

CHAPTER ONE

SWEETWATER VALLEY, MONTANA TERRITORY. 1870s

Jesse Branson strode across the ranch yard through the late afternoon shadows. Her shoulder-length auburn hair, once tied neatly back into a ponytail, had come loose as she completed her chores, and now a warm breeze blew wisps of hair about her tanned face. A pail of warm milk swinging easily at the end of a sinewy arm, Jesse walked effortlessly, her long legs making short work of the distance between barn and cabin. With her work done, she was looking forward to spending the evening with her lover and daughter.

“Darlin’?” Jesse called into the cabin as she pushed the door open. “Brought some fresh milk for KC.” She stepped inside, surprised to find the cabin dark lit only by the glowing embers in the fireplace. “Jennifer?” She set the milk pail on a table under the window to her left. “Ya can’t have gone too far,” she said as she surveyed the deserted room.

The plain log cabin had a fireplace at each end and a door in the middle of each long side. Between the doors and end walls, windows had been cut into the logs to allow sunlight into what would have otherwise been a rather dark interior.

Jesse smiled. How different the simple cabin seemed since Jennifer had come to live with her. Gone were the rickety chairs and table under the window, replaced by a much studier set. Neatly arranged dishes and cooking pots were stacked on newly made shelves attached to the logs, and foodstuffs — once left in boxes until needed — were arranged in an orderly fashion on more shelves.

At the opposite end of the cabin, the head of the bed remained in its original location — pushed up against a window — but new blankets had replaced the tattered quilts Jesse had inherited from the ranch’s previous owner. The bookcase she had made still occupied the space under the opposite window, only now it held many more books, as Jennifer was also a devoted reader. The dresser, which she had rarely used, now held the carefully folded dresses Jennifer wore when teaching school and extra clothing and diapers for the baby.

The cabin definitely had a different feel to it. It was no longer just the place Jesse came back to after a long day of working on the ranch or in town at the boarding house she owned. The cabin was now a home she shared with the woman she loved and the baby they were raising as their own.

Smiling, Jesse walked toward the door at the back of the cabin.

Sitting outside on the wooden steps, Jennifer Kensington could hear the rancher’s boot heels striking the floor planks as she moved about the cabin. She knew her lover would soon come looking for her.

“Your mommy is back,” Jennifer told the baby in her arms. Sleepy eyes opened wide in response, and the baby’s feet kicked excitedly. “You love her, too, don’t you?” she said to the smiling baby.

“Everything all right, darlin’?” Jesse asked as she walked out of the cabin and sat on the rough steps beside Jennifer.

“Yes.”

“Then what’re you doin’ sittin’ out here?”

“Thinking.”

There was a hint of sadness in Jennifer’s voice, and it concerned Jesse more than a little. “About?”

“KC’s been waiting for you to sing her to sleep.” Jennifer laid the baby in Jesse’s waiting arms.

“Seems to me, she’s mostly asleep already. Ain’t ya, Sunshine?” Jesse lifted the baby to her face, rubbing her nose against KC’s and laughing when the baby giggled. Every time she held KC, the infant they had discovered under a burned and ransacked Conestoga wagon, she was amazed by how much the child looked like Jennifer, sharing the same ginger-colored hair and blue eyes. “I love you, KC. You have sweet dreams tonight.” She kissed the baby’s forehead, then cradled KC in her arms, rocking and softly singing a favorite lullaby. Before long, the baby was sound asleep.

Jennifer reached over to make sure the blanket was tucked snugly around KC, protecting her from the cooling air.

“Want to talk about it?”

Jennifer leaned against Jesse’s shoulder. “I’m not sure.”

Shifting the baby to one arm, Jesse wrapped the other around Jennifer. The women sat watching the sun slowly drop in the west, changing the blue sky to a mosaic of reds and oranges.

