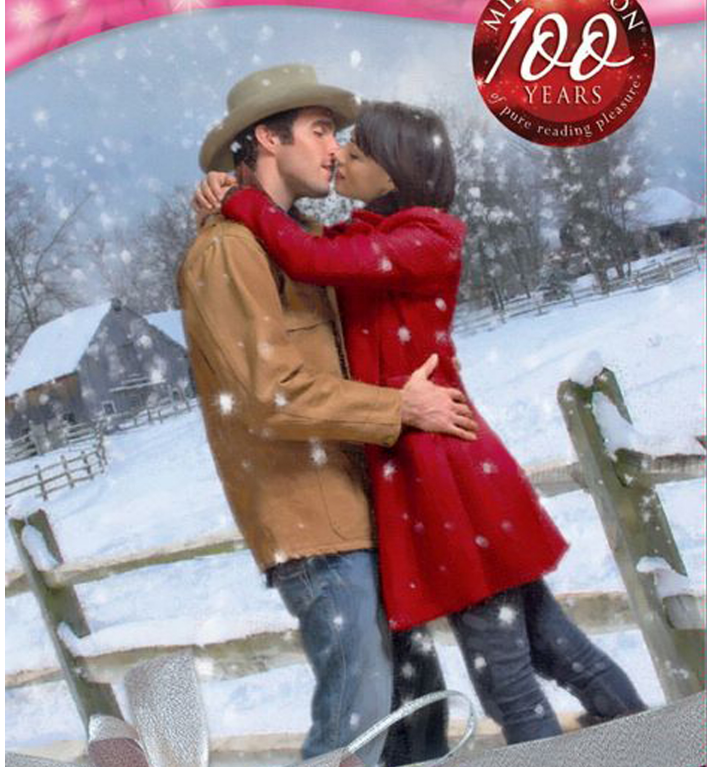
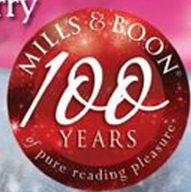


Cinderella and the Cowboy
Judy Christenberry



MILLS & BOON®
Romance

Judy Christenberry
Cinderella And The Cowboy
Серия «Mills & Boon Romance»

Аннотация

All she wants for Christmas... With her newborn and her toddler in tow, struggling widow Elizabeth Ransom stepped onto the Ransom Homestead looking for the family she'd never had. When the children's grandfather welcomed them with open arms, she couldn't believe her luck. But it was blue-eyed Jack who Elizabeth dreamed of...Jack Clayton had no choice but to leave now that the business was no longer for sale. But the lovely Elizabeth was tough to walk away from... The hard-headed, dyed-in-the-wool cowboy had been called many things...could he ever be called husband and daddy?

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Judy Christenberry

has written over seventy books and she's a favourite with readers.

Now you can find many more of Judy's heartwarming and powerful stories in Mills & Boon® Romance!

Step into a world where family counts, men are true to their word—and where romance always wins the day!

Praise for Judy Christenberry:

“...With well-written characters complete with scars and flaws, Judy Christenberry delivers good romance.” —*Romantic Times BOOKreviews*

“...Judy Christenberry sucked me right in and didn't let me go long after the story ended.” —*Cataromance.com*

“I want a puppy for Christmas... and a daddy.”

Elizabeth could only stare at her son, speechless, as he explained, “You said Santa makes our wishes come true, so I don't see why Santa can't bring you a husband—a good one this time.”

“But Santa doesn't bring husbands or wives, Brady.”

“Why not?”

Elizabeth finally pulled herself together. “Whatever made you ask for such a thing, Brady?”

“All the other boys have daddies. I figured my daddy didn't ever come to see me because I did something wrong. But Jack said there was nothing wrong with me. He said he'd want me for his boy.”

“No, there’s nothing wrong with you, Brady,” Elizabeth assured him, hugging him, wishing she could provide him with a father who would love him as much as he deserved. “Jack was right. You’d be a great son for any man.”

Brady smiled. “So then do you think you can marry Jack?”

Judy Christenberry has been writing romances for fifteen years, because she loves happy endings as much as her readers do. A former French teacher, Judy now devotes herself to writing full-time. She hopes readers have as much fun reading her stories as she does writing them. She spends her spare time reading, watching her favourite sports teams, and keeping track of her two daughters. Judy’s a native Texan and lives in Dallas.

CINDERELLA AND THE COWBOY

BY

JUDY CHRISTENBERRY



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CHAPTER ONE

ELIZABETH Ransom struggled off the bus, carefully leading her toddler son down the stairs while carrying her baby in a pouch across her chest.

