

# BOSS OF HER HEART

DIRTY TEXAS LOVE, BOOK ONE



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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## PROLOGUE



GARRETT

After the pain I caused, I knew that I didn't deserve to find love. I had left my lucrative career on Wall Street, fast paced playboy lifestyle, and the bottle behind. I had been back on my family's ranch for over a decade now. Completely comfortable in my role as the fun uncle, the supportive brother and non-profit business owner. But my past mistakes still haunted me.

I did my penance every single day, but I found so much joy in running my business that even my work made me feel guilty. I founded Hope Reigns—a horse therapy program for children of recovering alcoholics. And now, everyone thought I was a great guy. A stellar model citizen.

And they wanted me to find love.

Wes, my wiser older brother told me, "You have to forgive yourself, Garrett. You must move on."

"Never. Not after the mess I made. I can't risk that."

Jessica, the fiancée I had left behind, said, "You aren't the same

person you were ten years ago, Garrett. None of us are. You must forgive yourself. You can find love again.”

“Never.”

And Mama, precious Mama. In her soft gentle manner, she had told me, “Never say never, sweetheart. That’s usually when love comes to find you.”

And just when I hit my ten-year anniversary of chosen celibacy, I met Bella.

Her baby blue eyes had widened in fear the first time I helped her young son up onto the Palomino horse. A tendril of her red hair wrapped around her finger, twirling nervously. Her teeth biting into her plump pink bottom lip in the cutest way.

She was as nervous as an untamed horse, skittish even. Her uneasy nature, and earthy, natural, make-up free beauty instantly had me wanting to wrap her in my arms to protect her. Mine to tame.

And I knew I did not deserve to entertain the thought of holding her in my arms for even a moment.

As much as I wanted to make her mine, I knew I would never love again.

That still didn’t stop me from watching her fire red hair flowing down her back, thinking to myself, ‘red on top, red on bottom?’” What I wouldn’t give to find out. To pull that faded denim from her waist...

“Damn, Garrett, get ahold of yourself,” I muttered aloud, kicking at the loose Texas dirt with the toe of my worn leather boot.

But of course, just when I was trying to clean up my thoughts, she bent over, right in front of me, to pick up a penny that she had found. She had one of those upside-down heart shaped bottoms. You know the one—tiny waist, slim hips, then that curve just hits you out of nowhere—bam!

Her favorite light blue jeans went right up into the cleft of those

full bottomed cheeks. How I wanted to run my fingertip down the seam of the back of those Levi's, all the way...

"Heads up, that means it's lucky." She turned to me over her shoulder, flashing her dimpled smile and holding the penny out towards me.

"Lucky you," I said, tearing my eyes away from where they shouldn't be and flashing her what I hoped looked like a wholesome grin.

Yeah, that penny was the only one getting lucky around here. Choosing my monk like lifestyle after my sordid past, I knew it had been too long since I had been laid. I didn't even know how to act like a normal person around Bella in those jeans.

It wasn't just that I wanted to unzip those Levi's, pulling them off and making her moan with delight. That was the old Garrett. He had been dead for over ten long years.

I wanted Bella. All of her. Mind, body and soul. I was in love with her.

And so, I was relieved to hear that after seeing her twice a week for months this would be her and Oliver's last session. I could let her go and probably never see her again after today. Going back to my sexless thoughts and pure days, focused on my business and continue to make amends to my family.

Her baby blue eyes flashed at me as she interrupted my thoughts. What she said next made my heart stop beating.

"Hey, Garrett, you guys hiring?"

The words were out before I could make up a polite lie. "As a matter of fact, we are."

Throwing that gorgeous, fiery mane over her shoulder, she held up her penny once more. "Maybe it is my lucky day, then."

And that was when my world stopped, tilting on its axis. Changing everything as I knew it.

We were hiring. And Bella would be a perfect fit. There were currently no women working at Hope Reigns. Carrie, my brother's

wife, helped when she could, but she was teaching full time and just wasn't available like we needed.

If she came on board, Bella Buchanan would be working directly underneath me. Damn, I mean under me. I meant—for me? You can take the playboy out of the mansion, but his mind is just never going to get clean, even if he is. Sobriety is one thing; sexuality is a whole 'nother beast to tame.

And ever since Bella had shown her face on The Lonestar Cattle Company's Ranch, I had found it to be an untamable monster.

Maybe there was something to be said about forgiveness, redemption, second chances. I was starting to hope so. Because I had the feeling that working beside Bella every day was going to be the breaking point for my purity.

