

MASTERING HER WILL

DIRTY TEXAS LOVE, BOOK TWO



SHANNA HANDEL

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



BUTTERCUP

As I bounded out of the church and into the blinding sun, there was only one thing on my mind as Mrs. Buttercup Hargett.

Rough, dirty sex.

Jake's large hand was wound tightly around mine, the shiny silver band glinting on the ring finger of his left hand. Giving a joyous laugh, his warm brown eyes locked on mine as we made our way over the threshold of the chapel. The promise within those flashing eyes had my insides melting.

We stood before the church as the heavy oak doors closed, alone for only moments before they would reopen the doors and the guests would exit, eager to get a peek at Mr. and Mrs. Hargett departing in a white limo.

"Hello, wife," he said, pulling on my hand and tugging my body towards his. Pressed up against the chest of my husband, I sighed as his mouth moved to mine. A kiss as deep as the sea had me floating on the earth, my body warming with desire.

“I want you,” he whispered into my ear, his cheek nuzzling mine as he tore himself from me. Holding me at arm’s length, both my hands in his, he spoke clearly but his voice was husky with desire. “I want you. Wife of mine.”

The stolen moment, his first words as my husband, would forever be etched into my memory as we hurried down the stone steps of the church to the limo that waited to take us to our wedding reception. There was no way I was going to make it until tonight without tearing the clothes off my six foot and some change, broad shouldered, wavy brown haired—hot as Texas makes them—husband.

Tonight would be our first time. I hadn’t even seen my husband naked yet. It was like something out of a 1950’s movie. The virginal bride and her hunky husband who had never taken their clothes off around one another. Except we were no virgins.

Jake had made us wait. And wait, and wait some more. One time, my friend, Cherry—her mind always on *SEX*—had grabbed my arm, whispering in my ear, “How’s he in bed? Hmmm? Must be great. Jake is such a hunk.” I didn’t need a mirror to know my face had turned beet red. Muttering something incoherent about Jake being old-fashioned, my face burned as Cherry had hooted and hollered at me in disbelief. She hadn’t let up on the subject until I threatened to tell everyone at the EMS building we volunteered at that she was secretly afraid of the sight of blood. She shut up after that.

But Jake made the rules. And what Jake says goes. And that was exactly how I liked it. Except when I didn’t—which was every time we started making out while we were dating.

Things would start to get all hot and heavy and I would be grinding around on his thigh, my crotch trying to find purchase to rub on, much like a dog in heat, and he would stop us.

Stop everything. Saying we needed to ‘cool it.’

I would keep trying to get us to take things further. Unbutton my shirt slowly, my lacy bra peeking out. Or reach down and

‘accidentally’ brush up against the erection that was straining against the fabric of his pants. Stick my finger in my mouth seductively, murmuring, “Don’t you want to?”

That’s when Jake would get firm with me, telling me that I ‘needed to learn how to wait, young lady.’ As I would try tactic after tactic, he would hold strong, informing me that we would be glad we had waited. That our wedding night would be special.

And if I took things a little too far? Well, that resulted in Jake swiftly throwing me over his lap, flipping up my skirt or ripping down my jeans, taking down my panties, and spanking my bare bottom with his huge paddle like hand until I was promising to behave myself.

Yes, I said it.

Spanking.

My husband believes in domestic discipline. Where the man is the head of the household and his wife submits her will to his. And in return, he loves, adores and spoils the heck out of his bride. In Jake’s case the rules applied before marriage as well, keeping a tight rein on our relationship with his firm hand.

And he could not keep his hands off me—my rear at least. Even though he wouldn’t let us go any further than kissing and touching, he found it A-Okay to spank my bare ass anytime he saw fit. Not that I was complaining; I had recently discovered I was a lifelong closet spanko.

And now he had me believing in domestic discipline.

Before Jake I had wondered what was wrong with me. Enjoying living in an age of women gaining power, I desired both—to be a strong woman and a submissive partner. I got the shivers every time I saw a man being firm with his woman.

And we weren’t the only ones in our small town of Poke. Things seemed to run a little more old-fashioned around here. When I first moved here, I was surprised to find that my brother Ray and his wife Jessica were in a DD relationship. As well as their friends, Wes

and Carrie. Something must run in the water around here—making the women swoon over their strong men.