“This is his driveway, ma’am,” the gentlemanly bus driver said as he held out her luggage. “You can’t miss the house. It’s the only one on this road.”

Finding the house wasn’t the part she was worried about. It was what would happen when she got there. “Thank you for your help. You’ve been very kind.”

“Mommy?”

She looked down at her three-year-old. “Yes, Brady?”

“Where is my grandpa?”

“Just a little farther and we’ll meet him.” As the bus pulled

away, she looked around at the tall weeds growing alongside the drive. “First we’re going to stow our luggage here where no one can see them.” She put the two suitcases behind the weeds, hoping that her son wouldn’t ask why. She didn’t have the heart to tell him they might not be staying.

She said a private prayer that her father-in-law would at least offer hospitality for a few days. She prayed too that Tom Ransom had heard of his son’s death; she didn’t want to break the news that his son had recently been killed in a car accident.

Forcing a smile at her child, she took his hand. “Let’s walk to Grandpa’s house, okay, Brady?”

“Is it very far, Mommy?”

“I don’t know, honey, but the bus driver said it was at the end of this road.”

“I’m cold, Mommy.”

Early December in Oklahoma could be a lot worse, she knew; still, there was a biting wind. “If we walk faster, we’ll get warm.” She led her son down the road. After a few minutes he noticeably tired. “Keep walking, sweetheart.”

As they picked up the pace, she heard the baby awakening and soothed her with her voice. Poor Jenny. She would never know her daddy.

On second thought, perhaps that was for the best, seeing as how Reggie Ransom was far from a model father. He’d walked out on them one afternoon, and she hadn’t seen him since. Only when she managed to reach him and remind him of their

existence did he bother sending any money for rent and food.

She always knew Reggie wasn't the type to be tied down by a wife and kids. He wanted a carefree life, wining and dining on the rodeo circuit where he was a star.

But Elizabeth had wanted a family to belong to so badly that she ignored her intuition and married him anyway, right after college. Especially after she found herself pregnant. She remembered thinking she was going to have everything she'd ever wanted. Too bad Reggie hadn't felt the same.

As soon as they were married he told her he had to go back on the circuit.

Elizabeth kept them afloat with her teaching job, paying the rent and Brady's day care bills. But when she got pregnant with Jenny and took ill, she couldn't work. Money was tight. Now Jenny was six weeks old, but with the school year started, Elizabeth had to wait for the next semester to be hired.

She needed help now.

Tom Ransom was her only hope. She hoped her father-in-law could offer just a little to help them along.

"Mommy?" Brady grabbed her hand and tugged on it. "Mommy? Is that his house?"

She looked up, surprised to see a white clapboard house and several outbuildings in front of her. "Yes, I think so, Brady. It's very nice, isn't it?"

"Yeah!" After a moment Brady asked, "Do you think Grandpa will like me?"

"I'm sure he will. You look a lot like your daddy."

"Is that good?"

"Your daddy was a handsome man." She didn't mention her husband's deficits, his abandonment of his family, spending all the money he made on other women and booze. No child needed to hear that.

"Mommy, I see Grandpa! Can I go tell him it's us coming to visit?"

She shaded her eyes and looked up at a tall, rugged man standing by a pickup. "Honey, I don't think that's your grandpa. That man's too young. You'd better stay with me."

She refused to give credence to the fear that clawed at her throat. Had this man bought the land from her husband's father?

The man must have seen them, because he got in the pickup and drove down the drive to them.

"Are you coming to the ranch?"

The man looked to be in his early thirties, with dark-brown hair under a Stetson. A typical rancher, she thought. But was he an owner? "Yes, if...if it still belongs to Tom Ransom."

"It does."

Her sigh of relief was audible. "If you don't mind, we'd appreciate a ride to the house."

He nodded toward the passenger seat. "Get in."

She helped Brady climb into the truck and then pulled herself and her baby up, feeling old beyond her years.

"I'm Elizabeth Ransom. I've come to visit my father-in-law."

“You’re Reggie Ransom’s wife?” There was shock in his voice.

“He told his father about us?” she asked, feeling pleased.

“No, ma’am. If Tom had known you’d existed, he’d have brought you out here a long time ago.”

So much for her good feelings. “I...I hope he’ll at least let us stay a few days.”

The man only grunted.

He said nothing until they’d pulled up in front of the house. A large house, huge in comparison to the tiny one-bedroom apartment in which they’d lived.

“I’ll come get you down,” the man said gruffly. He hopped down and then came around to her door. “Hey, little guy, you want to come over here and let me help you down?”

