

Bet Your Boots

By

Starla Kaye

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Starla Kaye

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Chapter One

Cole Whitlock was bone weary. There wasn't a square inch of his body that didn't throb, especially on his bad leg. And his mood had headed south the second that ornery calf had slipped away from the herd he and Rusty had been moving three hours ago. All he wanted was a big piece of whatever pie his Great Aunt Bessie had made today, a bottle of beer—maybe a whole six pack of beer—and to kick off his boots. Then to be left alone. That was the most important thing of all: to be left alone.

But when he limped his way out of the horse barn after wiping down Jazz, he looked across the ranch yard toward his home and spotted a hot pink Jeep in his driveway. *What the hell?* He didn't know anyone who drove such a ridiculous vehicle. *Pink. Jeez.* Must belong to some friend of his aunt. But who?

The warm wind shifted, carried with it the smells of roasting beef and the ranch cook's spicy barbecue sauce. He glanced longingly toward the nearby cookshack for the ranch hands. His stomach rumbled. He'd missed lunch, had barely taken time to grab a couple of fresh biscuits before he'd sped out of the house this morning. Bessie had not been happy about the way he'd been skipping meals lately. She'd burned his ears as he'd apologized and hurried out, turning down the scrambled eggs and bacon she'd prepared for him. He was on her bad list. Again.

He forced his feet to move in the direction of the big Colonial-style farmhouse he'd inherited along with the responsibilities of running the CW Ranch. He reached up to swipe at the sweat on his brow with his shirtsleeve. Darn hot for only the first day of June. Looked like it would be another of those scorching summers in Kansas.

Closer to the house now, he squinted and made out the license plate on the Jeep: ROMANCE1. His aunt had some oddball elderly friends. But "ROMANCE1"? Squinting even more, he made out the bumper sticker: I Brake for Frogs, with a picture of a woman's red lips kissing a frog as it started transforming into a crown-wearing prince. *Weird.* Yes, the Jeep definitely belonged to some nutty woman.

"It's about time you showed up," his Aunt Bessie called to him and snagged his attention.

He picked up his pace, couldn't help grinning at the five-foot-nothing, slim stick of a woman standing on the front porch, arthritic hands on her hips. The wind blew by him but didn't so much as move a curl of her heavily hair-sprayed white hair. As always, she wore a dress, apron, the pearl earrings he'd given her last Christmas, and a sweater. As warm as it was, he'd liked to strip down to nothing and she wore a sweater.

"If I weren't plum worn out, I'd still be doing chores." He strode by the Jeep, shook his head at it. "Which of your lady friends does this belong to?"

"It doesn't belong to any of *my* friends. It belongs to that doctor of *yours* who arrived a couple of hours ago." She shifted to the side so he could walk into the house. "Some of the boys helped her unload the U-haul into Victoria's house. Then Eric took the trailer back to Junction City. I insisted she come to the house here to have a cool drink while we waited for you."

"*My* doctor? *She?*" He drew a complete blank, while his stomach knotted with dread.

As usual, Bessie ignored his questions. She waved him into the air-conditioned house. “After driving straight through from Phoenix, the poor dear looked as worn out as an old pair of shoes. Seventeen hours without resting! It’s a wonder she made it here in one piece.”

“She who? Bessie, who the devil are you talking about?” He shut the door behind them and set his dusty work Stetson on the entry table.

Bessie rolled her eyes behind the thick glasses. “Dr. James, of course. That friend of your sister. Remember?”

“Not really,” he said, but she’d already headed off toward the back of the house, probably the kitchen. He caught the faint scent of apple pie and sped after her. If nothing else, he was getting a piece of that pie. As hungry as he was, he might eat the whole thing.

She hustled along as she always did, chattering away. “I gave her some of the red punch you had in the pitcher in the refrigerator. That stuff leftover from Rusty’s birthday party last week.”

“Bessie,” he groaned, thinking about the highly spiked punch he should have poured out instead of saving. “That wasn’t regular punch.”

She stopped so fast he nearly ran her over. She faced him, thinned her lips a second and her time-caressed forehead furrowed. “Well, it was in the pitcher I *always* put lemonade in.” Her tone made it clear he’d broken some kitchen etiquette rule, even if it was *his* kitchen and *his* pitcher.