## CHAPTER 1



BELLA

I had sworn off the bad boy. You know, the drop dead gorgeous guy with the sexy dark hair perfectly swept back in an effortless look that you know *actually* cost him two hundred dollars to achieve?

The man with the worn in jeans hanging from his trim hips. The thin material of his shirt pulling taut over the tight muscles of his shoulders as he moved. Long and lean—not from working out in the gym, but from his active lifestyle.

You know, the guy who has your panties melting off you just from that confident glance from the corner of his flashing eyes? That guy.

I had sworn off them. And so why had I opened my big mouth last week and asked one for a job?

Garrett Love—can you believe that name? Weston, Garrett, and Carrie Love the proud owners of The Lonestar Cattle Company had become like a family to me and my son over the last few

months. And Garrett had quickly become the star of my X-rated dreams every night since I had first laid eyes on him.

Sober for ten years and having sworn off his playboy Wall Street ways, he was a safe bet, right? The look of the bad boy but with ten years of excellent behavior under his belt.

I couldn't help but hope there was still a little bad boy left for me, somewhere buried deep within those jeans. I liked my escapades in the bedroom to look like my riding boots at the end of the day. Filthy dirty.

Hitting the side of my head with the heel of my hand, I hoped my inappropriate thoughts would be dislodged. I was talking about how I felt about my new boss, after all.

My first day on the job and I was going to be late. Damn, damn, double damn. I tore my eyes from the clock on the wall and continued to struggle to get my riding boots pulled on. Grabbing my keys and racing out the door I couldn't stop myself from daydreaming about the boss man taking me over his knee for a long, hard spanking for being late on my first day.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror. My cheeks blushed as red as my hair, as I threw my keys in the ignition. "Come on, Bella, be professional," I muttered as I turned the key. There was a groan, and a moan, not from me—from Bessie's engine. A high-pitched whine and then—nothing.

"Damn." I rested my forehead on the steering wheel of my Wagoneer. "Not today, of all days."

Hopping out of the car, I gave old Bessie's threadbare tire a kick of my boot. I might be late, but there was no way I wasn't showing up for my first day of work. Hustling down my mile-long dirt drive, I set my sights on the main road.



"THANKS AGAIN!" I called, smiling, waving and shutting the door of the semi.



Walking towards the barn, I looked over my shoulder giving Bill, my new friend, a final wave, laughing as he honked his great horn at me. When I turned back, I bumped straight into the rock-hard chest of Garrett Love.

“What—was that?” he asked, his hard gaze boring into mine. His mouth was set firm, his jaw clenched with an intense look of displeasure.

“That was Bill.”

“And did you know Bill before this morning?”

“Technically, no. But I found out that he drives by my house once a month when he delivers onions,” I said brightly.

“Bella Buchanan, did you hitchhike to The Lonestar Cattle Company this morning?” He raised one of those dark, perfectly shaped brows at me. My insides melted at his stern tone.

“Maybe? Possibly? Yes?”

My admission was met with silence. I filled the tense air with nervous rambling. “My car wouldn’t start, it made this really weird noise and I was already late and it’s my first day and I...”

“I think we’d best have a little talk, boss to employee.”

My stomach dropped like it did the time I took Oliver to the amusement park and he made me ride the Free Fall. The ride climbs vertically to the top of the tower in 7.2 seconds, then without warning, the car is released, and riders drop sixty feet in less than two seconds. With his livid eyes gazing down on me, that was how I felt right now.

His fingers wrapped around my elbow. His tight grip had the skin under my light jacket tingling as he led me to the office he had built onto the back of the barn.

Sitting me down in the wooden chair in front of his desk with a thump, he shut the door tightly behind us. He stood behind the desk.

He put his hands flat out on the desk, leaned his weight on them, his eyes flashed as he growled, “Do you have any idea what could have happened to you, hitchhiking out there?”

I gave a nervous gulp, avoided his eyes and instead focused on the place where the rolled-up sleeves of his button-down work shirt met his toned forearms.

“Um.”

He ran his hands through his tousled hair and paced back and forth in front of the desk. “I have half a mind to put you right over my knee and spank you for doing something so absolutely reckless.”

Okay—so he didn’t say that. I imagined that part.

He asked me, “Why didn’t you just call me to pick you up, Bella?”

“Um.” My master’s degree in communication was apparently a giant waste of money.

Returning to his place behind the desk, his gaze locked on mine, daring me to take my eyes from his. When he spoke, his tone was low, dangerous almost.

“Don’t you ever do that again, Bella. I don’t care if you are on your way to work, the gym, the grocery store. You call me. You do not hitch a ride. Do. You. Understand?” He punctuated each word with a rap of his knuckles on the desk.

