

Forever Daddy
Sweet Texas Love - Book Two

By

Shanna Handel

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Table of Contents

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two.....	19
Chapter Three.....	32
Chapter Four	44
Chapter Five.....	56
Chapter Six.....	63
Chapter Seven	73
Shanna Handel	81
EBook Offer	82
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	83
Blushing Books	84

Chapter One

“Now we aren’t going to be rowdy anymore tonight, are we?”

Carrie sniffled as she sat on her fiancé’s rock hard thigh, her bottom burning. Wes had warned her before the games had even begun, that she would find herself in this very predicament, should she let her temper get the best of her. Which, with the company they were keeping, she inevitably had.

“No, sir,” Carrie answered quietly.

Wrapping his arms around Carrie and cradling her on his lap, Wes asked, “Are you ready to join everyone, and behave yourself?”

Hearing the faint sounds of laughter coming from the main room, Carrie mustered up the courage to say, “Yes.” She did so love playing cards. Carrie wanted to get back to the heated game of Spades, but was unsure how on Earth she was going to manage the walk of shame back into the room where all eyes would surely be on her.

“Can you act like a young lady, now?”

“Yes, Daddy.” Carrie’s fiery personality mixed with her competitive nature often got her into trouble, especially when she suspected that someone was winning the game by cheating. Garrett was known to cheat, and so Carrie had been keeping a close eye on him tonight. Had he not been such a shady character, Carrie might be sitting down comfortably right now, instead of wiggling around on her sore bottom.

“You don’t like Garrett, and for good reason. But you are the one who invited him and Jessica to come, and you promised me you could behave.”

“I know. But that was when they weren’t here. It seemed so easy then. When they arrived and the reality set in, I just—” Carrie trailed off, giving a frustrated sigh. There was a long, sordid history between the four of them and she was ready to move on, but getting over the past was always harder than she thought it would be.

“This is what I was worried about. Do you remember what I said when you told me you wanted to have Garrett and Jessica here?”

“That it was too much. That it would cause a strain for me.”

“And what did you say?”

“I said that I could handle it.”

Leaning back, Wes gave her ‘the look.’ “I think your exact words were, ‘Oh, Daddy, don’t be silly, I totally have this under control.’”

Not meeting Wes’ eyes, Carrie stared at the toe of her cowgirl boot making patterns in the plush carpet, and replied, “That doesn’t sound like me.”

Wes chuckled. “Doesn’t it?” Softly kissing her cheek, he asked, “What was my response?”

Carrie felt the fading blush return to her face. “You thought it might spark my temper, seeing Garrett, and that it might be better if we gave it more time.”

“To which you said?” Wes raised an eyebrow at her, demanding an honest account of the past conversation.

“I called you an old fuddy duddy, stick in the mud and said that you don’t like to have fun. And then you laughed and told me to invite them. And you bet me that I would end up over your knee.”

“Looks like daddy’s always right,” Wes said with a wink. “Do you want me to call it a night? Politely get everyone on the road?” He nuzzled against her neck, murmuring, “That’d be just fine with this cowboy. I’m ready to have you all to myself.”

The shiver she got from his scruffy chin rubbing against the most sensitive spot on her neck almost changed her mind, and she may have relented, if not for her competitive nature. Carrie had to finish the game, and she had to win. “I want to go back to the game night,” she replied.

Wes chuckled at the determination in Carrie’s tone. “Let’s give it another try, but you have to control that temper. Any more outbursts like that, and I’ll take you straight to the barn for a good, sound strapping. Understood?”

In her mind’s eye, Carrie pictured the all too familiar, little, brown leather strap hanging from the barn wall. “Yes, sir.” Biting her lip, Carrie promised herself she would do whatever it took to keep her temper under control. Her bottom already had enough of Wes’ loving attention for one night.

Chuckling, Wes patted her leg. They stood and headed down the hallway. Wes opened the door and hand in hand; they re-entered the crowded living room. Carrie was grateful her friends were polite enough not to stare.

Carrie sat down, gingerly, right back on the chair that Wes had lifted her out of just a quarter of an hour earlier. They had been playing spades with Garrett and Jessica, and the game had gotten livelier and louder by the minute. Wes had generously given Carrie’s upper thigh quite a few warning squeezes under the table, but she could not seem to contain herself that evening. Carrie inevitably crossed the line when she decided Garrett had somehow managed to slip the two joker cards into his lap when it was his turn to deal. Leaping up out of her chair, she shouted, “Jiminy crickets, Garrett, you’re nothing but a dirty cheat.” Crossing her arms, she had thumped back down in her chair, hard.

An uneasy silence had filled the room. All eyes were on Wes’ tall, broad frame, as he slowly stood from his seat. He pulled a hand through his tousled golden waves, then, with gray eyes flashing, took hold of Carrie by a firm grip on her upper arm. His husky voice was low as he calmly said, “Would you all please excuse us for just a moment?” Carrie’s face was burning as Wes coolly lifted her from her seat. She had felt all eyes on her, watching her bouncing blonde curls leave the party, as Wes guided her to the hallway. He had shut the hall door behind them, and led Carrie, her tummy full of butterflies, to the very back bedroom of the ranch house. There, Wes had taken Carrie over his knee, flipped up her skirt, pulled down her panties, and spanked her bare bottom until she was making many promises to be his good little girl for the rest of the night.