He listened for sounds of this doctor woman. Silence, except for his aunt’s tapping, thick-soled shoe, emphasizing her annoyance with him.

“Sorry.” What else could he say?

She bobbed her white head in acceptance. “Your doctor was rather thirsty. She drank a couple of glassfuls. Then, as I was asking about the plans she had for using the guest lodging this summer... Well, her face fell flat down on the table. Right smack on her nose. Mercifully, she didn’t break it. Had to hurt, though.”

Cole blinked. The strange woman was stone drunk. Perfect. His day kept getting better and better.

“She’s still there. In the kitchen. Passed out.” She heaved a sigh. “Looks like you’ll have to carry her back to Victoria’s house.”

“Dammit, Bessie,” he grumbled in disgust, only to add, “sorry” when she scowled in disapproval. When he’d been younger, she’d washed his mouth out with soap for bad language as much as his mother had.

He started to edge around her, resigned to checking on the unwanted guest, when he froze. *Shit!* He finally realized who this woman was, this friend of his sister. He and Victoria had spent the first month he’d come back to the ranch after his broken leg from the rodeo circuit had healed arguing about almost everything. In the year that his parents had moved down to Florida, after sharing ownership of the ranch with Bessie for as long as he could remember, Bessie turned the CW into both a working ranch and a guest ranch. Victoria, who shared the fifty percent ownership from their parents with him, was wild about the idea. He hated it. But the ranch needed working capital right now with the markets so volatile. Rent money from the guest ranch part made sense, which he’d hated to agree with. So she’d mentioned knowing someone who might be interested in renting the guest lodge all summer. He’d decided to leave that whole part

of the ranch business up to her. And he hadn't really thought she'd come through. She had and he'd forgotten about it. *Shit!*

His aunt looked as if she'd read his mind, heard his silent "Shit!" Soap bubbles in his mouth would be in his future—if he'd allow it, which he wouldn't—if he didn't distract her.

"We'd best go check on the doctor."

Now that he was out of the blazing sun, his mind started working again. Somewhat. He moved past his tiny aunt and remembered he'd actually signed some agreement about the rental. *M.M. James*. He'd assumed it would be a man. Victoria hadn't bothered to correct his misinterpretation, even though he'd referred to the renter as *he* several times during their telephone conversations. What was Victoria up to? She knew how he felt about women at the moment, which wasn't good.

His bum leg hurt with each step he took. His mood soured, especially when he thought about spending the next few months with a woman on his ranch. Bessie didn't count. She was almost as old as dirt. Besides, he loved her dearly. Other than her, though, just the thought of women left a bad taste in his mouth. Two divorces in ten years did that to a man. The first one hadn't been a bitter one, just inevitable. The second...only six months ago...*that* had been ugly.

He hadn't even met this new female in his life and already she was giving him grief. Then it occurred to him that maybe he could change this doctor's mind. He'd sit down and talk reasonably to her. Convince her there were much better places for her to have these summer camps. *What were they again?* Damn if he could remember. He'd miss the rent money, but... *No*. She was going.

The wooden tabletop felt cool and hard against Mandie's cheek. She wanted to lift her head. She really did, but she couldn't manage it. And every bone in her body had somehow melted; her muscles had morphed into jelly. Odd, very odd.

Footsteps sounded heavy on the tiled floor behind her. Loud. She wanted to cover her ears. Again, she couldn't. Her arms each weighed a ton.

"Oh good! You're awake!" the sweet, elderly woman Mandie vaguely remembered exclaimed as she scooted around to the side of the table.

"Don't shout," Mandie muttered and found the strength to lift her head a few inches. Her head pounded.

A man a good foot taller than Bertie—Betty? Bessie?—walked up behind the white-haired woman. He looked formidable, like he could move a mountain if it got in his way. He was nothing like the men she was used to, but he intrigued her.

"Dr. James?" the cowboy asked in a husky voice that did funny things to her insides. He didn't look pleased to see her.

She found herself fascinated by his coal black eyes. "No pupils." When his brow creased in confusion, she pointed with her nose at his face. "Your eyes. All cornea. No pupils."

"Of course I've got pupils," he protested. "You're just drunk. Now, are you or are you not Dr. M.M. James?"