“Okay,” Brady said, climbing over his mother’s knees. “Will you catch me?”

“Sure I will.” When he took the boy to the porch, Brady looked at his mother.

In spite of her tiredness, Elizabeth scooted down off the high seat.

“I’ll go tell Tom you’re here.” He turned back. “Just a minute. Where are your bags?”

“W-we left the bags in the grass by the front gate.”

She followed him inside the back door, into the kitchen. Looking around the room, recently updated and spacious, she hungered for such a lovely working environment.

The man came back to the kitchen. “Tom’s waiting.”

“Thank you. Brady, let’s go meet your grandfather.” She took the boy’s hand as he moved closer to her.

She followed the man down a long hallway, realizing for the first time that she never got his name. He stopped at the last door and opened it.

Elizabeth stepped into a large bedroom, where a man sat in a wing back chair in front of a glowing fireplace. He looked to be in his sixties, with a receding hairline pushing back his graying brown hair.

“Mr. Ransom,” she whispered. “I’m Elizabeth Ransom, your son’s widow. This is my...our son, Brady, and our daughter, Jennifer.”

“Come in, Elizabeth,” he said in a small voice. “I’m glad to meet you.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m pleased to meet you.”

Tom shifted his gaze to the boy. “Brady? Come here, boy. You look like your daddy when he was your age.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And the little one?” he asked Elizabeth. “How old is she?”

“She was born six weeks ago.”

“You doing all right? It’s tough to make a trip when your baby is that young.”

“Yes, she came a little early because of...of the news I received.”

“Tom, I hate to interrupt but I need to go get their bags.” She’d

almost forgotten that the man she'd met out on the driveway was in the room. "They left them in the grass by the gate."

"Okay, Jack, thanks."

At least now she knew his name. Jack.

When the door closed behind him, she knew the time had come to make her plea.

"Mr. Ransom, I'm here because..." She ducked her head, unable to make eye contact. "Because I need help. I'll be able to get a teaching job for the next semester but...but I don't know how we'll make it until then. I wondered if the kids and I could stay here."

"But he was doing well, wasn't he?" There was such sadness in the man's voice.

"I don't know. He sent me money every once in a while, but not often."

"So he left you broke?"

She pressed her lips together and dug in her purse. "Here's my copy of our marriage certificate. Yes, he left me broke."

"I'm sorry." Did she detect a note of anger in his tone? "I know he made a lot of money. He shouldn't have left you broke."

"I can get a job when the new semester starts, sir. It won't be forever that we'll hang on to your sleeve. I promise—"

Tom held up a hand. "Don't worry about it. I've got lots of room here. Stay as long as you want."

Elizabeth blinked away the tears. "Thank you. I can keep the kitchen clean and do the housework while we're here."

“We usually have a lady come in to clean once a week.”

“Who does your cooking?”

“Me and Jack just manage. We take turns, and sometimes we eat in the bunkhouse.”

“I don’t want to intrude, but I could cook for you.”

“Don’t feel you have to.”

She smiled. “I’d be pleased to cook for you, Mr. Ransom.”

“Let’s make it first names, Elizabeth.”

“Thank you, Tom.”

He stood up and held out his hand. “Welcome home.”

Jack Crawford revved the engine of the pickup as he wended down the driveway from the house. He’d seen the look on Tom’s face when he laid eyes on his grandson. His old friend had been hooked like a fish at sunrise.

He shut the engine at the gate and got out to search for the woman’s bags. Why would she hide them in the weeds? Probably so she wouldn’t look too needy when she came to the door.

Instead she stood there, looking maternal, holding her son’s hand and her daughter against her chest. The firelight had cast highlights on her light-brown hair and illuminated her tall, thin frame.

Not that Tom would notice those things about her. He’d been too focused on the kids.

His grandkids.

Jack knew Tom Ransom too well. Beneath that crusty cowboy exterior beat the heart of the most righteous, kind and honorable

man he knew.

Tom would do the right thing.

Starting today, the Ransom Ranch would have three new boarders.

Maybe the kids were just what Tom needed to come out of the funk he'd fallen into since his wife's death and his son's departure. He'd lost interest in the ranch years ago, then lost interest in most everything. If it hadn't been for Jack, he would've sold the ranch long ago. Jack had been making it viable, turning a profit on the 2500-acre cattle ranch, and keeping Tom going at the same time.

But now...?

No, Jack couldn't blame Tom. The woman and her kids were family, after all.

But where did that leave him?

"I've got your bags. Where do they go?"