A delicious tingle ran down my spine the first time I heard Wes take his petite spitfire of a wife, Carrie by the arm whispering in her ear, “Just wait till we get home, young lady.” And when Jessica was doing my hair to get me ready for my first date with Jake, she had told me, ‘Jake is a spanking man,’ I still remember how my breath had caught in my throat, my eyes wide and shining in the mirror, my stomach dropping ten feet.

I could never share my desires with my ‘normal’ friends. They would have laughed me out of town. Called me archaic. Wanted to know where my brain had gone. Then I met Jake.

The first time Jake took me over his knee I felt complete, somehow.

I know it’s not for everyone, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. I love it when he calls me, good girl, little girl, young lady. And even though I may not love a punishment spanking when I’m in the throes of it, there are other types of spankings. The ones that warmed my skin and melted my core and had me positively gyrating on Jake’s hard thighs as we kiss afterwards. That is until he would pull me off him, firmly telling me ‘you need to learn patience, little girl.’

The memory of the last spanking he had given me flashed into my mind. My usual laid-back personality had somehow transformed into a raging bridezilla—my sister-in-law, Jessica helpfully informed me this was totally normal and not to worry; the calm ones always snap from the pressure of wedding planning. That was me. I snapped—at the last person I should have, Jake.

I got shivers just thinking about the flash in his eyes and his stern voice commanding me, “You will not speak to me with that tone, not now, not when we are married, not ever. Are we clear?”

I should have dropped it at that point—but I was too far gone. “But the wedding planner told me that my wedding would be ruined if I have my favorite Double Dutch Chocolate Cake. And

that chocolate cakes had to be bad luck and when I told her it didn't matter, she sneered at me and said, 'well, I hope you don't get any cake on that white dress of yours.' What a total b—" my rant was cut off by Jake's hand grabbing my wrist and tugging me towards the couch.

"That's it," he growled, causing butterflies to take flight in my tummy.

"What? I'm right about this. She had no right to... Jake let me go! What are you doing?" I cried, knowing full well what my fiancé was planning by the way he was sitting down on the couch, pulling me across his lap.

"What do you think I'm doing, Buttercup?"

I protested as he pushed my torso onto the couch, my legs hanging down over his lap, my bottom perfectly centered over his knee just like he liked it. Trying to look over my shoulder I continued my protest, "But Jake—"

Pinning my flying hand behind my back, without a word, he began to spank me.

"Ow... Jake... you aren't being fair! She was the one in the wrong, not me! I was just telling you exactly what happened. I don't know why you are spanking me for this!"

Wordlessly, he continued to spank my bottom over my dress. He usually lectured me while he spanked, but that day was different. The sharpness of his swats increased as he spanked, his irritation brewing with each swat, but I could not keep my big mouth shut.

"Jake Hargett you let me up this instant!" I yelled, kicking my feet and struggling to get free.

"That's it," he mumbled to himself. He slipped one leg out from under me, wrapped it around both of my legs, locking them into an iron like grip with his thigh and his knee. In one swift motion, my dress was up and over my waist, my panties tugged down baring my bottom.

"This has been building up, Buttercup. I should have taken you

over my knees a few days ago when you were getting snappy with Carrie about the decorations. Should have just taken you right over my knee in front of everyone and put your sassy attitude to bed. But I didn't and now I have to make up for lost time."

Tightening his grip on my wrist, he spanked—hard. His hand came down on my bare bottom with a loud, *slap*. I cried out but that didn't stop the next succession of spanks from raining down on my poor butt.

My protest went from exclamations to stutters to sobs. My body went limp; my tongue went quiet. I stopped fighting him.

"Do I have your attention now, Buttercup?"

"Yes, sir," I cried.

The spanking stopped. Still holding me firmly in his grasp, he said, "Can you quiet down long enough to listen to what I have to say?"

"Yes, sir," I sniffled, my cheek resting on the couch cushion. The skin of my bottom burning as it lay exposed over his knee.

The grip on my wrist relaxed but his leg held firm around mine.