“Yes, sir,” I whispered.

At my utterance something in his faced changed. There was a look of recognition as he considered my face. The look was fleeting, but I had seen it, clearly.

“If I hear you so much as stuck your thumb out anywhere near the side of a road, I will take you over my knee and spank you until you are unable to sit comfortably in a saddle for a week. It that understood?”

My knees felt so weak, I thanked my lucky stars I was seated in a chair. Hiding my trembling fingers beneath the desk, I nodded my head.

So, it was as I had thought. Garrett was an ex-bad boy turned good with dominant tendencies and a hand that itched to spank.

And he was my boss. And I was absolutely, head over heels in love with him.



GARRETT

After the stunt she pulled, she needed her bottom bared and spanked until there were tears in her eyes and her trembling voice promised never to do such a thing again. And then a good hard, ‘don’t you forget who the boss is around here’ fuck.

But instead, I maintained my professional composure, *after* I threatened to spank her ass that is, and gave my new employee a detailed tour of the ranch. Knowing in the back of my mind that I had *the contract*, still warm from my printer, sitting in the middle of my desk drawer.

“I forgot to ask you this during our interview last week, but are you able to work most weekends? I know you have Oliver to think about and all.”

Her voice sounded shamed when she spoke. “I actually only get him one weekend a month. I can have him more—you know since I’ve been sober for so long, but he has such stability with his new family I hate to tear him apart from his new brothers. Staying with me is not quite as fun, I’m afraid. But that’s part of what the program teaches you isn’t it? Putting others needs before your own wants.”

My voice felt tight in my throat as I spoke. “I know how that goes better than you think.”

Her eyes cut to mine, as if trying to suss me out. Avoiding the inevitable conversation, I continued to point out all the tourist spots of the ranch. As well as the long list of safety issues for her to be aware of. No one was going to get hurt on this ranch under my watch.

Interrupting one of my lectures on the importance of keeping the kids away from the areas I had designated unsafe, Bella's high laughing voice interrupted me.

"Can I ask you a question?" she said, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Sure."

"Are you always this serious?" she asked, teasingly, poking a slim finger into the side of my ribcage.

"I have to be."

"Why?"

"I've made too many mistakes to count in my past. Alcohol was only the catalyst for my selfish behavior. I've gotten that out of my life, but I can't go back to the man I once was. There is no room for error, and so I am, as you say, serious. It's better this way—trust me."

"Everyone has past mistakes, Garrett," she said softly.

"But not everyone is faced with those mistakes, day in and day out. And not everyone's past mistakes impacted other people's lives as mine have."

Her blue eyes considered my face. Reaching up, she traced the line of my jaw with her fingertip.

I froze under her gentle, unexpected touch.

"I know you're a good man," she said, quietly. Her hand dropped from my face and she turned to continue our tour. "Even with the mistakes in your past."

"I try very hard not to ever make a mistake now," I admitted quietly.

She gave her tinkling bell laugh. "How can one do that? It's impossible to never mess up."

"You'll see, when you read my contract. I run a tight ship."

Her cute little nose wrinkled up. "Contract?"

I gave her ribs a gentle nudge with my elbow. "You know, the employee contract that all new hires have to sign. The one that

says, among other things, not to be late.” I didn’t have the heart to tell her that her contract was very different from the one the others had signed. My other hires didn’t have Bella’s past, or flighty tendencies. I knew I was taking a chance on her and she was going to need very special guidance.

A pink blush rose to her cheeks. “Ah, that one.”

“There are consequences, you know.”

She gave a little gasp, her eyes flying open wide as she stared at me. She asked in a husky whisper, “What kind?”

Bingo. It was as I had suspected.

“You’ll see,” I said, in what I hoped to be a reassuring tone. Tugging her hand, I led her back to the barn. “Let’s finish our tour, first.”

“Tell me the tale of Samuel Love. I heard he was nothing but a common horse thief,” she said brightly, her eyes shining and her hand warm in mine.

“Well, to start, his name was Samuel Parr. Then, some say Samuel Poke. No one knows for sure but the documents for the ranch say Samuel Love. Story goes he changed his last name to hide from the law after the Civil War.”

“Why Love? That’s an unusual last name.”

“The only thing he figured could heal the country after such a bloody war that tore brother from brother was love, so he changed his name to Love. That’s how the story goes at least.”

“But he probably just figured with a name like that no one would think him guilty. Love sounds so innocent.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Luckily, she looked away from me because I knew the look I was giving her was anything but innocent. The feel of her bare skin against mine, even though it was only hand holding, had me burning to the core for the petite redhead.



