

Chapter 1

“Ow! What the...! Stop that!” Sheri tried to turn around in the small pantry, but her foot in its unaccustomed cowboy boot seemed to be wedged between a barrel of flour and a cracker box. She tried to bend down and get it free, but snagged her curly brown hair on a corner of a shelf. Held there doubled over, her immediate problem seemed to increase. Someone had given her another sharp smack on a portion of her anatomy that wasn’t used to any sort of attention.

“Shush! Do you want somebody to hear you?”

She knew that voice. It was the kind of sound a person didn’t forget easily: annoying but attractive in a kind of train-wreck sort of way. It was the last voice she wanted to hear. “Oh, it’s you. It’s you? Ryker? What are you doing here? Ow! Stop that! I’m not here for fun and games.”

“Oh, yes you are, at least for the moment. If you read the mission brief, you know you’re only getting what any 1890’s gal would expect in the way of treatment from her man if he caught her wearing jeans. A real guest would know all about it. Do you want to seem like a real guest or not?”

That brought her up short. She was here in this Texas ranch house to do a job, and a very lucrative job at that. “If this weren’t a favor for the world’s best boss, I’d scream this house down right now.”

“But it is and you won’t.”

He was right. “I’m not sure I owe Mr. Tobin this big after all.” Twisting and shoving with her backside served only to wedge her in tighter, holding her even more securely for another loud pop from his hand. Was spanking part of operative training? It hadn’t been on any of the courses she had taken. “I could leave and let somebody else take over. There are plenty of volunteers who would love to impress the chief.”

“How would that look on your record? Bailing on a mission? Just because of a little heat to the seat? Applied purely in the course of proving your cover, of course. It’s the best thing I can do to help you blend in.”

“Don’t tell me none of the women on this ranch object to it, even if they do accept it,” Sheri said caustically. “Any sane person subjected to such treatment would have to give at least a token protest.”

That got a laugh out of Ryker. “They protest, all right, but they don’t generally fight. Play along or your cover will be blown.”

“And how exactly does one ‘play along’ with this sort of thing?” she hissed back at him.

“Don’t tell me I’m your first. What an honor! But with your bratty attitude and vexatious ways, it strains credulity to think that this is the first time this gorgeous bottom has gotten the walloping it so richly deserves.” He didn’t seem to be worried at all about being overheard, but rather spoke in a normal, conversational tone, all the while applying the flat of his hand to the round of her seat with stinging, rapid rhythm.

“Lay off me and let me go!” she whispered fiercely, feeling like a demented librarian on steroids.

A barrel and a box shifted beside her and for a moment she thought she might escape, but it was only Ryker shifting things around to get a better position. She felt his hand go around her waist, pinning her to his side as he continued his unwanted attentions to her nether cheeks. “Just a

few more swats should do the job for now, but I'll give you more of the same if I get half a chance. And believe me, here on the Purple Sage, I will."

She was about to give him a smart retort when she heard voices approaching. This gave her pause. She stood still and held her breath, accepting outwardly what internally she was fighting tooth and nail.

The door suddenly swung part way open and stuck fast with a thump, having struck Ryker's cowboy boot, she imagined. "Just a minute," Ryker called out. Then he continued, in so low a voice, Sheri could barely hear. "Now, follow my lead. It's the only way Chaps stays in the dark."

This statement clinched things for Sheri. She could not allow Chaps to find out why she was on his dude ranch, in his very house, installing a low-level universal monitoring system of which he would have no knowledge. It was because of threats to him and suspicious activity in the nearby town that his right hand man Luke had finally been forced to ask for her boss's help, but the extent of the problem had to be hidden from the retired operative and his wife.

She had time for one quick nod before Jeb moved his booted foot to let his jeans clad knee slide gently up under Sheri's waist. She was surprised at how strong he was and how easily he lifted her slightly before making a show of setting her down. He took her in his arms and patted her back, saying, "There, now, it's all over. I'm sorry I had to get on to you, this being your first day and all, but rules are rules."

"Jeb," asked a woman's voice from behind the door. Sheri wondered how much she or her male companion had seen and why they were calling Ryker 'Jeb.' "What's going on here?"

"Surprise! This is the gal I was telling you about. Sheri, meet Chaps and Kitty. They run this ranch. They're our host and hostess for the week."