"You will not use a disrespectful tone to me—regardless of whether you are right or not. And that filthy word you were about to say is banned from this house. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, go and get your hairbrush." He released me, and I quickly scurried to my feet, my dress falling back down over my bottom, but my panties still in place around my mid-thigh—I knew better than to try to pull them up. Jake did not allow that.

Looking him over sitting so relaxed on our couch—long legs splayed, arms crossed casually over his chest. Then I considered his face. His chiseled jaw was set firm, his brown eyes flashing at me—livid. His wide white grin was nowhere to be found on his handsome tanned face.

Giving a gulp I came to the decision it would be better if I didn't argue.

Holding my head high trying to maintain a shred of dignity. I

made my way to the bedroom, the panties shortening my stride as they tightened against my thighs with each step. I could have sworn I heard a chuckle, Jake taking pleasure in my walk of shame.

When I was alone in the bedroom, I took a deep breath, standing just inside the doorway. Staring at the top of my dresser, shivers went down my spine as I gazed upon the only heirloom I owned.

A boar bristled, wooden handled hairbrush that my man had deemed to be the perfect paddle.

From behind me, an impatient voice demanded, “Buttercup, don’t keep me waiting.” I gulped again, hurried to the other side of the room, grabbed the hairbrush and went to face my fate.

Tiptoeing into the living room I stopped a safe distance from my then fiancé. I breathed a sigh of relief—his handsome face was calm. Long leg crossed over his thigh, ankle resting on his knee, his leg jostled up and down.

Jake’s exterior may have been calm, but his bouncing knee told a different story. When Jake was upset—really upset, he jiggled his leg, sometimes sending the whole room to shaking.

He was not happy with me—at all.

One dark brow raised, and his tone was low as he said, “Get over here. Now.”

I had taken too long retrieving the hairbrush. I scurried over, hesitating only a moment before handing over the implement that would soon be paddling my ass.

Uncrossing his leg, his one-word command sent a shiver through me. “Over.”

I laid over his lap, this time tucking my hands under my head obediently. At least I was comfy laying across the couch, though I knew the feeling wouldn’t last long.

The material of my dress flew up over my bottom, my panties had inched down, and the stretchy material was now around my knees.

“Do I need to lock your legs in? You still feeling like you want to kick me?” he asked, darkly.

“No, sir.”

“Buttercup, you are a sweet girl, as sweet as they come. The stress of preparing a wedding is taking a toll on you. The stress I can handle. But the out and out mean streak it has brought out in you—I cannot. What kind of man would I be if I let my soon to be wife turn into an angry ranting woman with a dirty mouth?”

“Um... not a good one?”

“Yes. Not a good one. I have seen too many unhappy marriages where the women get more and more bitter over time, complaining, snapping at their loved ones, always defending themselves because they are ‘stressed.’ You talk like you talked this afternoon and you need to know your bottom is going to feel my wrath. Are we understood?”

“Yes, sir.” I laid limply over his lap, absorbing his words. I had gone my whole life without anyone caring what I did, how I spoke, how I acted. I had turned out okay in the end, being more mature than my years, taking care of myself, but God, it felt good to have a strong man holding me accountable for my actions—even if my butt had to pay the price.

“I am going to paddle you good, Buttercup. This Bride-Godzilla whatever they call it on TV stops today. I want my sweet girl back. And I intend to do what I need to do to have that happen.”

“Okay,” I whispered. My tummy tightened in knots but who was I kidding? Was I nervous or excited? I couldn’t tell—maybe both? I knew this was truly about correction for Jake but the way he handled me, his firm voice, his strong hands, had my pussy dripping with desire. A blush of shame rose to my cheeks—he knew his spankings made me wet.

The smooth wooden back of the hairbrush came down on the center of my right cheek. I sucked breath through my teeth at the sharp sting. A matching spank came down on the left. And the pattern repeated.

His hand already had my bottom stinging—the brush had my bottom absolutely on fire.

I lay limp the stinging swats melding into one burning bottom. The sound of the flat side of the brush making contact with my skin made my cheeks flush in embarrassment. My toes curled into the carpet as I willed my legs not to kick.

When he was satisfied with his work, Jake released me. I jumped to my feet, my hands wanting to go to my sore bottom and try to rub the sting away. He watched me jump from foot to foot for a moment, then commanded, “Be still.”