BELLA

When he released my hand, I felt cold and alone. He was still within feet of me but somehow on our short walk I had begun to crave his touch.

All tenderness was forgotten when he opened his office door wide for me and I saw the big, wooden desk. Gulping nervously, I took a seat in the same chair I had been in just that morning—when my boss of less than one day had threatened to spank me if I hitchhiked again.

My overactive imagination could not stop from picturing myself as a naughty school girl sent to the principal's office as I sat on the hard, wooden chair, waiting for Garrett. He took his time filing papers, tidying his office, his broad muscled back to me. It only served to make me more anxious. I crossed my legs, tightly, tucking my trembling fingers underneath my thighs, out of view.

When he turned to me, his dark brows were narrow, his jaw set. A thrill ran through me as his stern gaze roved over me. I tried to paste a bright smile on my face to hide my apprehension.

Opening the middle drawer slowly, he retrieved a manila file folder. Discreetly sitting forward a bit, I could just make out my name, Bella Buchanan, neatly written in an elegant cursive at the top of the folder. Flipping it open, he pulled from within what I assumed to be the contract he had mentioned earlier. The packet looked to be about two pages thick, on simple white printer paper, neatly stapled at the top.

Tossing the paper in front of me, it landed without a sound. I gulped again. Garrett sat down, filling out the entirety of his big chair with his lean pantherlike physique.

“Read it,” he demanded. He leaned towards me, his elbows resting on the desk. His gaze bore into mine. I swear the man never blinked. The little muscle in his jaw started to twitch as I kept him waiting.

I picked up the contract.

My eyes roved over the first line. It read: I, Bella Buchanan, as an employee of The Lonestar Cattle Company will abide by the rules and regulations set forth for me by owner and founder of Hope Reigns, Garrett Love.

Okay, a little formal but nothing too crazy. So why did my heart feel like it was pounding out of my chest? A deep voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Out loud.”

“What?” I mumbled, my mind distracted by the words in front of me.

One brow raised to me as if a warning. “Read the paper. Out loud.”

“Okay,” I mumbled. Hands shaking, I held the paper in my lap. My voice wavering, I began to read.

“I, Bella Buchanan, as an employee of The Lonestar Cattle Company will abide by the rules and regulations set forth for me by owner and founder of Hope Reigns, Garrett Love. If I should break the rules, consciously or by accident, I agree to submit myself to Mr. Love’s...”

Looking up at him, my eyes popped open so wide, it hurt. His solemn gaze bore into mine.

“Finish.”

“d—discipline?” I managed to squeak out. He gave a nod of his head. “Corporal punishment.”

My face was on fire—I could feel my cheeks burning and knew that they were as red as my hair. My insides felt funny, my knees weak.

“I meant what I said earlier. I *will* spank you.” He paused, taking in my reaction. My eyes dropped to my lap. I was unable to meet his eyes.

“You take your responsibilities too lightly. Your own safety is a joke to you. You may be sober, but you still seem to live your life

like you're a college kid. People's lives are at risk on this ranch and we can't afford for someone to 'forget', or 'be late', or God forbid," I snuck a peek up at him and his face was livid as he completed his statement, "*hitchhike*."

I sat silently, my head bowed, the contract wrapped in my sweaty hands. When I could finally speak, my voice was barely above a whisper. "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

His tone softened. "I care about you, Bella. I want to see you succeed here. And that requires discipline, which I am afraid you lack."

I went from anxious to furious in seconds. "Who are you to say what I lack?"

"When you applied for this job, I investigated you, as I would do any employee. Judging by what I found, you still live as if you are a college student. A string of jobs quit on what seems like a whim with no notice given. You're rent is almost always late. Your mode of transportation is obviously unreliable—"

Going after old Bessie... he had crossed the line. Inhaling a big breath to prepare for my outburst, I then let it go. "None of that is your business, Mr. Garrett Love. And to spank me like a child. This is so, so—illegal!" It was the only term I could come up with in the heat of the moment.

He had an amused smirk on his handsome face. I wanted to claw it off.

"Tsk, tsk. Temper, temper."

The one thing that was certain to enrage someone who was already furious was to tell them directly that they have a temper.

I stood up, almost tipping my chair over behind me in my fury. Grabbing up the papers, I slapped my hand and his ludicrous contract beneath it, onto the desk. Stabbing it with the tip of my finger, I punctuated my words. "This. Is. A. Joke."

"I'm afraid not." Drumming his own fingertips on the papers, his eyes dark, his tone condescending, he announced carefully. "This.