For a moment, Sheri was too dumbfounded to speak. The person Sheri realized now must be Kitty said, "So nice to meet you! Jeb, you've managed to do real well for yourself, I can see that right off, but you should have told us she was coming this week!" Meeting the woman in person, Sheri could better understand why Mr. Tobin would go to such lengths to keep her safe from the ugly implications of the recent communications his intelligence section had intercepted. She was a sweet lady, radiating warmth and affection. The thought of the ugly world of international espionage and crime touching her turned Sheri's stomach.

"There wasn't time. I knew she was coming soon, but when she got a chance to take some time off from her job, I told her y'all wouldn't mind if she came and stayed a few days, with just us. Then she'll know her way around by the time all the folks get here for the weekend." Ryker's lie sounded so convincing, Sheri found herself half believing it.

The man Ryker referred to as Chaps spoke up, clapping his hands once and rubbing them together in what Sheri took to be a gesture of enthusiasm. "Jeb's brought himself home a gal! Well, that's news, for sure. Just wait till I tell Luke!"

Sheri noted the look of chagrin on Ryker's face. "I guess we have to tell him, don't we?"

"Since he and Sasha live out here on the ranch full time, I think it would only be polite," Kitty put in. She eyed Sheri's jeans and flannel shirt doubtfully. "Didn't you tell her how things are out here?"

Ryker gave Sheri's shoulders a squeeze. "Yeah, that's what I was dealing with just now here in the pantry." He looked around at their surroundings with a gesture towards the door. As Kitty led the way back into the kitchen, he continued, "We wanted to surprise everyone, so I brought Sheri onto the place without going through the trailer, which means she couldn't change. I brought her some clothes just now and asked her to get into them, but when I got back from putting up the wagon, she still hadn't put on the dress. I had to do a bit of persuading."

Kitty looked embarrassed, but Chaps just chuckled. “Best to start off on the right foot, young lady. Rules are rules and around here, if you break them, Jeb will have the right to enforce them. I’m sure he explained that all to you.”

Jeb? So that’s what Ryker calls himself out here, Sheri thought. I know Chaps by another name, too. If his reputation is true, he’s not somebody to mess around with. He’ll be able to tell if I’m lying so I’d better make this as close to the truth as I can. “Yes, he did, and I didn’t mean to upset anyone. We won’t be here long. Just wanted to look around while I was in the area on a business trip. I didn’t see the need to change into the dress. I’m in Western clothes at least.”

“Boys’ duds, Miss. Not the same at all,” Chaps began, concern in his voice.

“And of course you’ll be staying a while,” Kitty added. “You didn’t bring her all the way out here just to turn around and go back, did you?”

“No, indeed,” Jeb answered. “And that’s my little surprise to you, dear. I talked to your boss and arranged a week of vacation. A little engagement present, like.”

“So it’s official?” Kitty clasped her hands together in delight. “How wonderful! Have you set a date?”

Sheri gave it her best shot, trying to keep her face from betraying the outrage she felt. How dare he come up with such a ridiculous cover story? How are we supposed to pull this off? Doesn’t he know about keeping it simple and sticking as close to the truth as possible? There was no reason to enter into this elaborate hoax when I had a perfectly good legend already planned. This is a simple implantation job, just glorified re-wiring, really, and here he goes making me jump through these very unnecessary hoops. All this ran through her mind in a split second. Pasting an embarrassed and rueful look on her face, she said, “I thought we were going to keep it private for a while longer.”

“Can’t help it, darlin’. I want to tell the whole world you’re mine. And anyway, for you to come here, we have to let everyone know we’re engaged. Remember? I explained it all to you. Chaps doesn’t like single females visiting. This way, you can get to know my friends here. After we’re married, we’ll be visiting every chance we get. I want you to love it as much as I do. And we can spend some time together without any distractions.”

Chaps cleared his throat. “Engaged isn’t the same as married, Jeb. I hope you understand that. You’ll have responsibility for her, but you won’t... uh...”

Jeb nodded. “I know we can’t share a room until we’ve actually tied the knot. Sheri, darlin’, are you all right? You must be parched. Maybe a glass of lemonade?”

Kitty patted Sheri on the back. “Where are my manners? I should have offered you something to drink long ago. Y’all go sit on the front porch. I’ll bring it right out.”

Sheri tried to breathe normally. “I’m fine. Really. I didn’t mean to interrupt your day. In fact, Jeb told me that you wouldn’t even be here.” She tried not to emphasize the unfamiliar name. I should never have trusted his intel. I can’t believe I didn’t cross check when the target would be absent from the premises. The client won’t be happy with how badly I’m messing this up, and Jeb here isn’t helping.

