



INSPIRATIONAL CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

Blue Jean Bayou

JANIS JAKES

A cabin in the pines.
A cowboy with a past.
One chance to rewrite her future.

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Dedication

To the Lord, for He is so very good.

A MAN'S HEART DEVISETH HIS WAY: BUT THE
LORD DIRECTETH HIS STEPS. PROVERBS 16:9,
KJV

CHAPTER 1

The cabin lay deep within the Piney Woods of East Texas on forty acres of tree-shrouded solitude. Autumn was Jenna's favorite time of year at the family cabin. Expansive skies crested patches of swampy terrain. The scent of pine intermingled with the musty smell of rich, moist earth, and created an odd but familiar aroma.

She sat alone in her father's well-worn canoe, floating aimlessly about the glistening green pond. She imagined him sitting across from her, baiting his hook with barely a word spoken. She could almost hear the whirr of the fishing line, and then the plop of his lure as it landed in the perfect spot.

Life wouldn't be the same without him.

The sound of a vehicle drew her gaze to the cabin's gravel driveway. A white pickup stopped near the back porch—probably the contractor she was scheduled to meet. A tall man wearing jeans, a bulky brown jacket, and a western-style hat slid out.

Jenna reached for the oar on the bottom of the

canoe to head toward the dock. Her eyes widened and her heart lurched. More than an inch of water wet her fingertips and sloshed about the heels of her tennis shoes. She stared, momentarily paralyzed, as more water bubbled in from a small hole in the bottom, spilling into the canoe's belly.

A black plug floated near the hole. She grabbed the plug and shoved it into the space, only to have it slip right through the opening and out into the pond waters.

Frantic thoughts bounced about her mind. At this rate, the canoe would sink in a matter of seconds. She could swim for the dock and make it, but what lay beneath the green waters? Fish, turtles, snakes, and possibly even—

Gators? Jenna cringed. She couldn't imagine a more grisly encounter.

She inched her rear to the seat's edge, shoving the oar into the pond and slicing forward with hard, fast strokes. The windless day did nothing to help, but neither did it hinder. The water continued to inch upward about her shoes.

Don't panic. You can make it. Don't jump. You'll regret it. Keep paddling.

Water bubbled in faster. Her heartbeat pounded in her eardrums. A silent prayer burst through her brain: *Lord! Help!*

A flash caught her eye as she saw the man in the cowboy hat sprinting toward the dock. She wanted to cry out, but fear strangled any words before they left her throat.

“Paddle faster,” he yelled.

Her shoulders and arms burned. How much faster did he think she could paddle? The water had risen to her ankles. The canoe grew heavier and harder to row with every passing millisecond.

“Grab the rope!” He tossed a blue nylon rope her direction.

She dropped the oar into the water at her feet, catching the rope on the first try.

“Tie it to the handhold!”

The burn in her arms inched downward to her fingers. There was no time to think about the pain. All she could do was react. She wound the rope about the wooden handhold near the canoe’s bow. Now the hem of her jogging pants was soaked and water squished between her toes.

“Get your hands off the rope,” he ordered.

She lifted both palms into the air in surrender. “Hurry!”

The man pressed a button on a pulley, and the rope began reeling her toward the dock like a heavy fish caught on a hook. The whirring sound let her know to keep her hands away.

When mere inches separated the canoe from the wooden dock, Jenna stood up. The man reached downward, and she grabbed his hand, leaping onto the ladder. With trembling legs, she climbed up, semi-stumbling into a hard chest before regaining her balance and firm footing.

“That canoe is not safe,” she exclaimed the obvious. “It shouldn’t be anywhere near the water.

And whoever plugged the hole did a lousy job.”

“Are you OK?” Dark, coffee-hued hair, a little too long, curled about the collar of his flannel shirt and brown corduroy jacket. His face appeared freshly shaved. The scent of him reminded her of hay and leather, a warm but sweet smell that quickened her senses.

Compassion lingered within deep-set brown eyes, tugging upon a distant chord of familiarity. Jenna looked at him harder. A vague memory stirred.

She pushed her hair over her shoulders, blinking away the heat of fear-laden tears before they could fall. “Do we know each other?”

He grinned, showing a faint dimple in his chin. “Magill Bridge. You were in second grade, and I was in third. We promised each other we’d marry, live in a tree house, and adopt a monkey.” He chuckled. “We even shared a grape popsicle to make it official.”

