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# Beauty & the Beastly Rancher

JUDY CHRISTENBERRY

SILHOUETTE®  
*Romance*



GRIFFIN

Judy Christenberry

**Beauty and The Beastly Rancher**

«HarperCollins»

## **Christenberry J.**

Beauty and The Beastly Rancher / J. Christenberry —  
«HarperCollins»,

Like her very own knight in shining armor, rancher Joe Crawford emerged from the mist to rescue Anna Pointer from a desperate situation. Widowed and raising two children alone, Anna could not refuse Joe's offer of assistance, though she was determined to ignore her attraction for the wealthy bachelor. A man of few words, Joe had always kept to himself. But Anna claimed to see beyond his beastly demeanor, giving this solitary man hope that a happily-ever-after was within his grasp...if only he dared to risk all that he was and become the prince this beauty believed him to be.

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## MEET THE CRAWFORD FAMILY

Joe Crawford: Eldest son and reclusive bachelor. He believes no woman would have him, but he craves a family and will enter into a marriage of convenience if it means finally getting what he desires.

Anna Pointer: With two children to raise, this widow couldn't refuse Joe's proposal of marriage. But her secret desire for her husband could lead to heartache like she never imagined.

Pete Crawford: The happily married second son has plenty of advice to give his older brother... even if Joe doesn't want to hear it.

Carol Crawford: This family matriarch just wants all of her children to settle down and be happy. She believes Joe's marriage to Anna will bring him all the joy he deserves and she'll stop at nothing to bring the two together.

Caleb Crawford: The head of the Crawford family is hiding some scandalous secrets from his own children. Find out what they are, in *Hush*, Judy Christenberry's newest novel from Silhouette Books, available September 2003.

Dear Reader,

The summer after my thirteenth birthday, I read my older sister's dog-eared copy of *Wolf and the Dove* by Kathleen E. Woodiwiss and I was hooked. Thousands of romance novels later—I won't say how many years—I'll gladly confess that I'm a romance freak! That's why I am so delighted to become the associate senior editor for the Silhouette Romance line. My goal, as the new manager of Silhouette's longest-running line, is to bring you brand-new, heartwarming love stories every month. As you read each one, I hope you'll share the magic and experience love as it was meant to be.

For instance, if you love reading about rugged cowboys and the feisty heroines who melt their hearts, be sure not to miss Judy Christenberry's *Beauty & the Beastly Rancher* (#1678), the latest title in her FROM THE CIRCLE K series. And share a laugh with the always-entertaining Terry Essig in *Distracting Dad* (#1679).

In the next *THE TEXAS BROTHERHOOD* title by Patricia Thayer, Jared's Texas Homecoming (#1680), a drifter's life changes for good when he offers to marry his nephew's mother. And a secretary's dream comes true when her boss, who has amnesia, thinks they're married, in Judith McWilliams's *Did You Say... Wife?* (#1681).

Don't miss the savvy nanny who moves in on a single dad, in *Married in a Month* (#1682) by Linda Goodnight, or the doctor who learns his ex's little secret, in *Dad Today, Groom Tomorrow* (#1683) by Holly Jacobs.

Enjoy!

Mavis C. Allen

Associate Senior Editor, Silhouette Romance

## Beauty & the Beastly Rancher

### Judy Christenberry



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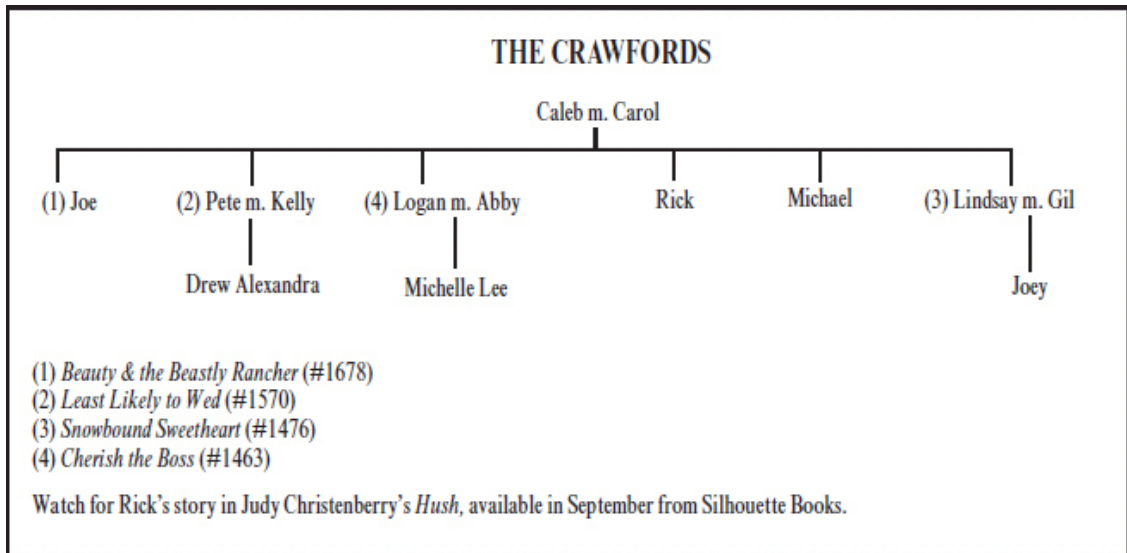
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Lone Star Country Club

The Last Bachelor

## JUDY CHRISTENBERRY

has been writing romances for fifteen years because she loves happy endings as much as her readers do. She's also a bestselling author for Harlequin American Romance, but she has a long love of traditional romances and is delighted to tell a story that brings those elements to the reader. A former high school French teacher, Judy devotes her time to writing. She hopes readers have as much fun reading her stories as she does writing them. She spends her spare time reading, watching her favorite sports teams and keeping track of her two adult daughters.



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## Chapter One

Joe Crawford shoved back his straw cowboy hat and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. He'd been on the tractor for more than an hour, plowing the small pasture to prepare it for the alfalfa he intended to plant there.

