her flesh burned to be touched, to simply be skin-to-skin with him.

“Now maybe you’ll tell me the rest of the story.”

Her gaze snapped to meet his. “Tell you the rest of what story?” She tried to play dumb, but knew it wouldn’t fly. She couldn’t get anything past him.

“The whole ‘parents wanting grandchildren’ story. There’s still more you haven’t told me. I know families like yours, parents who put demands on their children that most don’t expect. The demand your parents put on you and your sisters is grandchildren. What’s the prize?”

“Access to our trust funds,” Sabrina said grimly.

Brody’s lips formed a thin line and he nodded once. “Money.”

“Doesn’t it always boil down to the bottom dollar? Mom and Dad suspended access to our trust funds until we each give them a grandchild.”

Brody looked around, slowly scanning her apartment. “You could touch it before?”

Sabrina nodded. “They put the stipulation in place last summer. I never used it, but I could have if I wanted to.”

“Why now? What does it matter if you can touch it when you’re obviously doing okay without it?”

“You mean besides the fact that it rightfully belongs to me, and it’s my security for the future?” Sabrina pushed a hard breath from her lungs and shifted, sitting up a little straighter in the corner of the sofa. “Mom and Dad picked the worst time to toss out the ultimatum. I never touched the money because I’ve been biding my time, making sure I have all my ducks in a row before I implemented the plans I’ve made for my career, my *life*. I’d expected to start that this year.”

“What kind of plans?” Brody leaned back, stretching an arm along the back of the sofa and turning his upper body to face her.

“Finishing my studies to get my CPA license, opening my own accounting firm that specializes in helping struggling companies get their finances straight before it’s too late.” She shrugged. “Chattanooga and the surrounding areas are full of independently owned businesses run by people with good work ethics and a strong understanding of what it takes to make the company successful, but a lack of knowledge on how to handle the finances to get to that point. These companies end up folding because they can’t afford to hire someone to get them on track. Firms in town charge top dollar for services they can perform for a fraction of the cost.”

“You want to help people save their businesses without putting them further in debt.”

“Simply put, yes. I’m already doing this, but I want to do more. I want to expand. To do so I’ll need help and an office for starters. I’ll encounter my own startup costs, and I know it will take some time to get the firm on stable ground. It can be done,” she added quickly, confidently. “I don’t doubt that for an instant. I’m not looking to get rich.” She laughed dryly. “I’m already rich. I’m just looking to do the career I love and put it to use by helping others do the same.”

“Why not go to a clinic? There are those baby banks or whatever you want to call them that specialize in artificial insemination. You’ve got a sister that’s a doctor, don’t you? She could probably tell you the best place to go.”

“Savannah,” Sabrina nodded then shook her head. “I don’t want a tube baby, Brody. I won’t say I didn’t consider it. It’s the most practical option I’ve come up with. But it’s not what I want. I just can’t do it.”

* * * *

Brody watched Sabrina, listened to what she said, and heard what she didn’t say. It all boiled down to love. She might tease him about his princess ideals, but she wanted the fairy tale. Thing was, so did he.

He wanted love, marriage, a family, and he knew without a doubt he wanted it with her. He also knew she wouldn't believe him if he told her.

"You're serious about trying again? I mean, you would help me?"

Help her get pregnant so she could give her parents the grandchild required to hand over access to her trust fund. Help her have the child she wanted, but without the strings of the husband, the family. Brody knew exactly what she meant by her question and exactly how to answer her.

"I'm serious." Veiled hunger flittered through her expression. She wanted him, but instinctively, for reasons he couldn't quite yet figure out, she would never accept that he wanted more than sex from her. That meant he would just have to show her, make her, and take her. "You might be the one to change your mind when you hear my stipulations."

Sabrina narrowed her eyes. "You want part of the trust fund."

"I'm not going to get mad about that being the first conclusion you jump to for a couple of reasons. One, it's because the trust fund is at stake that we're even talking about this. Two, you know better than anyone, including myself, what kind of financial position I'm in. But, no, my condition has nothing to do with your money. I'll even agree to sign a prenup so you know it's protected."

Her already-narrowed eyes turned to slits as she stared at him. "A prenuptial agreement is only necessary protection when a man and woman get married."

"And our baby shouldn't be born out of wedlock," he countered simply.

"You're saying you're only willing to help me if I marry you." Astonishment came through loud and clear in her tone.

"Yep." Brody never thought he would see the day he resorted to blackmail to get a woman. He saw the surprise swirl in her eyes, watched it change to a contemplating question, and hoped to hell she didn't call his bluff. He would help her regardless. She'd gotten under

his skin. He couldn't explain the whys or hows of it any more right now than he could the moment he saw her round the corner at the Walmart on day one. It just happened. He wanted her and aimed to make her see just how badly. "I want him to have my last name."

"Him?" She frowned. "Why is it that men always think they will produce a son?"

"I need a son, someone to carry on the Holt name."

"And if it's a girl? There is a fifty-fifty chance, you know."

Brody shook his head. "It won't be a girl." God, he actually enjoyed it when she rolled her eyes at something he said.

"What if you don't get me pregnant?"

He lifted a brow. "You've got that much confidence in me, huh?" He'd get her pregnant. If he had to live with his cock inside her tight, wet heat for the rest of the year, he'd see her belly swollen with his child.

"It's a sensible question, Brody. Making a baby isn't quite as easy as two plus two."

"It can be." He planned to get started on proving that fact just as soon as Mother Nature finished her monthly visit. "But for the sake of argument, give it six months. If I don't get you pregnant in that time, we'll get the marriage annulled."

"Consummation voids annulments."

"Fine, then we'll get a divorce."

"Provided I was to agree to this cockamamie plan of yours, it would take six months before we could get married." She laughed softly at the blank look he leveled on her. "We'd need time to plan the wedding. Things like that aren't done overnight."

Making the baby would be. Why in hell couldn't marrying her be, too?

"Then there's our families to consider," she went on. "They're going to wonder why we would rush into marriage. Okay, my family wouldn't, given the circumstances, but yours would. They won't know we're only doing it in preparation of producing a child, and we

certainly couldn't tell them. This whole situation is strange enough. And if we turn around six months later and get a divorce..." She bowed her head, her hair falling around her face like a satin curtain. "The idea is ludicrous."

It couldn't be ridiculous when the answers to each of her arguments sprang to his tongue without thought. "We'll elope. We won't tell either of our families we're married. When we find out you're pregnant then we'll plan a real wedding, tell everyone, and invite the states of Tennessee and Texas if we need to."

"We'll get married twice."

"We'll be the only ones to know that."

"And how long do we stay married after the baby is born, Brody?"

Shit. He stalled, waiting for the right retort to grace his tongue. He didn't get it this time. "We'll figure it out when we get there." He raked a hand through his hair and leaned forward. "Stop over-analyzing, calculating, and whatever else it is you're doing in that head of yours and say yes."

* * * *

Sabrina was trying to protect her heart. What would possess him to make such a proposition? She wasn't certain she wanted to know the answer. She gaped at him as confusion warred with disbelief on a battlefield of hope she didn't want to acknowledge.

No. The word burned the tip of her tongue, and yet she couldn't bring herself to refuse his proposal. Yes didn't sound right either because accepting would be emotional suicide.

"This is crazy, Brody." It baffled her how he didn't seem to see that.

"Explain to me how it is any crazier than having a tube baby or getting pregnant by a man you're not married to."

I won't lose my heart to either of those. "Why?" she asked despite herself.

“Why what?”

“Why do this?”

His hesitation clued her in to the lie before it left his mouth.

“You’re helping me. It’ll be my way to return the favor.”

Bullshit!

His lips tilted in a grin of pure male cockiness. “I won’t bother to point out the more obvious benefits.”

“The sex.”

“You said it yourself, it *was* good.”

“I’m fixing your taxes. You’re offering to marry me and give me a child.” She shook her head. “I’m failing to see the equivalency here.”

“It’s not my fault your mental calculator is apparently broken. Sounds to me like you need to change it in for one of those high-tech new gadgets with the letters and numbers, that way you can add ‘y’ plus ‘e’ plus ‘s’ and come up with the right solution. I told you to stop thinking about it so hard and say yes.”

Frustration propelled her to her feet. “I can’t make a rash decision like this. I need to think about it.” She needed to calculate the risks, analyze all the factors, and figure a way to salvage her soul while spending the next six plus months with a man who could, and likely would, tear her apart.

“I’ll humor you by not pointing out the rash decision you made two weeks ago in my pond.”

Sabrina spun on him and glared at him from beneath her lashes. “Yes, please, humor me.”

“I’ll do you one better than that. I’ll give you a week to decide. We can’t consummate the marriage for a few days anyway, right?”

“Right.” Sex. She’d been wrong. It *was* all about the sex for him. It stung knowing that. Except, why would a man like Brody Holt need to corner a woman into marriage to get sex?

“Then it’s settled. We’ll talk about it in a week.”

She expected him to leave, not reach for her hand and tug her down to sit in his lap. His fingers lightly brushed her hair aside, and his hands closed over her shoulders and started to massage.

"I figured I might finally get this finished since I can't get carried away this time."

Sabrina couldn't help but smile any more than she could keep herself from melting under his touch. It felt so good being with him again. Too good. Dear God in heaven, how could she ever think to protect her heart from this man when she couldn't function beyond the fiery lust that filled her when she got within ten feet of him?

"What's your favorite color?"

His question pulled her out of her thoughts. She wrinkled her forehead as she shifted to look at him. "My what?"

"Turn around. I can't massage you as well when you're looking at me. I want to know what your favorite color is. If you're going to be my wife I should know more about you. My favorite is brown and yours is..."

Sabrina turned back around and grumbled, "Brown is boring."

"It's neutral," he argued, but she heard the humor in his tone. "It's also the color of horses and deer and grass in the winter. I figured you, being so practical and all, would understand that."

"Red." She bowed her head as his fingers moved over her flesh, kneading at the muscles in her shoulders and the back of her neck, eliciting a pleased moan from her throat.

"Red what?" The laughter she heard previously in his tone turned to part confusion and a husky awareness that made her blood sizzle.

"Duh! My favorite color. It's brilliant, sexy, bold red." She swore she felt his cock jump beneath her bottom at that.

"What kind of food do you like?"

"Mexican, as hot as I can get it."

He chuckled. "You can take the girl out of South Texas, but you can't take the country out of the girl."

"You got it."

“Favorite television show?”

“Wait, you didn’t answer the food question.”

“I’m a meat-and-potatoes boy.”

Sabrina grinned. “You can take the hat off the cowboy.”

“I’ve never heard that one, but I guess it fits.”

“I don’t watch television. I rarely have time, and when I do I prefer to find my entertainment in books.”

“Yeah, I noticed there seemed to be a stockpile of novels around your place. I like books, too. Do you ever read anything besides romance?”

“Sure. I read mysteries, suspense, thrillers.”

“Mm-hmm, but you haven’t been reading any of those lately.”

Sabrina glanced around her living room at the books cluttering the coffee and end tables, the shelves of the entertainment center, the pile haphazardly tossed in the far corner. All romance, she noted as he’d obviously done as well. “What you see are all subgenres.”

“Of romance,” he added.

She lifted a shoulder. “I’m female. Sue me. I like romance.”

His arm moved to circle her waist, to hold her as he leaned forward to snag one of her favorite erotica books off the coffee table. He whistled. “Looks like the edgy side of romance to me.”

She plucked the book from his hand and tossed it back on the table. Edgy side of romance described it perfectly. She knew he understood it, too. She’d seen the flickers of domination at random moments in his eyes, and it thrilled her in places she wasn’t sure had ever truly been awakened. “It’s still romance.”

He rested his chin on her shoulder, turned his face to the side of her neck, and grazed his lips over her flesh. “Feeling better?”

She took a deep breath and let it out slow. She did feel better. “Cramps are gone and shoulders are nice and loose, so yeah, I just might live to see another day after all. Thank you, Mr. Holt.”

He grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "Glad to hear it. I've got to get going." He patted the curve of her rear, lifted her as if she weighed nothing at all, and set her on the sofa beside him.