Elizabeth started at the sound of Jack's deep voice behind her. She turned from the cabinets where she was checking out the cooking supplies. "I don't know. I didn't ask Tom."

He started for the hallway. "Come on. I'll find places for you. He needs to get some rest."

She gave him a troubled stare, then followed him. Beside her, Brady picked up the diaper bag. "I can carry this one, Mommy."

"That's wonderful of you, Brady. Your sister will be glad to have her bag with us." She followed Jack up the stairs. "Tom said we could live here for a while," she told him.

“Yeah, I thought he would.”

“I offered to cook for the two of you. He said you took turns and sometimes ate in the bunkhouse. Which would you prefer?”

He swung around and gave her a studied look. He didn't exude the warmth she'd found in Tom.

“It depends. How well do you cook?”

She straightened. “I've been told I'm good.”

Jack's eyes swept her, as if sizing her up. Before he could reply, Brady spoke up. “Mommy's pancakes are really good!”

“Is that so?” he asked, never taking his eyes off Elizabeth.

“Yeah, they're yummy. Baby doesn't eat them, but Mommy makes them for me.”

“That's good enough for me. I'm up for pancakes.”

“But we don't eat pancakes for dinner, Brady,” Elizabeth reminded her boy, grateful for the diversion.

“What do we have for dinner, Mommy?”

“I don't know, sweetie. I'll have to see what they have.”

“Trust me,” Jack said. “We have everything you need.”

There was something in the way he said it that made her think he wasn't talking about food. She cleared her throat and changed the subject. “What room shall we take?”

“Well, I think Brady should take the room on this side. It's next to mine. And you should take the room on this side of the stairs, and put the little one next to you.”

“We don't need that many rooms. We can share one.”

“I believe Tom would like you to each have your own room.”

He wants you comfortable.”

“I don’t—”

Jack apparently wasn’t entertaining her excuses. “Come to your new room, Brady. Bring your suitcase with you. I’ll help you unpack.”

“No! I’ll unpack for him.”

“You’ve got to unpack for yourself and the baby.”

“I’ll manage.”

“In that case, then, can I take Brady to the barn so he can see some puppies that were born a couple of weeks ago?”

“Please, Mommy?” Brady pleaded with his mother.

“Yes, if you’ll do what Jack says.”

“Okay, Mommy!” Brady hugged her legs and then held his hand up for Jack.

Jack took it. “We’ll be back for dinner.”

Elizabeth stood there, watching her little boy walk off with Jack. The unfamiliar sight of Brady with a man nearly brought tears to her eyes. How she’d yearned over the years for Reggie to be there for him, to be a real daddy.

Casting off the regret, she took the larger bag into the bedroom Jack had suggested she take. The large room was half the size of their entire apartment, with more storage than she needed for the clothes she owned.

In Jenny’s room she found a twin bed but no crib. She could put Jenny to bed there with pillows all around. For the time being, she figured. She wouldn’t grow enough to need a baby bed until

they moved on.

She sighed. She had so much to do to bring her children up right. When Reggie was killed, she shouldn't have been relieved, but she'd already known their marriage was a mistake. He hadn't cared about her, not when he moved on to the next available woman. He'd never touched her after she got pregnant with Jenny.

She remembered that night. He'd come home drunk and had taken her to the bedroom and had sex with her. The next morning he didn't remember anything he'd done. Then he'd claimed she'd betrayed him when she turned up pregnant.

The only reason she'd stayed with him was that she wanted her son to have what she never had. She shivered at the memory.

She'd been five when she'd been taken away from her mother by Child Services, never to be returned. The emotions of that day flooded her again, swamping her with sadness and fear. She'd never known her father.

More than anything, she wanted her children to have family, someone who would always help, offer comfort. She'd have to be their family now. Because of Reggie she didn't think she'd ever remarry.

After hugging her little girl and promising her a future, she put Jenny on the bed and surrounded her with pillows. Then she stowed the child's belongings.

She went to the kitchen after unpacking for Brady and surveyed the full pantry and freezer, packed with any cut of beef

she wanted to cook. The refrigerator was her final review. Jack was right. They had anything she'd need to cook dinner tonight.

Half an hour later, Brady ran into the room. "Mommy! They have lots of puppies. They don't have their eyes open yet. And they wiggle a lot!"

"I'm glad, Brady. Now you need to hang up your coat and go wash your hands so you'll be ready for dinner."

"But, Mommy, can I have a puppy?"

Elizabeth whirled around and stared at her son. "What did you say?"

"Jack said I could have one."

