

The Cowboy's Baby Blessing

Deb Kastner

&

Her Unexpected Cowboy

Debra Clopton



LOVE INSPIRED
INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

**THE COWBOY'S
BABY BLESSING**

Deb Kastner

Chapter One



Rachel Perez was looking for a man, not a monkey.

And she was most definitely *not* looking for a date, unlike many of the other single ladies scattered across the lawn at the First Annual Bachelors and Baskets Auction in Serendipity, Texas. What better way to nab themselves a bachelor for romantic reasons than a bachelor auction?

But that was *so* not Rachel.

No, not even close.

Rachel was in the market for a guy who was handy at fixing things—and she needed him, like, yesterday. She needed someone to tear down the well-used play set in her backyard and replace it with something new and to government specifications. The recertification status of the day care she ran out of her home depended on picking the right man for the job.

That was why she was glad that her town had chosen this particular type of “bachelor” auction to raise funds to build a senior center for the town—an auction that wasn’t actually about getting dates with bachelors at all.

The Bachelors and Baskets Auction had started out

with the idea of hosting only true bachelors, but because the auction was for such an important cause, married men had jumped on the bandwagon, as well. Every man had his own unique skill set to offer to the crowd.

Making the auction a full-town event had also opened the bidding to a wider range of individuals. Single and married women alike were encouraged to bid on the men of their choice to help them with whatever projects needed doing around their homes and ranches.

Rachel suspected there would be a lot of husbands washing dishes and folding many loads of laundry before this day was done.

And determined not to be outdone by the men, the ladies in Serendipity had soon added their own contributions to the auction—loaded picnic baskets as a prize for the fellows they won. Virtually everyone in town was involved at some level. That was just the way the folks in Serendipity were—generous to a fault and ready with any excuse to get together and have a celebration. And willing to buckle down and put in good work, too, when it was needed. Surely there'd be someone perfect for the job of fixing up her outdoor play area for the kids in her care.

She intended to be picky about her choice. Someone older with lots of experience.

Even so, she had to admit she was amused by former army corporal Seth Howell's grand entrance. He might be too young and flighty to fulfill her requirements, but he was admittedly fun to watch.

At a full run, Seth banked his feet off one tree trunk before swinging from the branches of another. He hurdled over a bench and backflipped onto the platform where the auction was being held.

Jo Spencer, the redheaded owner of Cup O' Jo's Café, second mother to most of the town, as well as self-appointed auctioneer of this event, cackled with delight at his antics. She put a hammer in his grasp so he could continue to entertain the audience by displaying his abilities and showmanship.

He swung it around in circles and jabbed it a couple of times like a rapier, then posed like a well-built statue of a carpenter, showing off the sinews of his muscular biceps. Seth was shorter and leaner than some of the other cowboys Rachel had seen auctioned off so far—like the gigantic McKenna brothers, who towered over most of the crowd, but Seth was clearly in prime shape.

“Now, you can see for yourself, folks, what a unique specimen we have right here,” Jo began. “He is ready and willing to help you with whatever odd jobs you’ve got planned for him, and you can be certain he will be adding his own brand of fun to the mix.

“Doesn’t that sound lovely? Now, don’t be deceived by his incredible physical prowess. Seth is not just a good-looking hunk of a man—he has a brain, to boot. You may not know this, but Seth is the fellow who single-handedly designed and built the new playground in the park. The man has *skillzzz*.”

“Jo’s right.” Lizzie Emerson, Rachel’s best friend, elbowed her in the ribs and grinned like she’d just pulled off a major prank. “That guy is cute *and* talented. And he couldn’t be more perfect. He made the play set at the park. You need a play set built. He can do that—and so much more. Maybe one of your *odd jobs* could be for him to take you out for dinner.”

Rachel locked gazes with her sixteen-year-old daughter, Zooeey, and rolled her eyes. “For someone else,

maybe, but I'm not looking for a date. You know perfectly well that all I'm looking for is a handyman to help bring my day care up to snuff before the next inspection. I don't have time for a romantic relationship even if I wanted one. Which I don't," she added when Lizzie's eyes glowed with mischief. "Even if I was looking for a date, I wouldn't try to find him at a bachelor auction. No—he's not the one for me."

Which was too bad, really. With what she now knew of Seth's background, she might have considered bidding on him, even if she had to put up with an occasional goofy antic. She'd seen the amazing wood-and-pipe structures he'd built for the kids in the park. She could easily imagine a similar structure gracing her backyard and replacing the well-worn swing set and climbing tower she now possessed.

But thanks to Lizzie and Zooley, bidding on Seth was out of the question, with the pressure she'd be under to make her work with him some kind of romantic rendezvous. The new playground in the park was nice, but under the circumstances, it was not enough to tempt her to make an offer on him.

Too much trouble, with a capital *T*.

"Which one of you pretty ladies is going to open the bidding on this handsome fellow?" Jo called, looking out into the audience. "Grab those pocketbooks and bid as generously as you can. Our senior center is just awaitin' to be built with the money we raise here today, and Seth's worth every dime you spend, don't you think?"

Zooley laughed and snatched the three crisp one-hundred-dollar bills Rachel had tucked in her hand, waving one of them in the air so Jo would see.

"One hundred dollars!"

“*What* do you think you are doing?” Rachel snapped, enunciating every word as she frantically reached for her daughter’s wrist.