My hands dropped to my sides and I stood, frozen, in front of him.

Reaching out slowly his hands slipped under the thin fabric of my dress. His nimble fingers unrolling and pulling up my panties, snapping them into place over my hot skin. To my utter disappointment, his hand left the underneath of my skirt. How I had longed for his deft fingers to stray beneath my panties, feel my wetness, stroke my clit. He did not.

Standing before me, towering over me, Jake gathered me into his arms. “I love you, baby. Can you be my sweet buttergirl, now?”

“Yes,” I whispered, snuggling deep into his chest and wrapping my arms around his lower back.

Softly kissing the top of my head, and patting my bottom he asked, “And soon, you’re going to be my sweet little wife?”

Holding back a chuckle, I replied honestly, “I’ll try. We all know even the sweetest of women has their moments. That’s what a firm husband is for.”

Jake’s lips met mine and he kissed me deeply my body melting into his. But of course, as always, just when it was getting good, my insides like molten lava, he stopped everything—leaving me burning with desire.

But no longer would I burn. Tonight, my desires would be fulfilled.

My mind came back to the present as we made our way down

the stone steps of the chapel, his hand in mine. I was no virginal blushing bride. After months of anticipation, of wanting, of yearning, I was finally going to get exactly what I wanted— Jake Hargett’s rock hard cock thrust in my weeping, begging pussy.

And not a moment too soon because I’m beginning to think a girl could die from desire.



THE LIMO DRIVER closed the door behind us, the soft *thud* announcing our departure. Finally, alone—if only for a few minutes as we made our way to the reception. Jake pulled me across the black leather bench seat in the back of the limousine to get me closer to him. Laughing as I pushed my crinoline and yards of material of my skirts to the side, I cozied up onto his lap.

As my head rested on his chest he murmured about the finer points of the screen that separated driver from rider. There was a gentle buzz as he held his finger down on a button. To my excitement and embarrassment, a dark tinted window rose, giving us a moment of utter and total privacy as husband and wife.

Reaching his arm, he leaned over my lap, his hand finding the ends of my elaborate dress. I could feel my skirt raising as he battled with the cloud of material. Winning his battle, I trembled as fingertips slowly and lightly made their way up the bare skin of my leg.

Squirming with delight, his fingers reached the tops of my thighs and trailed down between them. To my damp, silky panties.

My cheeks burned with shame as he said, “Tsk, tsk. Naughty wife—getting so wet and you haven’t even been touched.”

“I was... remembering... things.”

His smile crossed over his face, he murmured into my ears, “What things, sweetheart?” I could barely register his touch as his fingertip traced the outline of my slit. Burying my head further into his chest, I pressed my mound towards his hand. “Let me guess. You

were thinking of all the times you were being a bad girl and I had to put you over my knee... pull down your panties... and give you a good, hard spanking. Is that right? Do you like it when I spank you?"

Closing my eyes and leaning my head back, I nodded honest and earnestly.

My answer was rewarded by his hooking around the elastic of my panties right outside my entrance, pulling them to the side, his finger slipping inside my wetness. Gathering my juices, his finger slid up to my clit, pressing and swirling in my slickness.

Rubbing harder on my clit, he growled, "Answer me, wife."

His fingers froze as he waited for me to speak. Wanting his hand to keep bringing me pleasure, I pushed past my embarrassment, saying, "I like it when you spank me."

"Sir." His fingers slowly started to move again.

My hips were squirming as I repeated, "I like it when you spank me, sir."

"Good girl," he murmured, kissing and nibbling at my neck. "You're my wife now. So not only will you learn to obey me in our everyday lives, you will learn to obey me in the bedroom as well."

My eyes still closed, I was melting with pleasure as he played with me. "What do you mean?"

"I see your eyes go wide when I command you. I know what my wife likes."

"What is that?" I asked, lazily as my hips ground into his, his hand working its magic.

"To be controlled," he growled. I gasped as he plunged two fingers within me. Removing them slowly, he thrust them harder within me. "To be owned." Once more he withdrew them, then pushed them within me. "To be dominated. I will be the head of our household in all ways. And you will love it." Two fingers remained thrusting within me as the flat fingerprint of his thumb gently pressed on my swollen clit.

