

Chapter 1

“This isn’t your normal dude ranch. You know that, don’t you? I don’t want any misunderstandings. Right from the git-go, you gotta agree to that.”

“Yes, I understand,” Sasha said to the tall, broad-shouldered cowboy who answered her knock at the door of the trailer. “When I saw the ad on Greg’s List, I knew this was the place for me. I have my costume and everything.” She looked around at the lovely, lonely landscape and couldn’t suppress a grin, which she noticed was not reflected on the man’s face.

“Weekenders usually just borrow something, but if you’ve got your own, that’s fine. You are just a weekender, right?” He eyed her with what looked to Sasha like suspicion.

“I’d like to try it out for a weekend,” Sasha replied. She pushed her shoulder-length brown hair behind her ears with deft but nervous fingers. “But I get time off during the week if you’d rather I come then. I work double shifts as an elderly man’s attendant, so it would be possible.”

“No, it being the weekend is not the problem,” he explained.

“Chaps, who’s at the door?” a female voice called from inside the trailer. “Is it the new girl?” A blonde head peeked around the blockade of his back and shoulders. “Why are you keeping her out there in the heat? Laws-a-mercy, Chaps, hadn’t you got any manners? You just get on in here and cool off before you melt!” All the while she chattered on, the pretty, fifty-something matron rearranged people and doors to suit her apparent purpose.

Sasha hoped her intentions involved letting her onto the property. As yet, she had not been allowed to set foot across the fence line that ran from the middle of the trailer on both sides. Sasha followed her hostess, as she supposed the woman to be, into the trailer and sat on the worn-out couch she indicated.

“I’m Kitty and this is Chaps. At least, that’s what you’ll call us on the ranch. And we’re almost there, so you might as well—”

“She’s not on the ranch yet. We’ve got to talk to her first,” Chaps said firmly. The lines around his mouth and eyes told Sasha that here was a man who had spent more time in the sun than out of it. “She’ll have to understand and agree to everything.”

“Oh, she’ll agree,” Kitty cooed. “Why else would she answer the ad if she didn’t like the terms? They’re clear enough. Wrote ‘em myself, so I should know.”

Sasha indeed remembered what she had read that intrigued her so: “Love John Wayne westerns? Want to live out the dream? Come to Purple Sage, Texas and try your hand at being a hand! A cowhand, that is. Live as you might have in the late 1800s. Give us a call if you want to make history come alive.”

Kitty was still speaking when Sasha came back from her wool-gathering. “And she read the terms and conditions I emailed her before I ever sent directions. If she’s here, that means she agrees to the rules.”

“Oh, no, there’ll be no problems there,” Sasha confirmed when Kitty finally stopped to draw a breath.

Kitty continued her monologue. “She knows about the costumes and how they have to be authentic from the skin out. No modern anything anywhere on the ranch. No conveniences that weren’t available back then. We do a lot of work by hand.”

“No problem, there. I’ll like the challenge,” Sasha claimed.

Kitty nodded approval. “Of course, in an emergency, we’d take a person to the hospital or whatever they needed, but that would be off the ranch.”

Here, Chaps broke in. “But once you step inside that gate, well, we think of this trailer as our time-portal. This side, you’re in the modern world. That side,” he pointed over her shoulder, “you’re in 1891.”

“Or at least in the movie version,” Kitty added. “We don’t try to duplicate the uglier parts of that era. We want total immersion, but we also want to keep it fun. I mean, you can’t bring in a modern book, but you don’t have to pretend you can’t read just because most folks back then couldn’t.”

“But *some* of the attitudes, we want to keep,” Chaps put in forcefully.

“And that’s what’s making my husband here nervous,” Kitty continued. “See, you’re an unattached female and he’s afraid you’ll cause trouble. There’s no reason to assume that just because we’ve had problems before when a single gal came to the ranch that it will happen again. That actually worked out okay. It’s a funny story. See—”

Chaps put his hand on his wife’s shoulder. Sasha assumed it was some kind of signal because the way Kitty ceased speaking reminded Sasha of a duck’s feet, paddling madly until somebody shot the duck.

“That can wait for another day,” Chaps intoned. “I want to be up front about this. There was no women’s lib in 1891 and there’s none on my ranch, either.”

“Well, don’t make it sound like a prison sentence,” Kitty cried, turning to Chaps. “You men treat us women like queens!”

“Kitty!”

Kitty straightened again, and settled herself back on the couch with an obvious effort.

“We need to get back before supper, so we’ve got to keep things moving here. If she’s not willing to go along with our ways, she needs to head back to town and find a room for the night. Or it’s not too late for her to go to Joe’s ranch.” Turning to Sasha, he explained in a kindly voice, “Joe’s just down the road and puts on a real nice show. You’ll do trail rides, and chores if you’ve a mind, and his chuck wagon’s always full of salads and stuff you won’t find here.”

