

# BARTENDER DADDY

SWEET TEXAS LOVE - BOOK THREE



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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## CHAPTER 1



“Carrie,” Wes said, raising his voice over his wife’s anxious chatter.

Paper streamers and stars were flying across the living room. The large windows on either side of the fireplace showed the peaceful rolling landscape of the Texas ranch. Standing in the center of the room, disrupting the serene scene, was a curvy, little, golden-headed tornado. Haphazardly digging through a giant cardboard box, Carrie’s curls bounced frantically as her worrying continued. “And we still don’t have the cake ordered. You wouldn’t believe what that witch said to Jessica about me. But that is a story for a different day. I *must* finish tying the ribbon on the candle holders and...”

Wes tried again. “Carrie,” he said, his tone a warning.

Without pausing long enough to take a breath, Carrie said, “We have to be sure there is something to tie on the back of the car when they leave. Pie pans, or tin cans, or whatever the heck you are supposed to do.”

Enough was enough. Time for daddy’s voice to make an appearance.

“One.” Wes waited. Finally, Carrie quieted, turning towards her

husband. Blowing a stray golden curl up from her forehead, she threw her hands on her curvy hips. "What?" she sassily retorted.

Raising a brow at his tiny wife, Wes said, "Mistake, Carrie," taking a step towards her. "That's two."

Taking her hands down from her hips, Carrie looked only slightly apologetic. Giving an exasperated sigh, she said, "Sorry. Yes, Daddy?"

"That's better, Carrie girl." Bending down and picking up a stray pink paper star, Wes said, "Be sweet."

Carrie threw her hands into the air. "I'm trying, but there is just so much to get done. And I still haven't even told you what that bakery brat said to me."

"You should be enjoying this, Carrie. Not being frazzled. Surely wedding planning is less stressful than teaching?"

Laughing callously, Carrie said, "No way. Uh-uh. And Bridezilla wants everything perfect and Ray has us on a teeny tiny shoestring of a budget." Crossing her arms, Carrie's voice took on a tired whine, "It's impossible."

Grabbing her shoulders in his hands and giving them a gentle squeeze, Wes spoke gently, "Slow down, baby girl. It will all get done." Carrie's term of teaching had been completed. Having abundant energy pent up in her little body, it needed to be released. The Poke town one-room schoolhouse Carrie had run a kindergarten class in last year had been a blessing to the small town. The school board had voted and agreed to have Carrie re-open but wouldn't have the funding until the following year. With too much time on her hands, Carrie had thrown herself into this wedding planning, head first.

Wiggling from his grasp, Carrie spoke more calmly than before. "I will. Just after I find my cake topper," she said, returning to her chaotic station at the coffee table.

"You need to relax before you get yourself into trouble," Wes said, picking up and placing decorations back into the box. Pre-wedding planning, their living room had been a relaxing place. The

large, tan sofa facing the stone fireplace and windows was the perfect place to watch the sunset over the hills. Soft, cream-colored rugs covered the polished wood floors. It was their retreat from the world. And right now, it looked like a party store had exploded within the walls. Wes did not like chaos. “The first thing you need to do is get yourself organized,” Wes said, picking through the pink and teal sparkly mess he had gathered.

Pausing her search, Carrie turned to Wes. “I know exactly where everything is, thank you very much. I only lost the cake topper.” Two more stars made their way to the floor as Carrie returned to the box of paper crafts. “Ugh. Men. You all don’t understand anything,” Carrie muttered under her breath.

Disrespect was a hard line for Wes. There was only one thing that could salvage the day and amend his little wife’s unpleasant disposition. His only regret was not taking care of it sooner.

“That’s three, and that’s a spanking.” Wes quickly sat down on the edge of the couch, grabbing Carrie and flipping the little bit of a woman over his lap. Wriggling in his tight grasp, Carrie cried out as Wes started placing hard, methodical spansks on her denim covered bottom. The sound of loud, ‘smacks,’ filled the room. Wes wasn’t born with a hand like a paddle for no good reason.

“Ouchie. Sorry,” came the voice from below his knee. It wasn’t quite as sincere as he liked it, so he kept swatting, his hand making the lovely ‘smacking’ sound as it landed on his wife’s soft derriere.

“When Daddy calls your name, you need to pay attention, young lady,” Wes lectured, while continuing to spank.

