

Marshall King scowled at the two cowhands seated across his work desk, Smith with his battered face and Haws with his bloodied hand. *Should have hired a bunch of women instead. Might have had a better chance against Jennie Jones.*

“Get your sorry carcasses out of my office,” he said, shaking his head in disgust. “Go clean yourselves up. Gunner, you stay.”

As Smith and Haws shot to their feet, Gunner left the corner he’d been leaning in to take one of the empty chairs, hat in hand. King didn’t wait for the door to fully shut before drilling into his best cowboy.

“What happened out there, Gunner?”

“She wasn’t alone, boss.” Gunner brought one leg up over his knee, appearing calm in spite of King’s fury.

King frowned. “You mean that kid brother of hers?”

“No. A young man, some hired help, I think.” Gunner crossed his arms and regarded King with a level gaze. “He’s good with a punch and a gun. She drove off the cattle while he took care of Haws and Smith by himself. I turned back when I saw they weren’t with me anymore.” Dropping his knee to the ground, he bent forward. “Besides, she’s goin’ know it’s you.”

“How so?”

Gunner glanced at the floor as if he hated to voice his next words. “The cowboy pretended to be looking for a job. Haws told him we worked for you. He gave him your name.”

Cursing again, King jumped up from his chair. “He’s gone, today.” He stabbed a finger at the desk to emphasize his words. “I don’t want to see his ugly, whiny hide around here anymore.”

“You might need him still.”

“What for?” King glared at Gunner, in no mood for argument.

Gunner lifted his shoulders. “If you decide to make a run for it instead of going to jail, we’re gonna need all the help we can get driving your cows, sir.”

“I ain’t leaving.” King planted his hands on the desk, bending forward as he thought the situation through. “If she goes to the sheriff, I’ll name Haws and Smith as the criminals. Say they were out trying to stockpile some cattle for their own and that you didn’t know better. They might have to spend a week or two behind bars, but I can pay their way out.”

He straightened and walked to the window, staring at the distant hills that bordered the Jones’ property. “The bigger trouble is this cowhand she’s hired. If she can afford to pay for help, she’s not going under fast enough.” He turned back to Gunner. “We need to call her loan due by the end of the month, get that weasel of a bank president to cooperate. I’m not waiting another few weeks so she can slip through my fingers again.”

“When do you want to leave for Fillmore?” Gunner rose from his chair and placed his hat back on his head.

“Tomorrow.” King returned to his desk chair as Gunner started for the door. For the first time that morning, he felt like smiling. Things would go his way this time—he’d make sure of that. And he wouldn’t be cornered into giving the bank president one extra cent for bumping up the foreclosure date, either. This time he’d use good, old-fashioned blackmail to get what he wanted from Albert Dixon. *Maybe that’s how we solve the problem with her hired help.* “Hold up, Gunner.”

The cowboy paused, his hand on the door handle.

“I won’t need you to come with me to Fillmore this time,” King said. Gunner’s thick

eyebrows lifted in surprise. “I want you to keep tabs on Jennie Jones and this cowhand instead. Watch the house, follow them into town, ask around about the family—whatever you have to do to dig up some dirt on her. I want to convince this young man it’s in his best interest to leave the place before Miss Jones’ debt is due.”

Gunner frowned. “I’m a cowhand, Mr. King, not detective.”

King crossed his arms and stared hard at him. “I’ll make sure you never work at either job if you don’t do as I say.”

Gunner met his gaze for a long moment, then gave a curt nod. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” King grinned. “Let’s go get ourselves that ranch.”