She turned and stared at Jack. "You told him what?"

"I suggested he could pick out a dog if you didn't mind."

"No! No, he can't have a puppy! Brady, go wash up."

"But, Mommy—"

"Go, Brady!"

The little boy went into the bathroom on the bottom floor. Elizabeth knew his heart was broken, but she had no choice.

"Why can't the boy have a dog?"

Not that it was any of his business, she thought, but she told him anyway. "Because I can't take a dog with us when we leave."

"You sure Tom is going to let you leave?"

Elizabeth looked at him then. What did he mean by that? And did she detect a note of sarcasm in Jack's tone? Somehow, she didn't think he was in favor of them being there.

Until she got the lay of the land, she thought it best to simply

avoid the subject with Jack. Instead she asked him to get Tom to the table for dinner. He merely gave her a nod and walked out of the room.

She'd made a beef and cheese macaroni meal with a salad and hot rolls. It wasn't elegant, but it was quick, hot and filling.

Just as she put it on the table, Tom came in, holding on to Jack's arm.

She smiled warmly at the older man. "Good evening, Tom."

"Are you all moved in already?" Tom asked as he sat down.

"Yes, we are, in very spacious quarters."

"Good, good. You're family. And I'm thrilled to have you and the kids here. Where's the baby?"

"She's napping. She'll be up for a bottle at eight, after dinner."

"It occurred to me that we'll need to get a crib. Jack can go with you to buy one and whatever else you need."

She shook her head. "I can't afford to buy anything right now. We're all right. I have her surrounded by pillows."

"Nonsense, Elizabeth. I'll pay for the crib and other things you need. My son did a poor job of taking care of you and your babies. It's my job now. I'll provide for you. You and Jack can shop tomorrow."

She fought to hold back her tears, blinking rapidly. "Tom, I really appreciate your offer, but we won't be able to take much with us when we leave, so there's no reason to buy them."

Tom frowned. "Honey, I'm not planning on you leaving. Like I said, you're family. The only family I have left. Jack, here, has

been like a son to me since Reggie went away. I was too easy on my son. I didn't make him learn good and bad. I wondered why God took him and not me. Now I know I still have purpose here on earth. I have you, Brady and little Jenny. God left me here to do what my son should've done."

She gave up the fight and let the tears fall. "Tom, I promise I didn't come here for you to take care of us. I can get a job when school starts again."

"Do you like teaching school?"

"It's not bad."

"Wouldn't you rather raise your kids?"

"Yes, but—"

"How about cooking?"

"I enjoy cooking, and will be glad to cook for you and Jack, Tom. That...that would be like having a family."

"That's what we want, too." Tom leaned forward and patted her hand. "You just take care of the house and those kids and let us know if you need anything, okay?" Before she could reply he continued, "And while you're at the store, me and Brady can get to know each other."

She swiped at her tears. "I don't know what to say, Tom. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, no more tears, young lady. We're going to wear happy faces around here from now on."

Elizabeth couldn't help but smile.

Her smile lasted through dinner and the cleanup. Jack insisted

on helping, despite her protests, and she thought maybe she'd won him over.

"What time's breakfast in the morning?" he asked as they finished up.

"Brady usually gets up about seven. Is that okay?"

"Fine. And after breakfast, you and I will drive into Oklahoma City to do some shopping."

"We don't have to, Jack. I don't think Tom will even notice if we don't buy much."

Jack shot her a look that wiped away her smile. "I may be Tom's friend, Elizabeth, but I'm also his employee. I do what I'm told to do."

CHAPTER TWO

ELIZABETH didn't accept Jack's warning. When she got up the next morning, she fully intended to blow off the shopping trip.

She hurriedly dressed and slipped downstairs to make breakfast. Pancakes were bubbling on the griddle when she heard steps on the stairway. From the sound, she figured it was Jack coming down the stairs. But she was surprised when he appeared with Brady in his arms.

"Brady, did you forget to get dressed?"

The little boy giggled. "Jack said I could come down in my pajamas."

"I see."

"It's okay, isn't it?"

She ignored Jack's question and smiled at her son. "Hop up

in your seat, sweetie.”

“Okay, Mommy,” Brady said.

She flipped the pancakes onto plates and brought them to the table, already set with butter and syrup.

“These look good, Elizabeth,” Jack said.

She didn’t respond, choosing to pour milk for Brady instead.

“I’d like some milk, too, please,” Jack said.

She poured another glass.

As she turned back to the stove to flip the four new pancakes, Tom’s door opened and the man came to the table.