The field wasn't large, but he hated to let anything go to waste. He could make enough to feed the herd for a month by taking the time to plant this last piece of land he owned. All it would take was a little sweat.

He might not attract the women like his brothers, or produce grandchildren, but he was a hard worker and made plenty of money for his efforts. He'd realized in high school that women weren't interested in him, so he'd turned his attention to studying, earning him a four-year scholarship to Oklahoma State University to study land management. Now, at thirty-five, he figured love had passed him by.

He turned the tractor and started back toward the other end of the field, toward the county road that flanked the land. His gaze drifted to the corner where the road turned south. There was an old fruit stand there, built many years ago. It was on Derek Pointer's old place or Joe would've torn it down. It was an eyesore.

But today it was occupied. Someone had set up shop, selling vegetables and fruit. He couldn't imagine who the widow Pointer had given permission to. Or maybe they were nesters, not asking.

His eyesight was good, so when he caught a glimpse of movement, he looked again and discovered whoever it was had a potential customer pull to a stop. He noted the two men who got out of a muscle car, not the usual type to be interested in produce.

He shrugged his shoulders. It took all kinds. He shoved the men from his mind. He'd almost reached the opposite end of the field when some movement drew his attention again. This time it was a small child, flying across the barren field between Joe's land and the produce shed.

Joe didn't know how he knew something was wrong, but he did. The child was trying to signal him with her skinny arms. Joe shoved the gear into Neutral and grabbed the hand brake. Then he vaulted from the tractor and met the child more than halfway.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Those men are hurting my mommy. Please help her."

He remembered the swagger he'd noticed when the men got out of the car. He didn't know who was selling the produce, but two against one wasn't fair.

"Stay here. I'll let you know when you can come." Then he raced to the produce stand, his vision blocked by the three-sided structure.

Anguished cries told him the woman was in distress. When he rounded the side of the stand, he saw her, lying on the dirt, one man at her head, holding her hands, and the other on top of her, pulling at her clothes. He didn't recognize either of them. They must have been from out of town.

Joe was a big man, the biggest of the Crawford men. His father had always told him not to take advantage of smaller men. But he knew his father hadn't meant times like this. He swung his mighty fist into the man at her head and he fell back, turning loose of her hands. Then Joe turned to find the other man charging him.

He didn't mind their resistance. It kept them from trying to hurt the woman. He planted his fist in the man's stomach with fierce pleasure. He turned to check on the other man, who had pulled himself together and was coming toward Joe. He never got there.

The woman, Anna Pointer he now realized, had grabbed a board lying on the ground and slung it across the back of the man's head. He silently fell to the ground.

"Nice job," Joe said with a grin, amused by the woman's action. He reached in his pocket for the cell phone he carried and dialed the sheriff's office.

“We’ve got an attempted rape where Highway 50 turns south, at the old produce stand. Two men attacking a woman. We’ll hold them until you can get here.”

He turned back to the woman and discovered her sinking to the ground as if her legs had become too weak to hold her. He reached for her. “Mrs. Pointer, are you all right?”

He kept some distance between them, letting his arms do all the work. “Did they hurt you?”

“Just—just bruises. Oh! My little girl—”

“She’s okay. What’s her name?”

“Julie.”

He found an empty box for her to sit on. He started toward the side of the stand, but a movement and Mrs. Pointer’s cry alerted him to the man he’d hit in the stomach. He tried to attack Joe, but the man was six inches shorter and didn’t have a lot of muscle.

“No, you don’t.” He hit his jaw hard. Then he picked up a piece of rope lying on the ground. He twisted the man’s hands behind his back and tied him up. Then he did the same for the other one.

“Maybe that will hold them for a few minutes,” he said to the woman and resumed his attempt to bring the little girl to her mother. He expected the child to be where he’d left her, but she’d followed him and stood a few feet from the stand.

“Julie, your mom is fine. She wants to make sure you are, too. Come here.”

Julie came closer, but she skirted around Joe, leaving plenty of distance between them. He wasn’t surprised. Children didn’t take to him much because of his size and his irregular features. He had dark brown hair with bushy eyebrows and a crooked nose, giving him a gruff look. His four brothers were handsome as sin. Women chased them constantly. Nobody chased Joe. He’d accepted his lot in life, but scaring little children still bothered him.

“Mommy!” Julie cried out as she flew into her mother’s arms.

“Oh, baby, I was so worried about you. Are you all right?”

“Yes. Did those bad men hurt you?”

Tears were running down both their faces, and Joe looked away. He felt like he was invading their privacy.

The females were hugging each other when Joe heard a baby cry. He looked around, startled, and found another box serving as a bed for a baby wrapped in a light blanket. The woman went to the box and lifted the baby, bigger than Joe had first thought. He’d forgotten Derek’s wife had been pregnant when he’d died in that car crash. It had caused a lot of gossip because he’d had a woman with him, who was not his wife.

“You came here with Julie and your baby? Don’t you know how dangerous that can be?”

She lifted her head and glared at him. “I do now.”

“You should’ve figured it out before you put the kids at risk.”

“I just wanted to sell my excess produce. Pardon me for not realizing some men would think it a fine opportunity to rape me!”

A siren in the distance stopped Joe from responding. He started to say she should know the nature of men. After all, she’d been married to a man who thought of no one but himself. But he was handsome.

The Sheriff’s deputies jumped from the car as soon as it slammed to a stop, sending dirt spraying into the air.

“Crawford, is everything okay?”

“Now it is. These two stopped and, realizing Mrs. Pointer was on her own, had her down on the ground, trying to undress her when I arrived.” He looked over at the two men. The one the widow had whacked on the back of the head was just coming to. The other one was sitting up, struggling with the rope.

“I bet they’re regretting that decision since you came along,” one of the deputies said, grinning at Joe.

“Mrs. Pointer took out the one on the left. He might need some medical attention, though he doesn’t deserve it. Neither of them is too bright. And if they show their faces around here again, they won’t be leaving.”

“You can’t prove anything,” the one sitting up sneered.