"Oh, Jake," I groaned, his thumb now making hard, slick circles

around my button as his fingers buried deeper within my pussy. The pleasure that I was feeling melted my inhibitions and with abandon, I scooted my hips up until I was sitting on that hand, grinding my hips and letting his fingers fuck me as his thumb rubbed hard against my clit. “Yes,” I moaned, trying to remain quiet in the back of the limo, but I wanted to shout the word. “Yes!” Yes, to Jake owning me, dominating me, running our household, being in charge. Yes, to everything my husband promised me.

As the pleasure mounted, my fingers dug into the back of Jake’s neck as he sat, so casually beneath me, my bottom gyrating in his lap. “Oh, Jake,” I groaned. As the inside of my sex clenched around those lithe fingers, his thumb rubbed harder and faster on my clit. I moaned, I groaned, I made noises I didn’t recognize as my own as I came in shaking bursts.

Shuddering, I collapsed back on the limo seat. My entire body went limp as I basked in the post, ‘this man has been my husband for five seconds and just fingered me—to orgasm—in a limo,’ afterglow. Withdrawing his hand from my spent sex, he wrapped his arms around me, whispering, “There’s a good girl. Your pretty kitty likes my hand, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“And you like it when I tell you how it’s going to be.”

“Yes.”

“My wife.”

“My husband.”

My eyes considered his—brown, warm, kind, with a strength behind them that I had not seen in many men. Our lips met, as husband and wife.



JAKE

You might think I had done the wrong thing making Buttercup wait until our wedding night. Afraid it was going to be one of those situations where the anticipation was so great that the thing you were waiting for could never live up to your imagination?

Not a chance.

Not with what I had planned for our first official night as husband and wife.

I had a darker side I had been unwilling to share with other girls—knowing full well they weren't going to be around for long.

But my little Buttercup had come back to Poke. I knew she was the one from the first time I laid eyes on her, over ten years prior. Her brother was marrying his wife, Jessica, and I was the DJ at the wedding. Buttercup had come to town for the celebration.

Wearing a beautiful lavender dress that made her green eyes shine, I could not take my eyes off her. She had the sweetest smile. Chatting the night away with the aging ranchers, I knew she was making their night as well as mine.

I wanted to talk to her, get to know her. But I was working, so I kept my focus on where it should be—getting people on the dance floor. The following week when I finally got up the courage to ask Ray about his little sister, Buttercup, he informed me she had a boyfriend.

I left well enough alone. But it turns out the boyfriend, Tom, was a bad dude and Buttercup fled their relationship, returning to Poke. And as luck has it, I just happened to be working on her brother's house, building him a garage, when she moved in with his family.

I got to know her, chatting with her under the soft spring sun. She had taken to coming out to the yard more and more while I was working. Making up excuses—bringing out scraps for the chickens, playing ball with her three nephews. But I knew she was coming out to see me. And I'd never been happier.

Until she said 'yes,' to my marriage proposal.

She was the one I had been waiting for all my life. And now, she was my wife and I intended to fulfill her desires. All of them. Especially the wild ones I knew she had hidden deep within her. To be tied up, to be controlled, to submit to my will.

When I had first told her what I desired in a relationship—domestic discipline—don't think for a second that I had missed the glimmer in her eyes. The way her body melted in her chair, leaning forward to me, her red lips parting slightly, her breath coming in short, excited gasps.

And that first time I had spanked her on her bare bottom, her legs spread, the telltale glistening of her sex. I knew she wanted everything I could give her.

But one thing Buttercup needed to learn was patience. And I would teach it to her. With my fingers, with my mouth, with my cock. Soon, I would know every inch of that beautiful body. Every sensitive spot, every button to push. Every cry, every moan. It would all be mine. And I would be ruler of it all.

My wife.

I stood in my quiet corner in the shadows of the reception hall, taking a break from my friends and family, and watched my beautiful, blushing bride as she twirled and laughed, engaging everyone she came across.

Her long, dark hair hung freely down her back, sprigs of baby's breath tucked into a pearly headpiece upon her crown. Hints of red highlights caught the light as she made her way under the chandelier of the great hall. Her green eyes shone with happiness as she hugged the townspeople of Poke.

My heart felt full at the knowledge that the happiness was put there by me, by the love that we shared.

