



JOANNA SIMS ROMANCE

PRESENTS



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

Jim Brand crouched down in front of his father's safe. His hand was surprisingly steady as he reached for the lock. There wasn't much time; he needed to open the safe, find the will, and then get the heck out of the study without being seen. Not an easy feat with the ranch crawling with house staff and cowhands.

Slowly, carefully, with each soft click of the dial taking him one step closer to his goal, Jim landed on the last number and sucked in his breath. He was about to take his future into his own hands, where it belonged.

"Jimmy?"

Frustrated, Jim snatched his hand back from the safe at the sound of his wife's voice just outside the door.

His heart pounding, his breath shallow, his body perfectly still, Jim didn't answer his wife's call.

"I don't know where he could have gotten off to," he heard his wife, Sue, say to someone else in the hallway. "He knows the whole family is waiting for us at the hospital!"

Jim hated the interruption, but he resisted the urge to continue; in his crouched position, his knees started to ache and beads of nervous sweat ran down his neck onto his collar bone. It seemed like a mighty long time before the sound of his wife's footsteps were far enough away that he felt able to return to his task. If his father hadn't changed the combination to the lock, the safe should open.

"Damn, but I'm good," Jim smiled when the safe door popped open.

His father required order in his life, and his safe reflected that fact. It was easy to locate the will, tucked securely at the bottom of a stack of papers related to Bent Tree. With his eldest son, his favored son, Jed, still in the hospital after being trampled by a stampede of cattle, chances were he'd have at least a day or two to return the will to the safe without detection. That was more than enough to time to have the will copied.

"Jackpot." He scanned the document quickly before refolding it.

Satisfied that he had achieved the first step in his plan, Jim had just closed the safe when he heard rapid footsteps in the hallway. He quickly, quietly, moved to the darkest corner of the room just to the left of the door.

The door swung open, almost hitting him, and his wife breezed into the room and made a beeline for his father's bookshelf, which was stuffed to the gills with leather-bound books of all shapes and sizes. She hadn't seen him in the corner, but she would surely see him on the way back out the door. He only had a split second to make a decision; either way, Sue was about to become involved in his plan.

Like a rattlesnake during a strike, Jim leapt across the room, grabbed his wife from behind, covered her mouth and pinned down her arms. Beneath his hand, Sue cried out in fear, and struggled against his hold on her body.

"Quiet, Sue!" He commanded in a harsh whisper near her ear. "It's me."

When his wife recognized his voice, she stopped her whimpering and struggling. He forced her to walk backward with him toward the open door and didn't plan to let her go until it was securely closed. Once the door was closed, he let Sue go.

Her hands, now free, were pressed into her stomach and her brown eyes were widened with confusion.

“Jim! What are you doing?”

“Hold your judgment, woman.” He loomed over her menacingly. “I’m doin’ what needs doin’.”

The moment Sue recognized the document he was holding, her hands clamped over her mouth, stifling any noise that might want out. They stood in his father’s office, staring at each other, two still figures in the midst of a ranch bustling with activity.

His wife was a plain woman, that was true enough, but she was as smart as most men. It didn’t take her much time to mentally unravel his plan.

Sue’s hands slipped back onto her stomach as if it ached. In a whisper now, she said, “Oh, Jimmy. No.”

Jim grabbed her arm and held it hard. “I’m last in line to inherit this spread, Sue. When Pa dies, we could be kicked off this land without a penny to our name. Is that what you want?”

She shook her head. “Your brothers would never do that to us!”

“Sure they would, ‘cuz I would,” Jim Brand sneered. “Now it’s time for you to decide. You’re either with me, or you’re against me.”