“If you’re dead, I won’t have to prove anything.” Joe’s words were softly spoken, hoping Mrs. Pointer wouldn’t hear them.

The man turned to the deputies. “Did you hear him threaten me? I’m going to press charges!”

Joe didn’t show any fear. Anna Pointer rushed over to his side. “I don’t think that will matter once I tell them what you tried to do. Besides, as he said, you come back and you might be dead.”

The two deputies nodded. “We protect our womenfolk around here. And we don’t press charges for doing that. You’d better keep your mouth shut. All that would do is confirm that you tried to hurt this lady.”

They pulled both men up and dragged them to the car, putting them into the back seat.

“That rope isn’t very strong. You might want to put on handcuffs,” Joe called.

The deputies did so. One of them called, “Thanks for reminding us. Sheriff wouldn’t be pleased if they got away. Ma’am, we’ll call you about pressing charges. Mrs. Pointer, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

The men drove off in another cloud of dust, leaving Joe and Mrs. Pointer standing there. She had the baby in her arms with Julie holding on to her shirrtail.

“You’re not going to do this again, are you?” he asked, wanting to be sure she understood the danger.

“I won’t bring the children back. I’ll put them in Mother’s Day Out at the church.” She didn’t look at him.

“What? Didn’t you understand what was about to happen? What’s wrong with you?”

She was a beautiful woman. But her jaw firmed and she looked up at him. “I won’t risk the children, though I need to sell the produce. I’ve got a bank payment due on the land and I don’t have the money for it. I have to sell what I have.”

He stared at her. A wisp of wind would blow her away. Julie, too, looked like she hadn’t had a good meal in a while. Only the baby had any fat on him. They weren’t starving to death, were they? He looked around at all the produce and fruit she had and told himself he was being ridiculous.

“You can sell at the Farmer’s Market in Lawton. You’ll make more money there.”

“But I would have to pay a fee for the space. Thanks anyway.” She began loading boxes into the back of the old rattletrap truck parked beside the stand.

“You quitting for the day?”

“That was the first car to come along in two hours. And I—I don’t feel well.” She carried more boxes to the truck.

He picked up twice as many as she was carrying and followed her. “Are you sure this thing runs?”

“It did this morning.”

He frowned as he loaded his haul. Derek hadn’t been a good husband. Joe knew that. He’d heard too much about his social life, leaving his wife at home. But he’d always seemed to have money to spend. Had he left his widow penniless?

“Julie, bring the aprons, please, sweetie,” she ordered in a gentle voice.

The little girl picked up the aprons displayed on a piece of rope strung between two poles. Then she carried them toward her mother, dragging them in the dirt.

“Good job, Julie,” Joe said and picked her up by the waist, holding her high enough that the aprons didn’t get soiled. When he set her down by the truck, she peeked at him from beneath long lashes.

“Thank you. That was fun.” Then she handed the aprons to her mother and went back to the baby bed where the baby was fussing.

“She’s a good helper,” Joe said. She was as pretty as her mother.

“Yes, she is.” She cleared her throat. “I don’t think I thanked you for your assistance this afternoon.”

“I’m glad I was nearby.”

They continued to carry her things to the truck until everything was loaded. She politely thanked him again, then she loaded Julie and the baby.

Joe was glad to see a carrier seat in the truck. While she was strapping in her baby, he asked Julie if he could help her with her seat belt.

“I can do it. Mommy taught me.”

“You are a smart little girl. I bet your mommy is proud of you.”

“Yes. I help her with everything.”

“Well, you certainly helped her today.”

The woman slipped on her own seat belt and checked Julie to be sure she had hers fastened. “Thank you again, Mr. Crawford.”

She cranked the engine. Nothing happened. She pumped the gas pedal and repeated the process. The engine started up, but Joe didn’t think it sounded good. It probably needed to be checked out.

She drove away, leaving him standing there, staring after them. Slowly he walked back to his tractor. He didn’t have much more plowing to do. In the time it took to finish, his mind was filled with thoughts of the woman he’d just saved. He thought her name was Anna. He hadn’t known her husband well because he was about four years younger than Joe. His brothers knew him. They’d talked about what a jerk he was.

It seemed Anna had suffered from her marriage. Not only had her husband betrayed her, but he’d also apparently left her penniless. He looked over the fence at the barren land.

He wondered why she didn’t work the land. Or hire someone to do so. Maybe she should rent out the land. That might pay the mortgage. He should ask her.

He shook his head. He knew she wouldn’t welcome a visit from him. But he couldn’t tolerate their suffering. If he could help her get back on her feet, maybe she’d find someone to marry who could take care of the little family. Someone who’d be good to her and Julie. And the baby. Derek had been a lucky man and he’d thrown it all away.

He finished the plowing and headed for his barn. As soon as he’d put everything in its place, he got in his pickup, a two-year-old model with all the bells and whistles on it, unlike Anna’s truck. He was going to find out about Anna Pointer. His mother knew everything going on in the county. She could tell him.

Carol Crawford had just gotten home from her daughter Lindsay’s house. She’d spent the afternoon baby-sitting Lindsay’s little boy, and her second son Pete’s adopted son and newborn baby. She had a smile on her face when Joe joined her in the kitchen.

“Joe! Are you coming to have dinner with us? How nice!”

He gave her a hug and kissed her cheek. “Don’t you ever tire of feeding hungry boys?” he asked with a smile. Since she had five sons before she finally gave birth to Lindsay, she’d spent most of her life providing for her growing boys.

“Of course not. How are you? I haven’t seen you at all since last Sunday when you had dinner with us.”

“I know. I’ve been plowing the fields. Today I was over by the Pointer place.”

“Oh? Did you see Anna? I’m worried about her.”

His gaze focused on his mother. “Why?”

“No one ever sees her anymore. She doesn’t come to town much at all. And she’s got two babies to take care of.”

“How old is Julie?”

She was surprised by his question, but he didn’t explain.

“I think she’s close to four. She was born about ten months after Anna married Derek. Terrible mistake.”

“Yeah. Uh, did Derek leave her provided for?”