Is. An. Agreement. You agree to submit yourself to my discipline. Or, you no longer work here. I told you very clearly. I run a tight ship and I do not allow room for error without consequences.”

“I’ll sue, I’ll call the news... I’ll...”

Interrupting me, he handed me a pen. “You will sign.”

“I will never sign this,” I said, tossing the papers at him with disgust.

His eyes locked on mine, his smugness replaced with a knowing look. “You need this. You want this.” Leaning in dangerously close, his voice as low as it could register, he growled, “You *will* sign.”

Mimicking his stance, I leaned in as well, clenching my teeth as I growled back my response. “Never.”

“Then, I’ll have Gary drive you home. Go back to Peach Street and get that little temper of yours under control. Think it over. I’ll be there to pick you up for work tomorrow morning, seven a.m. sharp. I will honk the horn, one time only. You are ready to go, and in that truck, or you are fired.”

Rising to his feet, I couldn’t help but look him up and down. His presence was intimidating to say the least. To my personal disappointment, I shrank back under his hard gaze. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, the tension pulling like a tight band between us, he held his hand out to shake mine.

Narrowing my eyes, giving him the best ‘if looks could kill’ glare that I could muster, I crossed my arms over my chest. Garrett moved from behind his desk, walking towards me. Trying to dig within and find the temper that was slowly being replaced with fear, I straightened my spine, reaching up to my full height of five foot three inches.

My knees buckled as he drew nearer. Running one hand down the side of my face, Garrett moved his mouth by my ear. Shudders ran through me and despite my temper, I could feel my insides melting. “You know what happens to sassy little girls around here, don’t you?”

I felt the blush burning in my once pale cheeks. He could probably smell the intimate moisture his simple touch had brought to me. Furious, terrified, and now horny as a teenage girl who'd just been kissed by a Frenchman for the first time, the man left me a wreck.

His hand left my face. With a dark chuckle, he turned his back to me and left the office. I could hear him calling, "Gary, can you kindly take Ms. Buchanan home?"

Damn him. Getting the last word. Dismissing me. Having his henchman drive me home. And the thing that made me the angriest—making me want nothing more in this world than for Garrett Love to bend me right over his desk and fuck my brains out.

Suddenly, there was a six foot five giant standing in the door-frame of the office, tipping his Stetson at me.

"Uh, Miss Buchanan, I'm here to take you home, ma'am."

I grabbed the contract off the desk. I'd be damned if I was going to leave my name on a piece of paper saying I would submit myself to Mr. Love's discipline where someone could see it.

"I'm ready." Stomping out with my head held high I passed by Gary. I tried to paste a look of confidence on my face, but my hands were trembling, and my legs felt like they were made of the rubbery slime Oliver had brought home from science camp last summer.

The ride was silent which was just fine with me. I was cutting ties with The Lonestar Cattle Company and their crazy ways. Better to not spend another second wasting my breath talking to one of them. Gary kept giving me long, sad looking, side glances, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Thanks for the ride," I muttered, giving the door a little more of a slam than was necessary. Stepping out of the truck, the big man shyly walked me to the door. When I was safely inside, with a tip of his hat, the henchman turned to the truck, climbed inside and headed back to the ranch.

After Gary dropped me off, I threw myself down on my couch with a pint of Chunky Monkey and a soup spoon. Muttering to

myself, I shoveled the chocolate banana concoction into my mouth. “I don’t lack discipline. Living like a college student—please. Who does he think he is? Mr. Perfect, huh?” As I stuffed the ice cream into my mouth, my gaze roved over my little bungalow rental.

Mismatched end tables held garage sale mismatched lamps. I had cracked the lampshades when I had moved in and never got around to buying new ones. Colorful sheer scarves hung over the damaged shades, hiding the evidence. Colorful swaths of fabric hung from the walls—I had no artwork to speak of. The goal was to create a bohemian look on a dime, but now the faded tapestries just looked cheap to me. And dusty.

On the coffee table were empty green glass bottles from the sparkling water I liked to drink all night—in place of the dozens of beers I used to consume. Next to them was a stack of ignored, unopened mail. Bills, probably. Bills that needed to be paid—weeks ago. A product of my most recently quit job in the string that Garrett had mentioned.

The screen of my television was covered in smudges. It sat on a dusty table, also covered with empty bottles. The burgundy colored shag carpet that must have been installed in the seventies was littered with dirty clothes. I couldn’t remember the last time I had vacuumed it. Or if I even owned a vacuum.

The unpacked moving boxes in the corner caught my eye, making my stomach turn. I had been in this house for five years. How had I not gotten around to unpacking all the boxes?