“That was all part of the surprise.” Jeb squeezed her shoulders in a way she would have loved if they had really been in love. Sheri followed Chaps through the house and onto the veranda, stowing her voltmeter disguised as a compact and her mini soldering iron that doubled as a lipstick in the leather handbag slung over her shoulder. Jeb kept his hand possessively on the small of her back, sending small jolts of unwelcome wistfulness through her.

If only it were real, she thought. I would have loved being surprised like that with an impromptu vacation, out here in the back of beyond, with no cell phones and no computers. As

much as I love my job, it has been getting to me lately. I was planning on a getaway. Was that why I took this assignment so easily? I should have known better. Any location that could be considered his turf should have been off-limits to me after what happened. He has too much of a hold over me.

“Well, seems like you surprised her, all right.” Kitty followed them quickly, bringing a tray with glasses and a pitcher of lemonade. “That might be considered more of a shock, Jeb. She may have had other plans. Or pets? Or kids?”

Sheri had the space it took to draw a breath to decide how to play this one. She didn’t want her cover blown and truth to tell, she didn’t mind the thought of staying here longer than just the few minutes it would take to install the system switch. “No, nothing like that.”

“Oh, it’ll be fun,” Jeb insisted. “And I want to see Luke’s face when he meets Sheri.”

He would have to mention Luke. Sheri knew that was the name the client went by here on the ranch, and that it was, in fact, his real name. It was his reports of suspicious people sighted near Chaps’ house in town, coupled with the reports Mr. Tobin already had that proved the necessity of the universal monitor. Sheri had thought not to actually see Luke, though she knew she could give his name as a reference if she were caught on the premises. Of course, that had all been planned without the Jeb-factor.

“Now, Jeb,” Kitty began. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were being spiteful or trying to stir up trouble.” Kitty seemed to want to say more, but a strange look from Chaps had her sipping her lemonade instead. Sheri didn’t think the sweet drink was the cause of her pursed lips and furrowed brow.

Jeb shrugged. “Luke still thinks I’m sweet on his wife, even two years on. You’d think he’d have learned to trust a little angel like Sasha by now.”

“Her, I trust. You, not so much.” The tall, thin cowboy who came striding around the side of the house resembled too closely the client picture she’d been shown to be anyone else. The hat and beard changed him, but she’d been trained to remember and recognize bone structure and other hard to alter features. This was the client, all right.

The men shook hands all around and Kitty went to get another glass. Sheri wondered if Jeb had bothered to brief the newcomer on his change of plans. She needn’t have worried. Luke was much too busy giving Jeb a hard time to enquire where this windfall had originated. “Anybody know CPR? How about a nitro tablet? My heart won’t stand the shock. Jeb with a real live actual female woman on his arm? But don’t worry, Miss. We’ll make sure he behaves himself somehow. You’re safe with us.”

“Says the man who considered using his gal as bait to catch spies on the property to be a proper method of courting,” Jeb said sardonically. “At least I won’t expose my lady to being listened in on by international arms dealers and thugs.”

Luke’s face turned the color of a ripe apple “I did not expose Sasha to...”

Chaps interrupted him. “Sheri here doesn’t want to hear about that ancient history. We haven’t had a minute’s trouble in two years now.” Sheri wondered if she was only imagining a look of unease passing over Chaps’ face.

“You have to admit, he didn’t warn Sasha about the Purple Sage ranch being an old age home for Spooks and Kooks.” Jeb spoke to Chaps but put a hand out as if to ward off a fist from Luke.

Luke threw a mocking right hook at Jeb’s hand. “Don’t call Sentry Security ‘Spooks and Kooks’. They’re a great outfit and Mr. Tobin is a great man.”

“I agree with you, Luke, but you have to admit, the nickname is fitting. Remember Salk and Pepper?” Chaps laughed at the memory.

“Nothing wrong with a little creativity,” Luke said defensively.

“Pepper did his best work hanging from wall mounted TVs by his knees,” Chaps recalled. “And some of the other employees have turned out to be... uh...”

“Mr. Parham can’t help going senile. He doesn’t know he’s spouting state secrets at the top of his lungs.”