She gave him a lopsided grin, thinking he really was dreamy when he got all disgruntled. "Yep, that's me." She laid her cheek back on the table. *Ah, such a relief*. "MannndieeeeMaarieeeeJaammmses." She happily drew out each name then hiccupped.

His eyes rolled heavenward, which made her giggle. Then he gritted his teeth and seemed to hold his breath, maybe hold his temper in, too.

“Say, you got any more of that punch? It’s pretty good.” Her eyes were beginning to cross; her head felt fuzzy again.

Sweet little Bessie reached down to pat Mandie’s hand. “I’m afraid you’ve had quite enough of the punch, dear.”

“That’s for damn sure,” the cowboy—Cole?—said and shook his head. “You’re going to have a hell of a hangover tomorrow morning.”

Huh? “I don’t drink.” She blinked at him, couldn’t focus. “No tol... no tolerance.”

“That’s obvious.” He heaved a put-upon sigh, looking even less pleased with her than before. “Reckon we need to get you into bed so you can sleep this off.”

She gave him a stupid smile and closed her eyes. “Sleep, yes.”

Mandie felt strong arms slipping under her knees and around her back. Then he lifted her up against his hard, muscled chest. “Oh, nice.” She settled closer, inhaled his sweaty scent and didn’t mind it at all. “You know, I’ve never made love to a cowboy.”

“Hell!” he growled and started across the room. “You won’t either. At least not to *this* cowboy.”

She tried to lean up and look into his face, got distracted by the sexy sight of his five o’clock shadow. She touched it and grinned. “Like this.” She fingered it again.

“Stop that!” He frowned over at Bessie, who was chuckling, and then back down at her. “Would you just pass out like a good little drunk.”

Mandie shook her head obstinately and then promptly faded away.

* * * * *

By the time Cole made it to Victoria’s small cottage a hundred yards from the main house, he wasn’t sure he had the strength or the coordination to hold her and open the door. His leg was killing him. It sure would have been better if Bessie had come with them. Unfortunately she’d gotten a phone call as he was leaving the house. As she usually did, she put the call on speaker so she could hear it better. One of the gossips in town had already heard about the pink Jeep, had already seen the pretty blonde in it. Did Cole have a new girlfriend? A fiancée no one knew about? He’d sworn vividly, ignored her chastising scowl, and strode out. She’d stayed behind to deal with the rumors before they got really out of hand. Part of the problem with living in a small, nosy community. Nobody minded their own damn business.

He tried to juggle his burden a bit and reach for the door handle when Mandie came around again. “Are you taking me to bed?” she asked, sounding both tipsy and interested, sensual.

“Good, God, no!” He managed to open the outer door and pull it toward them. Then he shoved open the main door. “You’re going to bed, but *not* with me.”

She gave what sounded like a disappointed sigh. “Gay, huh?”

He was halfway into the living room when he realized what she’d said. He gasped, “What did you say?”

“Gay?” She giggled. “It’d be a real shame. It’s okay if you are. I have other gay friends.”

Gay! Him? Maybe he was entrenched in a celibacy state right now, but *gay?* He considered setting her on her feet and walking right back out of the house. But she didn't look like she could stand on her own. So he aimed for the bedroom, gritting out, "I'm *not* gay! Hell, I've been married twice."

He'd had to dodge around boxes piled in the living room, stacked in the hallway, and more in the bedroom. "Did you bring everything you owned?"

She yawned. "I wasn't sure what all I might need." She yawned again. "Some gay men get married."

"Not. Gay." He attempted to put her down on the edge of the big, four-poster bed, but she clasped her arms around his neck and held on with surprising strength.

"I really like you. Even though you're sort of grumpy." She tugged him down on top of her. "Ohhhh, much better."

Not in his opinion. She smelled too good, felt too soft. In spite of his irritation with her and all women, his body reacted immediately to lying on top of this shapely-in-all-the-right-places woman. He tried to shove himself up but she clung to him.

"Prove it."

With effort, he pulled one of her hands down. "Prove what?" Her chin-length blonde hair felt silky soft against his hand still trapped under her neck.

Her body arched up. Her lower body rubbed his hard erection. "That you aren't gay." She rubbed again, purring.

Cole'd had enough of this torture. In two seconds flat he was sitting on the bed and had her stretched over his lap. He considered pulling her shorts down, knew he couldn't handle seeing her bare bottom right now, and swatted her left cheek instead. Hard.