“Ugh.” I stood up from my pity party on the couch. Heading into the kitchen, I tossed the rest of the ice cream into the trash, knowing that had been my dinner for the night. The sink was stacked with dirty dishes. I would do them just before Oliver showed up but usually not before.

Sighing, I made my way to investigate my bedroom. It was in an even more pathetic state than the rest of the house.

I kept the door closed whenever Oliver visited, hiding my mess of dirty clothes, books and empty food wrappers. Disgusted, I

turned from my room. Closing the door behind me I looked to my left. There at the end of the hall was a shut door. Taking a deep breath, I went to the closed door. Turning the knob slowly with reverence, I peeked into the crack in the door. Opening it the full way the sight made tears spring into my eyes.

The room of my ten-year-old son was immaculate. Bed made neatly, corners of the blanket tightly folded under the mattress. Books lined in height order on the shelves. I walked towards the shelves to investigate but already knew what I would find—when I ran my finger over the edge of the shelves, nothing came up with my fingertip. Oliver had dusted the last time he was here.

No dirty clothing, no toys, no empty food wrappers on his floors. My son, making order out of chaos.

The sight broke my heart.

I sat down on his bed my elbows resting on my thighs, my head in my hands. I moaned to no one in particular, “What is wrong with me?”

Two tears fell from my eyes and dotted my jeans, darkening the material where they landed. This wouldn’t do. I might make mistakes, but I wasn’t one to give up.

Garrett’s handsome face played in my mind’s eye. That look he had given me—I remembered it well. “Don’t you think you ought to clean this up, young lady?” the stern cowboy boss in my mind seemed to say.

“Shut up,” I said. The dark look he gave me in my head almost made me apologize out loud.

Shaking Mr. Love out of my brain, I stood from the bed.

“That’s it. Time for a little spring cleaning.” Leaving the room, I carefully closed the door to Oliver’s room and got to work.

Putting my favorite upbeat tunes on my CD player that I had purchased sometime in the early two thousands, I focused on my work while shoving Garrett’s face and voice from my mind. Grabbing a big, black trash bag from under the sink I started my overhaul by walking around the house, stuffing all the trash and bottles

within the dark depths of the vast plastic bag. It filled quickly. Saying a little 'I'm sorry but it ain't gonna happen' prayer to the recycling fairies, I got rid of all the empty green glass bottles. On top of those was the crinkling trash wrappers, then any stained or ripped clothing that was beyond repair.

When I was done, I had hauled two and a half bags to the big trash can on the curb. Then I bagged up all the dirty clothes, promising myself I would hit the laundromat that weekend. I put them in the corner of my kitchen.

Running to the bathroom, I grabbed my make-up bag of dollar store nail polish, taking it back to the kitchen and placing it on top of the garbage bag of clothing so I wouldn't forget it. Pink, purple, red, gold glitter polish—it was all in that bag for the little girls who had to go to the laundromat with their moms on Saturday. I loved the way their faces brightened when they saw me. As soon as I had my loads in the washer, I would set up my little manicure shop, painting all their little nails pretty pink, or purple, or some of each. Whatever they wanted that day.

Hands on my hips, I blew a strand of sweaty hair away from my face. Taking in my house, I tried to figure out what came next—this was my first time ever spring cleaning after all. Spying the huge tumble weeds under the couch and the thick film covering just about everything in the living room, I made up my mind.

Time to dust.

Using clean socks that had a few holes in them over my hands, I dusted every inch of the house, sneezing as I did. Then I went to my back-storage closet ignoring the mess in there. I figured everyone had to have at least one junk closet. Pushing past the out of date winter coats and toys Oliver had outgrown, I found it.

"Aha!" I yelled victoriously, pulling out the old Hoover. I had inherited it when a past roommate had moved out with no notice. I plugged it in and turned it on. It made a terrible whining noise and smelled of burning rubber, but it did the job. I vacuumed every

inch of the shag carpet, being sure to leave visible lines in a star pattern on Oliver's carpet when I did his room.

Next was the kitchen. I wanted to cry as I took in the stack of dishes with dried food that had hardened on them. I struggled through my messy cupboard to find dish soap. There wasn't any. I wasn't going to give up. Thinking quickly, I went to the bathroom and retrieved my lavender body wash. Pinning my dusty hair back, I pulled on my old yellow, elbow length, rubber gloves.

I turned on the water as hot as it would go. Unable to find the stopper, I put a plastic Tupperware lid over the base of the sink hoping the amount of dishes weighing on the lid would keep the water from draining. Squeezing the bottle, I poured half of the soap into the sink.

That was when I heard a knock at the door.