“Yes, Daddy,” Carrie said, the sweetness coming back into her voice.

“It’s Daddy’s job to spank all that sassiness away, isn’t it baby?” Carrie continued to squirm as Wes heated up her backside.

“Ye-ouch. Yes, Daddy.”

“Eye-rolling and hands on your hips, well that’s just asking for a spanking. Isn’t it?” Wes asked. Displeased with the amount of

wiggling Carrie was doing, Wes administered a sharp slap to the tops of Carrie's thighs—his signal for her to be still.

"Yes!" Carrie quickly stilled herself. Carrie hated to have her thighs spanked.

Satisfied with his wife's position, Wes continued to chastise the bottom that was perched perfectly over his thigh, making sure not to neglect a single spot. Especially that tender place where the soft curve of her bottom met the tops of her thighs, her 'sit spots.' Carrie had taken things too far, and as her daddy, he knew that the only way his baby girl was going to behave herself was sitting on a sore bottom for the rest of the day.

"Are you still wearing those little heart panties that you put on this morning?"

"Yes?" Carrie replied, sounding hopeful. The little peek she gave him over her shoulder told Wes that Carrie wondered if this punishment was taking a more romantic turn. She would have to wait for that. Disrespecting your man did not lead to sexy play time in Wes' book. First, you had to pay your dues.

"Do I need to get out your Christmas paddle, young lady?" Wes asked. He had bought Carrie a special wooden paddle last Christmas, that hung from a ribbon in the closet of their bedroom. Wes loved to watch his tiny girl reach up on her tippy toes to retrieve the implement— she could barely reach it and always ended up asking for help. Wes didn't use the paddle often, but when he did—Carrie was a very, very good girl afterward.

"No, Daddy, no," Carrie whimpered.

"I can pull down these jeans and paddle your bottom until it is as red as the hearts on your little panties." Wes repressed a chuckle as he watched Carrie look over her shoulder, wide-eyed, to see if her daddy was serious.

"Oh, no, Daddy. I'll be good. I promise." Carrie's tone told Wes everything he needed to know. The paddling could wait for another day; his sweet girl was back. With a few more well-placed swats, Wes finished the job. Gathering Carrie into his arms, he felt

his pride swell as she snuggled deep into his chest, her head resting over his heart, her arms wrapping tightly around his neck. Wes never could decide which part of their ritual he liked most: spanking his little girl's lovely behind, or the special aftercare he gave his wife.

"Are you done being naughty now?" Wes murmured into the soft curls of her hair.

"Yes, Daddy," Carrie sniffled, wiping her eyes with the collar of his shirt, as she tended to do.

"Are your sassies all gone, baby?"

Carrie nodded.

"I know you are under a lot of stress."

"I hate weddings," Carrie said.

"That is no excuse to be rude to your daddy. Do you need to stop helping Jessica with the decorating?"

Placing both of her hands on her daddy's chest, Carrie protested, "No, no!" Carrie added quickly, "I'll be a good girl, I promise."

Rubbing her back gently, Wes said, "I'll do my best to take care of you and to help you. I want you to be my sweet girl today. Not a disrespectful, naughty, little thing." Considering her brown eyes, he asked softly, "Can you do that, baby girl?"

Having buried herself back into his chest, the muffled answer was quiet, but he heard it. "Yes, Daddy."

"Carrie girl, go sit your sore bottom down in the kitchen. I'll bring you some paper and sweet tea, and we can make a list of everything that needs to be done."

Carrie stood slowly, seeming hesitant to leave her cozy nest in Wes' lap. Standing and grabbing her hand in his, Wes led Carrie to the kitchen. Seating Carrie on a wooden dining chair at the table, Wes went to the fridge.

The blue ceramic pitcher had a little chip at the top but was still a family favorite. Wes had snagged the pitcher of sweet tea from Mama's house that morning. Filling a glass with ice and pouring

the delicious brew, Wes watched Carrie wiggling in her seat. Her face wincing as she tried to find a comfortable spot to sit. Chuckling, Wes prided himself on the job he had done on her rear end. Carrie could squirm all she wanted. There would not be a way for her to sit without feeling her punishment.

Setting the glass by Carrie, Wes began gathering paper and a pen from the kitchen drawer. Joining Carrie at the table, Wes put the paper and pen down neatly. Making check boxes running down one side of the lined paper, Wes handed the sheet to Carrie. "Write the task on the line. In the margin, put the date you want to have it done by. As we finish the jobs, you can check off the little box."