Wes was a strict daddy. He let very few misdeeds slide. Although Carrie could use her charms to wiggle her way out of trouble every once in awhile, when it came to losing her temper or doing something dangerous, there was no wiggle room with Wes. Those were two things that Carrie could be certain would earn her a good old-fashioned spanking, or strapping, complete with tears and a bottom that would be sore for hours.

It wasn’t entirely Carrie’s fault she had flown off the handle. First off, Carrie was incredibly sure that Garrett had, in fact, cheated at the game, that was his nature. Secondly, there was the little problem of Garrett’s very existence. Well, it wasn’t the fact that he existed that upset her, just more his presence in her house. And that wasn’t entirely accurate either, as this was technically more his house than hers.

Garrett was Wes’ younger brother. After college, Gare had left the ranch and moved to New York City, taking a high paying finance job on Wall Street. After their father’s death, Wes had moved back to the ranch to run The Lonestar Cattle Company, and take care of their mama.

The messy, crazy truth was that Carrie and Garrett dated, were engaged, and broke up. Wes and Jessica knew each other basically their whole lives, dated in college and again, while Carrie was with Garrett. All the while, Garrett and Jessica secretly desired one another. And ever since their first few hours together on the Ranch, Carrie and Wes both knew they were in love with one another. Complicated is really the only word for it. Unfortunately, the situation only went from complicated to downright soap opera.

It all started when Garrett and Carrie had met in New York, where Carrie was working as a teacher. Garrett had rescued Carrie from her first fancy party. Feeling stressed and out of place, Carrie had tried to medicate her shyness with one too many liquor drinks. Garrett had carried the very drunk Carrie out of the party and taken her home. They had begun dating after that. A few months later, Garrett brought her to the ranch to meet his family.

Living in New York City, Carrie was far from home and the simple ways of life on her family's farm in South Carolina. Always ignoring that nagging feeling that she did not fit into the slick ways of New York, being on the ranch made the truth all the clearer to her. Carrie had become hopelessly homesick when Garrett brought her to the ranch. The homesickness was only one of her life's realities that were revealed to her that day.

Carrie had known for a long time what she desired from a man. She wanted a daddy. Someone to love and protect her, spoil her, dote on her, as well as draw clear lines and boundaries for her. There was also another desire that ran deep through her. The taboo one that she could never share with anyone, or explain, even to herself. She wanted a man that would take her in hand and spank her. Knowing that most women didn't desire such a relationship, and if the type of man she yearned for didn't exist, Carrie had settled for Garrett. Everything changed when Carrie met Garrett's big brother, Wes.

From the moment she saw Wes, she was smitten. Wes was a tall, rugged cowboy with wild wavy golden hair and flashing gray eyes. His commanding presence and hard work had earned him the respect of the men on the ranch. The over the knee spanking he gave Carrie without a second thought, when she had disobeyed him and tried to ride his wild mustang, had earned him her heart. Carrie was elated to find that her dream man did, in fact, exist, but devastated to know it was in the form of her boyfriend's brother.

Unable to leave the life she had built for herself in the city, Carrie returned with Garrett, but things never were quite the same for her. Garrett proposed, and scared by her daddy desires, 'what woman in her right mind wants her man to spank her?' Carrie accepted. Once the engagement ring was on her finger, Carrie pushed the nagging voice out of her mind that constantly told her she was making a mistake.

Two nights before the wedding, Garrett slept with his long time, small town crush, Jessica. Jessica and Wes had shown up for the wedding as a couple. This was a shock to Carrie, but it made sense that the two would seek comfort in one another. And Wes was a single man, free to do what or who he wanted, or at least she knew that's how she should feel. When Jessica and Garrett drank a bottle of bourbon and hooked up in Carrie's family home, a series of life altering events began. The wedding was called off, and the only word to describe the situation was messy. Utterly, hopelessly, messy. Jessica had become pregnant that night, and Garrett had quickly proposed to her.

Though Wes pursued Carrie, it took a lot of time and immature mistakes before she finally accepted who she was and the gift of Wes. Carrie was born for ranch life, not city life, and though she was a strong woman in the world, she wanted to be Wes' good little girl when she was in his arms. Eventually, though it took time and more heartache, Wes and Carrie found their way to one

another. Now, the past was in the past, and Carrie couldn't be happier. She had found her winding way to her spanking, cowboy daddy and soon to be husband. All the desires of her past were fulfilled by her love of Wes.

Looking over to where Wes sat, Carrie still couldn't believe that by spring, the handsome, loyal, hardworking cowboy was going to be her husband. The dust had settled from the murky mix up of couples, and now everyone could be amiable in the room together, though it wasn't easy. Jessica's pregnancy had been a shock to Carrie and Carrie still couldn't get used to her presence on the ranch.

Jessica sat across from Carrie, still tall and slender with even more gleaming white blond hair to flick expertly over her shoulder. The only difference was her big, round belly, and the giant diamond ring on her finger. Jessica and Garrett were planning to wed sometime after the baby was born, though Garrett had yet to commit to a date.

Carrie picked up her hand of cards, thinking to herself that she might even have liked Jessica if the situation had been different, but Garrett was a different story. She loathed him. But he was Wes' brother and this was his home, and in the end, she had gotten the daddy that she had been longing for.

Jessica's voice brought Carrie out of her fog of memories and back to the present. "What do you want for Christmas, Carrie?" Jessica asked shyly, rubbing her belly. Jessica knew exactly what was happening in the back bedroom over the past fifteen minutes, and Carrie was grateful to Jessica for starting a conversation to take the attention off her return to the room.