Carol stopped putting away groceries and turned to face her son. “I assumed he did. I’m sure he had insurance.”

“She almost got raped today trying to sell produce at that old stand where 50 turns south.”

“What? Oh, no! What happened?”

He gave her a thumbnail sketch of the event. Emphasizing Julie’s quick thinking and Anna’s determination.

“Well, I certainly hope she learned her lesson!” Carol exclaimed, frowning.

“She said she wouldn’t bring the children again, but she had to sell her produce so she could pay the mortgage.”

Carol continued to frown as she poured two glasses of lemonade from the refrigerator. “So she doesn’t have any income?”

“That would be my guess,” Joe said as he held his mother’s chair for her and then joined her at the table. “I suggested she sell things at the Farmer’s Market in Lawton, but she said she couldn’t afford the fee.”

“Oh, my. Why didn’t she let someone know? The community would have pitched in.”

“I’d guess because of her pride. After all, her husband embarrassed her enough.” He thought about that stubborn chin she’d shown him.

“Well, we have to do something to help her.”

He relaxed a little. He’d known his mother would want to help. “I was thinking of renting some land from her. But I didn’t ask her today. I was wondering if you still get free space at the Farmer’s Market since you’re on the Board of Directors.”

“I’d forgotten about that, but yes, I do. Only, it has to be used by me or a family member. I can’t give it to Anna, as much as I wish I could.”

“If I stayed with her, no one would question her, would they?”

“No, but they might question you about why you’re with her. That might prove a little embarrassing for both of you.” Carol looked at her son speculatively.

“Come on, Mom, no one would suspect Anna Pointer of having any interest in me. Women don’t want someone as ugly as me.”

“Joe, I wish you wouldn’t talk about yourself that way. You’re not ugly!” she protested.

“Of course not!” he replied in a teasing voice. “I just have a face only a mother could love.” He’d dealt with the reality of his life in high school. If it was a matter of muscle or brains, they picked him first, but after he’d done whatever they needed, he was abandoned.

“I’d be glad for you to stay with Anna and let her use my space. But you’ll have to stay with her. Can you explain it to her, or shall I write a note?”

“I can explain it to her, Mom. And explain that I won’t take advantage of her. She might be a little skittish after this afternoon.”

“Oh, my, yes.”

“I’ll go see her after dinner here. You wouldn’t have any cookies or something like that to take with me, would you? I think that might take Julie’s mind off what happened today. I’d hate for her to have nightmares.”

His mother stared at him and his cheeks heated up. “She’s just a baby herself, but she saved her mother today.”

“True. Why don’t I bake a cake? I can do that while you go out and talk to your Dad. He’s working in the barn this afternoon. He might be interested in renting some of her land, too. Or he might know others who would be interested.”

“Good idea, Mom. That would take care of the mortgage payment. Was she born in the city? Otherwise I’m surprised she isn’t working the land herself.”

“I don’t know, son. Why don’t you ask her?”

“I will.”

He hurried out to the barn, anxious to tell his father about Anna Pointer. “Dad!” he called as he stepped inside one of the three barns they had.

“Joe? What are you doing here? I thought you were plowing all week,” Caleb Crawford called as he came toward his oldest son.

“I am. I ran into a problem today and I wanted to ask your advice.”

He told his father about the incident with Anna Pointer. Then he explained Anna’s need for money to pay the mortgage.

“I figured Derek had insurance that paid off the land. Hmm, that’s difficult, making enough money from produce to satisfy the bank.”

“Yeah. I was wondering if you’d be interested in renting some of her land. She’s not working it at all. I think she’s got a hundred sixty acres in decent shape. I thought I might plant more hay and sell off what I don’t need.”

“Good thinking. Yeah, I might be interested. However, Pete would probably appreciate knowing about it, too. He’s got a family to raise, you know. And his land connects with part of Pointer’s, like yours does.”

“That’s true. Maybe I should go over there after dinner.”

“You’re going to a lot of trouble for this woman. Seems to me I remember she’s a beauty. You interested in her?”

Joe stiffened. “You know better than that, Dad. You know I don’t attract women like my brothers do.” He turned away, like he planned on walking out.

“Boy, you make too much of having a handsome face. It’s about time you found a woman and settled down. Pete is three years younger than you and he’s got two kids. Logan has two kids, too. The other two haven’t married yet, but it won’t be long. You’re falling behind.”

“I’m doing all right. My crops were good last year, and my herd is growing. I’ve got money in the bank. I’m not complaining,” he told his father.

“That’s just it, son. You need a woman to spend the money you’re making. It keeps a man humble and working hard.”

Joe laughed, trying not to sound bitter. “I can stay humble, Dad. That’s not a problem.”

## Chapter Two

Anna settled Julie into her bed after reading her one of her favorite storybooks. “All right, sweetie, time to go to sleep.”

“Okay, Mommy, but—I want to say thank you to God for the big man. He saved us today.”

“Yes, he did. I think that’s a nice idea.” She listened to her daughter’s prayers, hoping Julie wouldn’t have nightmares. Then she kissed her good-night.

In the poorly furnished living room, Anna sat down in the second-hand rocker she’d rocked her babies to sleep in. She hoped the rocking would ease her fears. She’d been so stupid five years ago when she’d let Derek talk her into marriage. She realized now that he’d married her because she wouldn’t sleep with him. Once he’d had her, he went on to new conquests, ignoring his marriage vows. By then, she was pregnant with Julie. So she told herself he was young and he’d eventually settle down.

But he hadn’t. And he’d canceled the insurance she’d thought he had. When he died, she discovered there was no money at all. He’d spent every penny they’d had. Even more. His parents were furious with her. He’d taken money from them and blamed the need on Anna.

After his death, they’d moved to Florida and wanted nothing to do with her or their grandchildren. The land wasn’t paid for, there was no money in the bank, and he had no lasting friends. She’d had to sell every piece of machinery on the place to settle his debts.

She’d found it difficult to face the community, embarrassed by her situation. So she’d withdrawn. And hoped she could sell something to pay off the bank.