"I'll come out to the ranch tomorrow after work," she told him as he got to his feet.

He snagged his hat from the table where he'd placed it before sitting down on the sofa. "I'll try to hold the surprises to a minimum."

Sabrina's gaze locked on his ass clad in his trademark Wranglers as he walked through her living room and out her front door, thinking the man was nothing but one surprise after another.

Chapter Six

Brody heard the barks a nanosecond before he caught the flash of fur streak past as the dogs hightailed it across the ranch. He looked up, locked gazes with his ranch foreman, and lifted a questioning brow.

A shit-eating grin spread across Pete's age-worn face. "You might want to go after 'em yourself, boss. Looks like that pretty lady you've been keepin' company with lately is back, and I don't think Roco and Hound plan on lettin' her out of the car."

Brody turned in his saddle and squinted as he brought the distant driveway into focus. Sure enough, he could just spot the back end of Sabrina's Saturn ION. The barking hadn't let up either.

"Damn dogs," he muttered and pulled on his horse's reins to steer him around. He guided the horse at a slow trot over the expanse of the open land, slowing when he rounded the house. He chuckled when he spotted Sabrina sitting calmly in the driver's seat of her car, one wrist resting on the steering wheel, and an expression of part hilarity and part irritation on her beautiful face.

"Roco, Hound, ya'll get your stupid asses over here." His forceful bellow instantly calmed the dogs. They backed away from the car, gave another loud bark each, and hightailed it back the way they came.

"Do you have a big green tractor I can ride on, too?" Sabrina called out as she got out of her car and slammed the door. A wickedly amused smile spread over her tantalizing lips.

Her reference to the Jason Aldean song made Brody chuckle. "Sure thing. We can even sit on the back and watch the sun go down

later if you want.” The sound of her giggle wrapped around his stiffening cock like a wet fist.

“You’re a quick one, Mr. Holt.”

Brody shrugged. “Aldean is a Georgia boy. That’s just over the state line. You, on the other hand, are a very slow girl. How many times and different ways do I have to tell you to call me Brody?” He dismounted, catching the horse’s reins and holding them tight as he walked toward her. “I thought you grew up on a ranch.”

“You know I did.” She rounded the front of the car, stopped, and leaned her delectable rear against the front grill.

“I wouldn’t have expected you to be afraid of a couple of dogs.”

“I’m not. As a matter of fact, my father has a dog identical to the black one that was yelping at my car door.”

“Roco doesn’t yelp. He barks.”

“He yelps,” she argued. “The other one,” she glanced around as if looking for the second dog in question, “was not a dog. I’m not quite sure what he is.”

“Neither are we. Let me tie up Silver, and I’ll show you inside.”

“I don’t want to take you away from your work. I can see my way to the office and get started on my own.”

“All right, how long will you be here?”

“At least a few hours. Things are a bit more complicated than they appeared on the surface.”

Brody groaned. “I don’t want to know just now. Stay for dinner.” He purposely phrased it as an order, not intending to leave her an inch of space to wiggle free. He didn’t wait for a response either. “I’ll let Carlotta know to set an extra place at the table tonight.”

* * * *

Sabrina propped her elbow on the desk, caught her forehead in her hand, and massaged her temples with her thumb and middle finger. The headache came on quick, a product of way too much deep

thought and far too many hours in front of a computer screen. Though it hurt to move her eyes, she chanced the shooting pain the movement would bring and glanced at the time in the bottom right corner of the computer monitor.

“Damn,” she breathed quietly. Maybe the headache hadn’t come on as quick as she thought. Hadn’t it been only two fourteen the last time she looked? It sure didn’t feel like four full hours had passed. “Time flies when you’re having fun.”

She pushed away from the desk and got to her feet. The stiffness in her muscles further substantiated that time had definitely gotten away from her.

“Got to remember to get up and move.” Too late, she gave herself the gentle coaching.

She left everything on the desk where it lay and wandered out of the office. A thick silence blanketed the hallway, but she didn’t get the eerie feeling she expected at finding herself alone in the approaching dark hours in a house not her own. Instead, she felt comfortable, cozy even.

She started to turn toward the front door, figuring she would step outside. Perhaps a bit of fresh air would do her good after hours spent in the office. Clattering noise from what she presumed to be the kitchen redirected her path.

“Well, hello there.” A plump, older woman with salt-and-pepper hair gathered at her nape and welcoming sea-green eyes greeted Sabrina when she stepped into the kitchen. “I wondered how long you could stay holed up in that office without coming up for air.”

Sabrina pointed in the direction she’d come from. “I was headed that way, for air, when I heard you in here. I lost track of time.”

“That happens to all of us when we get caught up in our heads.” The woman tsk-tsked and stirred something in a simmering pot on the stovetop.

Sabrina rubbed her forehead. “That explains why mine hurts then.”

“There’s aspirin in the cabinet on the end.” The woman indicated which end of the line of oak cabinets with a nod. “I’d get it for you, but I’ve got my hands full.”

“Oh, no, I can get it. Thank you.” Sabrina moved to the cabinet, found an extra-large bottle of aspirin right in front, and shook two into her palm.

“I’m Carlotta. Been the housekeeper here since Brody was in diapers.”

“I’m Sabrina. Been the tax accountant here since a week ago Saturday.”

Carlotta’s wrinkled lips quirked. “Quick one, too, aren’t you?”

“It’s nice to meet you.” Sabrina drew her bottom lip between her teeth. “Umm, where are the glasses?”

“Next cabinet over,” Carlotta answered, nodding again. “I hear Mr. Holt left a real mess behind.”

Sabrina retrieved a glass from the cabinet and filled it half way with water from the dispenser on the outside of the double-sided refrigerator. She used the time it took her to swallow the aspirin to gauge how to respond to the woman’s statement. How much of the Holt family affairs did Brody share with the housekeeper? In the Gibson home, the hired help were more like family than employees. She considered Carlotta for a moment and went with her gut, guessing the same applied here, too.

“It’s certainly a larger mess than Brody realized.” She drank the rest of the water, rinsed the glass in the sink, and held it up. “In the dishwasher?”

“Please.” Another nod. “He believes you’ll straighten it out.”

Back to Brody, Sabrina thought and pushed out a hard breath. “I’m sure doing my best to.”

“He needs someone like you.” Carlotta turned her back on Sabrina, shuffling to the opposite counter where she set to preparing an unidentifiable dish of chicken and cheese. From the scents starting to fill the air, Sabrina guessed it to be some kind of chicken casserole.

“All the girls have been gone a long time. Oh, they stop by from time to time, but he gets lonely around here.”

Sabrina made a noncommittal sound. She couldn't help but think if Brody Holt ever got lonely, it was by choice. A man like him could, and likely did, get any woman he wanted with very little effort at all. Hadn't he managed to get her barely forty-eight hours after showing up at her kiosk?

“He's got you.” Her gut instinct about Carlotta being more than a mere housekeeper to the Holts was obviously right on.

“Always has, always will.” Carlotta steadied the dish on one hand as she pulled open the oven with the other. “I take care of the house, most meals, and general chores. I don't know a thing about finances and all that tax stuff you're doing.”

“It's not as complicated as people think.”

“To you, I suppose that's true. Point is, he needs a woman around, one his age who'll stick. It's good to see him with someone besides that floozy, Mary-Beth. She ain't out for nothing but what's in his pants and wallet. Keep telling him that, and he still goes out with her just like he did the other night.”

Sabrina bit her tongue so hard a dart of pain shot through her mouth. So he went out with another woman, probably mere days before showing up at her apartment and asking her to marry him.

What difference did it make to her? It wasn't like his proposal had been real. The marriage, if she decided to agree to his cockamamie plan, wouldn't be either.

That didn't stop her from wishing for different facts. It didn't help her in her efforts to guard her heart from the man either. Said heart skipped a beat at the distant sound of the front door opening.

“That'll be him now.” Carlotta confirmed what Sabrina already knew. “He'll go upstairs and shower before coming in here to see about dinner.”

Sabrina rubbed her hands together, nervousness warring with an anticipation of seeing him that she tried to ignore. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You can make the salad. The fixings are in the fridge.” Carlotta shot her a toothy grin. “Fair warning, too, Brody hates his veggies. You just might end up feeding them to him before dinner is over.”

* * * *

Brody’s mother drilled proper manners into his head from the day he started to understand the English language. Determined he would grow up to be a gentleman, she instructed him on how to treat a lady. Everything from holding open a door to talking to her right fell under his mother’s tutelage. He improvised the part of leaning in to catch a whiff of Sabrina’s scent as he pulled out the chair for her at the dining room table and doubted his mother would mind.

Sabrina always smelled of fruits and flowers to him, an intoxicating mix that made his head spin. Touching her only added more fuel to his desire. Still, he couldn’t stop himself from letting his fingertips dance along her back from shoulder blade to shoulder blade when she took her seat. The almost imperceptible shiver that resulted from his touch pleased him and only heightened his need to sink his teeth into her tender flesh as he fucked her from behind.

“Does it count as a romantic dinner for two if the housekeeper prepared the meal and set the table?”

Sabrina tilted her head back to meet his gaze, her attention following him as he moved to the chair across from her. “I set the table. Carlotta did all the cooking. You came in, showered, and sat down to eat.”

Brody rested his forearms on the edge of the table and grimaced. “Guess that means I don’t get any points, huh?” God, he enjoyed making her laugh. The sweet sound did wondrous things to his system.

She shook her head. "Points don't come free around here."

"You really know how to make a man work, don't you?"

Her expression glinted with mischief. "I was raised on a working ranch with a full crew of men. I know how to make a man earn his keep."

"I'm getting that." What would it take to earn her? He didn't yet know for sure, but he aimed to find out.

"Speaking of work," she went on as she picked up her fork and took a bite of the chicken casserole, "I managed to get through the 2005 tax year today."

Brody's concentration locked on the fork, on the way her lips closed around the tines, and his cock flexed in his jeans. He wanted those lips wrapped around his shaft, wanted his hand buried in the back of her hair, fisting the satiny strands to control her head movement as he fucked her mouth.

Swallowing a hungered growl, he dug into the food on his plate even though he knew it wouldn't do a bit of good at satisfying his appetite. "What happens next?"

"I move on to the 2006. I did some more checking. The IRS implemented a new Voluntary Disclosure Initiative in February that gives offenders until August thirty-first to file all amended returns and pay all taxes and accompanying fees. Unless you object, I'm thinking you should wait until I complete each year and file them all at once. That way you'll be able to see the bigger picture instead of it trickling in a little at a time."

"You won't get any objections out of me. That's what I hired you for."

"Good. Then I'll continue with 2006 tomorrow." She dropped her gaze, not looking at him as she continued to eat.

Brody remembered his mother's moods well. He helped raise his three sisters and became the one they came to more often than not, especially after his mother passed away. He knew as well as he did his own name when a woman had something on her mind. He also

knew women well enough to realize Sabrina would clue him in on whatever plagued her thoughts when she got ready. That didn't make waiting for her delicate mouth to spill all any easier. A silence fell between them and stretched on far too long for his comfort. He started to break it, but her head came up, her gaze slamming into his, and he congratulated himself on his patience, no matter how tenuous it started to get.

"I've been thinking about your proposition."

Brody paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. "You mean my proposal."

"I think, given the circumstances, proposition is a better word. It will be a sort of business arrangement, after all, though I still for the life of me, can't figure out your reason for entering into the, shall we say, contract."

"You'll understand it in time."

Sabrina waved that away. "Whatever. The thing is, if we're married, even for business purposes, we must be exclusive."

"I agree." Brody struggled to sound calm and not let her see the party kicking off in his head. "I'm not seeing anyone. Are you?" Something indefinable moved through her eyes. He put down his fork, leaned over his plate, and watched her more closely.

"Honesty is another must," she told him. "The standard rules and limitations need to apply if for no other reason than to keep the peace for however long it drags out."

"I agree." She didn't believe him. That's where the indefinable look in her expression came from. She flat out didn't believe anything he was saying right now. Forget that she didn't think the marriage between them would be real. He would make her see the truth of that in due time. Apparently, he would also need to take on the task of earning her trust as well as her love.