"I need a new saddle for Mabel."

"But every time I see you taking off, you're riding bareback," Garrett laughed.

"At this rate, she's getting a paddle for Christmas," Wes murmured nonchalantly while straightening his cards.

A flush crept into Carrie's face, as her soon to be husband winked at her over the table. Wes was not shy about their lifestyle. All the ranch hands knew what was going on behind closed doors, she had seen their empathetic gazes whenever Wes guided Carrie by her upper arm into the barn. And they all had a special place in their hearts for the funny, lively, little curly blonde woman with the chocolate eyes and feisty personality. She was, truly, the baby of the ranch.

"All the same, I'd like a new saddle, not a paddle." She flashed her eyes at Wes, and he raised an eyebrow at her, chuckling. Carrie turned to Jessica. "What are you asking for, Jessica?"

A beautiful, serene look crossed Jessica's face. "I'm just hoping for a safe birth and a healthy baby," she said. "Baby is due early January, so I figure that's close enough to Christmas to wish for."

Carrie was feeling almost forgiving towards the couple when Garrett chimed in, "Well, I, for one, am treating myself to a new car this Christmas."

Carrie caught Wes rolling his eyes at his younger brother. "My brother, the high roller of Wall Street."

Laughing good-naturedly, Garrett said, "Hey, somebody's got to make some money around here. The Lonestar Cattle Company, alone, isn't going to pay for Mama's retirement." He turned over his shoulder and called, "Right, Mama?"

At the table behind them, Mama, Wes and Garrett's mother, sat playing bridge with her friends, a demure smile on her sweet face. "Oh, we're getting on just fine here at The Lonestar." She shot a wink over Garrett's shoulder to Wes and Wes tried to hide a smile. "Just where do you think you got your banking skills from, honey?" The combination of Mama's shrewd investment

skills and Wes working dawn till well past dusk, had paid off. They suspected the income of the ranch had secretly surpassed that of the young finance whiz.

“Well, what did you ask for from Santa, Wes? My brother, the penny pincher.” Garrett flashed his Hollywood smile. The brothers loved to tease one another and the holidays made the brotherly banter come out even more.

Wes sat quietly for a moment. His eyes looked wistfully at the oval shaped Aventurine stone that sat in the silver band around Carrie’s left-hand ring finger. Locking eyes with Carrie, he said, “I wanted to have my wife for Christmas.” Then looking over Carrie’s shoulder, calling loudly to Mama, he said, “But Santa said no, didn’t he, Mama?”

Carrie could not help but laugh out loud as Mama quipped back, “You both know very well that springtime is the appropriate time for a ranch wedding.” The women surrounding her nodded their heads and threw in their murmurs of agreement.

Mama’s best friend, Faye, added, “And you could never have pulled off a big wedding that fast.”

“I think that was the point. Wes and Carrie wanted a small wedding,” Jessica said, her eyes twinkling at Carrie.

“And to be married as soon as possible,” Garrett chimed in. “These two can’t wait for the honeymoon,” he added boisterously.

Wes had proposed to Carrie on Thanksgiving. They wanted a simple affair as soon as possible and had planned to be married by Christmas. When they shared their timeline with Mama, the joyous smile had fallen from her face. In her gentle way, Mama had asked them if they might consider having their wedding at the ranch come springtime. Wes nor Carrie could say no to Mama, and so the date was set for early April.

“Just think, if you’d have gotten married we’d be done with parties. Now, we get to have this great Christmas together, and we have the wedding to look forward to.” Jessica’s hand never left her belly, and she rubbed it gently as she spoke, “And this little one will get to see Aunt Carrie and Uncle Wes on their special day.”

Wes asked, “What do you all think, is Jessica carrying our ring bearer or our flower girl?”

Feeling generous, Carrie chimed in, “My vote is for a flower girl. What about you, Jessica?”

“I don’t care either way. I’m just so excited to meet the little one.” A strange look crossed Jessica’s face as she softly asked Garrett, “What do you think it’s going to be, Gare?”

Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, Garrett said, “Oh, doesn’t matter to me.”

“I have a feeling there is a little cowboy in there,” Wes said, smiling at Jess. “My next ranch hand.”

Garrett suddenly stood from his seat. “This has been great, you guys.” He stretched his arms above his head, yawning loudly. “A whole lot of fun. But I want to hit Ray’s one more time before he closes for the holidays.” Shrugging into his black leather jacket, he muttered, “Only one bar in the town of Poke and it’s closed Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.”

Looking to Jessica, Carrie said, “Garrett, you can’t go off to a bar and leave your pregnant fiancée behind.”

“She can come with,” Garrett said. “We all know that would make Ray’s Christmas wish come true,” he laughed. Everyone in town knew that the bachelor bartender held a flame for Jessica ever since she had stepped into his bar on her twenty-first birthday, demanded Ray help her push all the tables to the side and proceeded to encourage every single patron to celebrate her big day by line dancing.

Jessica laughed, waving her hand in the air, “He’s harmless. I can’t help that there are so few single women to pick from.” Jessica stood from her chair, Wes offering his arm to help her up. “You go on, Gare. I get so tired at the end of the day, going to bed is way more enticing than going to a bar.”

Garrett turned to Wes. “Brother, you up for a drink?”

“No thanks, Gare. I’m going to hold down the fort.” Wes walked over to Carrie and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, tightly. “I think we are going to spend some time with Carrie’s folks.”