She’d tilled the garden by hand and raised a good crop. But how was she going to sell them?

She’d tried to brazen her way through Joe Crawford’s questioning, but she knew she couldn’t go back to today’s fiasco.

A knock on her door startled her. She crossed the room in the shadows, grabbing her broom as some form of protection. “Who is it?”

“Joe Crawford.”

She didn’t want to let him in, but he’d saved her today. She had to at least do that much. “Come in, Mr. Crawford,” she said, opening the door.

He stood on her front porch, hat in one hand and a cake container in the other. “I hope I haven’t come too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“Before Julie’s bedtime.”

“Come in,” she said again. He stepped past her and turned to face her. “I’m afraid Julie just went to bed. You can leave a message for her if you want.”

“I’d better leave this instead of a message. My mom baked it. I thought Julie might need something to distract her from what happened today.”

His thoughtfulness made her want to cry. But Anna wasn’t one of those ladies who melted. It made her angry that he could make her want to weep on his shoulder. Stiffly, she said, “It’s very kind of you to think of Julie.”

“And you. I don’t expect Julie to eat the entire cake.” He grinned a little, something he hadn’t done much earlier in the day.

She drew a deep breath. “Thank you again.”

He stood there awkwardly. It reminded her of her manners. “Would you care to sit down, Mr. Crawford?”

“Yes, I would, Mrs. Pointer.”

He continued to stand, looking at her, and she realized he was waiting for her to sit down first. Amazing, Derek’s few friends had treated her like a servant.

He sat down, holding his hat between his legs as he rested his elbows on his knees, his gaze lowered. “I need to talk to you.”

“Please, Mr. Crawford, don’t bring up the subject of my returning to the produce stand. I have no intentions of doing so.”

His eyebrows rose. “Glad to hear it.”

“Yes, well, it was kind of you to be concerned,” she said as she stood. “Thank you again.”

He blinked several times. “Is this a bad time?”

“No, of course not, but I thought—Is there something else?”

“Yes, ma’am. I wondered why you’re not working the land.”

It was her turn to blink. “I—I don’t have any tools. I had to sell them. I was embarrassed by Derek’s debt and wanted to pay it off as soon as I could.”

“Ah. I see. Well, then, would you consider renting the land to me? Not all of it,” he hastily added. “My brother Pete would like half of it.” He named the going figure for good land.

All Anna could do was stare at him. She’d placed a small ad in the local paper two months ago, but she’d gotten no response. “Why would you be interested, Mr. Crawford?”

“I don’t like to see land go to waste. With a little work on my part, I can have a bigger harvest.”

“And your brother?”

“He’s got two kids to feed. He always needs a bigger crop.” Again, he smiled at her.

He looked much friendlier when he smiled. “I—I advertised my land a couple of months ago. No one contacted me.” She lifted her chin to challenge him.

“I didn’t see it,” he said simply.

“I don’t want charity!” she snapped.

“Mrs. Pointer, I won’t pretend that I need your land to survive, but I can make a profit off it. If you’re willing to rent it, why shouldn’t I do so?”

“You’re sure you want to lease it?” She was trying not to jump from her chair and sing and dance because he’d solved her major problem. “I can make it one way or another if you—” She couldn’t really but he wouldn’t know that.

“My brother and I are both interested.”

“Then, of course, I’d be delighted to rent it to you.”

“Great. I’ll have my lawyer draw up a lease agreement and bring it by tomorrow. We’d like to split the lease between us. Pete is taking the land that meets with his place and I will use the other side.”

“That’s satisfactory.”

“We’ll exclude the acre your house and garden occupy.”

“Thank you.” She stood again, assuming their business was settled.

“Uh, I have something else to say.”

She sank back into the rocker. He was going to lecture her again, which irritated her.

“My mother is on the board of directors of the Lawton Market place. She gets a space free of rent.”

Anna had no idea where he was going with this subject.

“I thought you could sell your produce Saturday in town.”

“I told you I can’t afford—”

“That’s just it. I can use the space free. All you need to do is stay with me all day and no one will question you.”

“I couldn’t do that!”

“Why not?” His voice changed, filled with bitterness. “Why not? Afraid of what people will say?”

She blinked several times, unsure of the reason for his change of voice.

He continued, “I promise I won’t take advantage of you.”

She turned bright red. “Of course not. I didn’t t-think that.”

“Good. I’m a confirmed bachelor. I’m not offering because you’re pretty, even though you are. And you don’t have to pay me back in any form. We’re just going to sell some vegetables and fruit. Agreed?”

His words were forceful and she sensed that if she refused, it would hurt his feelings. Besides, his offer was a godsend. First the land and now selling her produce. He was like a genie in a bottle, granting her three wishes.

“Mr. Crawford, I didn’t mean—being able to sell my goods there would be wonderful. But it would require you to spend the day in town. I know you have work to do.”

“Always,” he agreed with another grin, but the bitterness was gone. “I can wait to start plowing your land until Monday.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Will you be here tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Okay, once the leases are drawn up and I have Pete’s check I will come pick you up. Then we’ll go to town, take the leases to the lawyer and deposit the money in the bank. We can look at the space we’ll have for Saturday. Agreed?”

With her mind whirling, she said, “Yes, that would be wonderful, but—never mind. We’ll be ready.”

“What is it?”

“I was thinking of my son’s nap time, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Why don’t we drop the kids off at my Mom’s?” When she started to protest, he held up his hand. “She’s already offered. She likes little kids.”

“That—that would be wonderful. If something comes up, I can take them with me.”

“Fine. I’ll tell her you said that. Now, I’ll go,” he said as he stood, and she was reminded again how tall he was. Julie’s prayer for “the big man” was certainly appropriate.

“Mr. Crawford, you’ve been—so helpful. I can’t thank you enough.”

“I’m getting more land to work, Mrs—Aw heck, we might as well call each other by our names. Otherwise, no one is going to believe we’re friends. I’m happy with our agreement, Anna. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, Joe. Thank you again.”