"Good." Sabrina heaved a sigh. "I'm glad that's settled. Not that I'm agreeing yet, mind you, but I felt like we needed to set some stipulations. Don't you?"

“Absolutely.” Brody considered her for a long moment before speaking again. “What is it you think I’m hiding from you, Sabrina? What are you thinking I’ve done since I proposed to you?” He didn’t care what she wanted to call it. He freaking *proposed*, no matter how lame it had been, and he damned well intended to call it that every chance he got.

Sabrina sipped from her glass of iced tea, studying him over the rim. “Nothing since. Carlotta did mention you had a date a few days before. I simply didn’t want your *proposition* to screw that up for you.”

“The date was the night before I proposed to you, not a few days before.”

“I sit corrected.”

“Jealous?”

“Why would I be?”

Why indeed? Brody leaned back in his chair, careful to keep his expression blank. He knew better. He all but felt the jealousy coming off her in waves, and when a woman got like that, it meant only one thing. He was well on his way to having her mind, body, and soul already.

Chapter Seven

Sabrina snagged the office phone when it rang, tucking it between her cheek and shoulder as she continued to tap at the keyboard. “Thank you for calling Mason Tax Service. This is Sabrina speaking. How may I help you?”

“Are you with a customer?” Lucille’s greeting came in a friendly, but no-nonsense manner.

Sabrina saved the file she had been working on and eased back in her swivel chair, grasping the receiver in one hand so she could straighten her neck. “No, it’s been a ghost town today.” Two hours down. She prayed to the patron saint of customers she wouldn’t sit for the next six without a soul to keep her busy.

“Good. Call Rita and tell her to come in at noon. She’ll be finishing out the day and working the weekend.”

Sabrina knew she probably looked like a fish out of water to the Walmart patrons walking by, the way her mouth kept opening and closing as she struggled to formulate a response to her boss’s order. “Why? What—?”

“You should’ve told me that you and Brody Holt hit it off on more than a professional level.” Lucille cut off Sabrina’s stammering, her tone teasing. “You definitely should’ve told me you planned to take a weekend trip.”

“But...but, we didn’t hit it off. What weekend trip?” Sabrina’s head spun. She couldn’t seem to grasp rational thought through all the sudden confusion.

“He’ll be there in an hour to pick you up.” Lucille continued spooning out information as if Sabrina hadn’t said a word. “Call Rita in, Sabrina, or do I need to do it myself?”

“No, I’ll do it.” Sabrina managed to catch that quickly enough. Since she had her little powwow session with Rita in the Walmart manager’s office, they seemed to have settled into a fairly decent working understanding. The last thing she needed was for that to change now.

“I figured you would say that.” Sabrina heard the smile in Lucille’s voice. “Tell her if there are any problems this weekend to call me. Enjoy your time off, and I’ll talk to you on Monday.”

Lucille hung up before Sabrina could utter another word. Fit to be tied, she put down the phone more forcefully than she intended only to yank it up again. She didn’t stop to think as she consulted the list of numbers taped to the desk and dialed Rita. Her employee’s response didn’t help to perk her mood. Rita always complained she wanted more hours and griped when she got them.

“Ungrateful twit,” Sabrina muttered, hanging up the phone. She quickly shot a glance right and then left, letting out a small sigh of relief when she noted that no one heard her. “Controlling, infuriating cowboy,” she added the next instant when her rapidly growing anger settled on its true source.

Sabrina knew precisely what Brody planned. She had been off her period for a full week but hadn’t found the time to get to the courthouse. Not that she ever actually agreed to his proposition in the first place. The whole marriage of convenience thing seemed so historical to her, like something out of an old-school Harlequin novel. The difference between her and the many heroines who played out their roles in fiction through the years came in her refusal to hope her marriage to Brody would turn out anything like theirs always did. She knew full well the difference between fiction and reality, damnit.

A trumpet tune sounded from her cell phone lying nearby on the desk, alerting her to a new text message. She grabbed the phone,

swiped her thumb over the touch screen to unlock it, and glared at the message.

Did Lucille call u?

“Did Lucille call you?” Sabrina mocked aloud as she thumbed up the onscreen keyboard and started to type her reply message. *Yes, & noticed u didn’t.*

Mad? Brody’s response came instantly back.

Fuming!

Reason I didn’t call.

Sabrina hung her head. Damn the man for making her laugh when she was so pissed at him. Her phone trumpeted again.

Uve got hour to calm down. Then headed to ch.

Apparently he decided it didn’t matter if she agreed or not. They were obtaining the marriage license from the courthouse and getting married this afternoon. “This domination stuff isn’t going to cut it, boy,” she said aloud, ignoring the simmering flames in her system for a whole different sort of domination out of him, as she typed in her response. *Need to go home and change first.*

Sry, no time. Ch closes 430. Will have to change in car.

She didn’t bother to point out her place was less than ten minutes from Walmart, and he intended to pick her up a good four hours before the county courthouse closed. *Nothing to change into.*

Will bring something with. See u soon.

Sabrina didn’t bother to reply. She already knew it wouldn’t do her any good.

* * * *

At precisely twelve o’clock, Brody whipped the Mustang into the Walmart parking lot, sliding up to the sidewalk in front of an awaiting Sabrina. He pulled up the emergency brake, set the five-speed shifter in neutral, and left the engine purring as he hopped out. “Ready?”

Sabrina's answer came in a sidelong look that made his dick instantly hard. "My, you do clean up nice."

Hell, if he had known wearing dress pants and a button-up shirt would get him that kind of appreciation out of her he would've put the getup on weeks ago.

"I'm impressed." She walked beside him as he rounded the front of the car and pulled open the passenger door for her.

He caught her chin before she could bend to slide inside and pulled her face up to look at him. "It's not every day a man gets married. Thank God," he added and watched in lustful fascination as her lips uncurled in a dazzling grin.

"Just because I'm smiling doesn't mean you're off the hook. You're one infuriating man."

Brody leaned in and stole a quick kiss. "You can fuss at me in the car. We're short on time. Now get in." He waited for her to settle herself in the seat, then closed the door and double-timed it back around to the driver side.

"Is your clock broken?" she asked when he put the car in first gear, released the emergency brake, and punched the gas.

Brody glanced at the dashboard clock. "It looks like it's working fine to me."

"So it does," she agreed, reaching for the "oh shit" handle above her head. "It also says it's only a little after twelve. Why exactly are we in such a rush?"

"I've got a preacher who agreed to marry us today, but we have to be there no later than four." He shot her a look. "When is the last time you did anything at the county courthouse?"

She chewed her lip for a moment. "When I bought my car. It took me over three hours to get the title and registration straight."

"And you think getting a marriage license will be any faster?"

"Probably. There can't be that many fools in the Chattanooga area looking to get hitched this weekend."

"I'm not willing to take the chance." Brody looked pointedly in the rearview mirror. "The dress I brought for you is in the backseat."

"I'm not changing in this little car."

"I guess I should've brought the truck."

"Ha, ha. You can give me five minutes in the courthouse bathroom to change after we get the license. It's the least you can do after springing this on me without any notice."

"I gave you an hour," Brody argued. He had known better than to give her a second longer than that. "Hell, Sabrina, it was the only way I could get you out of that place early enough to get this done."

"You could've asked me."

"Right. That would've worked." He saw in his peripheral vision when she crossed her arms and glared at him. It never boded well when a woman did that.

"I'm learning something about you really fast, and I can't say I'm liking it very much."

"That would be?"

"You've got a controlling streak."

"When it's necessary, I do." Brody nodded. He learned really fast, too. He was pretty sure the flames he saw flickering wickedly in the depths of her eyes came from a need for domination she kept carefully hidden. They would get to that soon enough. He didn't intend to control her outside of bed, but he would at least long enough to get inside her heart and make her realize she loved him.

"Just so you know, I'll let you get away with it some, but you use it too often and we're going to have problems."

Brody had to work not to smile. "Duly noted." As long as she let him take control where it really mattered, they were in business.

* * * *

Sabrina skimmed her palms down her sides, turning this way and that, studying her reflection in the blurred mirror over the sink in the

courthouse bathroom. She couldn't deny the man had taste. Brody had chosen a simple knee-length dress with a heart-shaped neckline and fitted waist in a pastel pink for her to wear. Though she didn't normally wear pink, she silently admitted the color complemented her dark hair and tanned complexion. He even thought to bring her shoes. She wondered over that as she looked down at her feet clad in a pair of simple matching pumps. If she didn't know better, she would swear one of his sisters or even Carlotta picked out the ensemble.

"But he promised not to tell a soul," she told her reflection. "And therein lies just another of the man's many surprises." Surprises that she knew were going to end up being the death of her resolve.

"Yep, you're in real trouble, girl." She took a deep breath and let it out slow. Nerves made her stomach queasy, and her heart beat a little more rapidly than normal. Did all brides feel this way on their wedding day?

"You're stalling?" She closed her eyes, took another deep breath, and forced herself to put one foot in front of the other as she headed for the bathroom door.

She spotted him in an instant, leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the narrow hall, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his slacks and one shiny booted foot propped on the wall behind him. Pure sex and unadulterated need slammed into her in a rush. In a few hours this man would belong to her. At least long enough to make and have a baby. She wouldn't kid herself into hoping for more. No doubt about it, she was destined to get burned. Her only comfort came in knowing that, in the end, she would forever have a part of him in her child.

He straightened, total male appreciation flashing in his face as he held out a hand. "You look beautiful." His husky tone, coupled with the tenderness in his touch, made her throat tight.

She managed a quick smile but didn't say anything as he led her out of the courthouse and through the parking lot to the car. He held the passenger door open for her, waited until she settled in the seat,

then closed the door and got in behind the wheel. The engine purred to life, but he paused with his hand on the gearshift and angled a look at her.

“You’re quiet.”

Sabrina swallowed. She couldn’t tell him the truth. She couldn’t bring herself to say how badly she wished the vows they were about to share were real. It didn’t make sense in any case. How could she want to marry a man she’d known only a few short weeks? How could she have fallen in love with him already?

“I’m a little nervous, I guess.”

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“No. Are you?”

“No.”

“Good.”

He watched her for the span of several heartbeats before he finally put the car in first gear and eased out of the parking lot. They fell into silence as he drove through the downtown streets then maneuvered the back country roads near Holt’em Up Ranch.

“What was the point in my taking the weekend off?” she asked when the silence became too much. He had said he lined up a preacher to marry them. She could only surmise the preacher lived in the boonies, farther out of town than the ranch, seeing as how they passed it several miles back. “Lucille said you told her we were going out of town.”

“No, I told Lucille we were taking a weekend trip.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Out of town implies exactly that. A weekend trip can be anywhere or nowhere at all.”

“Sounds like you’re playing with details to me. Either way, why do I need the weekend off?” The sidelong glance he slid her way lit a fire in her womb and made her panties wet.

“I’ll spell it out for you when we get there.”

* * * *

The anticipation of that promise stayed with Sabrina through the ceremony and conversation that followed among her and Brody and the preacher and his wife. The heat and compassion she imagined seeing in Brody's eyes as he recited the general marriage vows for formality's sake made the hope she was trying desperately to keep at bay rise anyway.

If only he meant those sacred words.

If only the tender kiss he planted on her lips to seal the vows came from his heart rather than his loins.

If only it hadn't all been a show for the preacher and his wife.

If only.

Sabrina thought she deserved an Oscar after her performance at the preacher's house. Pretending to be the bubbling, blushing new bride when her heart and mind were in utter turmoil took an acting skill she hadn't known she possessed. Perhaps she should've entertained those second thoughts, put on the brakes, and threw the whole arrangement into reverse.

It's a little too late do to the right thing now. The country beat of the old Tanya Tucker tune drawled in her head as Brody pulled the Mustang into the barn at Holt'em Up Ranch. Intrigued as much as confused, she pushed aside all her misgivings and inner hem-hawing and got out of the car before Brody got the chance to come around and open her door.

"So, by your definition, a weekend trip can be nowhere at all, especially when that nowhere is somewhere that isn't my normal place of residence. Is that it?" The furrow that etched itself between his brows as he mulled over her question nearly made her giggle.