After taking a dainty sip of her tea, Carrie said, "I'll give it a try." Her voice once again sounded like his sweet Carrie girl. As it always did whenever she was freshly spanked.

"It's better to make a plan than to waste time worrying," Wes repeated his Mama's familiar phrase.

"Okay, Daddy." Taking another sip of her tea, Carrie started to write.

Soon, she had filled out every line on the front of the paper, as well as the back. Asking politely for Wes to make another sheet with, 'the cute little boxes,' Carrie wrote away, happily. Wes gladly obliged. Organization was the cure for chaos, just as spanking was the cure for sassiness.



TUESDAY NIGHT WAS DATE NIGHT. Hurriedly, Jessica smoothed a pink sheen of lipstick on her lips and dabbed her pale lashes with jet black mascara. Checking her white-blonde hair in the mirror for any remnants of her toddler son's dinner, Jessica was satisfied with her reflection. Jessica took one last look in the mirror to be sure she didn't have lipstick on her teeth. Flicking her hair over her shoulder, Jessica said to herself, "That's as good as it's going to get." Giving her reflection a final nod, Jessica dashed out of the bath-



room. Date night was Jessica's favorite night of the week and she didn't want to be late.

Smiling as Jessica entered the living room, Mama said, "Have fun, Miss Jessica." Mama had been the one to suggest the weekly date night for Ray and Jessica. Working daytime hours in her hair salon, it was hard to get couple time with Ray, as he owned the only bar in the tiny town of Poke, and worked most nights. Mama had insisted it was a priority to set aside an evening a week to relax together and luckily for the couple, Mama was more than happy to spend a quiet evening with her grandson.

"You know we will, Mama. Thanks again for babysitting." Tickling Evan's tummy as Mama held him on her hip, Jessica laughed at Evan's sweet giggles. "Let's keep it to two cookies this time, Mama," Jessica said with a wink.

Feigning a look of innocence, Mama gave a shrug. "There are no rules for grandmothers," she said. Giving Mama and Evan a kiss on the cheek, Jessica flew out the door and headed to Ray's.

Pulling open the heavy oak door marked, *Ray's*, in faded, gold lettering, Jessica scanned the bar. "Unbelievable," Jessica laughed to herself. There were even more old bachelors seated in the bar than there had been last Tuesday when Jessica had arrived for 'date night'.

Word had gotten out amongst the eldest generation of the town of Poke that on Tuesdays, Jessica could be found perched at the bar so they came to visit and chat. Last week Jessica had overheard an elderly rancher say, "Sure, Jessica is staring at Ray the whole time, but us regulars can still appreciate a little eye candy." Jessica didn't mind, the men were sweet and harmless. She knew firsthand how lonely it could be being single. Jessica was glad if she could brighten someone's day, and she was happy to help boost her fiancé's drink sales.

Exchanging pleasantries and hellos, Jessica finally made her way through the crowd and over to the bar. Sliding into her usual barstool, the one closest to the spot where Ray liked to stand

behind the bar, Jessica gave a contented sigh. The men of Poke town made sure to keep the stool open for Jessica. If anyone came in on a Tuesday and tried to sit there, well, there would be hell to pay until that person moved down a stool. Taking a deep breath, Jessica allowed herself to relax.

“Jessica’s here, Ray,” Harry called out from the back of the bar. Looking over her shoulder, Jessica waved at Harry. Standing in his faded denim bib overalls, Harry was leaning against the jukebox, tapping his foot along with the beat of the song.

“Harry, what is this music you are playing tonight? You know Tuesday night is Country Western night.”

“Just one more P. Diddy,” Harry said, hollering to be heard over the loud rap music. “I’ll turn on your sappy tunes after Puff Daddy finishes *Mo Money, Mo Problems*, I promise.”

Laughing, Jessica turned her attention back to the bar to look for Ray. A little flutter hit her tummy as the bartender appeared from the small kitchen in the back of the bar. Standing six feet five with muscled, tattooed arms showing underneath the short sleeves of his black tee shirt, Jessica never got tired of looking at her man. Having convinced Ray to stop shaving his head, Jessica admired the short, dark hair that met his beard. She had influenced the beard length as well, and it was now much shorter, but still long enough for Evan to tug at.