That would be Mr. McAllister. An elderly man who had lived next door to me for the past year or so, his cat was always getting out and he would come have me help him find her. Sweetie was usually up in the Bradford pear tree that grew in my little fenced in backyard. Grabbing a quick look at my reflection in the mirror above the sink, I gave a shrug. My disheveled hair hung wildly and there was a patch of bubbles on my face that I tried to wipe away with the back of my glove.

"Gross," I mumbled when the rubber touched my face.

Leaving the sink to fill, I went to answer the door.

"Hello," I called airily, "Sweetie out again?"

My breath caught in my throat. There on my front stoop stood none other than Mr. Discipline himself. A strand of his dark hair hung sexily over one eye. His jeans hung from his hips just so—the way that made you want to pull them off with your teeth.

"Who's Sweetie?" he asked, shoving past me. I closed my gaping mouth as Garrett made his way into my house. Uninvited and unannounced. Looking around he asked, "Doing a little housekeeping? Is that running water I hear?"

"Shit," I muttered under my breath, pushing past Garrett and

rushing to the sink. A huge cloud of lavender scented bubbles was mounding within the sink, spilling over the front of the cabinets. Water and suds ran over the floor. "Double shit!"

As I hurried to turn off the faucet, I slipped in the sudsy water, falling right smack down on my rump with a loud, "Oomph!"

"You okay?"

I looked up to see Garrett, leaning in the doorframe. His shoulders shook as he chuckled at me.

"Get out," I growled between my clenched teeth, tears of fury stung the backs of my eyes.

The laughter on his face melted away, his gaze softening as he looked me over. He reached his hand out to me, offering to help me up.

Swatting it away with my yellow glove I struggled to my feet. "What part of get out do you not understand, Mr. Garrett Love? You may be the boss at your fancy ranch, but you are not the boss here at One Twenty-Three Peach Street. I can assure you of that."

The smile was now gone from his face. Crossing his arms over his chest he leaned on the doorframe. When he spoke, his voice was gentle. "I came to apologize."

The words hit me just as I was throwing my hands on my hips to go into another rant about where his jurisdiction of power stopped.

"Really?" I opted to cross my own arms over my chest—less sassy of a stance and hear him out.

There was a twinkle in his eyes as he spoke. "I'm sorry."

"You should be. That contract was ludicrous at best, and had to be all kinds of illegal..."

Holding a large, perfectly formed hand out to stop my rant he interrupted me. "I'm not sorry about the contract."

My jaw dropped open, but no words came out.

"I still hope you sign it." Reaching out, he placed the tip of his finger under my chin closing my mouth for me. Then with the back of his clean, soap scented hand he wiped the bubbles from my

face. His warm gaze locked on mine. “You are adorable; you know that?”

Bella Buchanan—uncharacteristically—was still speechless.

Returning to the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest, he said, “What I said at the ranch still stands. And I would like very much for you to work for me. But that’s not why I came here.”

Coming out of my trance I threw my hands on my hips where they belonged and demanded, “Then tell me *why* you *are* here?”

“To tell you I’m sorry. I should have driven you home myself.”

“Do you really think I would have risked being in the car alone with you after finding out about your crazy contract?”

He chuckled. “Well, at least, I should have offered.”

“That’s very nice,” I said curtly. Waving my hand around my house, I asked, “Now, can I get back to my spring cleaning?”

Raising a curious brow to me he asked, “Is it always this tidy in here?”

A blush rose from the base of my neck all the way up to my cheekbones. “Yes.”

His dark brow knitted, his eyes narrowed at me. Jaw set, he gave me ‘the look’. The one that told you he was not a man to be messed with. That dishonesty came at a price. And the same one that melted my panties right off my body.

Clearing my throat, I decided honesty was the best policy with this man. “Um, no. *Okay?* I started cleaning after your henchman dropped me off. Are you happy now?” I was humiliated but at least I had told the truth.

“I am happy. This place was a pigsty.”

“How rude—and how would you know...”

“I have my ways.”

So, Gary was not only a driving service but also a spy. I had wondered why the big man had seen me to the door.

“Well, if you are so bothered by the mess, why don’t you help me with these dishes?”



There was 'the look' again. My body betrayed me, and I felt a dampness where I shouldn't.

"Who made the mess, little girl?"

Cheeks burning, I had no idea what made me answer him. I should have kicked him out and never spoken to him again. But something in his stern gaze, his masculine stance, maybe just the fact that he cared what my house was like, made me squeak out my embarrassed answer.

"Me."

"Then you need to clean it up yourself."