Heat seared her cheeks. He’d recalled that moment entirely too well. “Creed Johnson. Right?”

She had to make sure. This Creed Johnson didn’t look like the nine-year-old Creed Johnson she’d promised to marry two decades ago. The Creed she remembered was about her height, as thin as a rail with a higher-pitched voice, and arms as long and stringy as her own. Nothing like this tall, handsome cowboy with the deep voice, muscled chest, and masculine presence.

“You look the same,” he said with an admiring twinkle in his eye.

Laughter slipped from her lips as one hand rose to

sit on her hip with a bit of playful sass. "So...I still look eight years old?"

He was quick to catch up. "Not even close. But your hair was the giveaway. Once a ginger, always a ginger."

"Not necessarily. When's the last time you were in a hair salon?"

"Never. I'm more of a barber shop type."

She crossed her arms. "After all these years, you never left Shelton's Cove?"

"I left plenty of times." He shrugged. "But I kept coming back until one day I finally decided to stay."

"Kind of like my dad."

"Exactly like your dad."

Her dad. The man who talked in five-word sentences. The man who knew as much about braiding a little girl's hair as repairing a broken lawn mower. And, the man who'd set the bar so high, no man on earth could come close.

"Dad mentioned Johnson's Remodeling. But he never mentioned you," Jenna said.

"Guess he wanted to surprise you."

She couldn't tell if Creed was serious or joking, and with her dad, who knew what he was really thinking. While her father was loving and kind, his communication skills weren't the best. They never had been. She'd always told herself he was from a different era and cut from a different cloth: few words, strong faith, quiet courage. She wished there were more men like him.

"I just got here this morning. The last time I saw

my dad—" Words stuck in her throat.

"Sam didn't like living so far from his kids but didn't want to leave Shelton's Cove. Especially as he got older." He drew his hat off his head. "He was a good person. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." Her gaze shifted toward the canoe. "He'd be pretty angry with me right now. I think I ruined his fishing canoe. Along with my new jogging shoes."

"Angry? Naw. I told Sam plenty of times he needed to fix that old thing before some kids came along and took it for a joy ride. Can't very well blame you for that. I even offered to fix it for him, but he wouldn't let me. He was stubborn in some ways. Said a plug would work just as good." A grin slid across his features. "Sure wish he was here so I could tell him, 'I told you so.'"

"Seems like you knew my dad pretty well." Her father had never mentioned Creed, but then again, he never mentioned anyone.

She'd known Creed and his older siblings from her family summer vacations at the cabin. At some point, his family had moved across town, too far for a kid to walk, and she didn't dare ask her dad to take her to see him. Instead, she'd assumed she'd never see him again. Over time, she'd forgotten he even existed, and assumed he did the same when it came to her.

"You could say so. We played shuffleboard together at the VFW on Friday nights," Creed said.

"So, you're a veteran, too?" she asked.

"Two tours in the Middle East. Infantry."

Already, Jenna liked Creed and could see why her dad liked him, too. He was friendly, laid back, and seemed comfortable in his own skin. Not too different from the boy she'd befriended more than two decades earlier.

"I'm glad you came when you did," Jenna said. "I almost took an early afternoon dip, along with who knows what's inside that old pond."

The semi-oblong pond spread across three acres, surrounded by rocks, grass, weeds and several clumps of trees. Her father had paid professionals to dig the hole when he'd first bought the place, spending a small fortune to make sure it held water and was well-stocked.

"Turtles, catfish, bass, and maybe a water snake or two. Course, your tennis shoes are ruined. Even after they dry, they'll stink like pond water for the rest of your life." His phone buzzed, and he answered. "Hey, Deb." Several seconds of silence were followed by, "That sounds great. I'll be there. Anything you want to fix works for me. Except liver and onions. I'd rather starve than eat that again." As soon as he ended the call, he glanced back toward the cabin. "Ready to talk about your project?"

Jenna started down the short path leading to the front porch. The cool air felt even more so with her feet and pants damp, making her ready to get inside. "I made a list." She half expected him to groan, but he held his poise.

He stopped in his tracks as a flock of birds flew over, looking upwards to the treetops, and then back

toward the pond. "Sam really loved this place."

"Me, too. We made great vacation memories here before he decided to make it his forever home. I wish we could keep the place, but—"

Creed blinked. "He told me he'd left the cabin to his kids. You're not selling it, are you?"