He looked better than yesterday. Sprier, brighter. “Good morning, Tom. How are you this morning?”

Jack greeted Tom also.

Brady grinned at his grandfather. “Good morning, Grandpa!”

“Brady, that’s the best greeting I’ve heard in a long time.”

“Mommy made pancakes for us.”

“I can see that.”

Just then Elizabeth put a plate down in front of him.

They all ate in silence. Elizabeth didn’t get upset that they didn’t rave about her pancakes. She knew they were good.

When breakfast was over, she sent Brady up to his room to get dressed. Tom went back to his bedroom when he finished.

Jack got up and filled a cup with coffee and sat back down again.

“Do you want more pancakes?”

He looked up in surprise. “No, I’m full. But they were

wonderful.”

“Thank you.”

She continued to do the dishes. After a few minutes Jack said, “I can finish the dishes. Why don’t you go ahead and get ready so we can get on our way.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Look, Elizabeth, I told you last night. I’ve got my orders and I intend to follow them. Whether or not you agree.”

Elizabeth turned and gave him an icy stare. “What are you going to do? Carry me out against my will?”

“If I have to.”

His stare was just as frigid as she maintained an even eye contact.

Seconds passed before an idea struck Elizabeth. She’d go with him and make him think he was taking Tom’s orders, but she wouldn’t buy anything.

Wiping her hands on the dish towel she held, she never broke eye contact when she said, “I’ll be ready in two minutes.”

Then she walked out of the kitchen without another word.

Jack chuckled under his breath as Elizabeth walked out of the room. She’d had such a full head of steam, he figured she wasn’t backing down. He wondered what she had up her sleeve.

Regardless, he intended to follow Tom’s orders to the letter.

When he heard her coming down the stairs, he jumped to his feet, only to find the two children with her.

“I need to take Brady to Tom’s room.”

He waited at the door as she gave the boy final instructions to not bother his grandfather.

“He’ll be fine, Elizabeth. A little bothering never hurt no one.”

She leaned down and kissed her son goodbye.

Then she walked out of the house, assuming Jack would follow.

He did.

Jack suggested they start with the infant department. He knew she intended to end it there, too, but that wouldn’t be happening. Not on his watch.

As they looked at all the cribs they had on the floor, Jack noticed she paid more attention to the prices than the crib. But he saw the sparkle in her big blue eyes when she approached one in particular. Then he stepped to the saleslady and told her they would take the one she’d lingered over.

Elizabeth whirled around. “What did you just do?”

“I chose a crib.”

“Why didn’t I get to choose?”

“You did. I saw the way you were looking at that one.”

“But—”

He ignored her and turned back to the saleslady. “We’ll take it.”

Elizabeth huffed.

“What else can I get you today?” the saleslady asked.

Elizabeth answered for him. “Nothing else. This will be all.”

“I believe the lady asked me the question, Liz.” He gave the

older woman his full attention. "What would you recommend?"

She offered some suggestions, including bedding and a musical animal mobile for over the bed, pads for over the sheets, and springs to replace the rollers on the bed.

"I'll take it."

"All of them?" the saleslady asked Jack.

"Yeah, all of them."

Elizabeth glared at Jack. She knew what he was up to. "I will not participate in this!"

"That's fine. Why don't you go on to the boy's department and pick out Brady's clothes?"

"He doesn't need any clothes."

"We'll see."

Instead she sat down in the comfortable chair they had for customers and took Jenny out of the pouch across her chest. When the baby started to fuss, she gave her a bottle, all the time ignoring what that difficult man was doing.

Jack was having the time of his life. When he and the saleslady had rounded up everything, he asked what else they would need.

"Won't your wife want to help?"

He didn't bother correcting the woman. "No, she doesn't care. Let's pick out some pretty clothes for Jenny."

"But won't your wife be mad at you?"

"That makes making up a lot more fun," he said with a wink.

She gave a girlish giggle and went to work again. In no time she had a pile of pink in front of him.

“Okay, I think we’ve finished,” Jack said. “You’ll have them sent to Pickup for us, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course. It’s been a real pleasure, sir. I wish you and your wife all the happiness in the world.”

“Thank you.” He bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

“Are you finished now?” Elizabeth asked him as he approached her. “Jenny wants to go home.”

Jack chuckled. “I suppose she told you that?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

“I am not!”

He just grinned at her and said, “Ask Jenny what she wants to do.”

Elizabeth pouted. “You needn’t make fun of me.”

“Right. Let’s go.”

When they reached the door to leave the store, he suddenly stopped. “Oh, Liz, I need to go to another area to get something for Brady. Tom asked me to pick out something special for him.”