Carrie smiled up at Wes. “They were so sweet to come for Christmas. After everyone leaves, I’ll pull out Mama’s leftover pies for them. After all that food, I’m still hungry.”

“No one can say ‘no’ to Mama’s pie. If we feed your parents enough of it, they will be sure to come back and visit soon,” Wes added.

Eye’s lighting up at the idea of dessert, Jessica laughed, “If that’s your plan, Carrie, I might not go to bed yet.”

Garrett said his goodbyes hurriedly, brushing Jessica’s cheek with a quick kiss, then he was out the door. Carrie listened to the sound of the engine of his fancy rental car, as he revved up and headed down the drive, all the while, thinking to herself that as much as she despised Garrett’s presence, for Jessica’s sake Carrie wished that he would have stayed.

Wes wrapped his other arm around Jessica’s shoulders. “Ladies, I believe we have a date with the kitchen.” As he led them, there was a smile on his face, but Carrie knew that Wes, too, wished Garrett hadn’t traded in a night on the ranch, for a night at the bar.

Comfort food awaited them in the tidy kitchen. Baking was Mama’s specialty, and with the added visitors, she had outdone herself this Christmas. The deep freezer in the laundry room was full of cookies, cakes, and homemade bread, while the refrigerator brimmed with pies.

Mama had beat Carrie to it, and already pulled out the apple, cherry and pumpkin pie, as well as whipped cream and vanilla ice cream. She made each slice to order, and without even having to ask, had heated up Carrie’s apple pie in a bowl, till it was steaming so the ice cream would melt into a puddle around the hot pie, just the way Carrie liked it. As Mama handed Carrie the bowl, her favorite baby blue one with the elephant on it, Carrie smiled and said, “Thank you, Mama,” happily knowing just how spoiled she was.

Wes, Carrie, Mama, Carrie’s parents; Jim and Pam, and Jessica sat around the kitchen table, enjoying seconds on dessert and chatting.

As their snack was winding up, Mama turned to their visitors and said, “I’m just so glad you could come for the holiday,” with a sweet smile on her face. “I was hoping for all of us to get to know each other better.” It went unsaid by everyone at the table, that the past was best left there. Everyone had swept the crazy events of the last few months under the rug and preferred to live in the present.

“New York City has been exciting, but you know I wouldn’t miss a Christmas on the ranch,” Jessica said, patting Mama’s hand. The gesture brought a hint of jealousy to Carrie’s heart, but she knew Jessica and Mama had grown close over the years in the small town before Carrie had even come into the picture.

“This place must be night and day from the city,” Jim said. Then looking pointedly at Wes, he added, “Things run a little more old-fashioned here, don’t they?” His firm tone making clear his point.

Jessica’s eyes went wide, and her fork stopped mid-air. She looked from Carrie to Wes. A small smile played at Wes’ lips, and Carrie felt a blush creeping into hers.

“Yes.” Pam quickly began to chatter, “Carrie has told us so much about your ranch, and we were just delighted to come and stay. It’s really a wonderful operation you have going here. And the history tour Wes gave us was so interesting. Sam Poke sounds like quite the character.”

“It’s mostly tall tales,” Wes replied. “But from the stories, it sounds like he was a handful. Carrie and I are glad you could come. I’m sure you must miss her on the farm, I know life on the ranch has been perfected by her presence.” He looked to Carrie and gave her his dashing smile, the one that he reserved just for his girl.

“We do miss her,” Jim said, wistfully. “I’m hoping you all can make the trip to visit the farm next Thanksgiving,” her dad continued. “And this pumpkin pie is putting mine to shame. Mama, you’ll have to be in charge of dessert, if you come.”

“Oh no, yours was delicious,” Mama protested. “I just add a little extra ginger to mine.”

“So, that’s the secret, is it? I’ll have to try it. Everything is a little spicier on the ranch, I take it,” Jim directed at Wes. Carrie’s father took the last bite of his food. “Thank you for the delicious dessert, and hospitality,” he said. Standing and taking his plate to the sink, he called over his shoulder, “Carrie, Wes, could I have a word with you?”

Wes, looking amused, winked at Carrie.

She gave a small shrug. “Of course, Dad.” Wes and Carrie stood, following Jim out of the screen door and into the starry night.

Jim discreetly pulled the door closed behind them. Once they were all settled in rocking chairs on the front porch, he got right to the point.

“Son, I noticed during the games tonight that you took my daughter away for a while and it seemed your little trip was, shall I say, disciplinary in nature.”

Carrie sat quietly, inwardly groaning. This was not a conversation that she had ever pictured having with her father. And she was not sure how she felt. Now, even her parents knew she was a spanked fiancée and soon to be wife. But hiding who she really was and what she needed for years, had taken a toll on her. There was a certain ambivalence she felt when faced with the idea of fully coming out with their lifestyle.

Leaning forward in his chair, Wes rested his forearms on his thighs. He looked straight at his soon to be father-in-law and said, confidently, “Yes. It was a disciplinary measure, sir.”

The night grew quiet. Carrie held her breath. Stars sparkled in the inky sky, and the air seemed suddenly colder. Wes continued, “Carrie lost her temper. Though it was a difficult situation, it was Carrie’s idea, and she knew the consequences of acting out. I gave her several warnings, but she got a little out of control and I reined her back in.” He turned to Carrie. “It may seem unusual, but it’s how we work. I won’t speak for my bride, but this is the way I was wired and I believe the same goes for your daughter.”