"I don't have a clue in hell what you just said," he finally admitted. "How about I answer all that this way? We're parking the Mustang because the truck handles back-wood roads a lot better. We

aren't spending the weekend here. I have another destination in mind."

"That requires a truck to get to."

"Is that a problem?"

"I guess not."

"Good. Hop in, and I'll be back in a second."

He left her to get in the truck while he disappeared into the main house. He returned moments later with a duffle bag he slung into the truck bed before climbing in behind the wheel. "Ready?"

"For what I don't know, but yes, I'm ready."

He grinned, slow and easy, and her heart did a leisurely roll. "Come here, Mrs. Holt." He snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her against him, planting a kiss on the top of her head before putting the truck in gear with his free hand and backing out of the drive.

Sabrina's eyes misted, and she blinked rapidly to keep the tears from falling. She understood his intent, recognized his efforts to make her wedding day special for her, to ease her discomfort no matter the whys behind their decision to get hitched in the first place. It touched her far more than she wanted it to.

Less than ten minutes of a bumpy, wood-lined road brought them to a stop outside a cottage right out of a fairy tale. She couldn't help but shake her head as Brody got out of the truck, took her by the hand to help her out, and then scooped her into his arms.

"Will this do?"

"It's perfect."

"I figured we could have a quiet weekend out here."

"Then it's yours, I take it."

"It is. We'll save the big honeymoon for after the real wedding."

"I wasn't expecting any kind of honeymoon at all, so thank you."

Something passed through his expression that she couldn't define and didn't dare try. He shook his head, and she felt his sigh beneath the palm she splayed on his chest. "You really should stop

underestimating me, darlin’.” He stopped on the front porch, shifting her weight in his arms so he could reach for the knob. The door opened with a quiet creak, and Sabrina gasped at what she saw.

“You’re telling me.”

Chapter Eight

He had decorated the cabin fit for a princess.

Sabrina gaped at the candles strategically placed on every available flat surface and lit to provide just the right amount of light for the matchbox cottage room. A small two-seater table sat in a far corner, holding two flutes flanking a bucket no doubt filled with ice to chill the bottle of champagne perched inside. A bed, large enough to make her belly do a delicious flip-flop, occupied the center of the space, the surface scattered with rose pedals. Amidst the pedals, she spotted a lace and silk teddy laid out for her. The sight sent bolts of electric excitement sizzling through her system.

She turned slowly to find him watching her, his expression unreadable beyond the almost palpable lust pumping off him in waves. “Carlotta did an amazing job.”

She expected him to chuckle, to shake his head, to make some move that would break the thick sexual tension settling in the room. She didn’t expect his serious, gruff response that raked over her like sensual claws.

“Carlotta had nothing to do with this. I get full points this time. Our marriage is supposed to remain a secret, remember?”

“Right. You did all this?” She spun back around, taking in everything one more time. “I definitely have to stop underestimating you.” The half-smile he wore when she faced him again was more dangerous than comforting. Her heart sped. Her breath lodged in her throat. Hunger exploded within her, very nearly drawing a soft whimper from her lips before she could stop it.

He didn't speak. He didn't have to. His expression and measured predatory movement conveyed his intentions clearly enough. He kept his gaze locked on hers as he closed the distance between them.

Sabrina started to quiver, from fear or excitement she couldn't quite tell. She took an involuntary step back.

"What's the matter, Sabrina?" The danger she sensed in him before sounded in his tone now. Rippled awareness and dark sensations traveled down her spine.

Sabrina gulped and licked her lips. She watched an inferno rage in his eyes as he followed the path of her tongue with his gaze. "I'm not quite sure. Nervous, I guess."

He yanked her against him, and the breath rushed from her lungs. Her hardened nipples pressed flush against his broad chest. He delved a hand in her hair, fisting it at her nape and pulling her head back. The forcefulness elicited another surprised gasp from her parted lips even as a wicked thrill made her head spin. His gaze imprisoned hers as she stared back at him with equal parts excitement and trepidation.

"Then we better give you something else for your system to focus on." His kiss conquered her senses, demanded her surrender, and drove her beyond the brink of insanity. It frightened her even as it excited her beyond her wildest imaginings. He eased back, his gaze dancing over her face and a satisfied quirk tilted his lips.

"Thought so."

"Thought so what?"

"That I could be myself with you." She didn't quite understand what he meant until he added, "It works both ways, Sabrina."

She could be herself with him. She could let go of things within her she kept bottled away her entire life. She could let the submissive inside her free.

She nodded, knowing even as she allowed herself the pleasures she always dreamed of but never quite experienced that her world would be torn apart.

* * * *

A primitive possession roiled through Brody's mind as he watched Sabrina take in what he said, watched her accept the meaning, and lastly, felt her surrender. He knew women, how to read them, how to pleasure them. He made it a point to learn all he could about what made a woman tick, the thoughts going through her pretty head, and the needs warring in her sultry body.

Many things about Sabrina Gibson remained a mystery. Brody looked forward to spending the next sixty years unraveling the marvels that constructed the woman in his arms. The tightened in his chest at the thought reaffirmed the already strengthening knowledge that even a few months with her, even watching her belly grow round with his child, would never be enough.

"Take off your dress." Lust made his voice low and tight. He released her abruptly enough that she stumbled back a half-step. She stared at him wide-eyed, hesitantly. Damn, the animal she set free inside him with that moment of pure surrender had been caged far too long. He raked a hand down his face, battling an inner war for a control he always held secure. "I want to watch you undress this time."

A look of veiled hunger moved through her expression, supplying him with all the indication he needed of her willingness to obey and to be pleased. Her hands shook ever so slightly as she started to remove her dress, slowly peeling away the material, revealing smooth, creamy flesh a microinch at a time until he felt the beast within him prepare to growl. The dress fell in a pool around her feet, leaving her standing in a bra made of sheer lace and matching panties that sent his blood pressure skyrocketing high enough to orbit the moon.

"Sweet Jesus." Heat built in his body, traveled through his nervous system and settled in his balls. Emotions he recognized as

sudden but true swirled inside him, making him weak, making him want. “All of it. Take everything off, Sabrina.”

A spark of innocence he never noticed flickered in her eyes as her fingers closed around the tiny plastic clasp holding the cups of her bra together. He swore he heard the faintest pop as the plastic gave and her breasts fell free. She shrugged the straps off her shoulders, let the bra fall to the floor behind her, and flattened her thumbs on her sides. She dragged her thumbs down in a mouthwatering move that outlined her perfect curves. When her thumbs reached the barely there straps of her g-string, she snagged hold and took the lace down as her hands continued their descent.

Brody broke out in a sweat. Air. It felt like the oxygen in the cottage was steadily seeping out the cracks. He freed the buttons of his shirt, tossed it to the floor as he dragged his gaze slowly up her naked flesh, lingering on her pert breasts. They started to rise and fall with her quickening breaths, her nipples taut points his lips burned to capture and please.

He toed off his boots even as he reached for his belt. She made a sound, the faintest whimper that bordered a plea, and his attention jumped to her face. She didn't meet his gaze but watched him nervously as he loosened his belt. Her eyes widened as he unfastened the buckle and set to work on the button and zipper.

“This isn't going to be like the pond, is it?” Her face flushed as he shucked his slacks down, kicked them aside, and moved toward her.

“Is that how you want it?” He knew better. She enjoyed their little exploration in the pond, but she burned for something more. He saw the dark needs she kept hidden from the world, the wicked desires to be pleased hard and driven to the brink of orgasmic madness.

Sharp teeth bit into her lip, and she shook her head, a quick flash of embarrassment dancing through her eyes.

Brody took her hands, pulled her to the foot of the bed, and guided her to stand between his legs as he sat on the edge. “You know what I've been dying to see, to feel since the moment I saw you?” He gave

her hands a gentle tug, and she folded easily, sinking to her knees right where he needed her. He cupped her chin and grazed the pad of his thumb over her slightly parted lips. “You bite your lip a lot. Did you know that? You do it especially when you’re thinking. I can’t tell you what it does to me.”

Her tongue peeked from her mouth for a lick before her teeth drew down on her bottom lip. Something sparked in her face, and he immediately defined it as defiance with a swirl of mischief. It almost made him chuckle, but the sound turned to a guttural growl when her lips tilted the slightest fraction in a knowing grin.

“Who would’ve thought you were hiding a vixen beneath all that practicality and professional polish?”

“You thought it.” She got him there. All shyness seemed to dissipate as her gaze dropped pointedly to his cock standing at rigid attention a mere fraction from her sultry mouth. “And you apparently decided to test your theory.”

Brody moved a hand to the back of her neck, cupping her nape and swallowing another growl as excited anticipation flittered through her eyes. “I’m not done testing it yet, darlin’. Suck my cock, Sabrina. Let me feel those pretty lips lock around my shaft.”

He didn’t need to use his hold on her neck to draw her forward. She closed the distance between his dick and her mouth all on her own. He knew the sound she made at the first contact of her lips to his cockhead would be forever etched in his memory. Sweet God above, she would destroy him, but what a way to go.

She licked the crest, a tentative swipe followed immediately, but a more assured one. The tip of her tongue delved into the little slit to lick away the bead of pre-cum, and his hips gave an involuntary jerk. Brody turned his hand over, fisting her hair, but allowed her to remain in control for now. He wanted to see what she would do with his cock. He expected hesitation, even for the shyness to return. Instead, she blew his mind right out of his head.

She filled her mouth with his cock, tonguing the sensitized underside as she swallowed every bit of his length she could manage. Her delicate fingers curled around the base of his dick, applying enough pressure to send a tingling surge of brutal pleasure through his cock and balls. His head fell back, eyes closing as he fought to breathe.

“God, yes, Sabrina. Suck me hard. So hot. So wicked.” His fingers tightened in her hair, his free hand splaying on the top of her head as she started to bob. She hummed, the vibration eliciting a hunger inside him stronger than anything he’d felt before. He forced his head up, wanting to see her, needing to watch as she swallowed his dick. The sight carved another permanent spot in his memory, topping the charts as the most beautiful thing he could think to witness.

Sabrina angled her head, looked up at him from beneath long lashes. Her eyes glowed with arousal and supreme delight with that spark of mischief he noted moments before. She held his gaze as she sucked him deep and hard, her cheeks hollowing to create a vacuum that milked every ounce of sanity and release from his body. Her free hand cupped his balls, massaged his sac, and she bobbed faster, not giving him a chance to hold back or maintain control.

“Oh, hell, yes.” He managed a breath through gritted teeth a nanosecond before hot jets of semen burst from his cockhead into her hungry mouth. He held her head in place, hands tightening in her hair as explosions of pure ecstasy shattered his system.

Sabrina didn’t ease up. Though he held her head steady, she maintained full control of her devilish lips and tongue. She worked them, licking his shaft and flexing her lips until she drank him dry.

Brody let her go as he fell backward onto the bed, chest heaving as he struggled to catch his breath. He grunted once, in protest or gratitude he wasn’t quite sure, when he felt the warm paradise of her mouth leave his cock. The bed dipped on either side of his hips as she straddled his waist and scooted onto the bed. He opened one eye to

find her hovering over him, moisture glistening around swollen lips tilted in a temptress's smirk.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Her voice purred with female triumph.

Brody needed to kiss her. It didn't matter that remnants of his cum dampened her lips or that the taste of his release lingered inside her mouth. He caught her neck, pulling her down and tracing her smile with the tip of his tongue before he delved into the sticky sweet warmth of her mouth.

* * * *

Sabrina's arms on either side of Brody's shoulders stopped supporting her weight. Her elbows buckled. Her body melted until she lay on top of him, curves molding to hard planes as he consumed her soul with his kiss. She tingled from her mouth to her toes, her pussy flaming for his cock, drenched and ready to bathe him in her juices.

"Did you?"

His gruff question took a moment to penetrate the arousal clouding her mind. She didn't want to talk anymore. She didn't want to think. She only wanted to feel, to touch, and to fuck.

"Did you enjoy yourself, Sabrina?" He used his hold on her nape to turn her head as he nipped and licked his way over her jaw to the sensitive flesh beneath her ear. "Did you like sucking my cock and drinking my cum?"