Zoey danced away, laughing in delight.

Lizzie offered a complicit grin. “We are buying you a bachelor. Which you desperately need, by the way. You need a *man* in your life, at least as much as you need a handyman. We know it, and so do you, if you’re being honest with yourself.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, you two. Didn’t you listen to what I just said?” She was relieved when elsewhere on the lawn someone bumped the bid up to \$125.

“Seth is the best of both worlds,” Zoey pointed out. “You aren’t going to find a better handyman out there when it comes to building playhouses.”

Her statement might be valid, but Rachel wasn’t about to concede. Not since the whole *both worlds* thing came into play with them. Dealing with a pair of matchmakers could lead only to embarrassment, for her and for Seth. She needed to nip this in the bud, right now. She scurried to make a mental list of reasons Seth wouldn’t work out for her.

She wasn’t coming up with much.

“I don’t want—” she started to say, but her daughter interrupted her.

“Seth will be good for you, and he’s the exact right fit for repairing your play equipment at the day care. No more arguments.”

At the moment Rachel couldn’t think of any, other than that Zoey’s idea of the perfect candidate and hers were as different as night from day. As with so many things lately, this was just going to have to be another topic on which they couldn’t seem to see eye to eye.

"One fifty for Seth!" Zooley shouted, squealing in delight when Jo pointed to her and acknowledged her bid.

"Zooley Maria Josephina Perez. Stop bidding and give me back my money this instant."

"I always know I'm in trouble when my mom uses my full name," she told Lizzie. "I think that's how she decided what my name would be when I was born."

"Zooley Maria Josephina Perez, get out of that tree before you fall and break your neck!" Zooley quipped.

Rachel sighed inwardly. If only it were that simple. Raising a teenager was much more difficult than having a good name to scold them with. For the scolding to work, the teenager first needed to be willing to listen to what the mother had to say.

Zooley's words were meant as a joke, but Rachel's heart tightened just a little. She loved seeing Zooley happy and carefree as she was acting today, focused on something that she genuinely seemed to believe would make her mother happy, but lately that had been the exception to the rule. It wasn't even funny to *jest* about Zooley getting into trouble—not when it was happening in fact, and all too often lately. And though they'd always been close, nothing Rachel said to her daughter seemed to get through to her at all anymore.

"It's for a good cause," Lizzie reminded Rachel, redirecting her attention to the stage.

"Yes, of course it is. To raise funds to build the senior center. I'm aware of that, as is everyone else who has come out today."

"No," Lizzie replied tartly. "The senior center is important, of course, but I was referring to finding you a single guy who is as good for your social life as he is for your day care. It could happen."

Rachel opened her mouth to protest once again, but Lizzie held up her hands to stop her.

“You heard Jo. Seth built the new playground in the park. You’re looking for a man to spiff up your playhouse and swing set. Face it, girl. Seth Howell is exactly the man you need for the job. That he’s nice on the eyes is purely going to be a side benefit.”

Maybe he was the best man for the playhouse job, and he was rather handsome, but Rachel wasn’t going to dig herself any deeper by admitting she privately agreed with her friend.

The guy was good-looking. If he was hoping to get a date out of this, he deserved to have that chance—but not with her. She would not embarrass Seth by being the high bidder when clearly there were any number of pretty young ladies spread out over the green seeking his undivided attention in far more interesting ways than anything she could offer.

She was confident he wouldn’t want to be stuck with a woman who had long since exited the dating scene and who had nothing more on her mind than getting her play equipment recertification-ready.

The bidding war on Seth, who had passed the hammer back to Jo and was currently amusing the crowd by walking on his hands, was inching up in twenty-five-dollar increments. Her daughter had, thankfully, stopped participating in the back-and-forth volley, letting the younger women who *really* wanted social time with Seth fight it out between them. Rachel had brought her hard-earned cash with the intent to bid on one of Serendipity’s best handymen or weekend do-it-yourselfers, most of whom were old or married or both, and she was fine with that. Better than fine—even if none of them

had been the one who'd built the playground in the park. She *definitely* didn't care that none of them could hold a candle to Seth's youthful good looks, even an upside-down Seth whose blood was rushing to his face.

When the bidding finally passed the \$300 mark, the knots in Rachel's shoulders relaxed. He was officially out of her budget now, so there'd be no more nonsense about Seth Howell. She would wait and bid on another man who would be willing and able help her spiff up her day care without putting crazy romantic ideas into her daughter's and best friend's heads.

Now that she was legitimately out of the running for Seth, she was beginning to enjoy watching the excitement the young, eager women were currently bringing to the auction. It was kind of cute, actually, seeing the hope and excitement in their expressions as they bid.

Eventually, the bidding stalled at \$375. A happy seventy-five dollars more than Rachel could afford, thankfully.

"Going once," Jo announced. She bobbed her head so her red curls bounced and hovered her gavel over the makeshift podium. "Going twice."

Jo paused, her gaze spanning the green. She had just raised her gavel for the crack of a sale when Zooey spoke up.

"Four hundred," she announced brightly.

"Wait, what?" Rachel said aloud.

Zooey knew perfectly well how hard Rachel had had to scrape the bottom of the barrel for the \$300 she'd collected to bid, and even then only because the need for a senior center was so great and because she could justify the remodeling work as a business expense.

And now she was going to be out another hundred?