Wes’ confident, honest response made Carrie feel a glowing pride for her man. Carrie looked at her father and awaited his response.

Silently, Jim stared down at his hands, twisting the silver wedding band on his finger. “I see,” he murmured. After what felt like an agonizing amount of time, Jim looked at his daughter.

His warm gaze assured her that she had not lost his love, or respect with this revelation. Carrie sighed with relief.

“And Carrie, this is the type of marriage you want?” There was a hint of a smile on her father’s face as he questioned her.

No longer able to meet her father’s eyes, Carrie looked down at her own ring. The silver specks hiding in the sea green stone sparkled in the moonlight. The memory of the moment Wes

placed the beautiful ring on her finger gave her the courage to answer truthfully. “Want and need,” she said quietly.

Carrie felt her father looking her over. “It’s not the relationship that your mother and I would choose, but I can imagine that for the right couple...” his words trailed off as he stared at the starry night sky. “Well, that’s not quite true.” There was a twinkle in his eye as he continued. “I could see how this arrangement would work for any couple, at some point. And you’re happy, Carrie?”

This was a question she had no problem locking eyes with her father and answering. “Happier than I’ve ever been.”

A mischievous glint came to her father’s eyes as he laughed. “Well, this is one way to finally get ahold of your temper, I guess.”

Wes jokingly interjected, “Sir, the truth is, if you had done this years ago, I wouldn’t be doing it now, so you only have yourself to blame.” To Carrie’s relief, her father laughed out loud as Wes continued, his hand gently rubbing her back, “Though I must say, I am perfectly content with how everything worked out.”

“You try having only one child, a daughter as beautiful and sweet as Carrie, and see if you don’t end up spoiling her a touch.” Jim good naturedly slapped Wes on the back.

“Oh, I fully understand. This lady is spoiled rotten by everyone on the ranch,” Wes replied, laughing as Carrie elbowed him in the side.

After a quiet moment of star gazing and letting the dust settle from the difficult conversation, Jim said quietly, “Well, I guess this is what they mean by the father ‘giving his daughter away.’ Come spring, I’ll be letting go and giving you my little girl.”

Carrie was already Wes’ little girl from the first time they were alone in the barn, but she thought better than to say it out loud. That was the day she had threatened to ride the then untamed horse, Mabel. Wes had grabbed her by the arm and said, “You make no mistake, you ride that horse and I will spank your bottom until you aren’t sitting comfortably for a week. Garrett’s girl, or not. My ranch, my rules, little girl.” The memory still made electricity run through her veins.

“Oh, Dad, you aren’t giving me away. You are just gaining the son you never had.” She stood from her rocking chair, and her father did the same. They hugged one another tightly, knowing that things between them were different now that Wes had Carrie’s whole heart.

Reluctantly letting go of his daughter, Jim held his hand out to Wes and shook it firmly with tears in his eyes. “Good night, Wes. I know you’ll take good care of Carrie, and Pam and I are very grateful for you.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate that.” Carrie could feel Wes’ loving gaze on her as he said, “It’s my most important job.”

“Goodnight, Dad.” Carrie reached up and hugged her father once more. With one wistful look over his shoulder, Jim saw himself back into the house.

When he had gone, the couple sat back down, rocking quietly and watching for shooting stars, something they did most nights. Carrie broke the silence, “Other than being incredibly awkward, that went well,” she said.

“It must be hard to pass the torch after raising a child all those years.” Wes moved his chair over until it was almost touching hers, then wrapped his arm tightly around Carrie. “But the time has come and now, I’ll be raising my wife.” He leaned down and kissed her under the starry sky.

Shivers of desire tickled down her spine at the sound of Wes’ words and feel of his touch. She wanted desperately to stay on the porch, as they were, all night.

“It’s time to tuck you in.” Wes’ stern tone ended the sweet moment too soon.

"I'm not ready. I was just thinking about how I could stay out here all night."

Wes stood, offering his hand to help her from her chair. "Could, but won't," he said firmly.

Carrie placed her hand in his and let him lift her from her seat. He gave her a playful swat on her bottom as he followed her to the door. "Off you go, little one."

After their nighttime routine, Wes sat by Carrie's side on the bed and tucked the quilt tightly around her. "Two days till Christmas, little girl. I wonder how you'll like your paddle," he said with a wink.

Rolling her eyes and groaning, Carrie replied, "You heard wrong. A saddle, not a paddle, Daddy."

"Well with eye rolls like that, I don't think it's a saddle that you are in need of, young lady. There will be lots of presents under the tree for my woman." He leaned down and his husky voice whispered into her ear, "And there will be a paddle for my little girl, too. You can be sure of that." Wes' promise to Carrie brought an involuntary shiver, as well as a warm liquid feeling.

Smiling at her reaction, Wes said, "Sweet dreams, baby." With a chaste kiss on her cheek, Wes left Carrie to ponder what Christmas would bring and whether she was looking forward to or dreading her daddy's special gift.

Christmas Eve morning, Carrie awoke, a smile on her face, stretching out in the guest bed under the warm quilt. She couldn't help but feel a childlike excitement for the holiday. It would be her and Wes' first Christmas Eve together, and she wanted it to be perfect.