“Hey, honey,” Ray said, leaning over the bar and greeting Jessica with a deep kiss. A catcall could be heard from the back of the bar. Ignoring the crowd, Jessica lost herself in Ray’s affection, the meeting of their lips melting her into a pool of liquid on her barstool. The kiss ended, leaving Jessica feeling as flushed as a teenager.

“Break it up, you two,” came a yell from the right side of the bar. Jessica looked over to see who was hollering. Mr. Callaway, an eighty-year-old rancher was grinning like the Cheshire cat. He was a regular at the bar, and one of Ray’s beloved clients.

“Pipe down, Mr. Callaway,” Ray said with a snap of his bar

towel. Grinning from ear to ear, Ray reached into the wine fridge and pulled out a bottle of pinot grigio. Pouring generously, since he was driving Jessica home which he always did after 'date night', Ray filled the glass.

Locking eyes on Jessica, Ray asked, "How's the planning going?"

Groaning, Jessica said, "I am beginning to think that weddings were invented to torture brides." Becoming Ray's wife and having Ray adopt Jessica's son, Evan, as his own would make every phone call and flower arrangement worth it. At this moment though, the usually cool-headed woman wanted to pull out chunks of her hair. "Some sort of sick, rite of passage stuff." Taking the glass of wine that Ray handed her, Jessica said, "Thank you, baby. I needed this." Jessica cheers her glass with the rancher beside her and took a long swig of the cool, tart drink. There was nothing like a chilled white wine to relax a woman who was reaching her breaking point.

"You're welcome." Ray corked the wine, placing the bottle back in the fridge. "Hungry?" he asked her.

Laughing, Jessica said, "I give you the same answer every time you ask me that question, Ray Stevenson. You'd think by now you would know I'm always hungry."

"That's the way I like you, sweetheart," Ray said with a wink. "Let's get you fed before you become the runaway bride. We'll get this wedding nonsense sorted out. First, food." As was their weekly routine, Ray disappeared into the small kitchen behind the bar. Stomach growling, Jessica waited anxiously for her dinner.

Carrying a silver tray, complete with domed lid, Ray returned, placing the tray on the bar in front of Jessica. Lifting the lid from the tray, Ray revealed a double cheeseburger and chili fries sitting on a bed of lettuce, complete with a linen napkin. "Voilà," he said with a smile.

"How did you know?" Jessica exclaimed, eyeing the comfort food hungrily. Normally on Tuesday nights, Ray pulled out his cookbook and created a new dish, experimenting with different spices. Jessica had yet to meet a food she didn't like, except for

salad, and Ray was an excellent cook. This was one of those weeks that you just needed Burger Barn.

Not bothering to be ladylike about it, Jessica tore into the burger, simultaneously dipping a French fry in chili sauce. Moaning, and savoring the flavors, Jessica rolled her eyes with delight.

Amused by her reaction, Ray laughed, "I know you've had a heck of a week trying to pull this wedding off. Sometimes a hungry girl just needs a burger," he said.

Washing down the bite of burger with wine, Jessica said, "Ray, if you hadn't already asked me to marry you, I would propose on the spot," as she began shoving three French fries into her mouth.

"Hey, Ray. That's a good-looking burger. What'd you bring us?" Mr. Piper, the owner of the local feed and seed, asked, sidling up to the bar.

"Beer," Ray answered with a smile.

"I like your hair, Ray," Mr. Piper said. "But I miss being able to check out my beautiful reflection in the back of your head."

Jessica giggled as Ray ran his hand through his short cut. After seeing a picture of Ray before he had shaved his head, his locks wavy and dark, Jessica had asked Ray to stop shaving his head. As a hairdresser, it killed Jessica that Ray would not grow the hairstyle all the way back out. Hair aside, Jessica was more than satisfied with looks of her beefcake.

At the end of a long day, there was nothing better than curling up with those tattooed muscled arms wrapped tightly around her body. The scruff of Ray's beard tickling her neck. The feel of her hand running over the bare skin of his strong back.

"Have you found a dress yet, Miss Jessica?" Ray asked, dragging her thoughts from her bedroom, back to the bar. Sheepishly, Jessica dabbed at the corners of her grease covered lips.

