

Jack sprawled in one of the chairs in front of Brady's desk. Hank took the other while Brady paced before the unlit fireplace, muttering.

"I don't understand why she hit me," Jack mumbled through the kerchief pressed to his bleeding lip.

Brady sneered at him. "You can't be that dumb."

"Why? What did I do?"

"Lost your touch with women, for one thing." Chuckling, Hank propped his boots on the corner of Brady's desk. "An amazing thing."

"It's not funny," Jack muttered.

"Rampaging women rarely are."

Brady stopped pacing to loom over him. "You really don't know, do you? You have no idea why a woman would drag her baby all the way from San Francisco to see you."

Jack blinked up at him. He vaguely remembered Jessica by the porch door, holding a kid. He'd thought it was one of the twins. "That was Daisy's baby?"

"No, you stupid bastard! It was yours!"

The rag slipped from Jack's hand. "Mine?"

"And hers," Hank reminded them. "It takes two—"

"Shut up," Brady snapped.

Hank shrugged and grinned. "I'm just saying—"

"Well, don't." Cursing under his breath, Brady went to stand at the window, feet braced, back rigid.

"Wait a minute." Jack raised a hand like that might stem the confused thoughts flooding into his mind. "Who said it was my kid? 'Cause they'd be lying. I don't have any kids. If I did, I'd know. Right?" He looked from one brother to the other, expecting confirmation.

One stared furiously back. The other grinned. Neither spoke.

“Jesus.” Jack slumped back into the chair. “It can’t be my kid.”

He replayed the scene in his mind. The woman—Daisy—glaring at him, even after he gave her his best smile. Brady looking thunderous, which wasn’t that unusual, and Jessica over at the window with a baby in her arms. His baby?

How could that be?

Feeling a trickle, he lifted the kerchief to his split lip. “Why didn’t she just tell me, instead of hitting me?”

“Hell, you’re lucky I don’t hit you too,” Brady said.

“Why? What did I do for crissakes?”

“Other than getting her pregnant then leaving her?” Hank asked, that smile still tugging at his lips.

Ignoring him, Brady said, “You didn’t know her, that’s what you did. She shows up with a kid—*your* kid—all the way from San Francisco and you didn’t even know who she was.”

“Only at first.”

“After you looked at her...you know...” Brady waved a hand in the direction of Jack’s chest. “When Jessica saw you ogling her, she almost hit you herself.”

“They are nice,” Hank mused. “I’ve always appreciated a fine bosom.”

Brady rounded on him. “Would you shut the hell up! You’re not helping.”

“What’s to help?” Hank asked mildly. “The deed’s done. Our little brother is well and truly caught. And by a woman who might actually keep him in line.”

“Is that what this is about?” Jack was stunned. “She’s upset just because I looked at her tits?”

“Better not let Jessica hear you say that,” Hank advised. “She’s got a whole list of words we can’t use and I’m pretty sure ‘tits’ is on it.”

“Christ, Jack!” Brady stomped across the room and back, hands planted low

on his hips, chin jutting. “How could you go off and leave a woman after you got her pregnant? I raised you to be a better man than that.”

Jack recognized the stance and the tone, but he was no longer as susceptible to it as he’d been when he left three years ago, so he managed to hold his temper in check. “In the first place, you didn’t raise me. In the second, I didn’t know she was pregnant when I left. And third, how do we even know the kid is mine?”

Brady threw his hands up in disbelief. “Did you even look at her?”

“The kid’s name is Kate,” Hank reminded them. “A nice name, I think.”

Jack ignored him. “I was too busy trying not to bleed on your wife’s fancy rug,” he retorted, his control slipping. *The kid. A daughter. Kate.* The name felt odd in his head. The whole idea of her—of Daisy—of being a father—felt odd.

“When did you leave San Francisco?” Hank, serious now, spoke in that calm, logical tone he used when Jack and Brady started in on each other.

Despite his quips, Jack was glad Hank was there. He had worked too hard to pull himself out of the role of being Brady’s little brother, the wild one, the irresponsible hothead. He’d cleared that chip off his shoulder years ago and didn’t want to be goaded into putting it back on. Tasting blood again, he dabbed at his lip. “It was after Elena left.”

“How long after?”

Jack shrugged. That time was a dark spot in his memory, the days running together in an alcoholic haze. Thinking back on it, he realized the only good thing about that bleak period was Daisy. The little fool had hoped to save him. But even she hadn’t been strong enough to pull him out of the hole he’d dug for himself, and if he hadn’t come out of his stupor long enough to sign onto that clipper bound for Australia, he’d probably be buried in it right now.

“A month,” he finally said. “Maybe two. I was drinking a lot.”

“Apparently not enough,” Brady muttered.

Jack checked the rag and saw that the bleeding had slowed. He tossed the cloth onto Brady's desk and looked up with a cold smile. "There was never enough."

"Exactly when," Hank persisted.

Jack gave it some thought, but still couldn't come up with a specific date. "In late fall. The grays hadn't migrated south yet, but the whalers were already rigging up."

Hank glanced at Brady. "It fits."

Jack sighed and rubbed his temple where a headache was beginning to form. None of this made sense to him. He would have been better off following the China trade.

"You'll do the right thing."

Dropping his hand, Jack looked up at his oldest brother, a little irritated but not really shocked that Brady was still trying to run his life. Maybe he couldn't help himself. Maybe all those years managing the ranch and his brothers had warped him somehow, made him think nothing could get along without his supervision.

"You're right, Brady. I will do the right thing. But it'll be what's right for me and Daisy and...and the little one. Not you."

Something flashed in his brother's icy eyes. Something angry and sad at the same time. "I'm not your enemy, Jack. I never have been."

Jack continued to look at him, letting his doubt show.

"Does make you wonder though," Hank said, cutting into the staring contest. "How it is we attract such violent women."

Brady turned to look at him. "Jessica's not violent."

"She set Sancho on fire. Seems pretty violent to me."

"She had reason. And what about Molly killing Hennessey?"

Hank waved the comment aside. "I'm just saying our wives are not females to cross and Jack's woman seems no different. So far they haven't killed us, but the way Jack is going, he could be the first. He should take note, is all."

"She's not my woman," Jack muttered.

"She must have been at one time," Brady said.

"What I want to know," Hank cut in before Jack could rise to the bait, "is if she didn't know you were at the ranch, why is she here?"

"She didn't know I was back?"

"Langley says not."

"And if it wasn't to see you," Hank went on. "Why did she come?"

"Maybe she expects Jack to marry her," Brady said.

"Or she's hoping to leave the kid here," Hank added. "But why now, after all this time?"

A good question. Jack rose. "I guess I'd better find out."

"You want my gun?" Hank called as Jack stepped into the hall.

"Keep it. Or better yet, use it on Brady."