And that dress. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the enticing, soft curves that were hidden underneath that ivory silk—the sweet little kitty I had just stroked to climax. The fabric was gathered in the back—I think she told me it was called a 'bustle,' I have no idea

—accentuating her tiny waist and generous curving backside. How I longed to slowly unbutton the tiny pearls, one by one, until the fabric fell from her body and I could—”

My thoughts were interrupted by Ray, my new brother-in-law. The big man was my height but seemed to stand a head taller than me with his huge, muscular chest and dark beard. Ray liked to work out ‘to be able to keep up with my three rowdy boys,’ but I think he did it to keep his energy up for his sassy, blonde-haired wife, Jessica. She was as strong willed as they came, and smart as a whip. And gave Ray a run for his money.

“Hey, man. Happiest day of your life, or what?” Ray asked, punching me in the arm. “You know you’re the luckiest guy in the world, right, that I let you marry my sister?” He joked, but it had taken me time to win over Ray as his sister’s suitor. He had liked me just fine when I was working for him, but when I had shown an interest in Buttercup, he had become cautious. I was glad to feel his big arm around my shoulders, accepting me as a member of the family.

Leaving my lewd daydream behind, I pulled my eyes from my bride, turning towards Ray. “I know,” I said, giving him a teasing grin. “Lucky that you let me marry your sister after all. I was starting to doubt I would have your blessing, Ray.”

Looking a bit ashamed, Ray quickly apologized—again. “I’m sorry I was so hard on you, Jake. Its just—you know how much Buttercup means to me. I knew you were a good guy and all, but it’s still hard for a big brother to let go—especially after all that she’s been through.” His proud gaze turned to Buttercup. We watched as Buttercup danced with Harry, an older gentleman who had chosen to wear bib overalls to our wedding and had requested *Mo money Mo problems* within five minutes of the DJ starting the dance music.

“Good thing I got to her before Harry did,” I laughed as the old rancher twirled and dipped my bride to the beat of the rapper’s flowing words.

“Oh, no, Harry is as good as gone on Mama Love. She didn’t see

it coming—never thought she'd love again after Wes' father died. But love found her on the dance floor that day I married Jessica. Maybe even thanks to your record spinning skills as DJ. And now they live up in that senior community and do everything together. I swear the boys rarely see Mama anymore—she's always at bingo, or yoga, and we know Harry's right there by her side. Doing the sun salutation or whatever the heck it is they do on those mats."

"Wearing bib overalls while he's at it?" I jested.

Ray turned to me with a serious look. "Yes."

I laughed as I watched Mama Love cut into the dance as the music slowed, procuring Harry for herself. The couple twirled, their smiles no different than teens in love, their gazes locked on one another.

Mama was the matriarch of the local ranch, The Lonestar Cattle Company, where her sons Wes and Garrett had taken over. Her husband had passed away years ago and she and her grown son, Wes, ran the ranch together for a decade. When Wes' younger brother Garrett came back to the ranch for good, Mama Love had moved to a senior community under the guise of 'giving the boys space.' Garrett had taken up residency in the smaller renovated bunkhouse and started a program for the children of recovering alcoholics, called, Hope Reigns.

Mama Love had taken up residency with Harry.

Buttercup stood watching Mama and Harry dance. Her sweet smile resting on her shining face. I felt an elbow in my ribcage as Ray said, "Time to sneak a dance in with your bride."

"Good idea. If you'll excuse me." I gave Ray a wink, turning to head to my wife.

Making my way across the floor, I was ready to hold my bride in my arms. But I was already too late. Wes Love had arrived next to his mama and had already stepped in, swirling Buttercup across the parquet dance floor.

And of course, his wife, Carrie Love came bursting in, a cloud of

yellow curls, pink lace, and cherry blossom perfume, demanding a dance from the groom.

I tried to smile and nod politely, giving sweet Carrie my full attention, but I couldn't stop my gaze from going over the head of Wes' little, half-pint wife to catch a glimpse of Buttercup as Wes twirled her across the floor.

Funny, how on your wedding day you barely get to see the person that you wanted to the most, the one who's whole purpose of the day was to celebrate with you—your wife.

