



JOANNA SIMS ROMANCE

PRESENTS



*If you don't die up there in that hospital,  
Brand, I'm gonna shoot you myself!*

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

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“Damn you to hell, Jed Brand!”

Maggie Brand had been dozing off next to her husband’s hospital bed when a man’s voice, filled with rage and venom, awakened her.

“What was that?” Ben Brand, her brother-in-law, had been standing guard outside Jed’s hospital room for the better part of the day.

“I heard someone yelling outside the window.” Her heart racing, Maggie stood up, but she didn’t let go of her husband’s hand.

Jed and his best friend Buck had been tracking cattle rustlers at Bent Tree Ranch, the Brand family ranch that abutted the Continental Divide. There had been a gunfight and a stampede; the

two rustlers were dead, and Jed, who had been trampled by one of their steers, had been unconscious, laid up in the hospital, for a week.

Cautiously, Ben looked out the window to the street below. "It's Old Man McCready and a bunch of his ranch hands."

Maggie's grip on her husband's hand tightened. "Why won't he leave us alone? Jed never would have killed his son if Trip hadn't been rustling cattle from Bent Tree!"

"He don't care who's right, Maggie." Ben stayed at the window. "All's he cares about is that his son's dead."

"If you don't die up there in that hospital, Brand, I'm gonna shoot you myself!" old man McCready hollered. "Do ya hear me, Jed? One way or 'nother, yer a dead man!"

Suddenly lightheaded and dizzy, Maggie sunk back down into the chair where she had been holding vigil by her beloved husband's bed. Her free hand went to rest on her pregnant belly, as it always did. Nearly losing her husband had only made a hard pregnancy more difficult; she'd had a horrible bout of morning sickness and abnormal cramping. And, now, her belly was so huge that she needed help getting into her shoes. The doctor was convinced she was carrying twins.

Her voice weak from worry and lack of sleep, Maggie said, "We have to call the law."

"That ain't gonna do no good, Maggie. Not in the long run. McCready's out for blood." Ben stepped back away from the window. "This's gonna get way worse before it gets any better."

Maggie felt a rush of heat all over her body; beads of sweat popped out on her brow, cheeks, and neck. A sharp pain, different than the kicks she had been feeling, ripped through her abdomen. Eyes closed tight, Maggie let go of Jed's hand, clutched her belly and doubled forward with a low moan.

"Maggie!" Ben was at her side, touching her arm.

There was a ringing sound in her ears and her brother-in-law's voice sounded as if it were coming from a million miles away.

"Maggie!" Ben repeated her name when she didn't respond. "What's wrong?"

Maggie reached for Ben's hand, dug her fingernails into the back of his hand, and forced herself upright.

"Get the nurse," she gasped, tears in her eyes. "I think..."

Another sharp pain made her double back over. Terrified, Maggie fought to get the rest of her words out.

“Something’s wrong with my baby!”