"Yes." She couldn't deny it. The feel of his unyielding cock between her lips, the thick semen that jetted from the slit created sensations of delight within her that brought her to the edge of her own release. She closed her eyes as he tongued her lobe into his mouth, gave it a not-so-gentle bite and then licked away the sliver of pain. "I want more."

He groaned and dipped his tongue in her ear drawing goose pimples to the surface of her flesh. She shivered. He chuckled. "You're going to get more."

His hands closed around her waist, and he lifted her as if she weighed little more than a feather. Before she could wrap her mind around his intent, he positioned her on her belly beside him on the bed and straddled the backs of her thighs. She felt his cock already hard and insistent, pressing against her heated flesh.

Sabrina turned her head, wanting to see him but finding her vision blocked by rose petals and her own shoulder. She puffed out a breath, clearing the petals from her sight, and lifted her head. One large palm skated up her back, closed over the back of her head, and pushed her down again.

“Right here. Relax.”

Dominance and tender need combined in his touch and tone to ignite a riot of confused sensations in her system. He reached for a nearby pillow and used it to support her hips, then curled his fingers around her wrists and guided her arms up, shackling her hands in one of his above her head.

The weight of his body added a wicked thrill to the turmoil of ecstasy brewing inside her. Naked, penned, and at his mercy, Sabrina closed her eyes as his heated breath met her shoulder a nanosecond before he licked and bit. She arched at the collision of pain and pleasure as he marked the back of her shoulder. A strangled sound of plea and need escaped her as he worked to spread her legs enough to accommodate his cock while still straddling her thighs and thrust inside.

“God, yes.” His forehead came down on her shoulder as he buried his cock inside her sodden pussy to the hilt. “Damn, you’re so tight and hot.”

Sabrina lifted her hips, pressing back against him, grinding against his pelvis. To her intense delight, the move drove him deeper inside her and pulled a ragged, animalistic sound from them both.

“That’s it, darlin’.” His breath fanned the side of her face as he held her down, wrists shackled by one of his larger hands, body

penned by his heavier, broader one. “Grind my cock. Christ, Sabrina, you feel good.”

She felt great! This night wasn’t turning out to be anything like she had expected. It was wilder, hotter, crossing the line of simple baby-making sex and hurling her into a realm of ecstasy she had never known. Naughty excitement raged within her, stealing her common sense and leaving her completely at his mercy. He set loose sensations inside her she had kept trapped her whole life. They spilled from her now, drawing sensual cries from her lips, compelling her body to move all it could beneath his weight, offering him everything and taking all he would give.

“Brody.” She trembled as feathers of pleasure caressed her womb, tightening her inner muscles around his cock like a fist. Her fingers dug into her palms, arms taut with the need to be free of the vice holding them down. She wanted to touch him, to see him, to watch as he fucked her, as he gave her the seed that would hopefully spawn the life they set to create.

He levered his lower body up and paused. His free hand fisted her hair and tugged as he leaned over until they were face to face. Her eyes closed on their own accord when he impaled her again in a single, quick thrust.

“Open your eyes. Look at me when I’m inside you.”

The desperation in his voice surprised her. She forced her eyes open and locked gazes with him.

“Who is inside you right now, Sabrina?”

“You are.” Talons of fiery, sinful hunger clawed at her breasts, her pussy, and her soul. “God, Brody. Please.”

He repeated the move, a quick retreat of his cock from her flaming channel, a rapid return that brought her hips off the pillow supporting them to meet his thrust and draw him deeper inside. Dazed, confused by the pleasure, torn apart by the knowledge that with each push he didn’t just enter her body, but her heart as well, Sabrina closed her eyes again despite his command.

“I can’t stand this,” he said harshly. “I need to look at you.”

Sabrina whimpered as her body protested his retreat. He withdrew his cock from her clenching pussy and rolled off of her. Before she fully registered the absence of his warmth, she found herself being flipped, lifted, and scooted. When he finally settled her, they sat on the edge of the bed with her straddling his lap. He held her there, poised with his cock pressing the swollen folds of her pussy, his gaze one of pure possession and dominance.

“Much better.” His lips tilted in a half smile as he used his hold on her waist to draw her down. He entered her far slower than before, the engorged head of his cock parting her feminine lips, spreading her sodden hole and inching inside with a tenderness that stole her breath. He stopped only when her eyes started to close, his fingers giving her sides a warning squeeze.

Sabrina held his gaze, ignoring the slivers of embarrassment that tingled in her cheeks, enjoying the eroticism that danced across sensitive nerve endings as he continued to fill her. Her hands closed on his shoulders, nails biting into flesh as she opened her legs wider, taking his cock as deeply as she could get it, and started to gyrate.

“Mother fu—” He cut off the curse as his head fell back on his shoulders, hips moving in time with hers, hands holding her so tightly she knew she would be bruised when this ended.

Dear God, she didn’t want it to end.

“Easy, darlin’.” He growled, hips stilling, cock buried to the hilt but unmoving.

She didn’t want easy, didn’t want slow. She wanted him out of control. She wanted his hunger and possession. She dipped her head, nuzzling his neck and licking at the corded muscle straining from his attempt to hold himself in check. He shivered when she nipped the muscle, groaned when she delved her hands in his hair, fisted and pulled.

“No.” Agonizing need clawed at her. “I want you. All of you. Be yourself with me, Brody.”

His head came up, eyes blazing with lust and desire. His hands slipped beneath her bottom to cup her ass. "Ride me."

An arrow of devilish fear sliced through her at the command. She pushed down with her knees, lifted her hips, and let herself drop. The penetration so deep and rapid yanked a ragged scream from her throat. Pleasure, a dart of pain, and intense ecstasy whipped through her system as she gyrated and rode his cock.

"Like that?" She already knew the answer. Yes, definitely like that. He lifted his hips to meet her movements, plunging in and drawing out, working her spasming muscles until the orgasm built to mind-blowing proportion.

One hand slid from her ass cheek, a finger slipping between to graze over her virgin anus, and she would've stilled at the shock if he gave her the choice. His continued movements, the possession in his gaze, the feel of his finger inching its way inside her back entrance took away all thought and controlled her very being.

The orgasm burst from her in a riot of colors and sensations that made her scream and go wild in his embrace. Her body tensed and jerked, inner muscles convulsing, gripping desperately at his cock still plunging rapidly into her pussy as the fire and pleasure washed out of her. She heard him grunt with his own release, felt his hot semen mix with hers, and still he didn't stop. He pulled his finger free of her anus, wrapped his arms around her waist, and rolled until she lay flat on her back, legs spread wide around his pistoning body. He fucked her, mindless and reckless, hard and in total control until he brought her straight through one orgasm and over the crest of another. Only then did he collapse on top of her, his body heaving in his struggle for breath.

* * * *

Sabrina floated somewhere between a blissful paradise and a dark hole of knowledge that she was falling in too deep. How could she

survive Brody now? Her body pulsed with the aftermath of their lovemaking. She would call it that in her own mind, at least. It had been sex, yes. Raunchy, hot, destructive sex, but at some undeterminable point she realized it didn't stop there. Whatever he chose to term what they just shared, for her it had been making love.

The knowledge sent a chill through the heat reverberating in her system. How could she go on when he walked away? And he would walk away, just not completely. Understanding that only made it worse. They would make a baby and the marriage would end, but not their association. She would have to face him every other weekend and holiday and two months in the summer when he picked up their child for visitation.

And she already knew every one of those times would rip her to shreds.

A tear leaked from the corner of her eye just as Brody lifted his head from where he'd nestled it in the bend of her shoulder. She turned her head quickly, not wanting him to see the tears, not knowing how she would explain them if he asked.

Brody cupped the side of her face, and she knew he felt the moisture, but he didn't comment. He turned her head to look at him, and the compassion staring back at her tore at another chunk of her heart. He dipped his head, brushing the tip of his nose to hers before covering her mouth in a tender kiss. Her throat tightened in her efforts to hold back more emotions.

Dear God, help me.

A small smile tilted his lips as he pulled back and slid off her. Then she felt herself being lifted again, turned and shifted until she lay with her backside spooned against his front. She couldn't stop the soft giggle any more than she could the contented sigh that followed. She liked the way he so easily picked her up and placed her where he wanted her. She liked more lying with him like this, settling into the security of his arms, feeling the strength of his body wrapped around her.

I'm so doomed.

His fingers danced up her side, his hand skimming over her waist to splay flat on her belly. The gesture felt far more sensual than any sexual caress and sent her heart and mind on another whirlwind of thoughts that would only lead to her demise.

"You think too much." He rested his cheek on her shoulder, the stubble of his jaw abrading the sensitive flesh on the side of her neck. "What's going through your mind?"

She nearly laughed aloud at that. What would he say if she told him the truth? How would he react to the things going through her mind and heart? He'd probably demand an immediate divorce.

"I think I'm in shock." She didn't lie. Shock gripped her belly, put her nerve endings on hyper alert, and left her totally disoriented.

He chuckled, the sound gruff and sexy. "That good, huh?"

Sabrina rolled her eyes. "Come on. You're not the type to need your ego stroked immediately after your cock, are you?"

"When a woman cries out the way you did, darlin', that's all the stroking my ego requires. I figured you were talking about still being in shock because we're married now."

"Oh." Though he didn't hit on the deepest area of the turmoil within her, he chipped at another big part. "I don't think I've made it to the shocked stage there. I think I'm still numb. Maybe tomorrow that'll hit."

"You still want to keep it a secret, though." He said it as more statement than question, and the disappointment she thought she detected in his tone surprised her.

She shifted, turning her head so she could meet his gaze. "Definitely. Think about it. If I'm not pregnant in six months, then we get a quiet divorce and no one will be the wiser. It would be different if we married for love, but there's no reason to stay together otherwise." She paused and frowned, stupidly realizing they really hadn't discussed beyond the point of their six-month time limitation. "Of course, if I do get pregnant then we'll have to figure out what to

do once the baby is born. We can't raise a child in a marriage of convenience, for lack of a better term. That would be worse than raising him or her in a broken home."

"What if it wasn't a marriage of convenience, as you call it?"

Sabrina blinked at him, stunned. Her heart did a slow roll in her chest. Butterflies kicked up in her belly. She ruthlessly gave a silent order for both to settle down. He didn't mean the question the way her needy heart hoped. He couldn't possibly, and yet she dared to wonder. "What else would it be, Brody?"

He stared back at her for so long she didn't think he would respond. She saw so many things swirling in his eyes, things she couldn't allow herself to attempt to sort out.

"We'll figure it out at the end of the six months." He kissed her, a quick peck to her cheek, then laid his head back on the mattress, arms still holding her possessively against him.

Sabrina let a long silence stretch between them until her thoughts started to smash into feelings she was trying her damndest to control or ignore. "You still haven't told me what is in this for you except sex at your disposal." She couldn't see his expression, but she felt him flinch. Or maybe she imagined that, too.

"I've got my reasons," he said evasively.

"I'm sure you do. You're not supposed to keep secrets from your wife." Sabrina tried to go for flippant but knew she failed.

"You're only my wife by legality and convenience as you said."

The cold way he reminded her of that fact sent a chill skating down her spine. "You've got me there. Marrying me isn't keeping you out of a penal institution no one knew you were headed for, right?"

That got her a chuckle out of him. "You could answer that better than I can. Would the IRS take our marriage as a likely reason for not slamming the bars on me for my father's actions?"

Sabrina relaxed back into his embrace, enjoying the way his hand started to caress her from belly to breasts. He was easing the tension

inside her with that simple touch. He was drawing her back from the precipice of doubt and wonderment she'd been teetering on to a place where she could truly ignore all her reservations at least for now.

"You won't need any reasons with the IRS, just money." Could that really be his motive after all? Maybe he was more like his late father than she thought. Maybe she wasn't falling for a hot, sensual, and dominant man she couldn't have, but a gold-digging, conniving liar she really wouldn't want.

"I'm leaning toward Rufus," Brody said after several long beats of silence. "What do you think?"

Sabrina lifted her head again, this time turning her upper body so she could shoot him a confused look. "What's a Rufus?"