She frowned, but she couldn’t say no to a special gift from a grandpa. “All right. And I should tell you that I don’t like to be called Liz.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He tipped an imaginary hat. “What size does Brady wear?”

“Size six.”

“Ah, I thought he was big for his age.”

“Yes, he... What are you buying?”

“Why don’t you find a seat for you and Jenny?”

“You won’t be long, will you?”

“As long as it takes to find what I’m looking for.”

“But—” She cut off when Jack walked away. Arguing was useless.

She sat back and watched him wander around the boy’s department. He wouldn’t be too long, she was sure.

But she was curious when he gathered a saleslady to follow him around. She gave an exasperated sigh.

After about half an hour, he finally returned.

“We have only one more stop,” he said as he pulled Elizabeth toward the adjacent department.

When she saw the ladies’ clothes she pulled up short. “No. We have nothing to buy here!”

“Yes, we do. If it’s important for Tom to take you to church, then you should accommodate him. That’s all I’m asking. Pick out a dress for church.”

She finally agreed. Checking the prices, she went to the sales rack. As she did so, Jack unfastened the halter that she’d used to carry Jenny around.

“What are you doing?” she gasped as she felt her halter come undone.

“I’m making it easier for you. You’ll have to try on the clothes.”

“But—”

“Yes, I can handle little Jenny by myself.”

Against her better judgment she picked out five dresses and let the saleslady take her to a dressing room.

“Oh, there are some clothes already in this dressing room,” Elizabeth pointed out.

“Yes, your husband chose those dresses. He said you were to come show him all the clothes.”

She shut the door gently, resisting the urge to slam it. Jack could try whatever he wanted, but he wouldn't get his way.

Jack grinned when the saleslady told him she didn't think his wife would be coming out. “Good. We need to get started.”

With the woman's help, he chose an array of clothes and shoes.

About that time, Elizabeth came out of the dressing room carrying her choices. Jack met her. “You didn't come out and show me any of the outfits.”

“No, I didn't.”

“You didn't choose any of the outfits I picked out.”

“No, I didn't like them.”

He looked at her with narrowed eyes. “You didn't even try them on, did you? That's okay. We'll buy them anyway.”

“No! I'll...I'll go try them on.”

“And come out and show me?”

“Yes, I'll come out and show you.” She said that with her teeth gritted.

“Good. Jenny and I will wait for you to appear.”

He sat down in the chair and waited. Once she went in the dressing room, he handed his card to the saleslady. She charged

all the things he'd bought and placed it all in closed bags to be sent to Pickup.

In the meantime, Elizabeth had come out in several of the dresses. Jack knew he'd gotten her size and coloring right; she looked beautiful in all of them.

When she finished all the outfits he'd chosen, she came out with her coat on.

"Happy now?" she asked him.

"You didn't like any of them?"

"I don't need any of them," she replied, taking Jenny from him and putting on the harness. "Let's go get the dress I chose and go."

Jack shook his head. "I'll go pay for the dress but we're not going home yet. We've got to have lunch first. I'm starving."

"But—"

"Jenny's hungry." He flashed her a pearly white grin. "She told me."

He got his way, of course.

Elizabeth groaned as she realized he'd gotten his way the entire day. Starting from pancakes at breakfast to shopping to lunch.

She was never so grateful as when they got in his truck later that afternoon.

"Just stay here," Jack told her when they pulled up to the loading dock in the rear of the store. "I'll get them to put everything in the back."

Everything?

All she bought was one dress and a crib, plus the special gift he'd picked out for Tom to give Brady. How long could that take?

As she waited what seemed like a half hour, Jenny fell asleep. Her own eyes felt heavy and she closed them.

Jack went into the shipping room. He waited until he was sure Elizabeth had fallen asleep, then he asked for help in loading his purchases. He cautioned the men not to make noise.

His ruse was successful.

He was smiling when he eased the pickup out of the parking lot.

Once he was on the road, Elizabeth stirred. "Why didn't you wake me?" she asked, looking around.

"No need. Everything's taken care of." Jack had to wipe away the smile on the face.

She prepared a bottle for Jenny and had it ready when the baby woke a few miles from the ranch.

As soon as he put the truck in Park, Jack came around and helped her out. "I'll bring the purchases up later."

"All right. I...I should say thank you."

"No need," he said with a shrug. "It was my pleasure."

Pleasure, indeed.

Once Jenny had eaten and fallen asleep, Jack suggested that Brady show his mom the puppies in the barn. She hesitated, then agreed once Brady had told her how much he missed her when she was gone.