Kitty returned just then with the glass for Luke. “He’s a nice old man and you’d better not let Sasha hear you refer to him as a kook. In fact, that’s enough about spies in general.”

Chaps grinned broadly. “As much as I admire Tob, it can’t be denied that the nickname Spooks and Kooks was well earned. Sentry Security always had more than its share of misfits, malcontents and just plain weirdos.”

“Those weirdos saved your life on more than one occasion, as I recall it.” Kitty cleared her throat, obviously trying to change the subject. “So, Sheri, tell us, who do you work for?”

Before Sheri could think up a lie, Jeb answered for her. “Sentry Security. She’s on their technical team.”

“Jeb! Then how can you—” Kitty protested while the men laughed uproariously. “Men! Sheri, would you like to join me in the kitchen for some sensible conversation? We’re obviously not going to find it here. Then we can go upstairs and get you into some suitable clothes. Even with nobody here, it will just be best for you to get into the spirit of the ranch.”

Sheri frowned a bit, but followed her new friend out of the room and up the stairs, glad indeed that her back was to the group when she overheard Chaps saying, “She’s from Sentry? The tech team? I’ve been meaning to ask them about installing some monitoring on the place. You know, something real discreet but sensitive and connected.”

Several minutes later, Sheri realized she was in the kitchen with Kitty, who was asking her, “Don’t you agree?”

Sheri shook her head to clear it. “Agree with what?”

Kitty gave her a sympathetic smile. “You haven’t heard a word I’ve said, have you? Come on. I’ll get you settled in upstairs and then you can take a little rest if you’d like.”

Thinking fast, Sheri made another snap decision. “Yes, that would be nice. I’m sorry I’m so distracted.”

“Jeb can be a distracting kind of a man, I suppose. How long have you two known each other?”

Again, Sheri stuck as close to the truth as she could. “Two or three years, I guess. He was one of my first clients at Sentry. And he knows my boss well. They go back some years, I think. Old family connections or something.”

“We really shouldn’t be talking about these modern topics on the ranch, you realize. I’m getting you in bad habits. When the weekend guests are here, you know we will have to follow the rules, don’t you? Jeb did tell you the rules, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he told me that once you come through the trailer, onto the ranch proper, you live like you were in the 1890’s. Nothing modern allowed. You can’t even talk about modern things.”

“That’s right, but I don’t want you to think it’s a burden or anything. It’s all in fun. We enjoy the experience of immersing ourselves in the atmosphere of the by-gone era. You can’t do that while chatting about television shows or computer problems. But we don’t take ourselves too seriously and we don’t work nearly as hard as women had to back then. We like to say it’s like living in a western movie, not too realistic, but a whole lot of fun.” Kitty’s searching gaze told

Sheri she would do well to put the older lady at ease if she didn't want a nervous hostess watching her every move and making it impossible for her to accomplish her real task here.

"That sounds like a wonderful way to spend a weekend. I'm looking forward to it."

Kitty raised her eyebrows hopefully. "And the little quirk we have here? You don't mind, I take it? Well, if you did, you wouldn't have been in the pantry with Jeb, would you?"

"If by 'quirk' you mean the whole spanking thing, then no, I don't mind. I've always loved romances with strong heroes in them and if they seemed like they might spank, so much the better."

"Yes, well, the fantasy and the reality can be very different." Kitty looked nervously at her hands, then brightened. "But it won't matter. Why should you get into trouble? I mean, what's Jeb going to have to complain about, hm? You take a nice nap and when you get up, you can put on the dress I'll hang on the bedpost for you."

"Dress? Now, here's the thing. I don't really wear dresses."

"You do now," Kitty replied matter-of-factly. "It's just while you're here and I think you'll be surprised at how comfortable they are and how much they help you get into the spirit of the thing."

Sheri still looked doubtful. "Can't we just pretend I'm progressive for my time? I'm sure there were some rebels back in 1890."

It was Kitty's turn to look doubtful. "I suppose that will be up to Chaps. If he says it's okay, then fine. He'll have the final word."

Sheri looked at Kitty but could detect no trace of mockery or even resentment. The older woman was just stating facts. "Really? You give in to him all the time? Good thing you only come out here on the weekends, huh?"

"Well, actually, Chaps is in charge everywhere. That's the way we choose to live. He listens to what I have to say, but then he makes the final call. I wouldn't want it any other way. Maybe to a modern woman like you, such an arrangement wouldn't sound appealing, but it works for us."