“I was thinking about how much my life has changed in the past few months,” Jennifer began quietly. “It seems like only yesterday I was talking Matt into buying me a train ticket to Denver so I could live the life I’ve always dreamed of.”

“And what is the life you dreamed of?”

“To prove I was more than just my father’s chattel, good only for marrying off in some business arrangement. That I was smart and capable and could do something useful.”

“I’d say you prove that every day at the schoolhouse,” Jesse assured Sweetwater’s schoolteacher. “And every day you take care of this baby and me.” When Jennifer remained quiet, Jesse posed a question straight on. “Are you happy, darlin’? Being here, being with me?”

Jennifer sat up to look at her lover. The questions, and the doubt behind them, had caught her completely off guard. “Yes. Why would you ask that?” The rancher’s body tensed. “Do you think I’m not?”

“To be honest, darlin’, you’ve been... Well, I wasn’t sure. I mean, ever since we got back from Bannack, you’ve been kind of quiet. I just...I just thought that maybe you might be...”

“Having second thoughts?”

“Yeah. Somethin’ like that.”

“I’m not. I’m happier now than I’ve ever been. I’m happier than I ever thought I could be.” Jennifer snuggled into the circle of Jesse’s arm.

“Good.” Jesse relaxed and laid her head against Jennifer’s. “‘Cause I don’t know what I’d do if you weren’t.”

“I love you, Jesse. And I can’t think of any place I would rather be than with you.”

“But?”

“But you have to admit that since I arrived in Sweetwater, our lives have been...well, unusual to say the least. First, you got arrested for cattle rustling and almost got hanged. We barely got you out of that and then you got shot. When all of that mess got settled, we rode to Bannack and along the way found KC’s parents murdered. The reverend in Bannack tried to take KC away from us, and the sheriff tried to have us killed. And in the middle of all that — we fall in love, you propose, and we decide to raise KC as our own daughter.”

“When you put it like that, it does seem to have been a tad more than most folks are used to havin’ happen.” Jesse grinned as Jennifer playfully poked her in the side. “But you have to admit, there were good things along with the bad. We found each other and we found KC.”

“Those are wonderful, sweetheart, but are you sure that getting married is the right thing to do?”

“I thought you wanted to get married. Wasn’t that part of your dream, too?”

“Yes. But I just expected I’d meet a—”

“Man?”

Jennifer sighed. “Yes. But Jesse, I didn’t know anything else. I never knew two women could fall in love. In fact, I didn’t know very much about love at all, except what my mother and father had, and I was sure that wasn’t anything I wanted.”

“How do you feel about loving me, darlin’, lovin’ a woman?”

“I don’t think anyone else could make me as happy as you do, Jesse, man or woman. But are you sure two women can get married?”

“Billie said there ain’t no law saying we can’t.”

“I’m...I don’t know if I want to do it in town. I mean, in front of the whole town. Can’t we ask Mayor Perkins to perform the ceremony here? We can have Bette Mae and Ed and Billie come out to the ranch.”

Jesse mulled over Jennifer’s suggestion. Although she thought she understood how Jennifer felt, she was sure she knew her own feelings. “Do you love me?”

“More than anything.”

“Enough to want to be my wife?”

“Yes.”

“I love you, too, darlin’, and I want everyone to know just how much. But if you don’t want us to get married in town, we won’t. It doesn’t matter to me where we do it, just as long as we do.”

“Then,” Jennifer sat up, turning to face Jesse, “let’s get married.”

“That’s my girl.” Jesse beamed at her lover. “What do ya say we put KC to bed and I’ll show you just how happy you make me?” She tried to pull Jennifer back to her, intending to kiss her.

Jennifer stood. “First, you need a bath.” Laughing at the pout forming on Jesse’s face, she added, “I’ll scrub your back.”

“How about you joining me and I’ll scrub yours?”

“How could I possibly turn down such an offer?”

“You can’t.” Jesse stood. Reaching for Jennifer’s hand, she entwined their fingers. Gently tugging Jennifer to her, she pressed her lips against her lover’s. “I love you.”