His grin came slow and devastating to everything female inside her. "It's not a what. It's a who. Our son. Rufus Ignatius Holt. A good, sturdy, country name, don't you think?"

Sabrina barked a laugh. "You've got to be kidding me."

He lifted a brow. "You got any better ideas?"

"I'm positive I'll think of some."

Chapter Nine

“James Tyler Holt. Now that’s a good, sturdy, country name,” Sabrina told her reflection in the bathroom mirror. “Or Brody William after Brody and my father, and we can call him Billy for short.” She chewed her bottom lip as the sound of the timer on the countertop ticked away the seconds. “John,” she continued to ramble off names, then shook her head. “No, that’s even more common than James and William. Colin. Now there’s a name that’s become more popular but not overly done yet.” She shook her head again. “Na, Brody would never go for that one.”

She turned from the mirror and paced the tiled floor in the matchbox room, wringing her hands with each step. “I’ve got to think of something he’ll go for. Rufus certainly won’t do.” She idly rubbed her flat tummy, not realizing where her hand had landed until the timer dinged.

Sabrina whirled, her gaze instantly flying to the stick lying by the timer on the countertop next to the sink. She gulped, pulse racing as she took a tentative step toward the counter and stopped. She closed her eyes with the next step, fear warring with hope in her system and making her lightheaded.

“For crying out loud, Sabrina, just look.” She forced her eyes open, made her feet take that final step close enough for her to view the tiny screen on the stick. Her knees buckled at the sight of the single blue line. She caught the edge of the counter, taking deep breaths and letting them out slow as the realization hit home. They did it, and it hadn’t taken six months. It barely even took six weeks. She was pregnant.

She glanced down at her belly, circled her palm over the flat flesh, and imagined how it would look, how it would feel in just a few short months. “Wow,” she breathed. “You’re really in there, aren’t you? Well, guess we should go tell your daddy.”

She reached for the door, pausing with her hand on the knob, and tipped her head back, staring at the ceiling for a long moment. Nerves rocked her insides. Hope she knew she had no business feeling wound around her heart. She tamped it all down, forced herself to think logically through it, and opened the door. The heart she fought so desperately to keep steady in her chest did an aroused little thump when her gaze landed on Brody. He lay in the center of her bed, back resting against the headboard, one leg bent at the knee and the other stretched straight. He had removed his boots when he entered her apartment, leaving his feet bare but for a pair of utilitarian white socks. He wore faded jeans with a gray T-shirt lovingly hugging every rippling muscle and inch of delicious flesh.

Would the mere sight of the man ever stop making her head go all wonky and her pussy cream?

She doubted it.

One brow slowly lifted over a questioning eye. “Well?”

Sabrina breathed deep and let it out slow. “Well, if Rachael decides to conform to a practical schedule like her mommy hopes, she’ll be making an appearance in a little less than nine months.”

His grin took a long time to tilt his lips, but when it did, Sabrina felt the effect of the sight ricochet off every erogenous zone in her body and some she didn’t even know were there. “You’re positive?”

She nodded. “Positive.”

His grin faded far more quickly than it had appeared, and her heart sank.

“Rachael?”

Relief crashed into her fear that he’d changed his mind now that it had happened. She let herself laugh with it, needing the humor to calm her conflicting nerves. “It’s better than Rufus.”

“Those home test things, have they gotten advanced enough to tell you what it is, too?”

Sabrina bit the inside of her cheek, wanting desperately to play it out, but knowing she wasn't a good enough liar to tease him. “It didn't tell me anything beyond the fact that I'm pregnant.”

“Then it can still be a Rufus.”

“No, it can't be. We are not naming our baby Rufus.”

“I guess we've got about seven and a half months to duke this one out.”

“I'll win.”

“Are you sure about that?”

No. She learned weeks ago not to be sure about anything when it came to Brody Holt. Instead of giving him the satisfaction of an answer, she glanced at her wristwatch. “I suppose I should call Mom, break the news, and get the wedding plans rolling.”

“Come here.”

She lifted her head at Brody's raspy tone, her gaze slamming into his. Flames erupted from head to toe, needs ramming into wants at the look of hunger in his eyes. She started to argue, but his power over her compelled her to obey. She went to him, climbing onto the side of the bed and walking on her knees until she reached his outstretched arms.

He enveloped her, drawing her in against him and capturing her mouth in a kiss of both possession and desire that sent her senses careening. He made love to her mouth with his tongue, gently licking over her tongue, her pallet, and her teeth until all air felt devoured from her body. His hands roamed her back, her sides, one sliding around between their bodies to cover her breast.

Sabrina moaned, arching into the touch, craving more as her very being responded to him. His other arm tightened around her waist, and he lifted her, settling her onto his lap, not pausing for a second in his delicious assault on her mouth. Then he set to removing her shirt, the backs of his fingers dancing up her flesh as he pulled the material

up. He wrenched his mouth from hers only long enough to pull the shirt higher, stopping when it covered her eyes, using it as a makeshift blindfold as he returned to kissing her. He nipped her lips, dragged his teeth along her jawline, and licked his way down the column of her neck.

Sabrina couldn't think beyond the sudden onslaught of hormones screaming through her system. The pressure built in her center, creaming her pussy and drawing a whimper of need from her swollen lips she couldn't have swallowed if she'd tried.

"Brody." His tongue continued its path down her throat and chest, his hair tickling as he dipped his head farther. She cried out again when his mouth closed on her nipple. His lips felt like rough velvet as he licked the taut bud into his mouth, gave it a quick nip that had her bucking in his embrace, and suckled until her cries turned to moans of pure desperation. "Please."

There was no need for this anymore. He couldn't make her pregnant twice. She wanted to tell him to stop. Dear Heavenly Father, she couldn't keep giving herself to him this way. Every touch, every kiss, every thrust of his cock into her center pushed him further and further into her heart and her very soul. He destroyed another part of her each time he started this because she knew he wanted only this, only sex, and she needed so much more.

Brody misunderstood her plea for him to stop. He lifted her again, this time flipping her onto her back. He pulled the shirt the rest of the way off, and she blinked him into focus, her breath catching in her throat at the carnal desire darkening his eyes.

"I want you, Sabrina." His raspy words moved through her as effectively as his touch over her flesh. He made quick work of her pants and his. Almost before she could register what was happening, she lay naked with her legs spread and his hips poised between her thighs ready to thrust his hard cock inside her begging pussy.

She couldn't resist him, couldn't deny him. She nodded, knowing all the while the moment he entered her she would be one step closer to her doom. She never dreamed dying could be this good.

Her body welcomed him, muscles stretching and clenching to accommodate his cock as he inched inside her. "Brody." She panted, lifting her hips to meet his invasion, wanting him to slam into her, needing the speed, the roughness.

"What do you need, Sabrina? Tell me." He braced the weight of his upper body with his hands on either side of her head as he flexed his cock inside her, stroked her internally, and drove her closer to the edge of sheer madness.

"Harder. Faster." She clung to the hope that it would work. Even when he dominated her, it felt too much like making love, but when he took her this slowly, when he peppered her with tenderness and looked at her the way he did now, it shattered her.

He shook his head. "Not this time."

"You won't hurt the baby." *It's me you'll hurt this way.* Her mind screamed the last as he pushed through the door to her soul with each snail-paced slide into her channel. He made her feel too much, made her senses crazed.

"I won't last if I take you faster." Arousal strained his voice, making it tighter and raspy. "I need you too bad, Sabrina. It feels too good."

His confession surprised her and made her wonder if she unknowingly reached a deeper part of him as he'd done to her.

"Your pussy is gripping my cock like a fist. So tight. So wet."

And maybe she was reading more into his statement than he really meant. Tears burned the backs of her eyes, and she struggled to keep them from falling. She had to remember whatever his reasons for marrying her, for agreeing to get her pregnant, the single motive that likely topped his list was this. Sex at his disposal. She was a submissive who would give him her body whenever he chose to take.

He wanted her body, wanted to fuck her beyond sanity, but he didn't want her heart.

He dipped his head, nipping her sensitive nipple and eliciting a gasp from her that bordered a whimper. Her body blazed out of control, needs colliding with emotions, overwhelming every ounce of her practicality.

"Brody." She stretched her arms as far as she could reach, latching onto his hips as he rocked them in a measured rhythm and still delved deeper inside her. She wouldn't last either. The pressure built, growing claws of pure rapture.

"Come for me, Sabrina. Come with me." The order came in a harsh male groan as he stroked her insides, his cock finding her G-spot and sending her over the precipice of ecstasy. "Fuck, yes!" He jerked with his own release. His face contorted in an expression of pained-pleasure. Then he slowly melted on top of her, still buried deep inside her channel, her inner muscles gripping his cock as the last of the spasms exhausted out of her.

* * * *

"You're pregnant!" Maria Gibson's joy gushed through the cellular waves. "Oh, Sabrina, you can't know how happy this makes me."

Sabrina couldn't help but laugh. "It better make you happy after all your pressuring and ultimatums, Mother."

"It was all because we love you, sweetheart."

"And because you wanted grandchildren." Sabrina flattened her free hand on her belly, imagining how it would feel in just a few short months when it became rounded by the life growing inside.

"Which you and Savannah have now given me."

A long pause filled the line. Sabrina decided to wait it out, letting her mother steer the conversation. She had waited a full week before

making the call, hemming and hawing over how to break the news, what exactly to tell her mother, and how much she should reveal.

“There will be a wedding, won’t there, Sabrina?” Her mother’s tone rang with equal parts uncertainty and hope.

Sabrina had expected the question and figured she would likely get the third degree on her relationship with Brody. It was one of the myriad of reasons she put off calling her folks. She didn’t know how to explain a marriage that would end once the baby was born. She tried calling Savannah for advice, but her sister hadn’t been any help. Savannah was so ecstatic in her new marriage to Brandon, her son and another baby on the way that Sabrina hadn’t been able to broach the subject of the truth behind her relationship with Brody, much less their plans to dissolve the marriage once the baby was born.

“Yes, Mom, there will be a wedding.”

“Before the baby is born, I hope.”

“Before the baby is born.” *It’s the only way he would agree to give me the baby.*

“Fantastic! I should’ve known my most practical daughter would do everything by the book.” Unlike Savannah, who hadn’t married Brandon until after the birth of their first child.

Yep, that’s me, practical Sabrina. Forget about romance. Who needs it? Forget about love and the fairy tale happily ever after Brody seems so set to give every girl in his life except me.

“We should start planning immediately.”

Sabrina only half heard her mother as she rushed on, excitedly jabbering about the impending wedding. The sooner they got it done and over with, the better for her. She expected the next seven and a half months to be filled with the joys of motherhood and fraught with more heartache than any woman ever wanted to feel.

Chapter Ten

Utter madness.

Brody doubted two words in any language could describe the scene at the Holt'em Up Ranch more aptly than utter madness. Women—tall to short, large to small, old to young—scampered across the grounds, setting up enough tables and chairs to seat the entire city of Chattanooga. Everywhere he looked, he saw flowers being draped, stuck, or somehow affixed to something. Strings of lights hung from nearby trees, courtesy of his ranch hands, William Gibson, and the ladder they pulled from the barn. A freaking horse-shaped fountain stood in the center of a makeshift dance floor. The mere thought of dancing made his feet hurt.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Brody shot a glance to his right and found his oldest sister, Megan, standing at his side. “What?”

“All of it, the way they’re transforming the ranch into a wedding paradise.”

“Looks more like a chaotic circus to me,” Brody muttered, but his lips twitched when his sister laughed.

“This coming from the fairy-tale prince.” Megan hooked a hand on his shoulder and used it for leverage to rise to her tiptoes and plant a kiss on his cheek. “Don’t go getting all sour on us now that you’re going to be a taken man.”

Brody slipped an arm around his sister’s waist and pulled her close. “Never. I’m still the same sap you girls turned me into one-by-one the day you were born.” Even sappier now that he’d fallen in love and didn’t know what to do about it. He had hooked the woman he

wanted, planted his seed in her belly, propositioned to hold onto her for the duration, and still couldn't figure out how in the hell to convince her he wanted more.

Megan beamed up at him. "We did a good job of transforming you, too."