"Hey, whatever floats your boat," Sheri assured her. "Free country and all that, right? And I can live with it temporarily anyway."

"I'm glad to hear that. Jeb loves the ranch. I'm sure he'll want you with him when he comes here. And you never know. You may get to like it."

Sheri shook her head. "I wouldn't hold my breath on that one if I were you. I've got a career and a life. I can't be waiting around for some man to tell me what to do."

Kitty laughed. "It isn't like that. Having someone in charge helps keep things running peacefully. I'm no robot waiting for instructions. It's just that everyone has to make compromises and concessions. Knowing who's leading helps that process. Once you're married to Jeb, you'll see how important that is. And with just us girls here, I can mention that it's really quite amazing how attractive a take-charge sort of husband can be. That's another reason why Jeb is so determined to keep you here for a while."

"It sounded to me like he just wanted to use me to get at Luke. Is there bad blood between them? Does Jeb want revenge on Luke or something?"

"Jeb's not like that," Kitty protested. "He's not vindictive or mean, as you must know. He might be a little competitive but only when it comes to Luke. Friendships between men can look more like battlegrounds than ballrooms to me, but they'd walk through fire for each other, I'm sure."

"If you say so."

“I think they feel like they have to prove their worthiness to themselves and to each other. They show off for their womenfolk, you know? Games and pranks and contests are their way of demonstrating to the world that they can hold any claim they make. Jeb’s staking his claim on you and warning off anyone who might challenge that. It’s really rather romantic.”

Sheri flushed hot. Why am I reacting this way? I should be laughing at the very idea of being married to Jeb. There’s no take-charge guy out there fighting for me, even if I did want one. This whole thing is crazy and I’m going nuts as well. Get me out of here!

When Kitty left, Sheri lay down on the bed for a few minutes, fully clothed, thinking furiously. How am I going to get out of this? How am I supposed to plant the wires and diodes at the strategic places with people running around everywhere? And how am I supposed to hide my tools in a dress?

“Sasha and I will do the supper dishes,” Kitty said. “Why don’t you and Jeb go out and look at the garden. The corn is looking great.”

“Sounds good,” Luke agreed. He swept Sheri out into the night, not listening to Kitty’s protest behind them or his wife Sasha’s merry laugh.

“I’ll lose him,” Jeb assured Kitty as he slid out in pursuit. “Leave a lamp lit for us in the kitchen, will you? I plan to be out way past dark.”

Jeb saw Luke and Sheri up ahead, half hidden by the tomato plants rioting in the late summer evening. The runner beans behind them dripped over their shoulders like a drizzling rain of green. Luke and Sheri’s hissed whispers didn’t carry, but Jeb could imagine what they were discussing. When he got close enough to hear, he found he was correct.

“... so if you want to know what went wrong, you’ll have to ask him. I was all set to sneak in and out, never seeing a soul.”

“We had no way of knowing Chaps and Kitty would return to the ranch during the week. What I can’t figure out is how Jeb found out they were coming when I didn’t know.” Luke looked around and saw Jeb approaching.

“I’d like to ask him that myself,” Sheri agreed.

“Ask me what? How I was better informed than either of you when this isn’t even officially my operation? Just natural talent, I guess. Not to mention the fact that I called Chaps and asked him to meet me here. I wanted him and Kitty to meet you, darlin’.”

“What? This isn’t a social call. I’m here on business!”

A strange look came over Luke’s face. “You’ve got to be kidding me. This was all you, Jeb? You’ve been playing me all along, haven’t you?”

Jeb shrugged. “You’re surprised?”

Luke gave a grudging laugh. “I shouldn’t be. This is you all over. Chaps was never against the idea. You were the one who said he wouldn’t go for the universal monitor.”

“How else could I get her here? And now, how else can I get you gone?”

“Huh. And make it easy on you? After what you did when I first met Sasha?” Luke put a friendly arm around Sheri’s shoulders to continue on the path around the vegetables. “He’ll catch up. You and I need to have a long talk.”

“Hey! You got yours. Let me get mine.” The only answer he received was her golden laughter floating back to him on the scorching Texas breeze.

Sheri seemed to be happily walking away with the one man in the world Jeb enjoyed thwarting at every turn. He saw red and before he could think it through, he strode into position

behind the couple and scooped Sheri up in his arms, knocking Luke sideways into the corn. He could hear Luke's chuckles and good-natured curses following them into the night.