

CACTUS KID TO THE RESCUE

by

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I opened my eyes and had no idea where I was.

The blazing sun blasted my face and formed perspiration on my upper lip. I tried to sit up, slumped back into a prone position. My ankle. Something was wrong with my ankle.

I tried to move it, stifled a groan. Shards of pain splintered in the flesh around the bone in what must be a sprain. I could only hope it wasn't broken.

Recollection returned as I lay there. I'd been riding on the west side of the K Bar, the ranch I'd inherited from my Uncle Frank. I was no tenderfoot, but the wicked-eyed little cow pony the wrangler had insisted was the only one in the corral available obviously had ideas of its own about where it wanted to go. And that wasn't the direction I'd chosen. Taking the bit in his teeth, the animal had headed off at a gallop into what could only be described as desolate desert.

Gritting my teeth, I forced myself into a sitting position. The pain spread from my ankle to my calf as my muscles stretched in the movement. Hands on the rock and sandy desert floor, I rested for a moment, let the pain subside into a consistent throb.

I looked from one side to the other. Where was that pony? How had I been thrown and left in the middle of nowhere. Or nowhere I knew of anyway. I was miles from the ranch house and no reason to expect any of the hands to come looking for a young woman they considered an upstart. An outsider who'd inherited a ranch they called home. One they didn't want any female trying to take over and run. Of course, I was the boss, so perhaps they wouldn't ignore any danger I was in.

If only I'd told someone where I was going. At least they might have sent a search party to find me when I didn't return for dinner.

Squinting at the overhead sun blazing down on me I estimated time. I'd left the ranch around four p.m., figuring on being gone for an hour or so, and back in plenty of time for the evening meal. Instead, here I was in mid-afternoon – the hottest part of the day, sitting without shade, without my horse, and injured on top of it.

Should I call for help?

Another survey of the landscape forced a wry chuckle from my dry lips. Wasn't too likely anyone would be within shouting distance. And I still didn't see the pony.

Perhaps it would return home. Go to the ranch. Maybe the cook or one of the hands would see it, still with saddle and bridle and realize the new boss had run into trouble.

The hope flared only for a moment. No point wishing. Number one, the pony might have found a patch of grass or a stream of water and was now enjoying an afternoon snack after he got rid of his nuisance of a rider. Number two, even if it did return to the ranch, no fonder of me than the hands were, they might consider leaving me here.

Tears welled into my eyes. I sniffed once, then again. No. I would not cry. I simply had to figure out a way to get out of the sun and hope and pray someone would come along. Or that someone would search for me if they knew I was lost.

I sat a little straighter, took another survey of the landscape. Flat desert in every direction except one. A small cluster of hills, or dunes, showed to my right. If I could reach them, perhaps I could last until help arrived.

If I couldn't walk, maybe I could crawl. I had to do something. I couldn't sit here and bake.

Grasping my lower lip between my teeth, I turned sideways. The pain flashed through my ankle, into my leg, and on into my brain. A gasp escaped me. No matter. I had to do this.

I managed to turn completely over, rested on my stomach. Pain sickened me throughout my being.

Panting, I rested for a few minutes. If I could drag my injured ankle so it didn't move much, maybe I could make the small hills. I'd have to try again. Regardless of how much it hurt.

I inched forward, teeth clenched against the pain the movement caused. I paused, took a deep breath, and moved again.

Trying to ignore the throbbing, pulsing pain in my right ankle, I continued to inch my way forward. A few minutes later, I stopped...exhausted. At this rate, it would be nightfall before I ever reached the hills, and the sun got hotter and hotter as time went by.

Maybe screaming for help wasn't such a bad idea.

I raised myself on my outstretched hands, threw back my head and tried to yell. The dryness of my throat and mouth produced only a whimper. I licked my lips, swallowed, tried again.

This time a reasonable sound emanated from me. I yelled again, and again.

No way could I keep this up. I fell back against the dusty earth and closed my eyes. Was this the end, then? Would I die out here, miles from what was now my home? A sob built in my throat, demanded release.

I froze. What was that? I raised my head. In the distance, from the direction of the hills, came a horse and rider. Only a dot on the horizon to begin with, they grew in shape and closeness in the next few minutes.