"No," Jessica said, wrinkling her nose. "Wedding dress shopping is just another layer the sadists have added to the torture, possibly the most painful part. Nobody looks good dressed up as a lace-covered marshmallow." Having limited choices in their rural

community, the dresses Jessica had found looked like they had been hanging on the racks since nineteen eighty. With poufy shoulders, huge skirts, and wrist length sleeves, the frilly ensembles ranging from bright white to creamy ivory just weren't Jessica's style. Or the style of anyone who was living in this decade.

"You may need to settle on one, sweetheart, the wedding is only a couple of weeks away," Ray said, looking concerned.

"Ray, nothing fits." Jessica tried to keep the whine from her voice. One year after giving birth, there were still ten pounds of baby fat hanging around, like a bad houseguest you couldn't get rid of. Jessica hadn't minded so much during those sweet months of babyhood, but now she had a toddler for crying out loud. It was beginning to look like she would never be back down to her pre-pregnancy weight. Which only added to the insult of the tight-waisted, dated gowns.

"Jessica," Ray answered softly. "We've talked about this."

"I know, I know. I just can't find a dress that doesn't make me look fat."

Ray raised one eyebrow to her. The *f*, word was a no-no in Ray's book. He was of the mindset that a woman was perfectly and wonderfully made no matter her size, and every woman deserved to be well fed. "A woman doesn't get to look as beautiful as you, be blessed with the sweetest son in the world, *and* complain about her weight. You know you turned every head in this bar, tonight, in those jeans, didn't you?"

"This crowd turns their heads so far they hurt their necks anytime someone with two X chromosomes come in," Jessica protested. "Heck, everyone looks better in jeans, anyway. Look at Harry," Jessica said, gesturing towards the man by the jukebox who was now two-stepping by himself, thumbs hooked behind his overall straps.

"That might be true," Ray chuckled. "Harry does rock the bibs." Drying the glasses, he had just hand washed in the bar sink, Ray

asked, "How many wedding dresses have you tried on, honey? Just round up the number," he said with a wink.

"I don't know, maybe a hundred," Jessica guessed, shrugging her shoulders.

"And you hated every one of them?" Ray asked, his brow furrowing, sounding mystified by the female experience.

"Yes," Jessica groaned, choosing not to reveal that she hadn't made it as far as Clinton yet, where there was possibly a much better selection. Not having the heart to try and squeeze into a designer dress that was two sizes bigger than the dress size she had been wearing just over a year and a half ago, Jessica had only shopped in town. "They were all either too tight, too big, too sequined, or too poufy. Even Carrie, who adores fashion, is sick of watching me try on dresses," Jessica answered with a sigh.

Contemplating her predicament, Ray looked Jessica over. "Tell me, honey, do you feel good about your body when you wear those jeans?" Ray asked.

"Yes," she admitted, shyly, ready to drop the subject.

"Be right back." Ray put down his towel and walked back to his small office beside the kitchen. Straining to see past the doorframe, Jessica watched curiously as Ray took a piece of white paper from his desk printer.

Returning to her with a determined look in his eyes, Ray grabbed his black Sharpie marker from the bar, the one that no one, even Jessica, could touch. Shielding the paper from her line of sight with his shoulder and arm, Ray got to work.

"What are you writing?" Jessica asked, curiously, trying to peek at his work.

Looking up at Jessica, his eyes sparkling, Ray said, teasingly, "You'll see." For whatever reason, that little look hit her in the pit of her stomach and made her knees weak. Until Ray, Jessica had never known that a good man could also be as sexy as the bartender in front of her.

Finishing his handiwork, Ray made a loop out of a piece of

silver duct tape, another off-limit item he kept on the bar. Leaning past the bar, Ray reached up towards the wall, tacking the paper over the tongue-in-cheek sign Jessica had bought for the bar that read, "Buy your first beer for the price of two, the second one's on me."

Out loud, Jessica read the words written on the paper in Ray's immaculate, precise handwriting, "Spread the word. The attire for the Stevenson's wedding will be denim. Wear your jeans, no matter how faded."

A few of the customers shuffled over to read the paper. Harry, wearing his 'uniform', overalls, hooted with approval. "I'm all set," he said, patting his chest and pointing at the sign. Harry approached Jessica and gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. "You'll be the prettiest bride there ever was, no matter what you're wearing."

"Thank you, Harry. And you'll be quite handsome yourself. I might even let you walk me down the aisle," Jessica said.