“Would you rather not have me?” Sasha queried. “I don’t understand what it is you think I won’t agree to. I don’t want just a nice show. I don’t even like salad! I just need some time away from my work. I sit inside all day and try to keep things calm and quiet for my client. What I need is to be with people and get outside for something different and totally new.”

Kitty sat up quickly and looked pleadingly at her husband sitting beside her. “Oh, go ahead. But just give us the boiled down version, will ya?” he sighed.

“I think what the boss here is trying to say is that there’s a power structure around here. He’s in charge of the men and the men are in charge of their wives. It’s the way it was back then and we try to keep to it. I told you about it in the email, but just for the record, you do understand, don’t you? The men are responsible for taking care of the women.”

“And that’s the problem with unattached females,” Chaps put in. “What about when she gets in trouble? Who’s gonna look out for her?”

The thought of someone else looking out for her, for a change, certainly sounded appealing, but she couldn’t voice that. Sasha knew he must be talking to his wife now, but she answered anyway. “I can look out for myself.”

“And when she gets mouthy like that?” Chaps demanded. “See? This just ain’t gonna work!”

Sasha knew her shock must show on her face, though she tried to turn the volume down on her temper. “I won’t ‘get in trouble’ as you put it. Why should I? I know how to act.”

“He does have a point,” Kitty sighed. “Out in the real world, I’m sure you do know how to act—”

“I’m not,” interrupted Chaps.

“But here on the ranch,” Kitty continued, “we’re all living under one roof, in strange and stressful conditions. It’s no picnic, you know. There’s fun, but we work hard, too. Several people living together in close quarters like that... well, it causes friction from time to time. You’d have to answer for your part in any fracas.”

“And the other girls answer for their misdeeds by getting spanked, is that it? You told me about that, Kitty, and I agreed. I’m not worried about that. It won’t bother me what other people do behind closed doors.”

“But how about when the other girls get in trouble and she gets off scot-free. It won’t be fair and they’ll complain,” Chaps complained. “Or she mouths off to one of the men. They don’t have to take that. They pay good money to live for a few days away from modern ideas.”

“How about we cross that bridge if we come to it?” Kitty suggested sweetly.

“*When* we come to it,” Chaps grumbled. “It’s only a matter of time.”

Sasha held her breath. *If all that Kitty had written and said is true, then this Chaps person will have the final word. Please, please, let me stay! Of all the re-enactment experiences I’ve read about, this one intrigues me the most. Why is that? Why do I want to stay so badly? I don’t know. I just do. And I really need some time away from Mr. Parham. Please...*

“Well, how about just a little tour?” Kitty asked.

“How little?” Chaps returned skeptically. “I don’t want to be mean, like dangling a toy in front of a kid, then saying he can’t have it.”

“No, not like that. Let her have a little adventure. We advertise the John Wayne movie experience. Why not let her stay like for a movie? Two hours. What can it hurt?”

The look Chaps gave her made Sasha wonder what he was thinking, but she forgot her curiosity in her excitement when he replied, “Go get changed, then, Miss. Two hours.” As she hurried out, she heard him whisper something like, “And if she causes any trouble, I’m holding you responsible.”

Kitty replied, “Nobody could cause trouble in two hours.”

“Wanna bet?” was his muttered retort.

The words bothered her no more than the vultures circling overhead.

Chaps was not an unreasonable man, but this situation bothered him. *An unattached female? She’s already causing trouble, stirring Kitty up that way. I can tell I’m going to have to lay down the law with my little wife, but quick. A few sharp swats on her bare behind should do the trick. Women just listen better over a man’s knee. She’ll feel the better for it and I know I’d rather give her a warning now than have to deal with big problems later. Maybe I’ll give her a bit of a warm-up over her panties first. Oh, that’s right, she’s already dressed for the ranch. She’ll be wearing those bloomer things. Or maybe she’ll have on those cute combinations. If they’re split-crotch, I can spread ‘em apart to expose her bottom cheeks, but if they aren’t, I’ll just have to spank over them. It won’t matter. I’ll still be able to apply some good old-fashioned common sense to the problem. She’ll see reason and we’ll have a great weekend.*

Chaps pulled the wagon up into the barn. Turning to the ladies, he said, “Kitty, you get down this way and go on inside. I want to have a word with young Miss Sasha, here.”

“But Chaps, we’re going to have a job as it is getting supper on the table. You know Friday night is always a hectic time. If she’s only going to be here a couple of hours, I want to show her the spring and the little patch of daisies.”

“If you’re so busy, how have you got time for all this gallivanting around?”

“It’s not gallivanting. Won’t take a minute, and we’ll bring back a couple of buckets of water for that trough by the shed where the pump is broken. I thought Jeb was going to fix that.”

“He was late getting in. I’ll put Luke on it.”