As soon as they left, Jack figured he had a half hour to get things in place. He started with Brady's purchases, removing tags and putting things in the dresser and closet. Then he went to Elizabeth's room. The new underwear and clothes filled three drawers, and her closet took all the dresses on hangers and the shoes and high heels in neatly stacked boxes.

He had fifteen minutes left to fill Jenny's room. After putting away her shoes and coats he set up the baby monitor and mounded disposable diapers beside the bed. Then he ran downstairs and put the bed sheets and clothes in the wash as the saleslady had suggested.

Grabbing his tool set on the way back up, he started setting up the crib. That's where Elizabeth and Brady found him when they came in.

"What did my grandpa get me from town, Jack?" Brady whispered.

Jack replied in a matching tone. "It's hanging in the closet."

Elizabeth followed Brady as he bolted to his room.

She was back in a few minutes, a scowl on her face.

"Why did you buy him a sport coat and dress slacks?" She lowered her voice the moment she remembered her sleeping baby.

"Tom wanted Brady to be able to go to church with him."

"But I don't think that was necessary."

Jack merely shrugged his shoulders and went back to the crib setup.

“What else did you buy?” Elizabeth mused aloud as she began to look around the room. She was fuming. Here she thought she’d managed to pull one over on Jack, and instead he’d been the sly fox. But when she noticed the baby monitor on the dresser, she couldn’t stop the smile.

Jack must have seen her face soften because he said, “I thought you might enjoy the diapers even more.”

“You bought diapers?”

He nodded to the bedside and the closet.

She found two boxes of larger-size ones in the closet. On the trip she’d used disposable diapers but they were about to run out. Without cash she figured she’d have to resort to cotton ones again. But not now.

Thanks to Tom. And Jack.

She turned to him and said thanks.

He grinned at her. “Glad to hear that I did something good.”

“I didn’t mean you—” Chastised, she hung her head. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t very nice about shopping today, but you were good to me.”

“Um, don’t praise me too much,” he muttered.

“Why not? You bought some things that Jenny needs.”

“I hope so.” After a minute he said, “You’d better go put the wash in the dryer.”

“What wash?”

“Jenny’s sheets and blankets.” He hesitated, then added, “And a few other things.”

She didn't bother asking for an explanation. Running down the stairs, she went to the laundry room to see what was going on. When she opened the washing machine, she found a barrelful of outfits, blankets, sheets. She put all the laundry into the dryer and went back upstairs.

"You did an interesting job of shopping, didn't you?"

He looked up at her standing in the doorway. "Yeah, the saleslady was really good."

"Yes, I see she really earned her commission. Though I'm not sure Jenny will be little long enough to wear all of this."

"Tom wanted the best."

"Yes, I guess so."

After a moment she asked, "Did you put my dress in my room?"

"Um, yeah, I did, but could you help me with this last piece? I need another pair of hands to finish this crib."

She knelt down beside him and held the bar sides while he worked them into the ends. This close to him, she noticed his muscular forearms and strong hands. Against her better judgment she let her eyes travel up his arms to his neck and face. Was he wearing cologne on his neck, or was that woody scent his own? It seemed to suit him. She could easily picture him out on his horse, swinging his Stetson as he rounded up cattle.

He turned to her then, and she was struck by the blueness of his eyes. Was this the first time she noticed their color? A blue so unlike her own, more like the sky on a clear Oklahoma day.

“Okay, now we have to stand the crib up.”

His voice broke into her daydream, and she hurried to her feet to follow his order.

When they had the crib upright, Jack pushed it and watched it rock gently. “Another suggestion from the saleslady.”

She nodded in approval. “That’s nice, Jack. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Elizabeth.”

Their eyes lingered on each other a little too long, and she suddenly felt uncomfortable. “I...I’m going to check on my dress,” she said as she went to the door.

“Uh, Elizabeth, you might... Don’t be mad at me, okay?”

She stopped. “Why do you think—” Standing akimbo, she assumed a menacing tone. “Jack Crawford, what did you do?”

He shrugged. “It’s just a few extra things.”

She ran for her room.

Jack went downstairs, as if in search of cover.

Brady caught up to him after coming out of Tom’s room. “Thank you, Jack.”

“For what, Brady?”

“Grandpa said you picked out all those clothes for me.”

“Now you have extra things so your mom won’t have to do so much laundry.” He hunkered low so that his eyes were level with the boy. “Do me a favor, Brady, and let’s not tell your mom just yet.”

That’s when they heard Elizabeth scream.

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