

1

Llano County, Texas

Twelve-year-old Jennie Delbert reined up her roan filly and squinted at the snowy horizon above Kingdom Come Ranch. Wondering if the white glare was playing with her eyes, she glanced over at her father to confirm if he also saw the gray plume rising in the distance. He had taught her that reading steam in winter was an essential skill for a rancher, one that could mean the difference between life and death on three thousand acres of bonescape hardscrabble. Meandering steam trails that quickly vanished promised a comfortable herd; and small, isolated tufts warned that one of the calves had likely become lost. But sharp, snorted puffs—disconnected, like those now visible over the drifts ahead—could mean only one thing.

One of the animals was in life-threatening distress.

Galen Delbert, the ranch's foreman, answered his daughter's silent question by lashing his Appaloosa into a gallop over the nearest ridge.

Falling several lengths behind, Jennie pushed her pony to its limit and followed her father into the ravine. She found him kneeling over a downed heifer that was struggling in pain. "What's wrong with it, Pa?"

"It's giving birth too early." He grunted as he reached into the writhing cow's birth canal to feel for the calf. "Bring me the rolled canvas on my saddle."

Jennie delivered the tarp and began collecting driftwood to build a crude shelter against the biting wind. In the corner of her eye, she saw something flash across the auburn sky. She pointed at a star shooting. "Look, Pa! It's like Bethlehem!"

Working feverishly to get the calf out, her father grimaced bitterly at the irony of the celestial coincidence. "I guess all we need now are three wise men. But those seem to be in pretty short supply around here."

Jennie knelt aside the suffering heifer and ran her hand across its side to soothe it. She knew Mr. Cohanim, the owner of the ranch, would dock her father's pay if they lost the calf, and it'd be double the penalty if the mother

died, too. Extending her caresses to the heifer's forehead, she gasped. "This is Beccah!"

Her father checked the underside of the mother's ear. He stared in disbelief at the engraved number on the metal vaccination tag. "It ain't possible."

Jennie stood and walked around Beccah, trying to make sense of what was happening. The heifer was a freemartin, a rare female twin of the herd's bull. The only other freemartin born on the ranch had been sold a year ago to a genetic-research laboratory at SMU. Her science teacher at the time had explained to her that doctors prized the rare calves for their stem-cell research because almost all of the freemartin's blood cells were identical to those of its twin brother. And every kid who showcased in 4-H knew that a freemartin was made sterile in the womb by the hormones from its male twin. She looked pointedly at her father, questioning if Beccah had somehow been miraculously impregnated, like the Virgin Mary.

Her father had no time to ponder the troublesome mystery. He rolled the heifer on its other side and finally managed to pull a female calf out by its hind legs. He wiped mucous from the newborn's snorting nose and rubbed its throat to start it breathing. Shocked, he lurched to his feet and took a step back. From head to hooves, the calf looked permanently stained with its mother's blood.

Jennie scooped some snow and tried to wipe the newborn's wet hide, but the bright flame coloring wouldn't come off. "It's all red ... even its eyes."

The calf took a shuddering breath and staggered to its wobbly legs.

Looking shaken, her father pulled a cell phone from his coat pocket and punched in a number. "Sir, it's Galen. I'm down at the west end of Cedar Gulch. There's something here I think you need to see. ... I think it may be. ... Yes, sir. Right away." He pressed the "End" button and looked off into the distance, taking a moment to gather his composure. Then, rousing from his unshared thoughts, he ordered his daughter, "Get the horses."

Jennie whispered a prayer of thanks to God for allowing both heifer and newborn to survive. She petted the disoriented calf, unable to break away from it. "Pa, do you think Mr. Cohanin would sell me this one?"

Her father glared at her. "No!"

"But you promised—"

"Get the damn horses, Jennie! Now!"

Frightened by his outburst, Jennie retrieved his Appaloosa and mounted her pony. Her father climbed to his saddle and lashed off into a gallop. She followed him for a half-mile east until he pulled to a stop.