Perhaps one more yell.

I threw back my head and let loose with my last ounce of energy, watched to see if my erstwhile rescuer heard me.

The person didn't move, then moved forward at increasing speed.

Yes!

The horse and its rider drew closer and closer. A moment later, the shadow of the animal looming over me gave me a respite from the heat.

"Wal, what's goin' on here?" A semi-amused drawl was music to my ears.

"My ankle. My horse...I guess threw me...I can't get up. Please...help me."

"Sure thing, Miss." A pair of hands reached under my arms, pulled me into an upright position.

I clung to the man's lanky frame, fought the waves of sickness the movement brought to my ankle.

"You hold on now. I'll let you rest a minute, then we'll put you on my horse and see about getting you out of here."

I stood, clasped in the stranger's arms, wanting to never leave what represented help and security. But I had to explain. I leaned back, looked up into a handsome face. A bronzed countenance with a pair of the bluest eyes I'd ever seen.

A half grin sat on his nicely molded lips. A lock of chestnut brown hair fell over his forehead where he'd pushed back his Stetson.

"You're sure a purty little thing," he drawled, shifting his hold until I was once again pulled tight against him.

"Please," I leaned away again. "Please take me to the K Bar Ranch. It's a few miles that way." I nodded in the general direction. "I'll be glad to pay you for your trouble."

His gaze searched my face. "Pay me?" He stiffened. "Don't reckon the Cactus Kid has to be paid to do a good deed." Insult was writ large on his face.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I just...I'm new out here and I don't know all the customs...and so I know I'm going to make mistakes...."

I could tell I was rambling. I usually did when nervous. And this good-looking cowboy made me extremely nervous, especially since I felt an attraction I'd not experienced before.

He leaned forward. "I'll take you home, Missy. But I have to admit, I sure hate to let such a purty lady out of my arms."

The drawl was back, this time accompanied by a twinkle in his eyes.

I couldn't help the smile that crept across my lips. "Well, this 'purty lady' will be a lot happier if she can get out of the sun and off my ankle."

He glanced down. "Right. You're injured. I'll put you up on Buck, here, and we'll get you home."

Without further words, and only a few gasps from me, he lifted me into the saddle, swung up behind me, reached around, grasped the reins, and shook them. The horse started forward.

The motion and jolting caused sickness to tumble in the middle of my stomach, but I tried not to give way to the nausea. The feel of the man's arms could also have had a little to do with the butterflies I also felt in that region.

It seemed like forever, but after what could have only been minutes, we neared the ranch house. Not surprisingly, it appeared deserted. But then all of the hands should be out on the range somewhere with the cattle, not loafing around the ranch.

The Cactus Kid stopped the horse, slid off, and walked around to the other side. He reached up, put his hands around my waist and lifted me off the saddle and into his arms.

The relief I felt at the cessation of motion helped, as did the secure sensations the man generated when he held me.

I grasped his forearms as I stood, favoring my injured ankle. I looked up at him. "I can't thank you enough for rescuing me. If it weren't for you, I could have been...." I stopped, gulped, couldn't finish.

His hand stroked hair off my face. He cupped my chin and tilted it so I was again facing him and looking up. "I was glad to help, ma'am. Always glad to help a lady in distress."

We froze in place. My breath quickened.

The Kid leaned down, his lips inches away from mine.

I grasped his forearms harder. Our breath mingled as time stood still.

"Cut!"

The yelled command allowed me to lean away from the attractive face so close to mine.

I gave a sweet smile, grasped his forearms as hard as I could. "The next time we have to do a love scene, Brett Ralston, make sure you skip the salsa and chips at lunch. Your breath is enough to substitute as knockout drops."

I let go of him, stepped back, swung around, and headed toward my dressing room.

We'd get a brief break now before we tried the scene again. No telling what the director didn't like, but at least I'd get out of the heat for a while. Maybe grab something for lunch since I hadn't had time earlier. Yep. Lunch sounded good. I needed some fortification if I had to do another love scene with Brett. Maybe I'd have a nice hamburger. Yes. One loaded with lots of fried onions.

I picked up my pace. Revenge would be so sweet. Pungent. But sweet.

THE END