"Hey!" She craned her head to look back at him. "You're spanking me!"

It felt right; it felt good. He planted another half dozen swats on her sweet butt. "Yes, I am. You were trying to attack me."

"Uh-uh." She squirmed. "Ow! Stop this!"

"I don't want you here." He placed his hand on her quivering bottom, which didn't help his situation at all. Now his pulse raced and he wanted....

She stiffened for a second and then attempted to wriggle off his lap. "I don't want to be here either."

"I'm not talking about over my knee." He swatted her hard and she stopped moving.

Suddenly she yelped, "I'm going to be sick!"

"Hell!" Cole immediately released her.

She scrambled off his lap and ran into the bathroom. The punch had begun to take its toll.

He rubbed a hand through his hair and then stood. She would be okay. He wasn't so sure about him, though. What the blazes had he been doing? Spanking a woman he barely knew? Spanking her, period?

He yelled in her direction, "We'll talk tomorrow." Then he raced out of the house and toward the safety of his own home. With any luck she would be gone before he got around to checking on her in the morning. But he doubted it.

* * * * *

“If you weren’t fifteen hundred miles away, Victoria Anne Whitlock, I’d wring your neck!” Cole snapped into the phone an hour later. He’d had to reassure Bessie that Mandie was all right. Then he’d had to take a shower to calm down in more ways than one. Now he sat behind his desk in his home office, bare feet up on the corner.

“I take it Mandie got there,” Victoria said and sounded amused, instead of intimidated by his harsh tone. “Did she get to you already? She’s a real sweetie.”

Yes, she’d gotten to him. She shouldn’t have, but, dammit, she had. “I don’t want her here.”

“Signed contract,” she reminded him in a far too happy tone. “Signed by *both* of us and the good Dr. Mandie James.”

He’d found the contract in his files before he’d sat down to make this call. He stared at it now. “I’m going to try and talk her out of it tomorrow when she’s feeling better.”

“Feeling better? Is she sick? What’s wrong?”

He wished he hadn’t made that slip, but if he didn’t tell her, Bessie would. “Aunt Bessie gave your friend some leftover spiked punch from Rusty’s birthday thing last weekend. ‘Course Bessie didn’t know it was spiked.” He thought about how Mandie had sat with her head on the table, how she’d passed out, how he’d had to carry her... how...

“Anyway, she’ll have a headache in the morning. She got sick after I carried her to your place.” Damn, he’d made another slip that his observant sister would no doubt catch.

She didn’t disappoint him. “Carried her?” Did he hear a smile in her voice?

“She’d passed out, Victoria. I had to get her to your bed.”

“My bed?” Now she sounded interested, pleased.

“I didn’t get *in* the bed with her!” But he’d gotten *on* the bed with her. With her over his knee, with him spanking her perky bottom. His sister certainly didn’t need to know any of that.

“I get the feeling you’re not telling me everything, brother dear.”

He blew out a breath of frustration. “Back to how much trouble you’re in with me, *dear* sister. Why didn’t you tell me the good Dr. M. M. James was a woman?”

“Hmmm, let me see if I can summarize it.” She remained silent a second for emphasis. “Because you currently have a very low opinion of the whole gender. Because you’re one stubborn sonofagun sometimes. Because you would never have signed that agreement. Pick any excuse you want, they all fit.”

“True enough.”

“Seriously, Cole, you need the rent money. I know the ranch’s finances are a constant battle, even with your back-up investment money from your rodeo circuit winnings.” She heaved a disgusted breath. “That black-haired feline ex-wife of yours did a real number on your other savings. But we don’t need to go there on that, do we?”

“No.” He really didn’t want to talk about his most recent ex or think about all the money he’d been forced to give her. *Black-haired feline* didn’t even come close to describing the bitch. His free hand was curling into a fist, his body tightening in fury.

“Anyway, Mandie needs a place for her therapy retreats this summer. And you need the money. Seemed like a perfect fit to me.”

He uncurled his hand and fingered the contract, frowned. He thought about the pretty blonde he'd held in his arms, the one who he'd laid on top of, and who'd wriggled around on his lap. Okay, she'd been upside down and he'd been spanking her. Still....

"I can't let her stay, Victoria." Did he sound desperate?

"Signed contract, I remind you again."