Harry hooted again, as he shuffled out of the bar, calling over his shoulder, "I'm off to 'spread the news.'"

Smiling, the couple watched the dear old man depart. When Jessica turned back to the bar, Ray was looking at her with concern.

"Jessica, I asked Wes to walk you down the aisle," Ray said, gently.

With her father gone and her brother, Kevin's death still fresh in her heart, the subject of who would be walking the bride down the aisle was one Jessica refused to talk about unless it was a jest. With Jessica and Wes as close as siblings, he was the natural choice to perform the duty. Jessica and Wes had a tricky past, but he was the closest thing she had to male family, and she loved him as she loved Kevin. Not wanting to put Ray in an awkward position, Jessica would never have asked this of him.

For Ray to know what Jessica needed and act on it, unselfishly, was touching. Tears stinging the back of her eyes, Jessica softly said, "Thank you, Ray," leaning over the bar for a kiss.

Killed in a car crash just hours before Evan's birth, Jessica still had healing to do. Only time would mend her heart. Talking about the past was difficult for Jessica. She preferred to live in the light and stay positive, focusing on the happy parts of life. Jessica loved that Ray accepted this about her, no questions asked.

"Love you, honey," Ray murmured, kissing her once more. Snapping back into prepping mode, Ray said, "Wedding attire covered. Delicate, emotional, heart-wrenching 'turmoil situation' covered." Ray smiled. "Now, what about food?"

"I'm the worst wedding planner, ever," Jessica groaned, burying her head in her hands. "Ugh. I totally forgot about food. What bride doesn't plan food for her wedding?" Jessica took her hands from her head, scared she would begin to tear her hair out for real, becoming the town's first bald hairdresser.

"You've had a lot on your mind. Would you mind if I took care of the menu?" Ray asked. "I would love nothing more than to take the food off your plate," Ray joked.

Thus far, Jessica had given up only a sliver of the planning control to Carrie, who lovingly referred to Jessica as Bridezilla, while still happily doing her bidding. But Jessica was coming unraveled and there was no joy for her in planning the meal.

"Yes," Jessica quickly answered her fiancé, slapping her palms on the bar top. "A thousand times, yes."

"You sure?" Ray asked, with a wicked smile. "You can't take it back once you say it. Last chance to back out."

"Yes?" Jessica answered, now unsure of to what she had committed.

"All right." Ray leaned over the bar, retrieving the recently hung sign.

Taking the cap from his Sharpie once more, Ray got to work. Finished, he tacked the paper back up over the funny beer sign. Underneath the line about attire now read, "Potluck reception. Bring your finest Texas side dish or your mama's famous sweet tea.



Grass fed, humanely raised, as local as you can get, Brisket will be provided.”

Before Jessica could react, Ray picked up his phone, dialing quickly. “Wes. Hey, man. We are doing well. How are you and yours? Uh-huh, well that little one is always causing trouble, isn’t she,” he said, giving Jessica a wink. Oh dear, Jessica thought, Carrie must be as stressed as her with the wedding planning. Jessica hoped that she hadn’t caused Carrie a trip over Wes’ knee.

“Can you do me a favor?” Ray continued on the phone, “Put aside, oh, let’s say, a hundred pounds of brisket for me? I need it the morning before the wedding.” A moment later, Ray gave Jessica a thumbs-up gesture, saying, “Thanks, Wes,” and hung up the phone.

Ray chuckled, a satisfied look in his eyes. “It sure helps to have an ‘in’ with the owner of one of the biggest cattle ranches in Texas.”

Mr. Callaway called out, “Look, fellas, Ray’s making brisket!” The customers once again gathered to read the sign. Volunteers started claiming dishes.

“My ranch beans are the tastiest in the state, I’m bringing those.”

“I call the tater salad. I’m the only one who puts dill in potato salad.”

“What on Earth are you talking about, Hank? My beans won a blue ribbon at the State Fair in 1977. You *know* that.”

“I’m already bringing beans, man. I said that.”

“Mine beans are better. We’ll let Jessica decide.”

“A bride can’t eat beans on her wedding day!”

“Just so no one tries to bring tater salad. Even a fool knows you put dill in it. There has to be dill.”

The banter continued. Jessica laughed, holding her glass out to Ray for a refill. “Oh, Ray, this is going to be so good. I’m looking forward to this.”

