



JOANNA SIMS ROMANCE

PRESENTS



*What would happen to his beloved wife, Maggie? Their unborn child?
He couldn't let it end like this.*

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

Rustling cattle was a dead man's game; if you got caught, and you got shot, that was your tough luck. Problem was, it wasn't only the rustler who could get beat down in the process.

"Buck!" Rancher Jed Brand tried to call out to his partner, but all that came out was a weak, raspy whisper.

After a month of searching, they had caught the rustlers. But, during a stampede, right after Jed had yanked one of the rustlers off their horse, a terrified steer knocked him down and stepped on him.

"Buck!" He gave it another try. There was blood in his mouth and he couldn't sit upright. No doubt about it, he was hurt bad.

Lying flat on his back in the dirt, the sweat on his face sizzling in the high noon sun, gnats swarming around him, Jed struggled to tug his revolver out of the holster on his hip. It took all his strength to cock the hammer, lift the gun in the air, and pull the trigger.

As the shot rang out, Jed silently prayed that Buck wasn't dead. It had occurred to him that he might die out here in the farthest corner of Bent Tree Ranch. What would happen to his beloved wife, Maggie? What would happen to their unborn child? He couldn't let it end like this for any of them.

“Jed!”

At the sound of Buck’s voice in the distance, Jed closed his eyes and thanked God. Then, he lifted his revolver and pulled the trigger a second time.

The moment Buck found him among the tall brush, the rancher felt as if he was only alive because of divine intervention.

His best friend dropped to his knees beside him, blocking out the sun.

“How bad you hurt?” Buck’s eyes scanned him from head to toe.

“Bad,” Jed gasped. “Got stepped on.”

They both knew what that meant: he could be bleeding on the inside.

“We gotta get you back to the ranch,” his friend said urgently. “Do’ya think you can walk?”

Hand pressing into his left side to ease some of the sharp, persistent pain, Jed gave a small shake of his head.

“No,” Jed gasped from the pain. “Get me over to that tree so I’m in the shade. I’ll have to wait here while you ride back to get the truck.”

Buck tried several times to help him stand upright, but nothing worked. And he was too heavy for his friend to carry him the distance to the tree.

“You’re gonna have’ta drag me,” the rancher told Buck.

His friend grabbed on to both of his wrists and dragged him over to a nearby tree. Buck did his best to get him comfortable, propping him up against the tree. His friend left for a moment to fetch his canteen.

“Drink this.” Buck held the back of his head while he brought the canteen to his lips.

Jed gulped down the water, coughing a couple of times as he leaned back against the tree.

“Are they dead?” Jed asked of the two rustlers they had caught in the act.

Buck twisted the cap back on the canteen and put it down next to Jed’s leg. “Both of ‘em.”

Jed caught his friend’s eye. “Do we know ‘em?”

“We know one of ‘em,” Buck nodded. “Trip McCready. Never seen the other feller before.”

A wave of nausea crashed over his body before he could respond to the news that a man they had known all their lives had been stealing from them.

“Go!” Jed grabbed his side, his face drained of color. “Go get Maggie!”