"I've gotta check the fences over at the Bollulos pen," he told her. "You go on home and tell your mamma I'll be back an hour after dusk."

She nodded uncertainly, figuring it was best not to ask why she couldn't come along. After watching her father hurry west, she split off toward home, troubled and confused. She had never seen him so rattled.

Moments after he disappeared over the ridge, she heard a distant whirring behind her. She reined up and looked back toward the *arroyo*.

Mr. Cohanim's helicopter was gliding in from the ranch compound.

Why was her father's boss in such a hurry to see another new addition to the herd? Hundreds of calves were born every year, and he never seemed to care much about them. She had been warned never to get attached to the animals, for they'd all eventually go to slaughter. But she felt an overwhelming urge to hold that red calf again and raise it. She glanced west, toward the dissipating wisps of snow left by her father's horse. If she rode hard, she could make it back to the birthing spot and ask Mr. Cohanim for the newborn, then be home before her father found out.

Rearing her pony around, she retraced her tracks down the ravine and navigated in the dimming dusk light toward the approaching chop of the helicopter's blades. She dismounted and tied her pony to a scrub brush. Sneaking down the gulch, she took care to remain out of sight while climbing to the edge of the bank. As the whirr became louder, she inched her eyes above the ridge.

Mr. Cohanim jumped out of the helicopter and walked anxiously toward the calf and downed heifer. With the rancher was a short, bearded man who wore a flat-brimmed black hat and a black coat whose hem dropped to his shins. Tiny boxes tied to long, spiraling curls of his hair hung below his ears. After bringing his companion to the tarped lean-to, Mr. Cohanim took off his Stetson to shield his eyes against the setting sun's reflection off the drifts. He bent down and ran his hand over every inch of the red calf, examining it as if searching for defects. Apparently satisfied with his inspection, he smiled and nodded to the man in the black hat.

Jennie was about to climb the bank and go ask her father's boss for the gift, but the stranger in black began chanting foreign verses that sounded like a hymn. Startled, she ducked back down below the ravine. The only word she could make out was "Levite."

Where had she heard *that* name before?

Wait, hadn't Pastor Mullens told them in Bible class that the Levites were like a big family of Old Testament priests? Maybe the man in black was giving the calf some sort of birth blessing.

The stranger pulled a knife from his coat pocket. He stretched the calf's neck and cut its throat from ear to ear. The mother heifer bawled as the calf's blood gushed across the snow.

Jennie pressed her gloved hand to her mouth. Blind with grief, she tried to make sense of what she had just witnessed. Did they kill the calf because it was different from the others? She bit harder on her glove to stifle her sobs. Even if the poor thing *was* sickly, she would have nursed it to health.

When the spasming calf finally gurgled its last death throes, Mr. Cohanim turned and signaled a thumbs-up at the helicopter. The pilot stepped out, pulled an iron barrel from the cargo bay, and set it next to the gutted calf. He retracted four metal legs, so that the barrel sat above the ground, and opened the top half, revealing a grill.

How had these men known to bring this equipment from her father's cryptic call? Whatever they were doing, it seemed planned and practiced.

While the heifer continued to caterwaul in protest, the black-clad man lifted the dead calf onto the grate as the ranch owner flicked a lighter to ignite a fire under its bleeding carcass. The flames quickly consumed the calf's dripping flesh and wet hide. When the fire finally eased, Mr. Cohanim pulled a pistol from his holster and shot the distraught heifer point-blank between the eyes.

They killed the mother, too?

Jennie swallowed another sobbing gasp. None of this made any sense. Even if Beccah had, through no fault of her own, given birth to a freakish calf, she could have been spared to try again, or at least been butchered for the meat. Wiping tears, she watched, frightened, as the three men scooped up the burnt ashes of the calf's innards and poured them into a metal canister. They loaded the container onto the helicopter, hopped in, and flew off, leaving the charred remnant of the calf's hide and smoking bones in the snow splattered with Beccah's blood.