Why was I letting him talk to me like a child who hadn't done her chores? Finally gaining a resemblance of composure, I demanded, "What is it to you?"

He took a step towards me. Uncrossing his arms, he placed a hand lightly on my shoulder. His eyes locked on my face, but I could only look at the ground as he spoke. "Bella, I care about you. And I want you on the ranch."

"Then don't spank me," I muttered, feeling silly at my childish words and still unable to meet his gaze.

"You need it."

I mumbled incoherently, "I most certainly do not. I am a grown woman and—" He moved his body closer to mine. His broad chest was inches from me. His nearness interrupted my thoughts, stopping my words.

Leaning down, his face so close I could smell the scent of his woodsy aftershave, his low voice rumbled, "I know you want it. You are just a naughty little girl who needs the discipline of a grown man." Pulling away suddenly and leaving me shivering in delight and shame, he took a step back, flashing me a cocky smile. "See you at seven—sharp. Don't be late."

Turning on his heel with his back towards me he made his way to the front door. With a flick of the knob he locked it, calling over to me, "You need to keep this locked from now on. You never know who might come in here." Then pulled the door closed behind him.

I literally fainted onto my couch unable to trust my quaking knees to hold my weight. I wanted him to come back in here and thrust what I knew had to be a healthy dose of cock inside me and cure the aching he had created. And I wanted to slap his face so hard my angry red handprint would still be on it when he got back home.

How dare he.

Looking at the contract I had thrown on my coffee table earlier that day, I tried to process my options. I could go get a job at McDonalds –which I would probably quit a week later. I could remain unemployed and prepare to live in my car on the side of the road. Or I could clean up my act and take the respectable, good paying job at the ranch, earning a stable income and hopefully the respect of my son. And get my ass spanked by my hot domineering boss.

Who was I kidding? One raise of his eyebrow and I was dripping for the stern cowboy. But could I allow myself to accept such a proposition? I picked up the contract, reading further down the page.

‘In exchange for an honest day’s work, Bella will be paid a generous salary and given one meal a day at the ranch house with the other employees. Bella will complete the tasks set before her and obey her boss’ commands or be disciplined. Should she be non-compliant and not adhere to the strict policy, her employment will be terminated.’

“Obey? This man is truly archaic.” Tossing the papers on the coffee table, I leaned back on the sagging pillow of my couch snapping my eyes shut. The mental picture of Garrett pulling down my jeans and bending me over his desk, his big hand coming down with a loud *smack* on the bare skin of my bottom filled my mind and warmed my insides.

Reaching down I unbuttoned my jeans and slipped my finger underneath my panties. I was dripping wet. And he hadn’t even touched me—not really. Just stood kind of close, delivering his

stern words and giving me that look. I groaned as a blush of shame rose onto my cheeks as my finger moved faster between my slick folds. My hips started to move as I pictured Garrett flipping me over, sitting my bare punished ass up onto his desk and slamming his...

“Knock knock, Miss Bella. Sweetie is out again, and I need your help.”

“Holy shit!” I jumped up from the couch zipping my fly. Disgusted at myself I ran my fingers over the denim of my jeans. “Oh man.”

I ran to the door, flinging it open with a smile on my face. “Hi, Mr. McAllister!”

“Is it hot in there? Your face sure is flushed. Your air conditioner out again? Want me to look at it?”

“No, no. Let’s go find your cat.” I hurried out to join him, brushing by Mr. McAllister and heading to the bushes where I knew the long-haired tortie would be hiding.

A half hour later after seeing Sweetie and Mr. McAllister home, I returned to my house exhausted from my day. I smirked to myself as I locked the door behind me. Boss’ orders. Throwing myself on my sagging couch, my gaze once again went around my slightly cleaner house.

I no longer found it bohemian and charming. It was just lonely and sad. My cleaning hadn’t even gotten it that clean. It still seemed stale and messy... and unloved. My only visitor that month had been Mr. McAllister and Oliver. Mr. McAllister always went home with his cat. Oliver, looking embarrassed had spent only one night this time, apologizing profusely that he had been invited to two birthday parties the next day and didn’t want to hurt his buddies’ feelings.

Two visitors all month. Three—actually. Lucky number three being the handsome, sexy as hell, spanking cowboy boss.

My eyes bore into the white pages that lay on the table before me. “What the hell? What do I possibly stand to lose?”

Shoving trinkets and trash that I must have missed in my cleaning frenzy to the side, I found a pen in the overflowing drawer in the coffee table. I put the nib of the pen to the line on the top of the paper beside the typed words, "Bella Buchanan." Squeezing my eyes shut tight, I signed my name.