Hurriedly, Carrie got out of bed. The dress she had bought for the day was flouncy and short, but not short enough to be immodest, as she knew exactly where that would lead her. Right over Wes' knee. It was made of the softest red velvet and she stroked it admiringly with her fingers. Pulling it on over her head, she twirled in front of the mirror, loving the way the fabric swished, then fell into place. Smoothing down the dress Carrie looked at the time then quickly twisted her hair into two, long braids, just how Wes liked it best. She loved how he would tug on the end of her braids before he walked out the door, and tell her to be his good girl while he was working. Feeling like the luckiest girl in the world, Carrie hurriedly pulled on her tan leather cowgirl boots, then flounced off to the kitchen to greet Mama.

The two had planned a breakfast worthy of Christmas Eve morning and Mama was already at the counter, whipping up her famous buckwheat pancakes. There weren't many foods better than the fluffy cakes stacked high on a plate and soaked with fresh, melted butter and maple syrup. Greeting Mama with a cheerful, "Good morning," Carrie tied on her cherry patterned apron and got to work frying bacon. With so many people staying over on the ranch they were going to need a huge pile of it.

The two women worked side by side. Lost in her own thoughts, it took a few minutes before Carrie realized that Mama was not engaging in her usual friendly chatter. "Anything wrong, Mama?" Carrie asked gently as she flipped the brown edged bacon.

"I didn't hear Garrett come in last night," Mama murmured, so low it was almost as if she was talking to herself. Carrie watched as Mama flipped a golden-brown cake and let it cook another minute, then move it to a plate and melted several little pats of butter in a row, on the griddle. Silently, Mama poured thick batter over the circles of butter.

It wasn't unusual for Garrett to keep late hours. What was out of place was the worried look creasing Mama's brow. "Do you want me to check and see if his car is here?" Carrie asked, knowing that Mama preferred to know the whereabouts of her boys when they were at the ranch.

With a wave of her hand, Mama protested, “No, honey, I’m just being silly. Garrett’s a big old boy. He’s fine, I’m sure.” She flipped the batch of pancakes.

Carrie smiled reassuringly. “He probably just got in really late. You know how rowdy Ray’s can get.”

“Actually, I don’t,” Mama said, sharply. “I wish he wouldn’t have gone and left Jessica here. Selfish.”

Tongs hovering in midair, Carrie froze. Never had Carrie heard Mama utter a word against either of her sons. Unsure of what to say, Carrie fumbled around in her brain, trying to come up with something reassuring. Not able to find the right phrase to comfort the mother of the cheating, impregnating, partying father of Mama’s grandchild, Carrie sighed. Rendered speechless, she was relieved to hear the familiar sound of boots clomping through the back door of the kitchen.

Carrie’s knight in shining armor, literally, arrived in the frame of the door. Wes was wearing his regular button-down, plaid work shirt, under what looked like a human sized wrapping of aluminum foil. Before she could ask her future husband what in the world he had gotten himself into, Carrie began to laugh.

At the sight of Carrie’s amusement, a smile spread over Wes’ rugged, handsome face. His skin was tanned from working in the sun and it crinkled as a sparkle came to his eyes, his grin wide and white. “Morning ladies,” he said, taking his hat from his head and hanging it on the peg by the back door. Wes moved in and wrapped his arms around Carrie, the material around his torso making a crinkling noise as he did. “Something smells delicious,” the space age cowboy said as he nibbled at Carrie’s neck. Laughing, he released her and headed for the bacon. “And the bacon doesn’t smell bad either.”

Still laughing, Carrie swatted at his silver middle. “Stop it. We are trying to cook breakfast for everyone, not just you.” Wes swatted at her rear as she danced around him, trying to block the platter of meat with her body. “Nice armor,” she laughed as she battled him away from the back with her tongs.

Throwing his hands in the air in surrender, Wes cried, “Armor? This is my tux. Thought I’d wear it to the wedding.” Carrie took another swing at his torso. “Just kidding, baby. You know I’ll wear my best. I have to at least try to look half decent next to your beauty.” Wes gave Carrie a sweet kiss.

“Well, what is it?” Carrie asked.

“It’s a new-fangled idea from the cowboys on the West Coast, called Distraction Training. Kevin talked me into it. He’s always up on the latest invention.” The metal made a clanking sound as Wes patted his abdomen, “But I have to give him credit, they work pretty well.” Wes untied the leather straps from behind the strange gear, then moved back towards the door. He lifted it over his head, throwing it out the screen door, into the backyard.

Re-entering the kitchen, Wes walked over to his mother. “Merry Christmas Eve, Mama,” Wes said, then placed a gentle kiss on his mother’s cheek.

“Merry Christmas Eve to you too, baby.” She gave Wes a quick hug, then turned her attention back on her flapjacks. “I was just telling Carrie that I didn’t hear Garrett come in last night.”

An uncomfortable look crossed over Wes’ face. He looked at Carrie, and she could see the clouds gathering in the gray pools of his worried eyes. Wes always made it around the entire farm before breakfast. Carrie deduced that Wes hadn’t come across Garrett when he was making his rounds.

Finishing the last three pancakes, Mama wiped her hands on her apron, then unplugged the griddle. She turned to Wes. “Weston, do you know something we don’t?” she asked quietly.

“Mama, Garrett’s car isn’t here, and he’s not in his room. I don’t think he came home last night.” Wes ran a hand through his wavy hair.

Ma sucked in a hard breath. “Damn it, Garrett.”

A loud clang filled the kitchen as Carrie dropped her metal tongs onto the wooden floor, in shock. Mama did not cuss, not ever.

“Ma, do you know something I don’t know?” Wes asked, picking up the tongs and handing them to Carrie. Crossing his arms across his flannel covered chest, Wes leaned back against the counter, shooting Mama a suspicious look.