I tried to stay focused as Carrie chatted away. Keeping time with the music, I continued to dance with Carrie.

"And Wes said the funniest thing and Rose started to crack up and laughed so hard—you know how ten-year-old girls are when they think something is funny—and the preacher shot us the dirtiest look and I just thought it was going to ruin the ceremony. But then they played the wedding march and those doors opened and Buttercup looked breathtaking and at the sight of that gorgeous wedding dress my daughter's eyes were round as saucers and she finally stopped her giggling—" Carrie carried on with her excited chatter, retelling our wedding from her point of view.

Buttercup's beautiful body twirled further from me as another song began. Wanting to be polite to one of our closest friends, I smiled and swayed, keeping time to the music as Carrie went on about her and her husband, Wes' wedding. Then onto the memories of the wedding of my brother-in-law Ray and his wife Jessica. I nodded politely as she moved on to speculating whether her mother-in-law was going to marry Harry—the elderly bachelor—at some point.

Smiling down at her I threw in a quick, "Dunno," which I knew would buy me at least another minute. But at the beginning of the third song I had danced with Carrie to, my stomach turned, my nerves going on high alert.

Buttercup was now dancing with someone I didn't recognize.

He was my height, broad shouldered, and looked to be about our age. When he turned with the music, his eyes meeting mine, I froze.

Apart from his sandy colored hair, he looked exactly like Tom, Buttercup's violent ex-fiancé whom I had run out of town just months prior.

When Buttercup had returned to Poke it was with a sudden urgency—she had been running from Tom. Having nowhere else to go, Buttercup had thrown a couple things in a bag, and taken a bus ride to Poke. Ray and Jessica were beyond thrilled and took her right in to their home.

But Buttercup had not heard the last of Tom.

Coming to Poke, with the nerve to hunt her down and show up on Jessica's porch, Tom gave some sob story about needing closure and wanting to say goodbye. Jessica had fallen for it and let the piece of trash in her house.

Buttercup and I were already an item by then, me making plans to propose. But Buttercup fell for his story, my sweet, little Buttercup never wanting to hurt someone's feelings even if it means hurting herself. She snuck off to a coffee shop to meet him and give him his goodbye.

Having a nagging suspicion about the creep I had followed her to the place where she met Tom. When I saw the two of them in the parking lot—Tom trying to take the keys from Buttercup, convincing her to let him drive the car—I knew he was trying to abduct her.

Flying out of my truck, I had made my presence known. And used my fist to make my displeasure known. I had hopped out of the truck, gotten Buttercup into it, then broken his nose.

Tom didn't deserve to breath the same air as Buttercup.

He left town but the memory of those months—looking around every corner—expecting to see Tom, protecting Buttercup as best I could, filled my mind, making a ball of ice form in my stomach. Sneaking off like that had earned Buttercup a severe paddling, in hopes that she would never put herself in danger like that again. To

this day I can't prove Tom's intentions, but sometimes you just know something, deep down and you don't question it.

And now, my bride of only a few hours was pressed up against a man who looked like Tom, holding my precious woman in his arms. Flashing what I hoped was a debonair smile, as smoothly as I could muster, I said, "Would you forgive me, Carrie, if I asked to dance with my bride? I love this song."

I had no idea what the song was, but the line worked, and tears sprung to Carrie's eyes as she released me from her tight clutches. "Well, isn't that so sweet? Go on, go on, Jake. Dance with your bride." I gave her one more smile over my shoulder as she made shooing motions, sending me off to Buttercup.

Willing my nerves to chill, I walked over to the man who was dancing with my bride, putting a heavy hand on his shoulder.

My voice came off more threatening than I had meant it to as I asked, "Mind if I cut in?"

He turned to me and a momentary flash of anger crossed his face—the same I had seen on the face of Tom when I demanded he leave town.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and my fist clenched, prepared for anything.

Holding out a hand, he shook mine, introducing himself with a wide grin. "Hi, Jake. I'm Ryder. It's nice to finally meet you—Buttercup has told me so much about you." He spoke amiably, kindly even. Had I imagined the threatening look?

Shaking his hand apprehensively, I said, "Wonderful to meet you, Ryder. And how do you know Buttercup?" At the firmness of his handshake, I threw in, "Forgive me that I didn't know your name—she hasn't mentioned you before."