Uncorking the wine, Ray filled the glass again. “What else needs doing? We are putting an end to this planning nonsense, tonight.”

“Let me think,” Jessica said, taking a sip of her wine. The fruity beverage was spreading its warmth over her. Ray’s take-charge

manner with the planning had her finally, relaxing. "Sarah Fritz was so mad at Carrie for canceling her wedding cake, even under the circumstances, she refused to bake ours."

A stern look crossing his face, Ray said, "That's just poor manners of Sarah. Carrie was on her deathbed when she canceled that cake. What does that have to do with you, anyway?" Ray snapped his bar towel in frustration, looking like he would like to teach the bakery boss some manners.

"Guilty by association," Jessica shrugged. When Jessica had called the bakery to request the cake, Sarah had made a snide remark about Carrie having canceled her wedding cake. Carrie had planned to bring the cake down to Mexico for her simple ceremony. Instead, she wound up suddenly and extremely ill. Rushed to the emergency room, Carrie was found to have a ruptured appendix. Spending weeks in the hospital recovering, Carrie was lucky to be alive. Having forgone the wedding, Carrie was married to Wes in her hospital bed, surrounded by her family all wearing matching, pale blue flowered hospital gowns. Baby Evan had been the ring bearer.

Hearing the baker's ludicrous reply and angry as a hornet, Jessica had cussed Sarah out, slamming down the phone to end the conversation. Ray wouldn't like that part of the story very much. If word got to him he might want to use that towel on her instead, so Jessica left it out.

Ray raised a suspicious eyebrow to Jessica while he picked up the phone again. Jessica fiddled with her hair, sensing Ray thought there was a portion of the story missing. Manners and kindness, even in the face of adversity were a must for Ray. Reading the expression on Ray's face, Jessica knew her fiancé was wondering what Jessica's reaction to Sarah had been.

"Hello, it's Ray. She's well, she's right here. Yes, it is our date night every Tuesday." Ray smiled. "How's the garden going? Nice. I was just calling to see how much of your famous banana pudding you would be able to prepare for the wedding." Ray gave

Jessica another wink. "Oh, I'd say about three hundred guests." Ray smiled, taking in the stream of words from the other end of the phone. Looking over his shoulder at the kitchen, Ray answered, "I have an empty fridge here at the bar. And I know a couple of bachelors who take all their meals at the Burger Barn. If I take care of storage, can you take care of making the pudding?" Ray paused, and Jessica could hear excited chatting on the other end of the line. "Wonderful. Jessica sends her love. Oh, and by the way, wear your jeans and boots to the wedding." Ray hung up the phone not giving Jessica's mother a chance to protest.

"I'll bet mom is freaking out more about the attire, than the five hundred pounds of pudding she is responsible for, right now." As she spoke, Jessica's phone started beeping with texts from her mother.

Ray reached over, silencing the phone. "Give her some time to adjust. Soon she'll be so busy baking, she won't have time to worry about what you're wearing."

"Two birds with one stone," Jessica said, sipping her wine. "You covered the dessert and told the mother of the bride she's wearing denim."

"Man, I'm on a roll," Ray said, snapping his bar towel, again. "Anything else?" Ray asked.

"Just decorations, but Carrie and I have those covered," Jessica answered. It would be fun, now, to finish the crafting with her best friend, all other worries off her plate. "And getting your sister from the airport."

"I can't wait to meet her," Ray said with a chuckle.

An eavesdropping Mr. Callaway had sidled up onto the stool beside Jessica. "What do you mean you can't wait to meet her? You just said she's your sister!"

"It's a long story, Mr. Callaway. Do you have a few minutes to hear it?" Ray asked, knowing Mr. Callaway had nothing but time at this stage in his life.

"I'm going to need another beer," he said, sliding a five-dollar bill across the bar. "Keep the change."

"Can do, but we're going need to drive you home, sir," Ray replied, putting the money in the till and pouring a cold one.

"Suits me just fine," Mr. Callaway said, shooting Jessica a wink. Separately and over time, Jessica and Ray had become the keepers of the older generation of Poke. Jessica, with her perms and curlers for her blue-haired customers, and Ray, entertaining the lonely bachelors and driving them home when the bar closed.

Caring for others. Ultimately, that was what had made Jessica fall head over heels in love with the bartender. The muscles were sexy and, yes, he was a beauty to look at, but below the tough, rugged exterior, Ray was a big sweetheart.