“I love you more.”

“So’s yer goin’ through with it?” Bette Mae asked after Jesse told her of her talk with Jennifer the night before.

“Is there some reason we shouldn’t?”

The women were in Jesse’s office in the Silver Slipper, the rooming house and saloon Jesse owned in Sweetwater and Bette Mae ran for her. The older woman was more a friend than an employee. KC was sitting in Bette Mae’s lap, happily playing with the little toy horse Jesse had bought for her during their stay in Bannack. Every few minutes she would look toward the office door, hoping to see her momma returning from her walk to the schoolhouse.

“Now don’ go gettin’ yer feathers all ruffled up,” Bette Mae said to calm the rancher. “But ya knows there’s folks in the valley tha’ won’ take kindly ta two of the prettiest girls about these parts gettin’ hitched to each other. Sure ya shouldn’t jus’ keep things the ways they are?”

“What difference does it make if we just live together or we get married? Either way, we ain’t gonna be allowin’ any lonesome cowpoke to come callin’.”

Bette Mae had to think on Jesse’s answer for a minute. “Guess that makes sense. But them lonesome cowpokes still ain’t gonna take kindly to you two marryin’. There’s damn few marryin’ women in this valley as it is, especially since ya sent the workin’ girls packin’ when ya took over the Slipper. Not that I’m complainin’ ’bout that.” She and the other girls who had stayed to work in the Slipper as cooks, maids, and bartender had been more than happy to give up their previous livelihoods. The ones that hadn’t been happy with the changes were provided a one-way stage ticket out of Sweetwater, courtesy of Jesse.

“Reckon they’ll just have to get used to it.”

"Who will have to get used to what?" Jennifer asked as she entered the office. She didn't need to see the scowl on her lover's face to know she wasn't happy about something.

"Bette Mae seems to think the cowboys in the valley will be upset if we get married." Jesse stood to greet her lover with a welcoming hug and kiss. "Someone has been missin' ya, darlin'."

"I've been missing her, too." Jennifer looked over the rancher's shoulder at their daughter who was reaching out for her. "Give your mommy a minute to hug me, sweetie," she told KC, "then I'll come get you."

"Everything all right at the schoolhouse?"

"Yes. I really wasn't expecting it not to be, but I guess I just needed to check it out for myself." The school term had ended several weeks earlier. With their trip to Bannack and being so busy with KC since returning, she had not had a chance to visit the one-room building before now.

"Just had to make sure it was still there, didn't ya?" Jesse teased, but she could understand how Jennifer felt. After winning the Silver Slipper in a poker game, more than once she had found herself just standing in the middle of Sweetwater's only street, staring at the two-story building as if to assure herself that she wasn't dreaming her good luck.

"Something like that." Jennifer smiled, kissing Jesse once more before gently pushing out of her arms to go to KC. "Have you been a good girl?" she asked as she sat beside Bette Mae on the couch and lifted the baby into her arms.

"She's been a right angel," Bette Mae said. She frowned at Jesse. "More than I can say for that one."

"Okay, what is this about the cowboys in the valley?"

"Bette Mae thinks that if I marry you, it'll dash their hopes," Jesse leaned against the front edge of her desk, grinning at the frowning woman, "and hearts."

"I never thought of that." Jennifer leaned back and held KC firmly as the baby stood in her lap, testing the strength of her legs. "Maybe getting married isn't a good idea. I don't want to upset anyone."

Jesse was frustrated with Jennifer's backsliding and upset that Bette Mae was causing it. "Darlin', do you plan on courtin' any of them cowboys?"

"Of course not."

"You plannin' on getting' hitched to any of 'em?"

"Don't be silly."

"Then they're gonna be upset anyway. Us gettin' married shouldn't make that much of a difference."