A smug look came over his face.

Sensing my unease, Buttercup casually made her way between us. Her green eyes locked on mine, flashing with concern. "Jake, this is Ryder. He's... Tom's brother."

"Thomas, actually, is how I know him," Ryder added lightly.

Giving Buttercup a warm glance that made my skin crawl, he said, "I think only Buttercup calls him Tom."

"*Called.*" My voice was hard as steel. I didn't feel sorry for sounding impolite.

Ryder quickly corrected himself. "Forgive me. Yes—*called*. That was a long time ago and she's in much better hands, now. Isn't she?" His words were right but something dancing in his eyes seemed wrong.

Looking a few years younger than Tom, Ryder had the same vampire look that I supposed some women found attractive. Pale skin met his blond hair, gelled perfectly with one strand hanging casually over his forehead. His blue eyes were cold, icy almost as they stared at me. His crisp black suit completed the look—giving him a movie star, bad boy feel. Same height and build as me, I wanted the stranger as far from Buttercup as possible.

"You're a spitting image of your brother," I said. It was a fact—not a compliment.

Ryder gave a good-natured laugh, "Yes. I get that a lot. Same face, just missing the black hair, huh?"

"Dark hair to match his dark personality."

Buttercup shot me a wary look. Not wanting to upset my bride, I held back the rest of the derogatory remarks that threatened to escape my mouth and instead said, "Ryder, you'll excuse us?"

Not waiting for an answer, I wrapped my arm protectively around Buttercup's shoulders, turning her away from her former lover's good-looking brother. I narrowed my eyes as a glimpse of a smug smile appeared on his chiseled face. I hurried her away.

Buttercup gave Ryder a little wave over her shoulder—her 'sorry my husband is overprotective wave'—I had experienced the familiar wave a few other times such as when I had steered her tipsy self away from Carrie, who was pouring a little too generous of glasses of wine at her Christmas party, and it was time to go home.

When we were out of ear shot of the golden-haired vampire, I

whispered into her ear, "What were you doing with him? What is he doing at our wedding?"

Buttercup looked up at me, distraught. "I bumped into him at the Five and Dime a few weeks ago. He is completing his residency at the hospital in Clinton. I told him all about you and our wedding. I told him he should come—I was just being polite. It seemed rude not to invite him."

"Clinton isn't Poke Town. What was he doing here?"

"He went to med school in Texas. He's lived here ever since. And Poke Town is growing at a rapid rate. He has friends here."

"I don't want you hanging around him. Do I have to remind you we have a restraining order against his brother?"

"No." She gave a little shudder at the mentioning of it. "I never should have let Tom manipulate me into meeting him—especially alone—to supposedly say 'goodbye.'"

"Even though he left town and I couldn't prove anything, I'm glad we have a restraining order against him. Good riddance." It was an old conversation, one we had had many times in those first few months. What guy stalks his ex, and tries to drive her somewhere? The thought of it all still makes me jumpy. After that Buttercup and I had a good, long talk that left her unable to sit down the rest of the day. There was no excuse for her disregard for her safety having met Tom alone. But that didn't stop my Buttercup from trying to explain to me how Ryder was different. She was such a softie.

"I was with Tom ten years. Yeah—he's a total jerk and a creep but Ryder was his little brother and I've known him a long time. He's a sweet guy."

"Not sweet enough to warn you to steer clear of his brother."

"He didn't know. No one did. I hid it well."

There was a sad look on the face of my bride on her wedding day—and I had put it there. Quickly mending the situation, I grabbed her in my arms, holding her close and swaying to the

music. “No worries, baby. This is our day, and nothing is going to ruin it, okay?”

I felt her head nodding against my chest.

“Can I tell you a secret?” she asked quietly.

My spine tensed, unsure of what she would say.

“I loved the wedding and I love our reception and I really appreciate you working all those extra hours and paying for all of this, so we could have a nice celebration... but...”

“Spit it out, Buttercup.”

“I’m just ready to be alone with you.”

“Me too.” I kissed her softly on the top of her head, careful not to mess up her beautiful hair. “Let’s cut the cake and get out of here. What do you say?”

The look that flashed in her eyes screamed, “Yes!”