"Yes. I mean—" Jenna glanced away, not wanting to hold his bold stare. "We all live too far away to visit very often. The property deserves someone who'll take good care of it and make great vacation memories here, too, or even live here. None of us can do that."

He shook his head, the toe of his boot shuffling dirt around. "Sam would sure be disappointed to hear that news. I think he expected the place to stay in the family."

A burn settled over her chest. "I'd like to keep the cabin and the land, but it doesn't make sense."

Why was she explaining herself to Creed Johnson? She even sounded apologetic. Maybe it was because she really did wish she could keep the place. But how often could she realistically visit from New York?

Her brother lived in Japan, handling budgeting for a major film company in Tokyo. Her sister lived in Washington, where she and her husband raised organic apples on a family farm. The place deserved better than what any of them could give.

He stopped at the cabin's threshold. A frown of disapproval rested upon his forehead. "It's your business. I'm here to give you a remodeling estimate."

She wished he sounded more upbeat. This was already a difficult task for her to handle by herself

without someone adding a heaping helping of guilt.

Creed drew a pad and pen from his jacket pocket. "So, what do you have in mind?"

"I want the place to keep the woodsy cabin feel. That's its charm. But the floors are soft in several places, so I'd like to replace them and the underflooring. The roof is the worst. I noticed my dad had a bucket in the bedroom and one in the hallway where the rain dripped in."

"And another in the guest room closet," he said. "Have you figured out yet that the oven has a glitch. Works a few minutes then shuts off. Sam said he only used the burners, so he didn't mind."

Why wasn't she surprised? She sighed as she tugged off her shoes and peeled off her socks, dropping them on the floor with a soggy slap of wool against wood. "No, and I was counting on using the oven to heat my leftovers. My dad never bought a microwave, said he thought it might scramble his brain."

He grinned. "Yep, I heard that from him, too. Same for cell phones."

She shrugged. "Guess it'll be Myrtle's Café for me."

"It's catfish Friday," he said. "You can't go wrong with Myrtle's catfish. Especially if you add a bowl of banana pudding as a closer." He glanced down the hall. "What about the bathroom? What do you want to do in there?"

"Everything. The place hasn't seen an update in decades."

He nodded as he turned and headed back toward the front door, stopping in the living room area. "I'll bring tile and flooring samples to choose from tomorrow."

Her index finger tapped her chin in contemplation. "What do you think about the windows? They're old and single panes. Probably drafty and super expensive electric bills."

The windows were a beautiful focal point, even if they did show their age. They swept across the entire front of the cabin, offering a panoramic view of the surrounding trees, nearby pond, and visiting wildlife.

"Sam always said the windows rattled when the wind blew, but why spend money on new ones when he could pull on a sweater and an extra pair of socks."

She shook her head though amusement lingered along the edges of her lips. "Frugal to a fault."

"You could get energy efficient windows but in a bronze frame to make them less noticeable against the cedar exterior. I'd also suggest a fresh coat of sealant on the outside to keep the wood protected. That's the one thing Sam was adamant about—did it every year."

"Bronze frames sound perfect and fresh sealant sounds great." She bobbed her head with a quick smile. "OK, that's enough to get started. Send me an estimate, and I'll run it past my brother and sister."

Creed Johnson had the job. Her father had insisted on hiring Johnson Remodeling for any needed repairs. He'd made a special point of leaving a note with his attorney to pass along to the family after his death. Still, it didn't feel like due diligence without something

in writing. She was used to running a business, and not on a handshake and a smile.

He scribbled another note on his pad. "I can't remember the last time I saw Caroline or Logan. How're they doing? Last I heard from Sam, your brother was handling financials for some foreign film company and your sister was raising kids and growing apples."

"Pretty much the same. They'll be here in three or four weeks, but neither can stay long. Maybe you could stop by to say hello." She ran her finger over a windowsill, deciding she'd spend the afternoon doing some serious dusting. "It's apple harvest time for Caroline, and Logan's employer is in the middle of film production. He said he lost his assistant last week and now he's got to handle all the financial reporting himself."

"Guess you'll be the one in charge then." He flipped his pad closed, dropping it into his shirt pocket along with the pen. "Your dad loved to talk about his kids. He said you were some sort of New York artist. I know he was pretty proud of you."

"I'm a graphic artist, not a canvas type of artist."

She wouldn't bother explaining that she owned the graphic design company and had more than twenty employees, including three company leaders who helped keep them on the right track. The days of creativity were almost a memory. Now her typical days included client meetings, community relations, analyzing financials, and solving issues others didn't have the bargaining chips to solve.

