



JOANNA SIMS ROMANCE

PRESENTS



*Two men on horseback rode into sight. If they started cutting cattle from the herd, they were gonna get shot. It was that simple.*

Setting: Bent Tree Ranch, Helena, Montana  
Circa: Late 1940s

---

Rancher Jed Brand belly-crawled up the embankment, shards of rock scraping at his bare forearms, sweat rolling into his eyes. Some no-good son of a biscuit had been rustling Bent Tree cattle, and Jed was determined to catch ‘em. Near the top of the embankment, Jed stopped crawling and popped his head up for a second to scan the horizon.

“You see somethin’?” Buck Barnes had scurried up the hill and dropped to his belly beside him.

“Nothin’,” the rancher muttered as he yanked the bandana off his neck and wiped the sweat out of his eyes.

It was a sweltering summer afternoon and Jed’s mouth was parched; thick saliva, grit, and dust from the trail coated his tongue.

“When I catch ‘em, I’m gonna hurt ‘em. Believe that,” the rancher promised his friend. Bent Tree Ranch covered thousands of miles abutting the Continental Divide. There was always work to do with never enough daylight to get it done. It made him as mad as a wet hornet wasting precious daylight hunting rustlers.

Buck nudged him with his elbow, offering him a flask.

Jed took a long draw on the flask, scowled, swished the liquid around in his mouth, and spat it on the ground.

“Damn it, Buck! That’s water!”

Buck twisted the top back on the flask with a laugh. “What’d you expect?”

The rancher tucked the stock of his rifle in the crook of his shoulder and aimed the barrel at the grazing herd of cattle branded with the Bent Tree mark.

“Whiskey.”

Still chuckling, his friend followed his lead and aimed his rifle. They could be sitting like this for hours with no payoff. They’d been hunting these rustlers for a month and hadn’t found ‘em yet.

“Gonna be a long day, I ‘spect.” Buck said.

“Today’s the day.” Jed rested his finger on the trigger. “I got a feelin’ in my gut.”

Morning bled into afternoon, with the sun beating down on Jed’s back. The longer he roasted like a pig on a spit, the madder he got. They did their time quietly; they’d known each other since they were kids and didn’t need to fill the time with idle talk.

“How’s your hind parts feelin’?” Buck broke an hour of silence. “I noticed you sittin’ a bit tender in the saddle.”

Jed was proud to be a newly married man; he’d eloped with the love of his life, Maggie. His father-in-law, however, decided to show his displeasure with the elopement by pumping Jed’s backside full of buckshot. The worst blessed pain he’d ever felt in his life. That was months ago, and he still couldn’t hardly sit right.

Jed was about to tell Buck as much when he heard voices in the distance. They were deep in Bent Tree land; all the hands were accounted for. No one should be out here.

“Did you hear that?” Buck whispered, his arms tensed, his finger itchy on the trigger.

“Damn right, I did.” Jed whispered back.

Two men on horseback rode into sight, the lower parts of their faces covered by black bandanas. If they started cutting cattle from the herd, they were gonna get shot. It was that simple.

“There they go,” Buck said, his barely audible voice wavering from adrenaline as the two strangers cut the first cow from the herd.

“I’ve got the one on the right,” Jed nodded.

Carefully, willing his hand to stop shaking, Jed pulled back the hammer with his thumb.

“On the count of three,” he told his friend.

They would have one clean shot, one chance to catch these no good rustlers off guard.

At the three count, two rifle shots shattered the quiet of the still air. Startled, the rustlers screamed and yelled and kicked at their horse’s guts to try to get away, while the cattle panicked and began to stampede around them. In the midst of the confusion and chaos, dust from the panicked cattle’s hooves stinging their eyes, Jed and Buck scrambled over the top of the hill, rifles raised, ready to shoot to kill.