Putting a hand to her head, Mama took another deep breath. “It’s not for me to say, just something Jessica said that stuck with me and had me worried.” She looked to Carrie. “You know that sixth sense you sometimes get, as a woman? When you hear something that just doesn’t sit right?”

Carrie nodded.

“Well, Jessica and I were talking the other night, and something she mentioned gave me this sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.” Ma stared out the window towards the parked cars by the barn. “And I have to say I felt this coming.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions, Mama,” Wes said.

“I know, I know, Weston. But other than hightailing it out of here and leaving his girlfriend behind carrying his unborn child, what excuse do you think we can make for Garrett not being here Christmas Eve morning?”

A small snuffle from the hallway outside of the kitchen drew their attention. There stood a desperately beautiful, heavy with child, Jessica. A vacant look resided in her red rimmed eyes. Her left hand rubbed circular motions on her enormous belly, as always, but the usual glint was gone from her ring finger.

“He’s gone,” Jessica whispered. Her body began to collapse in the doorway. Moving quickly, Wes got to Jessica just before she dropped to the floor. Arms around her, Wes pulled her up and held her as she sobbed hopelessly. “He’s gone,” she repeated.

Mama quickly went to Jessica’s side. Wes and Mama flanked Jessica as she cried. Standing alone in the kitchen, Carrie looked on, dumbly. Smelling the burning bacon, she quickly returned to her post. Turning the crackling meat, Carrie kept her eyes down as Ma and Wes ushered Jessica into the living room. Murmurs of their comforting words barely reached Carrie’s ears from where she stood. Unable to hear the conversation, Carrie could guess the gist of it. Garrett had left, maybe for good. Finishing the bacon, she placed it on several rows of paper towels to cool. Keeping busy, Carrie refilled the coffee pot with water and freshly ground beans, then set the table for breakfast. Her parents would be up soon and ready to eat.

While setting the blue cloth napkins on the table, Carrie caught a glimpse of Jessica on the couch, her head on Wes’ chest. An irrational jealous pang stung Carrie’s heart. Silly insecurities danced around in her mind. Carrie took a deep breath and went back to the counter to get the food. Once the table was perfectly set, Carrie wasn’t sure what proper protocol was. Should she just cancel breakfast and send her parents home? But Jessica was always so hungry and she never skipped breakfast. Carrie went to the living room and timidly called, “Breakfast is ready. Jessica, do you think you can eat?”

Jessica laughed, bitterly in response. “I can always eat. I won’t let Garrett ruin Mama’s famous flapjacks for me.” Wiping her eyes and rising from the couch, Jessica put a hand on her

lower abdomen. "Ouch, this baby is kicking me." She rubbed her tummy gently, whispering sweetly, "Are you hungry, baby?"

Selfish, selfish, selfish, Carrie thought to herself. Jessica had just been left high and dry by the father of her child, and here Carrie was, jealous that Wes was comforting her. Carrie was saved from her unpleasant thoughts by a familiar voice declaring, "My what a spread we have here."

Turning, Carrie smiled at her father. "Come," she said, "have a seat." Continuing to keep herself occupied, Carrie poured coffee and orange juices for everyone. Jim and Pam took a second look at Jessica's worried face and red eyes, then Jim began making polite, pleasant conversation for which Jessica shot him a grateful look.

The food was comforting and delicious, and the coffee pot bottomless. Soon, even Jessica was laughing at the light banter between Wes and Jim. Carrie smiled warmly, happy her parents seemed so taken with Wes. The conversation they had with her father the previous night had been painfully awkward, but it had also been freeing. Carrie no longer felt like she was hiding. In just a few short months, she had gone from feeling like a stranger in her own life to feeling like she was on the road to becoming her true self.

After a long relaxing breakfast, Jim and Pam washed the dishes while Jessica went back to her room to recover. After whispering something in Wes' ear, Mama went off to do some sewing, wringing her hands all the way.

"Come on, Carrie. Let's ride." Wes' smile didn't reach his eyes. When he followed up with "We'll go to the creek bed," Carrie knew he wanted to talk to her about something serious.

"Okay. I haven't been able to give May a good exercising with all the Christmas prep. Let me just change." Quietly, so as not to wake Jess, Carrie went to her own room across the hall and slid into her faded blue jeans and flannel shirt, throwing on her cream colored down vest.

As they were saddling up the horses, Wes said to Carrie, "Jessica said that Garrett called this morning. Said he was headed back to New York and he would send her things from the apartment, and money. Told her he just wasn't ready to be a father or a husband." Anger made Wes' voice sound eerily calm. His hands moved slowly and methodically as he bridled Dipper.

"Wow." At the moment, Carrie didn't have much more to say. Everyone knew it was in Garrett's nature to always put himself first, but this was beyond anything she could have anticipated him doing. Carrie slipped her thumb into the corner of May's mouth, then moved the bit into the horse's mouth, while pulling up on the leather strap with her other hand. Carrie put the top of the bridle up over May's ears and situated the bridle until she was sure Mabel was comfortable. Softly patting May's head, she said, "Just, wow."

Wes had been standing quietly beside her while she worked. "Yes," was his reply, then he climbed onto Dipper. They both knew that there were certain times in life that the only way to clear your mind was with a good, long, ride.

Carrie mounted May and with a loud, "Hiya," they were off. It was her favorite game to have Wes chase her. Checking over her shoulder every so often to see if he and Dipper were catching up, Carrie was happy to see Wes' grin. He caught up to her, and they slowed their pace, riding side by side.