“I surely wish you would. That way it will be sure to get repaired right. Luke’s a treasure.” A funny look came over Kitty’s face. Chaps knew that expression well.

“Kitty Faye! You see here!”

Kitty didn’t stay to listen. Sashaying towards the kitchen in a self-satisfied manner, she called over her shoulder, “Gotta run. Hurry up and tell Sasha whatever it is you want her to hear, then send her to the kitchen. I’ll get the stove going for the kitchen crew.”

There may be more than just a little reminder due my wife tonight, Chaps mused as he awkwardly helped Sasha out of the wagon. I might have to take those bloomers right off and heat her fanny properly. A healthy pink color should do the trick. I’ll make sure to swat low so she’ll feel it tomorrow, too. Walking off when I’m talking! What is she thinking?

Sasha was watching Kitty climb the steps onto the kitchen stoop with a look that let Chaps know he only had half her attention, so he’d better speak twice as sternly as he might have otherwise done. “Miss Sasha, I can tell you’re keen on all this. You’ve been looking around here as wide-eyed as a newborn calf and that’s all to the good. You’ll only be on the Purple Sage a little while, but even so, you’ve got to understand there are rules. One of the most important is about the horses. Being here at the barn reminded me you need to know this. Don’t get any ideas about riding. There’s no time for you to get checked out on a horse and everybody has to get observed for safety and skill before they ride.”

“Really? That’s too bad. I do love horses. I was kind of hoping...”

“There are plenty of dude ranches where you can ride all day, but horses have to be respected. They’re like a gun or medicine. They can save your life and they can take it from you. On my ranch, I say who rides and who doesn’t. And I trust a couple other fellas to judge, too. So no big ideas about sneaking into a stall or anything.”

“I understand.”

Chaps gave her a searching look before he added, “Stay around the house and close by wherever Kitty takes you. You’ll be fine.”

“It’s just so beautiful. And the life looks so intriguing. I wish I could explore every corner.”

A prick of sympathy touched Chaps’ heart, making him smile kindly. “You’ve got two hours and the ride back to the gate. Go drink your fill.”

“I never was so glad to hear the supper bell in all my life,” declared the thin, middle-aged man mounting the kitchen steps. Removing his hat, he hung it on a peg and reached for a biscuit.

Kitty slapped his hand away from the plate. “Wash first, you heathen!” she ordered affectionately. “Sasha, that was Slim. He’s no more ornery than the others, but then again, that’s not saying much.”

Sasha could hear the creaking of the pump handle, then the splashing of water. “They have to wash outside?” she wondered aloud.

“They don’t have to,” Kitty whispered, with a shake of her head.

“Of course, they wash outside. Where else would they wash?” This comment came from Pam, the redhead with whom Sasha and Kitty had been working with all afternoon to prepare the evening meal.

“You’re right,” Sasha said loudly. She felt a little awkward, trying to pretend that she knew all about how life should be, but she tried her best not to sound affected. “How silly of me.”

Pam gave her a sour look. “Would you please just stir those beans before they burn?”

Sasha whirled around and busied herself at the stove.

Kitty brushed past her with a plate piled high with fried chicken. “Slim’s wife is Debra. She’ll come out in the wagon from town with some of the others, including Pam’s husband, Paul.”

Is it my imagination, Sasha thought, or did Kitty just give Prissy Pam a hint that she’d better play nice?

“Let’s try this again,” Slim declared, coming in the kitchen a second time and reaching for another biscuit.

“I need this on the table, please, sir,” Kitty commented, heading him off with a large serving dish full of fluffy white potatoes.

“How’d it go with the—oh, she’s still here,” Chaps noted with surprise in his voice. Following several other cowboys into the kitchen, he hung his hat on a peg and bent down to kiss his wife. Sasha watched him give Kitty a stern look.

“Well, of course. She worked all afternoon on supper. She has to stay and eat some of it,” Kitty replied, never stopping in her bustling about.

“But you said—”

“Just two more hours won’t hurt anything.”

“She should have been on the early wagon back to the gate.”

“What’s wrong with the late one? There’s been no trouble, has there?” This comment she directed to the room at large, but everyone was too busy to answer. “See, no trouble at all.” Sasha hid her grin by bending her head over the bread she was slicing.

Finally, with most of the places at the long tables filled, Chaps stood up to give thanks. In the silence that preceded his prayer, the door banging shut sounded like a whip cracking. Sasha cast a covert glance at the door, noticing that most of the others were doing the same. She saw what reminded her of an extra tall floor lamp with a dusty shade lurching awkwardly into the dining room. Quickly, she closed her eyes again and ducked her head.

She heard the floor lamp mutter, “Sorry I’m late, Boss.” A chair scraped across the polished wood floor.