He was out the door before she could reach it and disappeared in the spring night.

Anna awoke the next morning with a spring in her step that had been absent for the last five years. She was going to have enough money in the bank to make the payment and have some left over. If she sold even half her things at the market on Saturday, she could purchase a few things that they needed.

She’d have to be careful though. Another payment would come around sooner than she’d realize. Now, for three whole months, she’d be able to face each day with a smile. She was thrilled. She was also relieved because she’d dealt with pressing charges against the men over the phone last night.

She took extra care with her hair and donned a blue dress that matched her eyes. She didn’t bother with makeup. That would be too obvious. When Julie got up, having had a restless night, she did a very unmotherly thing. She fed her cake for breakfast.

“Cake? I get cake?” Julie asked with excitement.

“Just this once. Mr. Crawford brought it over last night especially for you. He was disappointed that you were already asleep.”

“He came to see me?” Julie said in reverential tones. Anna realized no one came to see Julie. She had no playmates because Anna kept to herself. She felt doubly guilty at making her daughter pay for her sins.

“Yes, and he’s coming back today. He’s going to rent our land, honey, and that money will help us out. So everything is going to be better.” She lifted Julie in her arms and danced around the table.

“Mommy! I like it when you’re happy!” Julie exclaimed with a joyful laugh.

Again Anna felt guilty. She’d been letting their situation drag her down, but she hadn’t realized how aware of everything Julie was.

“Everything is going to be better, baby. You’ll see.”

“Is Mr. Crawford going to stay for lunch?” Julie asked.

“No, we have to do business today. You and Henry are going to stay with his mother while we go into town.”

“His mommy? He has a mommy?”

“Why, yes, he has a mommy. Why wouldn’t he?”

“Cause he’s so big,” Julie said with a look of wonder.

Anna laughed again. “Come to the table, sweetie and start on your cake. I’ll pour you a glass of milk.”

“Are you going to eat cake, too, Mommy?”

Anna stopped in surprise. With a smile, she said, “You bet I am.”

While Pete was signing the lease papers, he said, “If I remember right, Anna Pointer is a good-looking blonde.”

Joe grunted and looked at Kelly, Pete’s wife.

“How’s the store doing?” he asked, deliberately trying to change the topic.

“It’s doing great, Joe. Stop by and visit some day,” Kelly invited, smiling at her brother-in-law. “We don’t see you often enough.”

“I’m not usually in town as much as Pete.”

“I don’t remember ever seeing Anna Pointer either. Doesn’t she ever come to town?”

Joe doubled his hands and slid them into his pockets. “Nope. She has little kids.”

“So do I,” Kelly said with a laugh.

“I think I hear one now,” Joe said, looking up the stairs visible from the kitchen table. In no time, a four-year-old boy came running down the stairs. “Uncle Joe! Uncle Joe, hi! I didn’t know you was coming!”

“Were coming, son,” Kelly said.

Ignoring his mother, the boy continued. “Why are you here? Are you going to give me a ride?”

Joe grinned. Drew was his favorite nephew, mainly because he was the only one old enough to play. He loved it when Joe swung him up on his shoulders and galloped around with him.

Kelly intervened. “No, he’s not. But he does have a treat for you,” she assured her son.

“What?” Drew asked.

“Uncle Joe is going to drop you off at Granny’s house and let you play with a little girl who’s coming over. And I want you to be sweet to her.”

“A girl? No, Mom, I don’t want—”

“Drew?” Pete said quietly.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Be a gentleman.”

“Yes, sir. But girls can’t play.”

“What do you mean?” Joe asked, curious.

“All Alexandra does is sleep and eat.”

Kelly laughed quietly. “That’s because she’s a baby. She’ll do more as she gets older. This little girl is four years old, just like you.”

“Okay. Will Granny make cookies?”

Kelly rolled her eyes. “I’m sure she will. She always does.”

“Yeah. She’s a good granny,” Drew said in satisfaction.

“Go put on a clean shirt.” He started to protest, but his mother said, “I know you got that shirt out of the dirty clothes. It still has peanut butter on it.”

With a disgusted look, he trudged back up the stairs. “I’ll be right back, Uncle Joe. Don’t leave without me.”

“No, I won’t.”

Kelly sighed. “At least the tornado has passed for a few minutes. He keeps getting more and more energy.”

“Yeah. How’s Alex doing? Prettier than ever?”

“Of course,” Kelly agreed.

“You need kids of your own,” Pete said with a frown.

“Don’t start, Pete. I’m fine. It gives me time to be a good uncle to Drew.”

“I’m not complaining about that, of course, but you’re older than me. Don’t wait much longer.”

Joe shrugged his shoulders and picked up the check and signed lease. “Okay, I’m taking this over to Mrs. Pointer and then driving her into town. I think the payment is due right away.”

“And it’s okay if I start working the land today?”

“Yep.”

“Thanks for lining this up for me, Joe. It will be helpful.”

“For me, too. But Anna—that is, Mrs. Pointer, thinks we’re giving her charity. I had to talk a little while to convince her I wasn’t.”

“Good for you,” Pete said, watching his brother closely.

“Stop looking at me that way,” Joe protested.

“What way?”

“You know what I mean. This is business, that’s all.”

“Right,” Pete said.

“Joe, why don’t you bring her by the store and introduce her to us. Lindsay will want to meet her, too.”

Joe paused. Then he said, “I might do that. I don’t think she has many friends.”

“Good. We’ll look forward to meeting her.”

“Hey, wait a minute. How come you get to meet her and I don’t?” Pete demanded of his wife. She leaned over and kissed him. “Because you have to work today.”

Joe laughed at the look on his brother’s face. But he wasn’t worried. Kelly spoiled Pete, as he spoiled her. They had a good marriage that made Joe envious if he thought about it too long.

His sister, Lindsay, had a good marriage, too. Her husband, Gil Daniels, trained horses and was making quite a name for himself. At least two out of six wasn’t bad for his parents. Well, he had to make it three out of six because Logan had married his boss, Abby. A beautiful woman, who talked ranching with the best of them. Logan had learned that the hard way. She was a strong woman who resented being pampered as if she were weak.