Ray had cried like a baby at Kevin's funeral, earning him the nickname of 'gentle giant', from Carrie. When Evan was born through an emergency cesarean section, Ray had taken to showing up at Jessica's door with bottles filled with a green liquid that Ray referred to as, Moose Juice. The son of a midwife, Ray had a recipe to help new mothers with milk production. He had driven six hours round trip, once a week, to the town of Kent to get the ingredients to make the concoction for her.

And Ray had told Jessica the moment he knew he loved her. It wasn't the night while wearing cutoff shorts and boots, Jessica had pushed all the tables aside in his bar and got everyone to dance. To Jessica's surprise, Ray told her it was, "Ever since I saw you put that perm in Ms. Burberry's hair." The tender way Jessica had cared for the woman had solidified Ray's desire to make Jessica his.

"Mr. Callaway, we recently found out that my father, who left when I was young, had a child later in his life. I lost contact with my dad, barely remember the man, but I got a call a few weeks past. The old man has passed away, leaving an eighteen-year-old daughter on her own. No other family, she spoke with me for a long time over the phone, and I asked her to come out for the wedding. She sounds like a real sweetheart."

"What's her name?" Mr. Callaway asked.

"Buttercup," Ray answered, holding a straight face.

"Butter pat?" Mr. Callaway exclaimed. "What kind of name is that? Something you put on toast."

"Turn up your hearing aid, Mr. Callaway," Jessica spoke loudly.

"Hold yer horses, girlie." Mr. Callaway fiddled with his aid. "Okay, I'm all turned up. What'd you say, Ray?"

"I said, Buttercup."

"That's not much better," he mumbled.

"Well, that's her name and it'll be a pleasure to meet her. Her mother loved the movie, *The Princess Bride*, and named her after the lead character," Ray said.

"It's a classic, Mr. Callaway. You should watch it," Jessica said.

"Buttercup, humph. Well, where is this mother of hers?" Mr. Callaway asked, already sounding protective of the girl he had just found to exist.

"No idea. She took off when Buttercup was ten, leaving my father to raise her."

"Payback's a beast, ain't it? Don't that beat all. Your father leaves your mother to raise you, and he's left raising a daughter."

"Life is complicated," Jessica murmured. Having created her own difficulties through her mistakes, Jessica knew first hand just how complex life could be. Garrett, Wes' brother, who happened to be Evan's father, had disappeared the night before Christmas Eve leaving her a single mother. Just another reason Jessica counted Ray amongst her many blessings. Every night as she drifted off to sleep, Jessica listed all the things she was grateful for, watching the faces of her loved ones pass through her mind. Ray and Evan were always first, and together, as the mental picture floated by.

Yawning, Jessica rubbed her eyes. Home alone last night, Jessica's movie marathon was catching up with her.

"You ready, honey? You look tired," Ray said. "I can get Glenn to take over and we can head out."

Tired as she was, Jessica had one final request to make of Ray.

She needed just a splash more of liquid courage to be able to ask. "I'll have one more," Jessica said, holding her glass out to Ray.

"How about a half," Ray answered, his tone telling not suggesting.

Jessica knew there was no room for debate with Ray when the 'daddy tone', as Carrie called it, came out. Another glass would be lovely, but Jessica would take what she could get. "Thank you," she said as Ray poured her another splash.

Ray pointed quietly to Mr. Callaway. The rancher sat at the bar, head resting on his forearm, snoring softly. Jessica handed Mr. Callaway's half empty beer glass to Ray as Ray began wiping down the bar.

"We made some good progress tonight." He stopped and locked eyes with Jessica. "If there is anything else I can do for you, honey, just ask."

It was now or never. Twirling the stem of her wineglass between her forefinger and thumb Jessica debated coming clean with Ray. The bravery the two and a half glasses of pinot grigio had given Jessica allowed her to answer shyly, "There is one more thing."

"Yes, ma'am," Ray said, his face brimming with curiosity.

"Spank me."

The smile that crossed Ray's face was one Jessica saw only when his daddy dom side came out. The sight of it made her knees weak. Leaning in towards her, forearms resting on the bar, Ray ran the side of his finger down her cheek. Shivers tickled Jessica's spine as Ray replied, "It would be my pleasure."