When the prayer was finished, Sasha raised her head in unison with the others at the table. Her eyes had turned instinctively to the newcomer, so Sasha could not help noticing the way the man stared at her, open-mouthed. The man next to him had to poke him several times in the ribs before he absentmindedly reached his hand into the plate being passed to him.

“Hey, wake up, Luke. That’s the potatoes, not the bread,” his neighbor said with a laugh.

“Oh, right. Yeah. Uh, sorry. I... uh... yeah, right. Potatoes.”

Just then, Kitty leaned over and whispered to Sasha, “And this is the chicken. Take some and pass it. You two are holding up the meal.”

“Oh, what? Was I staring?” Sasha whispered back. She noticed everyone was too busy laughing at the latecomer to pay any attention to her.

“You were staring at him staring at you. Now, if y’all don’t want to be the butt of every joke for the next two days, serve yourself some supper and eat.”

To Sasha’s relief, conversation became general and the clatter of plates and cutlery covered over any lingering embarrassment. Looking for something to say, Sasha asked Kitty, “What was this ‘early wagon’ Chaps was talking about?”

“The early wagon goes out and gets the folks from the gate. We don’t talk about where they come from, but lots of them can’t get to the gate before six o’clock. Then there’s those that can’t get here ’till eight, so the late wagon goes to get them. Chaps will probably want you on that. It leaves just after supper.”

“Oh, I get it,” Sasha said, remembering the rule about not saying one word that would directly refer to the outside world or modern life. She figured some of the ranch hands would have jobs that let them leave a little early on Fridays so they could make it for supper, but others would just barely make it before bedtime. “So that’s why the big meal of the day on Friday isn’t the noon meal.”

“That’s right,” Kitty responded. “Most days, the big meal is dinner, at noon, but if the hands are too far out on the range or up in the hills, we take them ham and biscuits at midday to tide them over until a big supper in the evening. And this being Friday, Chaps will make some announcements, letting everyone know what’s going on the next couple of days.”

Sasha noticed that Luke and his closest neighbors at the table were having a heated discussion. Chaps obviously noticed it as well, because he called down to their end of the table, "Simmer down, boys. What's got you all riled up?"

Luke served as spokesman for one side of the argument. "It's that small herd from Kentucky, Boss. I think we should move 'em up to Chapel Knoll and out of this heat. They're not used to it. Looking peaked and worn, already."

"And I say, let 'em get used to it right off," another cowboy countered. "No use spoiling 'em."

"It's not spoiling 'em, Jeb," Pam put in. "It's not their fault they can't take the heat. It will break in a couple more weeks. Just give them some time."

Jeb turned to Chaps and began, "Movin' them cattle will take at least five men. You haven't got—"

"It's a small herd. Slim and I can move it out; just the two of us," Luke argued arrogantly.

Sasha looked to see Slim shift in his chair uneasily. "I guess we could, but..." Slim began.

"A lot of darn work for some mangy, mat-tailed—" Jeb argued querulously.

"Some of us aren't rich ne'er-do-wells afraid of hard work," Luke asserted with a nonchalance Sasha could tell was feigned. "Like I was saying last weekend to you, Boss, I love getting up before dawn. You know I can guide Slim and the herd safely through any perils."

"Through any perils?" Kitty whispered to no one in particular. "What's gotten into Luke? And we don't usually mention someone's circumstances off the ranch like that."

Several snickers were hidden behind napkins, but Jeb didn't bother to hide his derision. "Rooster with the smallest tail crows the loudest, they say."

The two men stood to face off across the table. Sasha tensed up, ready to duck if the punches started flying.

"Stand down, soldier," Chaps ordered. Immediately, Luke relaxed his fists and leaned back from his aggressive stance. "You, too, Jeb. Sit down, both of you. This is a dining room, not a saloon. Don't know for sure what's the matter with you." He gave Sasha a hard look, then cast his gaze to his wife, "But I may be able to guess. We'll talk about that after supper."

Sasha couldn't figure out why her new friend blushed and grabbed a plate of white beans to pass down the table.

Slim was scraping one of the apple pie pans with his spoon when Chaps stood up to make his announcements. "Hope everybody's ready for an early day tomorrow. The north fence needs restrung through the scrub pine basin. Fibber and Bill, you take that. Jake, there's hay needs stacked. You know what to do. Girls, Kitty tells me it's washday and we've got plenty of tomatoes to can. I'll talk to Luke and Jeb in my office after supper. Any questions?"

"Yeah. Who's playing at the dance tomorrow night?" Slim hollered out. "Me and my guys or Ned's crew?"

"Ned's visiting relatives back East, so if you don't mind, Slim, I'd be obliged if you'd sit in for him, but give your fellas a break."

"No problem, Boss."

“Okay, then, folks. Ladies, excellent supper as always. Luke, Jeb, my office in five. Kitty, could you bring us some coffee in there?”