But Anna...he thought she might need some pampering. Not that he would be the one to take care of her. He was her temporary protector. Maybe he’d look around for a good man for Anna. He could push her in that direction when he found someone good enough for her. That was a good idea. In town on Saturday, he’d make sure she was introduced around and see who he could find.

In the meantime, he’d think about his friends. Surely he had nice friends who would be interested. Well, not really. Most of his friends were married already. He scratched his head again. There was Dr. Patrick Wilson. He was actually a friend of Pete’s. He and Pete had become friends when Kelly took Drew to see him. Joe couldn’t hold back a chuckle. They hadn’t started out friends. Pete had been too jealous. But he’d delivered Alex and had become a trusted friend. Would Anna—Mrs. Pointer be interested in a doctor? Most women were, he thought with a shrug.

How about Bill Quigley? His wife had died last year. He had a couple of kids too. Anna seemed like a good mom. Maybe that would work out for her. There was Larry Baker. He was a widower, too, but he'd heard some not-so-nice gossip about him.

He wanted to be sure he didn't connect Anna up with someone even worse than Derek. The poor woman had suffered enough. Not that she'd said anything, but her house, while clean, didn't look good. She didn't have any of the frilly stuff like his mom did. And her furnishings looked old. Okay, so he'd make a new list and only include men with a good reputation and good money. It occurred to him that that list might be pretty short unless he decided to include himself. But, he wasn't looking for marriage. Was he?

When he drove into town early that morning to leave the lease with his lawyer, he actually ran into Patrick Wilson, the man who headed his list for Anna.

"Hey, Pat! What are you doing out this early?"

"Heck, Joe. I'm not out early. I'm just getting back. I had a call about two."

"Everything's okay, I hope," Joe said, a polite hint for more news.

Patrick sighed. "Andy Elkins fell and broke his leg and got a concussion. He'll recover, but it'll take a while."

"Andy? What was he doing up at two in the morning? He's eighty-seven!"

"Making a trip to the bathroom in the dark."

"That's too bad. I guess it's a good thing you don't have a family with the hours you keep," Joe said frowning.

Patrick looked surprised. "I guess you're right. Doctors' marriages aren't too stable from what I've observed. It would take a strong woman to deal with my life."

"Yeah, I guess so," Joe said, thinking he needed to mark Patrick off the list.

Patrick jabbed him with his elbow. "Don't be telling anyone that. You'll ruin my social life."

"I won't," Joe said. He waved goodbye and continued into his lawyer's office. But under his breath he muttered, "I guess we'll see who's next on the list." He had to find a better husband than Patrick. This was going to be hard.

## Chapter Three

Julie stayed by the window, anxiously watching for Joe's arrival. Normally, they not only didn't have visitors, but they also didn't go anywhere.

"Mommy! I think he's here. It's a big red truck. Is that what Mr. Crawford drives?"

"I'm not sure. It was dark last night." When she saw Joe get out of the truck, she said, "What a smart little girl you are."

"Can I go out on the porch?"

"Yes, of course, but don't get dirty." Anna went into the baby's room and packed his bag for the day. Lots of diapers and several changes of clothing. "You be good, too, Henry. Okay?" She smiled at the baby and tickled his chin. The little boy cooed and then repeated da-da-da.

"Well, no, not exactly," she whispered as she picked him up. Great. If Joe Crawford heard Henry's only word, he'd hightail it out of there. She came into the living room just as Julie led Joe inside.

"Mommy, I told Mr. Crawford I liked the cake."

"Good, honey. It was very good, Joe."

"Glad you liked it. Be sure to tell my mom."

"Yes, of course."

"Here's the lease with my and Pete's signatures. Let me hold the baby while you sign it."

"I can put him back in his bed or in the carrier."

"I'll hold him. Julie and I can talk to him, right, Julie?"

"Yes, Mr. Crawford," she agreed, staring at him, as if afraid he might disappear.

He sat down on the couch and whispered something to Julie. She burst into giggles.

"What?" Anna asked, frowning.

"Mommy, he says I can call him Joe!"

"You don't mind?" she asked her guest.

"Nope. I'd prefer it. Where we're going, there are a lot of Mr. Crawfords. We'd get all confused."

Julie gave him a puzzled look. "Why are there lots of Mr. Crawfords?"

"Well, one is my dad. Then I have two more brothers at home and they are Mr. Crawfords, too."

Julie was carefully counting her fingers. "That's four Mr. Crawfords!"

"Wow! I didn't know you were old enough to count. Wait until Drew finds out."

"Who is Drew?" she asked, watching in fascination.

"He's my nephew. He's four, too."

"The same as me!"

"That's right. You're going to play with him today."

Anna had been watching the exchange of words. "Uh, Julie hasn't had anyone to play with. She might not—"

"Don't worry. My mom knows all about breaking up fights. We used to give each other bloody noses all the time." He laughed when Anna stared at him horror-stricken. "Not that Drew and Julie will fight. Don't worry."

Anna was a little apprehensive about Julie spending the afternoon without her supervision. She wasn't used to turning Julie over to someone else. "Of course," she finally said.

Joe actually winked at her. "Stop worrying, Mom. Everything is going to be fine. Oh, by the way, did I mention that my mom makes good cookies?"

"What kind?" Julie asked. "My mom makes good cookies, too."

"Sugar cookies. I think cookie-making's a requirement for all moms. Ready to go?" he asked Anna. Anna knew Joe would never make it in Hollywood as a hero-type, but when he laughed with Julie, he was almost impossible to resist. Foolish thought. He had nothing like that in mind.

“Yes, we’re ready. Here’s the lease. Give me Henry and I’ll put him in his carrier.”

“He’s a big boy. I’ll put him in. He weighs too much for you.” He promptly followed his words, as if what he said was true.

“He’s not too big for me. I can—”

“Help Julie into the truck. Then you get in and I’ll hand you Henry.”