Her agency continued to earn recognition for work, but she couldn't remember the last time she'd designed anything remotely artistic. Her team earned, and deserved, the credit. Her role was to keep a roof over their head and the paychecks rolling, which she did very well.

He shook his head and chuckled. "Life's funny. I always remembered you with pigtails, a ball cap, and scraped-up knees from all the trees you liked to climb. Never pictured you as a city girl."

She couldn't remember that child, though she'd known her, too. Even the picture of her was fuzzy nowadays. That was forever ago, before she wanted to run far away from all that was familiar and make a name for herself in a place that was more than a smudge on a map.

"I still wear pigtails. I just wear them in Central Park during my morning jog."

He tilted his chin ever so slightly, a faint crinkling coming to the outside of his eyes. "I remember looking forward to your family's summer visits because that meant I'd get to see you." A chuckle rumbled within his chest. "Talk about a crush."

She remembered feeling the same about him. A strange sensation bubbled up from the inside, something she'd not expected. Maybe it was the way he was looking at her. Maybe it was her emotions from reliving too many memories at once. Or, maybe it was simply because he was way too good looking to be standing so close.

Heat warmed her cheeks. "That was a long time

ago.”

“Eons.”

Creed turned toward his truck, muscled legs leading him away in slow motion. Jenna strolled alongside him.

“So, how long are you sticking around town?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. Why?”

“You happen to hit town in time for the Shelton’s Cove Annual Bluegrass Festival. It’ll be all weekend long. It was Sam’s favorite annual event.”

“I remember him mentioning it a time or two...or twenty.” A short laugh left her lips. “He loved that music, but—” She shrugged. “Bluegrass was never really my thing.”

He tugged the truck door open and set his hat in the passenger seat. Long fingers ran through thick hair, smoothing away the hat crease. “I heard they had something special planned in Sam’s memory. He knew all the band members by name. Even played with them from time to time. I’m sure folks would be mighty pleased if you showed up.”

Her mind wavered. Could she handle a tribute to her father so soon? Her mind said no, but her heart said yes. He’d made an impact on many lives, but he was too humble to say so. His compassion often outran his wallet, but Sam Donovan never turned down a soul in need. He seemed to understand, better than most, what mattered in the eternal scheme of life.

The fact someone would do something special in his memory was a moment in time she didn’t want to

miss. "I'd love to come. All I brought with me are jeans. Will that work? Well, and a couple of pairs of jogging pants."

He crossed his arms about his chest, leaning back on his heels. "We're talking bluegrass, not Mozart. Wear jeans. Then you'll be dressed like everyone else in the crowd." He scooted into his truck, chuckling. "You're not in New York anymore. You're in Shelton's Cove, Texas—home of guitar picking, barrel racing, and chili fries."

She smiled, feeling silly and warm at the same time.

"There's a wooden stage set up in the town square, right in the middle of the park grounds. I'll see you there around two o'clock for the opening announcements. It'll be easy to find. Spitting distance from Myrtle's Café."

~*~

Jenna walked away as Creed backed out of the driveway. She'd always been a pretty girl with those wide, sky-blue eyes and cinnamon-hued hair. Now, she was an even prettier woman. Beautiful would be a better description. Couldn't imagine her still single.

Maybe Sam was right about her. She was a workaholic, no matter how many times he'd told her to slow down. Sam also said she was engaged once, but the wedding never took place. He didn't ask why, and Sam never said.

He figured he knew far more about her than she

knew about him. Sam was proud of all his kids, even though he didn't get to see them as much as he would've liked. Creed thought that might've been the reason Sam had taken him under his wing.

Sam had taken him to church, introduced him to Pastor Pedro, and made him feel as though he belonged on this earth. After returning from the Middle East, wounded inside and out, he wasn't sure where he fit in. With so many losses and so much emotional shrapnel, he could barely lift his head. Sam had helped him, and many others like him, regain a sense of normalcy after living for months, sometimes years, in a state of heightened alert.

He wished there was someone like Sam who could be there for Jenna. Part of him wanted to warn her about the stones she would soon turn over. He knew from personal experience that no one liked being blindsided. But another part of him, the part that held his more rational brain, knew that some secrets were not his to share.

He owed Sam his loyalty, not a crush he'd shared a grape popsicle with twenty years ago.