"I'm talking to her tomorrow, just like I said. I'm sure she'll understand. Hell, I'll even help her find somewhere else to go." He sounded confident now, right?

"I'm warning you, bro, Mandie can be a kind-hearted sweetie, but she's also got a formidable will—kind of like you. She made her plans, paid you good money up front. You're going to have to man up and endure the summer."

Cole closed his eyes and thought about Dr. Mandie James. He didn't know about *kind-hearted* or *formidable*, but he did know she would be TROUBLE in capital letters.

* * * * *

Mandie sat the bar in Cole's kitchen the next morning avoiding looking directly at the cowboy she had so many mixed feelings about. The first thing she'd remembered when she woke up with a pounding head a short while ago was how he'd turned her over his knee. He'd actually spanked her. Not long, not anything as intense as when her mother had spanked her growing up. Still, he'd spanked her. How could she face him now?

"Are you even listening to me?" Mr. Hard Hand asked from the other side of the room. He'd been keeping his distance, too, evidently feeling as awkward as she did about the spanking business.

She cupped her hands around the coffee mug in front of her. "Yes."

"You'll agree to tear up the contract then? Find another place for these camps of yours?"

She'd been sort of listening to him present reason after reason for her not to rent the guest lodging here. Not one reason made sense to her. Besides, she had liked what she'd seen of the ranch already. "No."

He muttered a curse under his breath, mentally searching for more reasons to change her mind, she was certain.

"You signed the contract, Victoria signed it, and so did I." She glanced in his direction. *Good golly, he was a handsome man. Being angry did nothing to lessen that.* "It's too late to make a change of arrangements with my clients. The first of them are due to arrive in less than a week. They've already made their travel plans."

Bessie had been puttering around the kitchen, putting a pan of bread in the oven to bake. Mandie saw the older woman scowl at Cole. Then she smiled at Mandie and sadly shook her head, as if apologizing for her stubborn nephew.

"Everything will work out fine, dear. My nephew always follows through when he's given his word on something." She glanced at him again. "It's just this whole guest ranch part of the business that's bothering him. It's fairly new, you know. He doesn't understand how it works. Thinks it's more bother than he can deal with."

Mandie remembered how Victoria had mentioned that he didn't like this new venture. Victoria, naturally, thought it was a terrific idea. But then her friend was halfway across the country and not having to deal with any problems on the ranch.

"This really won't be a problem for you, Mr. Whitlock." She decided to try separating their business from anything personal...like his carrying her to the cottage, her practically jumping his bones. Oh, yes, she'd remembered that, and it had been why he'd warmed her bottom. "Since I've rented the guest lodge for the entire summer, you won't have to deal with new renters all the time. Well, there'll be new people here every couple of weeks. But *I'll* take care of them."

He looked skeptical.

"I promise we'll be as little bother to you and your ranch hands as possible. In fact, you and I probably won't even cross paths often." She wasn't sure how she felt about that. He seriously intrigued her, but she wasn't sure why.

He blew out a breath. "It won't matter. I'll know you're around."

She raised an eyebrow and noticed how his gaze had begun moving slowly down her body. Suddenly she felt self-conscious in the shorts she'd chosen to wear. Were they too short? Was the T-shirt too tight? He seemed to be focused on her breasts now. She'd always been a little uncomfortable with being so well endowed.

Bessie cleared her throat, smiling as she looked from Mandie to Cole and back. "Don't you have chores to be getting to, nephew?"

The big man's face turned red and he shoved away from the counter he'd been leaning against. Not willing to give in easily, he pinned Mandie with a hard look. "We'll give it a week and see how it goes."

"The first group comes next week and will be here for two weeks," she reminded him. She'd given him a basic schedule for her camps this summer, but he probably hadn't even looked at it.

His lips pursed in annoyance, but he gave a curt nod. "Three weeks then."

"Sounds reasonable to me," Bessie commented. "Now, before you run off to lick your wounds, Cole, you should show Mandie around the ranch."

He frowned at the *lick your wounds* statement. Bessie could certainly push his buttons. Mandie decided to step into the discussion. "She's right. I need at least a quick look-over of the ranch. The parts I'll be using with my clients, that is."

"Fine." He didn't look happy, but resigned. "Just a short look around, though. That's all the time I can spare."