Jennifer looked at Bette Mae, who shrugged. "Much as it pains me to say so, she does have a point," Bette Mae said. "I jus' think ya should figure on some not takin' too kindly to it happenin'."

"Sweetheart?"

Jesse pushed off the desk. There wasn't enough room on the couch for her to sit beside Jennifer so she knelt in front of her instead. "Darlin', the boys around here didn't like me when I showed up in town with the deed to the Slipper in my pocket. And they didn't like me for clearing out the gamblers and the working girls. They didn't take too kindly to me buying the ranch and startin' a cattle herd. I didn't care what they thought then, and I don't care what they think about me loving you. All I care is that you love me."

"I do love you."

"So do we get married or not?"

Jennifer smiled. "We do."

"It's 'bout time ya made up yer minds," Bette Mae declared gleefully. "I was beginnin' ta think ya'd never get around to it."

Jesse shot Bette Mae a glare, only to catch the twinkle in her eyes. "You was saying all that just to make sure we knew what we were doing," she accused.

"Best ya thinks 'bout it afore than after, when the tittle-tattle gets a-started."

"Anyone says anything and I'll—"

"Jesse," Jennifer placed her hand against her lover's cheek, "promise me you won't do anything. No matter what anyone says."

Jesse leaned into Jennifer's caress. "I can't promise that, darlin'. You'll be my wife, and I won't let anyone say or do anything that hurts you. Or KC." She looked into her lover's eyes. "Don't ask me to." She was pleased when Jennifer nodded.

"Seein' yers down on yers knees anyway, ya goin' ta ask her to marry ya, right and proper?"

"I thought I already had."

"Never hurts ta make sure she knows how ya feel."

Jesse turned back to Jennifer. "Marry me?"

"Yes."

Jesse looked up at the grinning Bette Mae. "Happy?"

"I don' have time to be happy right now." Bette Mae leapt up from the couch, the movement so unexpected that both Jesse and Jennifer jumped in surprise. "I gots me a weddin' ta plan."

"Wait a minute," Jesse called after the woman scurrying toward the office door. "Don't you want to hear..."

"You might as well give up on her." Jennifer laughed. "I don't think we'll be getting much say in *our* wedding plans."

Jesse took Bette Mae's place on the couch. "I'll talk to her."

"Don't."

"No?"

Jennifer scooted over to lean against Jesse. "Don't spoil her fun, sweetheart. I think our wedding may mean more to her than we know."

Remembering the reason behind their recent trip to Bannack, Jesse had to wonder if Bette Mae might be thinking about a lost love, a woman who had married a no-account man and paid for that mistake with her life. "You think she probably wanted the chance to ask Elizabeth about marryin'?"

"Yes." Jennifer sighed. "I'm glad we found each other before we ended up like Elizabeth."

Bette Mae strode back into the office and stood with her hands on her ample hips. "Well, what are ya waitin' for? This here's yer weddin', so's yas might want ta come on out and help us plan it."

"We're coming, Bette Mae." Jesse laughed as the woman tapped her foot impatiently. "But first KC needs her britches changed and a feeding, or she'll be wailing loud enough to raise the roof."

"I can do that," Jennifer offered.

Jesse took the baby. "No, you go on with Bette Mae. I'm pretty sure you know a lot more about planning weddings than I do."

"Ain't tha' the truth," Bette Mae said with a chuckle.

"Don't be long," Jennifer said as she followed Bette Mae out of the room.

"I won't." Jesse reached for the canvas bag on the floor beside the couch that held clean diapers for the baby. "I'm not sure what kind of wedding Bette Mae is goin' ta be fixin' for us, KC," she told the baby as she laid her down on the couch. "But as long as your momma and you are there, that's all I need."

KC smiled and wrapped her fingers around Jesse's much larger one. She pulled the finger to her mouth and sucked on it. "I know you're hungry, Sunshine. Let's get your britches changed, then I bet we can find some milk in Bette Mae's kitchen."

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