The morning sun was bright. The winter air was chilly but still mild. Carrie let her eyes rove over the ranch as they rode silently. The land was beautiful and peaceful, and a pleasant break from the ranch house, which was currently a whirlwind of emotions. With Garrett gone and Jessica in shambles, the holiday feeling had left the house.

Carrie waited patiently for Wes to speak. After riding for a few miles in silence, Wes began to share what weighed so heavily on his mind.

“Mama had a conversation with Jessica the night before last. Jessica told her that Garrett kept putting off setting a date for the wedding. Jessica’s been going to all her perinatal appointments by herself.”

“It’s prenatal,” Carrie interjected.

“Hmm,” Wes replied distractedly. “You know that thing they do to take pictures of the baby?”

“You mean the ultrasound?” Carrie smiled to herself. She had no idea Wes was so clueless about these things. Carrie made a mental note to get her man off the ranch more often.

“Well, they are supposed to be a big deal, right? Garrett wouldn’t go to the ultrasounds. Jessica said that he barely glanced at the pictures when she brought them home.”

“That’s not normal,” Carrie replied emphatically then added more softly, “poor Jess. What is she going to do?”

“We don’t know yet. That is why I wanted to talk to you.” His gray eyes turned to hers. “Mama and I think it would be best if Jessica stays on the ranch, at least for a while.”

Currently, everything on the ranch was perfect and Carrie didn’t use the word ‘perfect,’ lightly or often. Their daily routine was pleasant, and Carrie and Wes spent many hours alone together. Having Jessica there was not a part of the plan. “I see,” she murmured in response.

Carrie rode May down to the creek bed. Quietly, she dismounted and led the horse to drink. Wes did the same with Dipper. Grabbing Carrie’s hand, Wes led her to the soft grass on the bed of the creek. They lay down together, staring up at the blue sky.

Wes pushed up on an elbow, turning to Carrie. He played with a curl of her hair as he spoke. “Jessica already ended her lease at the hair cut place in New York, in preparation for the baby to come. But her house in town is rented out. I have no worries that Garrett will send all the money she could need, but she really has nowhere to go. I just don’t think it would be good for her to be alone, now.”

Carrie continued to stare at the sky, she could feel Wes’ gaze trying to read the emotion on her face. “That makes, sense,” Carrie said, trying to hide the apprehension in her voice.

It was no use trying to put on a brave face, Wes knew her too well. “Mama and I both want your blessing on this. I understand with our messy past it could be a strain on you having Jessica stay with us, but it’s the right thing to do, Carrie.”

In her heart, of course, Carrie knew it was the right thing to do. But in her head, she worried about having the beautiful, funny, damsel in distress in such close quarters with Wes. Envious of the attention Jessica would be receiving made Carrie feel ashamed, like a little dog, wanting to mark her territory.

“Of course,” she said confidently, then added more quietly, “for how long, do you think?”

“At least until the baby comes, maybe a few weeks after that? We really don’t know.”

Wes lay back down beside her. Carrie watched as the fluffy white clouds made their way through the azure sky. She debated with herself for a moment, then turned towards Wes, resting her head on his chest, her arm around his torso. Her voice sounded small in her ears when she spoke. “What if having Jessica on the ranch causes a strain, for us? You and Jessica are close.”

Wes turned and gently laid Carrie on her side facing him, and mirrored her position, also resting on his side. Without a word but with love pouring from his soft eyes, he gently reached out his hand. Tucking the curl behind her ear, his fingertips trailed over the curve of her face, down her neck, slowly over her shoulder. His hand brushed over her chest then trailed down her side, caressing the curve of her hip. Finishing its journey, the weight of Wes’ hand rested in the curve

of her waist. His eyes smoldering, he said, “Carrie girl, you are my little girl. And absolutely, unequivocally the only woman for me. I was lost without you.”

Tears sprung to her eyes and she quickly blinked them away. The beginning of their story had been a rocky road and Carrie had left Wes over her insecurities once before. She felt bad over the pain she had caused him and was relieved when Wes came to her and proposed. Since then, everything felt as if it was as it should be. Now, that Jessica was back in the picture Carrie hoped her old insecurities wouldn't come back to haunt her.

Wes' hand found the curve of her face again, his thumb brushing over her lips and resting on her chin. “We don't have to stay on the ranch if you don't want to, Carrie. I understand that is asking too much. I can figure something out. I just wish I was further into the renovations on the bunkhouse, but it's not fit for you to stay there, yet.”

Carrie seriously thought about the idea. But Jessica having the ranch all to herself, having lunch with Wes and Mama, no way. That would make her feel worse.

Steadying her voice, Carrie said, “I can handle it.”

Concern hovered over Wes' face. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

The exploring hand began its journey again. Carrie drew in a sharp breath as tingles covered her skin under the path of Wes' gentle touch. Leaning in to kiss her, he whispered, “Now you let me know if anything changes, Carrie girl.” He touched his lips softly to hers. His mouth made a line of kisses up to her ear. Mouth by her ear, his low voice rumbled, “I don't want to have to spank you for not telling me how you feel, but I will. So be sure to stay open with me.” A shiver ran down her backbone. Wes' hand moved to the back of her head, tugging at her hair, his mouth meeting hers and kissing her hungrily.

The feel of his mouth on hers and his hand tugging at her hair reminded Carrie that she would do anything for this man.