Somehow, Anna found herself doing as he ordered. Joe handed in the carrier, grinning at the baby. When Henry broke out into da-da-da, Anna hurriedly said, “That’s all he knows how to say.”

Joe grinned. “I figured.”

Her cheeks flamed.

“Julie, did you bring your storybook? But remember, Mrs. Crawford may not be able to read it to you.” She hoped it distracted Joe.

“I bet she will, Julie. That’s something my mom likes better than anything. She made sure we all loved to read, too,” Joe said.

“Do you have a favorite book?” Julie asked, her eyes wide. “I didn’t know Daddies could read.”

Joe appeared a bit surprised by Julie’s comment. “What?”

“Of course some daddies read, honey. It was just that your daddy was busy.”

“What is your favorite storybook?” Julie repeated.

“Peter Pan,” Joe said. “I always wanted to fly.”

“Me, too!” Julie agreed. “But—but it scared me a little. I didn’t want to leave Mommy behind.”

“I know what you mean,” Joe said, which made Julie happy. It worried Anna. It wouldn’t take long for Julie to grow attached to Joe. The poor baby hadn’t spent time with her father.

Joe turned off the road to the drive that led to the Crawford homestead. The house was big and well tended.

Before the car stopped, a little boy came out on the front porch.

“Who’s that?” Julie asked.

“That’s my nephew, Drew. Remember? He’s four, too. And he has a little sister about Henry’s age.”

“A girl baby?”

“Yep. The best kind,” Joe assured her.

“Stop trying to charm my little girl,” Anna muttered.

Again Joe looked surprised. She said nothing else, unbuckling Henry’s carrier.

Mrs. Crawford joined Drew on the porch. Then she stepped down and came toward the truck. “Hello, Anna. Welcome.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Crawford. I appreciate your looking after my children this afternoon, but I can take them with me if it will be too much.”

“Why no, child. We’ll be fine. Drew and Alexandra came over to play with them. We’re going to make cookies.”

Julie clapped her hands and smiled. “I like cookies.”

“I’m glad you do. Come along and I’ll introduce you to Drew.”

Anna stood there holding her breath, but Julie took Mrs. Crawford’s hand and skipped along beside her. The little boy didn’t seem nearly as pleased about their plans.

“Don’t worry. They’ll be fine,” Joe whispered in her ear, startling her.

“Come on. I’ll carry Henry into the house,” he said, grabbing the diaper bag, too.

When they were back in the truck, heading for town, Joe reminded her of her tension. “Why are you so worried about Julie? She’s well behaved.”

“She’s just not used to playing with other children.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t—I don’t have any friends with little kids.”

“Your friends don’t believe in marriage and children?”

“When I moved here, it was after I married Derek. He didn’t run around with married men. So I never met any wives.”

“I see.”

“I know she’ll be fine,” she said quietly.

They reached town and Joe took Anna to his lawyer’s office. After she signed it, the man said he would copy the agreement and mail her copy. Then, much to her relief, they took the two checks to her bank. She still couldn’t believe Joe had made the deposit possible.

“Thank you again, Joe. This is such a relief.”

“Good. Oh, my sister and sister-in-law asked us to stop by their store. Do you mind?”

“Of course not.” How could she object after all he’d done for her?

When he parked on the main street in front of a big store with the name Oklahoma Chic, she offered to wait in the truck.

“Heck, no. It’s you they want to meet, not me. Come on. I won’t make you buy anything.”

She hoped she could stop herself from shopping. It had been so long since she’d even been in a nice store, much less purchased anything.

When Joe opened the door, cool air conditioning enveloped them. Even though it was only April, Oklahoma warmed up early. There were three ladies in the store, two of them about her age, beautifully dressed, with every hair in place. The other woman was older.

Anna tucked a strand of hair back, hoping she looked even half as nice as those two. She figured they were Joe’s sister and sister-in-law.

Joe called to them. “Lindsay, Kelly.”

“Joe, you came!” The blond rushed across the store to kiss her brother’s cheek, followed by the brunette.

“Lindsay, Kelly, I want you to meet Anna Pointer. She’s the one Pete and I are renting land from.”

Both ladies smiled, and Kelly offered a hand.

“Come in, Anna. Welcome.”

“Thank you,” Anna said, feeling awkward. She’d avoided social situations for so long, she’d almost forgotten how to act. “Your store is lovely.”

“Well, it’s a lot bigger than when we first started,” Kelly said.

“That’s because we’ve added children’s clothes,” Lindsay said with a chuckle. “That way we can buy our kids’ clothes at wholesale.”

Anna smiled. “That’s a good thing, since they go through them so quickly.”

Lindsay nodded and added, “We do consignment here, too. That way you can buy good secondhand clothes at a reduced rate. It saves a lot of money.” She led the way to the area where the children’s clothes were displayed.

“Some of these clothes come in looking like they’ve never been worn. I can assure you they’re not Drew’s,” Kelly said with a laugh. “I told him to be a gentleman today.”

Anna frowned. “Julie’s not used to playing with other children.”

Kelly patted her arm. “Don’t worry. I talked to Mother Crawford half an hour ago. They’re getting along wonderfully well. She’s just now putting them down for a nap, so she said don’t come back for two hours. We thought maybe you’d join us for lunch.”

Anna was startled by Mrs. Crawford’s message. “I—I couldn’t leave them that long.”

Lindsay asked, “Doesn’t Julie take a nap every day?”

“Well, yes, of course, but...”

Joe stepped forward. “Anna, if Mom said don’t come back for two hours, I’m not brave enough to take you back any sooner. Let’s go have lunch.”

“We’ll just go to the pizza place across the street,” Lindsay said.

“But can you leave the store?”

“Oh, we didn’t introduce you to Mrs. Carter. She’s our manager, and she lives upstairs.”

After they performed the introductions, they headed across the street, leaving Mrs. Carter in charge of the store.

Anna couldn’t believe what was happening. Her genie had worked another miracle. She hadn’t been out to eat with anyone since her marriage. And not anywhere without the kids. One day with Joe, and here she was.

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