A shout from across the way drew their attention. Maria Gibson covered a long distance in a short amount of time, despite the lesser height of her Spanish heritage. She met Carlotta as the other woman stepped out of the back door of the main house from the kitchen.

"Those two hit it off like white on rice," Brody commented, watching as the women conversed in a steady flow of dialogue complete with generous head movements and hand gestures. They talked as if they had been friends half their lives, seeming to know precisely what the other expected, and easily giving in to the other's suggestions.

"Mrs. Gibson reminds you of Mom, doesn't she? Not in physical appearance, of course, but in mannerisms and spirit."

Yes, Maria Gibson reminded Brody a lot of their mother. Cynthia Holt had been a tall, voluptuous brunette. She'd been a definite contrast to Maria Gibson's much shorter, more average physique. Mannerisms and spirit, however, could've made them twins.

"If Mom were here, we would probably have a female set of the three stooges on our hands when she got together with those two." The image the idea created made his throat tight and called upon an emptiness he tried not to recognize too often.

Megan nudged him, bumping her shoulder into his arm. "Have you told her yet?"

Brody blinked down at her, confused. "Told her what?"

"How much you love her." A sly grin unfolded on Megan's lips, her eyes twinkling with a knowing mischief that rang Brody's warning bells.

Brody cocked a brow. "Mrs. Gibson? I just met her. Now why would I want to go and profess my undying love to a married woman I met only a few days ago?"

"Hardy har har." Megan rolled her eyes, but she laughed all the same. "I'm talking about Sabrina, you dope."

"Sabrina?" Brody's confusion deepened for all of a half a second, before he remembered he'd never been able to pull the wool over either of his sister's eyes. They always saw right through him. Megan knew. Somehow she had found out he and Sabrina were already married, that they hadn't tied the knot for love, and that he was now hook, line, and freaking sinker in love with her but hadn't told her.

He heaved a sigh, turning until he fully faced his sister. "How?"

Megan shrugged. "I'm friends with the preacher's daughter."

"How convenient," Brody muttered, not knowing if he should be pissed or worried.

"For me, at least." Megan's grin spread wider before she sobered. "Look, she overheard her father talking the day you and Sabrina got married. She then relayed the news to me." She shrugged. "Simple as pie."

"Who else knows?" He scanned the backyard, his gaze landing on every person scattered around the grounds, wondering how many of them knew the truth. Was it possible the ruse was on him and Sabrina and not on the guests they invited, whom they believed oblivious to the fact that they were already married?

"Not a soul." Megan sounded so confident he believed her. "I threatened Peggy within an inch of her life and exposure of several dirty little secrets I know that would make our happy town frown big on a sweet preacher's daughter. She won't talk. Your secret is safe." She angled her head and narrowed her eyes. "But why the secret, big brother?"

"It's complicated." Brody looked away, his mind reeling. Hell, he could barely remember why they started this arrangement as a secret anymore.

“You’re married.” Megan clicked her tongue and gestured to the yard at large. “Yet, here you are acting as though you’re not, repeating the whole process in a much more elaborate manner, and you haven’t told her you love her because...?”

“She won’t believe me if I tell her.” The truth spilled from his lips before he could bite it back. Fuck it, he needed someone to tell. Why not a sister he always adored? “She thinks I only got into this for the sex and, hell, I don’t know, a portion of her trust fund, I guess.”

“What led her to think that?”

Brody pushed out a hard breath. “Maybe some things I said in the beginning, the way I handled the situation.”

“It sounds to me like you should find a way to set her straight.”

“I’ve been trying. All that sappy crap you girls pounded into my head all those years, it isn’t working with Sabrina.” He raked a frustrated hand through his hair. “If you’ve got any ideas, Megan, I’m all ears because I’m fresh out of everything else.”

“Actually...” Megan tapped a fingernail on her bottom lip, and he could all but see the wheels tumbling in her mischievous mind.

* * * *

Sabrina took several steps forward, spun on her heel, and retraced those exact steps for what likely amounted to the fiftieth time since she entered the guest bedroom on the top floor of the main house at Holt’em Up Ranch. She remembered vividly the last time she paced a room this way. The space then had been much smaller, the room totally different, but the cause could be pinned on one man the same as it could be now.

Brody.

Then she had wrung her hands, waiting out the seconds to find out whether or not he got her pregnant. Now she would like to wring his neck instead. The nerve of that man!

“Alpha, controlling, ornery, caveman cowboy,” she muttered, her steps taking on more force as her temper rose. She turned at the poorly stifled snicker behind her.

“Sorry, Brina.” Savannah gave an obvious and valiant attempt at a straight face but failed miserably. “It’s just funny to hear that sort of stuff coming from you. I’m the one who always complained about cowboys.”

“Right up until the day she married one,” their mother agreed.

Savannah shot Maria a look. “Oh, I still complain about them. Now I just say what I have to say to my cowboy husband’s face.”

“Maybe that’s what you should do, Sabrina,” Megan suggested.

Sabrina studied Brody’s sister. The oldest of the three Holt girls, she instantly pegged Megan as the stronger, more opinionated, more headstrong of the sisters. Sabrina didn’t think it had anything to do with the fact that Megan worked for the Chattanooga Police Department either.

“Maybe what’s what I should do?” she asked, feeling a sliver of caution she couldn’t quite put to a cause.

Megan shrugged before leaning a shoulder against the nearby wall and crossing her arms nonchalantly under her breasts. “Tell your husband, or soon-to-be hubby, if you want to think of him that way, what you have to say to his face.”

A warning bell struck in Sabrina’s head as Megan’s word choices sank in, but Gabrielle started talking and Sabrina let her temper cloud the caution signal.

“Isn’t that the point of writing the vows rather than going with the traditional?” Gabrielle sat perched on the edge of a high-back chair in the corner of the bedroom.

Sabrina shook her head, unable to grasp exactly what Brody’s point was behind this cockamamie idea. “I can’t believe he wants us to write our own vows. Men don’t ever want to do that!”

“Especially not alpha, controlling, ornery, caveman cowboys, right?” Savannah put in with another of her poorly stifled snickers.

"I think it's sweet." Brody's youngest sister, Kayla, gave princess a whole new definition. Sabrina took one look at her china-doll complexion, petite build, and angelic features and wondered how the girl had been born to the Holt family.

Sabrina whirled around and resumed pacing. "I think it's a harebrained idea, and I would love to know where he got it." She didn't mean to be rude. It simply happened. Panic set in the moment she heard what Brody wanted and continued to mount by the second.

"Why is it such a problem, Sabrina?" Megan went for point-blank, sounding more curious and knowing than Sabrina liked to admit.

"Because...because..." Sabrina struggled to come up with a believable explanation without giving away the truth. She couldn't write her own vows because then she would be revealing just how desperately in love with Brody she had fallen. "Because I don't know what to write," she finally blurted lamely.

"That's easy," Kayla proclaimed. "You just say what's in your heart."

Sabrina shot her a sidelong look. "I can't," she admitted, already feeling the doors of doom closing around her.

"Why not, sweetheart?" her mother asked.

Gabrielle broke the seriousness of the conversation when she giggled. Everyone turned to look at her. "Sorry." She held up a hand and bit back her smile. "I just figured what's in her heart right about now might not be fit for public ears."

Savannah joined in the hilarity. "She's pregnant and about to be wed to a truly gorgeous alpha cowboy. Her hormones must be on the brink. Yeah, I'd say you're probably right, Gabrielle."

"Oh, you two are a real laugh riot," Sabrina muttered through gritted teeth.

Megan walked to her, sliding an arm around her shoulder and leaning in to whisper softly enough that only Sabrina would hear. "Take my advice and say how you really feel. You never know when my brother might surprise you."

The twinkle of knowledge in Megan's eyes as she pulled back and met Sabrina's gaze had Sabrina gaping even as hope swelled in her heart.

* * * *

A girl couldn't hope for a more perfect wedding day. Sabrina peeked through the slit in the curtains covering the open window near the back door, tipped her chin back, and scanned the crystal clear sky. A light breeze fluttered inside, skimming over her cheeks. Birds chirped in the distance, combining with the low hum of chatter from the gathered guests seated in the rows of chairs on the lawn. No, a girl couldn't ask for much more on her wedding day, in terms of the weather, at least.

"Gorgeous out there, isn't it?" Savannah asked as she came up to Sabrina's side.

Sabrina sighed and pasted on a smile she doubted would fool her sister. "It's absolutely perfect."

"Mom and Carlotta did a great job at organizing all of this," Savannah commented. "Made Dad happy to be able to kick back on the sidelines with the men and just be a man."

"Being on a ranch like this, surrounded by all he knows, he's in his element here."

"He is that."

Sabrina sighed. "I wish Serena and Susannah could've been here."

"You know they both wanted to be. Serena's got her charity work, and, though she hasn't said as much, I think the clinic is in a bit of trouble now that she's lost the income from her trust fund."

"I hope you're wrong, not that she would tell us if that were the case."

"No, she wouldn't. As for Susannah, she's having too much fun playing mermaid in the Caribbean right now."

“Yeah, can’t imagine a girl wanting to leave a paradise like that for a little thing like a family wedding.” Sabrina might have sounded sarcastic if she hadn’t let her smile widen and become more genuine than any she’d worn that day.

“Especially when it’s the second one in less than a year,” Savannah chimed in with an ear-to-ear grin of her own. Her smile faltered mere seconds later, and her gaze mixed with compassion and concern. “What are you holding back, Brina?”

Sabrina’s throat constricted, from tears or fear she couldn’t quite be sure. She wanted so desperately to tell her sister everything going through her heart, her very soul, but putting voice to it all scared her to bits. She looked back through the part in the curtains but really didn’t see anything outside. She saw only the images in her mind of how she wished today would play out and felt the heartache she would inevitably feel when it didn’t happen.

She shook her head, blinking rapidly. Crying would only ruin the makeup Brody’s youngest sister took close to an hour to apply.

“You don’t have to go through with this,” Savannah said gently. “You don’t have to marry Brody.”

“We’re already married, Vannah.” The words left her on a rushed whisper she couldn’t take back. She closed her eyes and let the rest spill. “We were married before the baby was conceived. It’s the only way Brody would agree to get me pregnant.” Savannah blinked at her, opened her mouth to speak and closed it again. “Stop with the guppy look, will you?”

“You spring that on me, and you don’t expect me to be shocked?” Savannah asked in a hushed shriek. “Brina, why didn’t you tell us?”

Sabrina sighed and told her sister everything, starting from the morning she walked into the Walmart Supercenter to find Brody standing, larger than life, and fifty times as sexy, at her kiosk and ending with now.

“Do you love him, Brina?” Savannah asked when she finished her long-winded tale.

Sabrina nodded. "With all my heart and soul." She hadn't said it aloud until now, hadn't even told Kirk when he threw her an impromptu bachelorette party between just the two of them earlier in the week.

"Have you told him?"

Sabrina shook her head. "I wasn't supposed to fall in love with him. We married for the baby, for the trust fund, for..." What? Even after close to three months and countless hours together, she still didn't have a clue what he saw to gain from their arrangement.

"Hmm, and convincing your heart that you have no business falling for him worked amazingly well, too, didn't it?"

Sabrina narrowed her eyes. "It really isn't necessary to be a bitch right now, Vannah."

Savannah giggled. "All I'm saying is you can't control matters of the heart. Little Miss Always-So-Practical has found herself in a situation that has thrown your life into chaos and no calculator or equation on the planet is going to help you. It's time to fall back on words rather than numbers, sis. You can't marry the man a second time and not tell him what's truly in your heart when you do."

No, she couldn't. Sabrina came around to that knowledge all by herself somewhere in the wee hours of the morning as she pondered desperately over the stupid vows Brody insisted they write themselves. In the end, she devised two sets. One she deemed the coward's way out that would continue to keep her emotions locked in their cage and another that would reveal all. The latter kept her up the rest of the night as fear twisted with needs too strong to define and made her sick to her stomach.

"Will you two quit yammering and pay attention?" Carlotta stepped between them, an arm winding around Sabrina's shoulder and turning her toward the door. The older woman, shorter by a good three inches, stood on her tiptoes and leaned in. "They're ready for you out there. You look beautiful."

