



JOANNA SIMS ROMANCE

PRESENTS



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You’ve gone white as a ghost.”*

Setting: Hospital, Helena, Montana
Circa: Late 1940s

“Sue!” Maggie, her sister-in-law, reached out her hand with a weak smile. “I’m so happy to see you!”

“Maggie.” Sue crossed to the hospital bed and took the outstretched hand into hers. “I’ve been so worried!”

Fate had landed both Maggie and her husband Jed in the hospital at the same time. Jed was in a coma, having been trampled by stampeding cattle, while Maggie was experiencing complications from her pregnancy.

“Come. Sit by me.” Her sister-in-law looked exhausted and the pallor of her skin was pasty. “Everyone is with Jed. I feel so trapped here in this awful bed.”

“How is the baby?” Sue asked.

Maggie put both hands on her rounded stomach. “Babies.”

Instead of feeling happiness for Maggie, Sue felt a horrible sense of dread. If Maggie brought not one but two heirs into the family, when she hadn't managed to have even one child, her husband Jimmy was going to be furious.

“Twins?” she asked the expectant mother.

“Twins.” A pleased nod from Maggie. “Isn't it the most exciting news?”

Sue forced her face to reflect—on the outside at least—a feeling of excitement she wasn't actually experiencing inside. For her, this was the worst news. Moments before they had left for the hospital, she had caught Jimmy stealing the family will from her father-in-law's safe. Jim Brand, the youngest brother and last in line to inherit the family ranch, had hatched a horrible plan to replace the will with a forgery that would fracture Bent Tree Ranch into three homesteads upon Virgil Brand's death. Sue had hoped to convince Jimmy to return the original will to the safe, but now, with the news of twins, there was no way her husband would listen to reason.

“Sue,” Maggie touched her arm. “What's wrong? You've gone white as a ghost.”

Swallowing back a rush of nausea, Sue forced a smile. “I'm fine. Just a little tired from all the commotion, is all. I'd better get this bible to Virgil. He'll be wondering after it.”

She hugged her sister-in-law, then hurriedly left the room with the Brand family bible clutched in her arms. Jimmy had hidden the stolen will in that bible to sneak it out the farmhouse; raised by a preacher father, to Sue, this was a blasphemous act of epic proportion. Until today, she had believed Jimmy to be a God-fearing man. How mistaken she had been.

“Thank you, sweet Sue.” Virgil Brand accepted the heavy bible. “You didn't have any trouble finding it in my study, did you?”

Avoiding eye contact with her father-in-law, Sue shook her head wordlessly.

Virgil lifted up her chin to study her face. “Jim, I think you’d better take your wife home to get some rest. She looks plum wore out. Lord knows we don’t need another Brand laid up in this here hospital.”

“I’m okay, Virgil,” she was quick to say with a glance at her husband’s face. “Really, I am.”

Jim put his arm around her and she had to fight the urge to shrink away from his touch. “She’s been mighty busy, what with all the extra responsibilities she’s been taking on. I’ll get her home straight away, Pa.”

Her husband ushered her out of the hospital, the grip on her hand just a little too tight for comfort. On the far side of their truck, out of view, Jimmy pressed her back against the passenger door, pinning her into place.

“What did you tell her?” he demanded, his face so close to hers. “What did you say?!”

“Nothing!” Sue turned her head away from him. “I didn’t say a word! I promise, Jimmy!”

Gripping her chin in his hand, he cranked her head back toward him so she could look into his eyes. Jimmy had always been a little rough around the edges, but he’d never been cruel. But, in this moment, she saw something she had never seen in her husband’s deep blue eyes before: malevolence. Pure malevolence.

“You’d better keep as quiet as a little church mouse, Sue.” Jimmy rubbed his thumb across her lips. “If you know what’s good for you.”