Sabrina heard it then, the traditional wedding march in a lovely ensemble of flutes and horns from the sound system outside. She squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and readied herself to face her fate.

Her bridesmaids—Savannah and Brody’s three sisters dressed in soft purple with white ribbons and the unconventional addition of Kirk in his white tuxedo and purple tie—preceded her down the aisle.

Then it was her turn.

Sabrina stood in the doorway, seconds past her cue, her gaze fixated on Brody, who waited with his hands clasped in front of him, the picture of perfect cool. He turned his head, his eyes meeting hers, and her heart stopped.

She couldn’t do this.

She had to do this.

God, help me.

“You’re shaking,” her father whispered as she put her hand in the bend of his arm. He covered her hand with his free one and started to lead her down the aisle.

Embarrassed heat crept into her cheeks. “You know I’ve never cared much for being the center of attention,” she told him out of the corner of her mouth. Not for the first time since all the wedding planning began, she found herself wishing with each step that they had decided to come clean about the fact they were already married so there wouldn’t have been a need for this big shindig.

“Enjoy today, though, baby girl. This is the first most important day of your life.”

The second being the day her baby would be born. Sabrina easily understood that. She heard the hitch in her father’s voice at the same time her attention fell on her mother watching them from the front row. Tears of joy glittered in her mother’s eyes. She realized then that she couldn’t have deprived them of this moment. They wanted the child in her womb. That had been what set the whole wheel in motion. But seeing her getting married, feeling with each step she took she

was walking toward a life with the man she loved, was the true heart of all her parents wished for when they suspended her trust fund.

Her step faltered when they reached Brody. Her pulse pounded through her veins with enough force to make her light-headed. She couldn't hear anything around her, couldn't feel beyond the touch of his hand as her father did his duty of handing the bride off to her groom. The smile that unfolded on Brody's lips came slow and faint and dazzled her soul.

"Dearly beloved."

The preacher's raised voice broke through her shocked system only to deliver another surprise when she realized it was the same preacher who married them the first time. Though she struggled not to let her astonishment show, she figured it must have when the faint smile on Brody's lips turned to a discernible twitch.

Sabrina zoned out as she attempted to control her racing heart and mind. She figured she was managing to do pretty good until Brody started to speak.

"My idea," he said on a heavy sigh. "I had to follow my sister's advice and insist we do this ourselves, didn't I?"

"Second thoughts?" Sabrina asked, tongue in cheek. It helped to see his embarrassment.

"I'll never live this down." He took a deep breath, squeezed her hand and raised his voice. "I suggested we write our own vows because the traditional ones didn't seem to fit, especially since we've already said them once."

Sabrina's gasp got lost in the low murmur of surprise among the guests. Her heart tripped. Her eyes widened a second before she narrowed them suspiciously. What was he up to?

"Keeping secrets, from one another or our families, is no way to start a life together. It's no way to bring our baby into the world. Blackmail isn't a good basis for a marriage either, but I sure used it as a foundation."

Sabrina's head spun. She understood secrets. She kept a truckload of things from him herself. But blackmail? She shook her head, opened her mouth to speak, but he stopped her.

"It's not your turn to speak yet." His eyes twinkled with a hint of humor despite the firmness of his tone. "You wanted a baby for your own reasons. I wouldn't give it to you unless you married me. We were married in secret, kept it from our families on the off chance I couldn't get you pregnant. But here's the thing, I never intended to divorce you, Sabrina. Baby or no baby, trust fund or no trust fund, I've never planned to let you go. I used our baby, the possibility of a baby, and your need for your inheritance to lure you into marrying me because I love you."

Sabrina's jaw dropped as tears blurred her vision.

"I reckon I should've told you long before now."

Sabrina gave a watery laugh and nodded as a tear slipped down her cheek.

Brody shrugged. "I'm banking on it being better late than never. When we say I do this time, it's forever. There aren't any stipulations. There won't be a time frame. There won't be a divorce sometime after Rufus is born."

Sabrina briefly closed her eyes in mock exasperation, unable to let that one pass. "We are not naming this child Rufus," she muttered and heard a few snickers from their family in the front row.

His lips twitched, but his tone and the intense look in his eyes took her breath away. "Sabrina Gibson, I'm claiming you as my wife from this day forward, to have and to hold, to love and cherish for the rest of my life. If you'll have me." His voice dropped to barely above a whisper on the last, only loud enough for her to hear, and those final words welded every sliver of doubt in her soul into a certainty of a love like no other.

She swallowed hard and cleared her throat. The words that came weren't any she had written the night before, but the ones winding around her heart now. "Brody Holt, you are one maddening,

unpredictable cowboy who will no doubt keep me on my toes for the rest of my days. You stole my heart despite my best efforts to guard my emotions, shot down every practical intention I had, and have made me the happiest woman in the universe today. I'll take you and every crazy surprise you dish out and promise to love you for the rest of my life."

Epilogue

Sabrina shut the cover of her laptop and rubbed the back of her neck. Though it took her longer than expected tonight, she could leave the office knowing everything to implement her new plans for her accounting firm were in place and ready to rock. It felt good finally seeing the pieces of her future fitting together like a perfect puzzle once more. A different puzzle than she originally planned, a much better puzzle than she intended.

She smiled as she straightened behind the desk and looked around the office she'd taken over as her own. She hadn't changed much of the décor from the way it looked when Brody's father used the office. She'd shuffled things around on the bookshelves, added her accounting and tax manuals, put in another filing cabinet and added a colorful throw to the back of the sofa sitting along the far wall. It felt right. It felt like hers, she thought, just as everything else did about Holt'em Up Ranch.

"Because it's home." A home, she noted as she angled her head and listened closely, that was currently silent. The realization barely had time to form when she heard a soft knock simultaneously with the door opening.

"Time is up, Mrs. Holt." Brody closed the door behind him as he entered the office, his steps not faltering a bit on his way across the hardwood floor in a direct path to her. "It's quitting time for the day."

"Oh, it is, is it?" Sabrina got to her feet, her arms reflexively lifting to circle his broad shoulders when he reached her and pulled her into an embrace. "Is Rapunzel down for a while?"

Rachael, not Rufus, had been born six months earlier and instantly wrapped Daddy around her delicate finger despite his protests throughout her pregnancy that the baby would be a boy.

“Sleeping like the beautiful princess she is.” He smiled and kissed the tip of her nose. “We had a long talk, and she sweetly agreed to stay that way for a few solid hours so Mommy and Daddy can have some us time.”

“Oh, she did, huh?” Sabrina laughed and laced her fingers in the back of his hair, toying with the strands. “And exactly how did you intend on spending our ‘us’ time?”

She let out an undignified shriek when his hands framed her sides and he lifted her, spun her around, and planted her bottom on the edge of the desk. His hands immediately slid to her thighs, pushing between them and spreading her legs open as he wedged his body against her center.

“How’s this for intentions?” He didn’t stop there, but delved his hands beneath her shirt, taking it off as he dipped his head and captured one breast in his mouth through the material of her bra.

Sabrina’s back bowed, her chest thrusting out to find more of the devilish torment he could give her with his mouth. “Mmm, I’m liking it already. More.”

“More, huh?” He licked a path along the lacy line of her bra, and she shuddered. He looked up at her, a wide grin spreading his sexy lips. “What kind of more?”

“Any kind.” The words left her on a sigh as he pushed her bra up, freeing her breasts. Then his mouth closed over her bare flesh, teeth latching onto one taut nipple, and a tormented moan escaped her throat. “That kind.”

He chuckled and nipped again, his other hand finding her other breast and working it with the same delicious diligence until her pussy felt fit to explode from the mounting pressure. Her hips bucked, rocked, and she found the solid length of his cock encased in harsh denim within her means to gyrate and explore. She did exactly that,

grinding her center until her juices soaked through her panties and slacks.

“Christ, darlin’, do you need my cock that bad?” Brody’s hands moved to cup her ass, to pull her even harder against his rigid body.

“Yes.” Need didn’t begin to describe the torture raging in her center. Arousal grew claws, raking talons through the super sensitive inner flesh of her channel. She always felt this way with Brody. Crazy, sex-starved no matter how often they made love. The time between Rachael’s birth and the doctor releasing her for sexual activity had been the longest weeks of her life. She thought she might die of the desire then. She knew she would crumple if she didn’t get her husband inside her now.

She wore her hair down today. He caught the very tip of it in his fingers and yanked her head back. She gasped at the sharp pleasurable pain that zinged through her scalp. His teeth grazed her jaw on his way to her ear. He licked her lobe between his teeth, nipped, and whispered hotly.

“I’m implementing a new in-house office rule. From now on the required uniform is a skirt, no panties, no bra. Do you understand?”

Just the thought of sitting in the office virtually unprotected from his whim to take her when he wanted sent her system on a whirlwind of electric overload. She tried to nod, but his grip on her hair kept her head still. “I’ll be lucky if I get any work done.”

The demonic twinkle in his eyes confirmed her statement. “If you’re wearing something I can’t get into easily, it’s going to get shredded, darlin’. Fair warning.”

“And I just thought you were dominating before our real wedding.” They jokingly referred to their elopement before the preacher as their trial run.

“Are you complaining?” He didn’t wait for her answer. His free hand was already getting busy with the button and zipper of her slacks. To his credit, he worked them free before starting to shimmy them off her. He stepped back enough to allow her room to help, and

she wiggled out of the pants, ridding herself of her drenched panties in the process.

“I’m loving it.” She did, too. Every controlling, rough, lovingly possessive act and order he gave her only made her love him more.

It took him far less time to free his cock from the confines of his jeans. Thank God. He returned to his place between her widespread legs, his cockhead nudging hard at her sodden folds but not slipping inside. His intense expression told her that he held back by sheer will alone.

“Give it to me, Brody.” She goaded him, making her tone a sexy purr, drawing her lower lip between her teeth in the way she knew drove him wild. “Give me all of it, all of you.”

He did. In a single thrust that drove every fantastic inch of his cock into her flaming channel, he gave her precisely what she wanted. Her head fell back as she struggled not to scream from the sheer bliss of the pleasure.

“You have it.” He ground the words through gritted teeth, obviously caught as much as she in the intense ecstasy. “All of it, all of me from the moment you turned the corner that morning. You always will.” He released her hair, and she lifted her head, her gaze meeting his and holding. They didn’t need further words at that moment. The sensations passing through them, the connection love welded between them said it all.

Brody started to move, pulling back slowly only to ease in again. She watched him, saw his struggle to keep it measured and sweet, knowing it wouldn’t last long before he would cave and give her the hard banging she wanted. Her own climax teetered on the edge. She wanted release, wanted to feel the explosive relief, wanted to feel the sticky heat of his seed as he came inside her.

“You do realize I’m still not taking any form of birth control,” she asked him as the thought occurred to her.

He pulled back, let his cock nearly slip out of her completely before he drove back inside her, grinding until he stroked her G-spot

in just the right way to coax a whimper from her as she started to fall. “I’m still looking for Rufus anyway.”

Somehow Sabrina managed to smile as the first waves of the orgasm washed through her. “So you wouldn’t care if I got pregnant again so soon?”

“I want you to get pregnant again so soon.” His grin spread wide and devilish. “And you can hold me accountable for my actions.”

Sabrina threw her head back and laughed. “That, my husband, I will promise to do.”

“I bet you will.” Brody’s grip tightened on her ass as he pulled back once more, this time slamming into her hard and fast and giving her everything she wanted and more.

Sabrina let the cry escape in a reckless abandon and knew she would never think of accounting for anything the same way again.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tonya Ramagos is a bestselling author of contemporary, fantasy, paranormal, and cowboy novels. She spends most of her time in a fictional world dreaming up hot hunks and headstrong heroines. When she's not writing she's reading. Anything from legal and military non-fiction to any genre of romance can be found on her bookshelves and flash drives. Her music tastes are just as varied, with artists ranging from country to rock to heavy metal loading her MP3 player. Her idea of relaxing is curled on the sofa or on her back deck with a book and her favorite beverage. A single mother of two fantastic boys, she enjoys playing games, dancing, and walking the nature trails around her home in Tennessee.

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