

Deleted beginning The Wedding Rescue

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Ranch boss Jack Walker nodded to his men as he rode the bay mare across the hard dirt barnyard, his mind occupied by a certain headstrong female. The cowboys quickly returned to their tasks, no doubt interpreting his mood, knowing Lexi was on site. He grimaced as he passed her battered pickup truck, wondering how the thing didn't break down and strand her. Not a good idea in the isolated hills of eastern Montana, no matter the weather. But did she listen to sense? Hell, no.

He swung down and looped the reins over a rail. On edge to learn Lexi's diagnosis of his gelding's leg, he rushed into the barn. Marco had pulled up lame a few days before. Lexi's dad had been out on a call when Jack had phoned the vet's office, leaving Lexi, his vet tech, to treat the horse's infected foreleg.

Jack didn't object to a woman seeing to his animals. He didn't object—much—to the men being distracted by her. But something about Lexi got to him like a rash of poison oak.

Once his vision adjusted to the darker interior, he stopped dead at the sight of her rear end pointed in his direction. Bent over, she rubbed salve on Marco's leg while talking to the horse in a low voice.

Jack frowned at her rump, curvy though it appeared. He shouldn't be aware of her curves. After all, he was marrying her twin sister in two days.

"What's the prognosis?" he asked.

Lexi stiffened at the sound of his voice but didn't turn as she wrapped gauze around the wound. "The infection looks better. I'd say you can ride him early next week."

She stood and wiped her hands on a rag from her back pocket. Her red and white checked shirt flapped open, revealing a snug red tank top underneath. Over more curves.

Jack swallowed and concentrated on Marco, patting his smooth neck. Out on the range, the horse acted as an extension of Jack, anticipating his commands. Other horses responded; Marco read his mind.

She stroked Marco's neck. "You'll need to walk him first with the saddle on to see when he can take the extra weight first. But I don't think he'll limp. You're strong, aren't you, Marco?"

Her "not thinking" his favorite horse would be affected didn't carry a lot of water. Jack would feel a lot better if her dad checked on Marco. Kevin Marshall had more experience, as well as the veterinary degree. "When can the doc come out to see him?"

Lexi's lips tightened. Which was a shame, given they were as full and pink as Grace's. Not that he paid much attention to Lexi's lips.

For Pete's sakes. Lexi reminded him of his fiancée. He didn't like it. The twin sisters were as different as a daisy and an orchid, and yet, he had a strong reaction every time he saw Lexi. She put his nerves on edge, and always had.

"Dad's been busy." Lexi stared at the ground. "But if you don't trust me to care for Marco, I'll swap duties with him. He can stop by here later this afternoon."

Jack didn't need to see the wounded expression in her eyes to know he'd hurt her feelings. He trusted her, mostly, but this was Marco. Still, she'd be his sister-in-law soon, and more importantly, Lexi had never misdiagnosed an animal's health. He'd feel better if the doc confirmed the treatment as the right one, but he didn't have cause to doubt her. Better to swallow his misgivings than risk upsetting Grace. "No, I'm fine with you treating him."

Instead of being grateful, Lexi shot him a skeptical glance. If she had any of Grace's charm, she didn't waste it on him.

Not that he'd ever burned daylight while contemplating her charms. Sure, once upon a time, he'd acknowledged how she looked good dancing at Kerr's Grill, her peachy dress swinging around her knees and a smile lighting her face, making him consider asking for a dance. And sure, maybe once or twice, he'd envisioned taking her to a movie in the next town over and putting his arm around her in a dark theater then claiming a kiss or two on the way home.

He hadn't acted on those impulses, thank the Lord. That would have made things awkward when Grace returned home to Little Tree, looking like every man's dream—like Jack's dream, anyway. Grace embodied everything feminine and soft and sweet. She would fit into his life here on the ranch, do her paintings, and raise his daughter, Annabeth, and whatever little ones they had.

Grace wouldn't go tearing across the country in a battered truck to save a critter, or go head-to-head with an ornery bull or a cussed old rancher. And she'd never ride off on horseback by

herself, like his wife, Sarabeth, had, and get herself killed in the back country.

Lexi was a different matter. She and her sister only shared their good looks.

“How’s Grace?” he asked, for something to say.

Lexi smiled, her blue eyes like the sky on a cloudless day. “She’s so calm, it makes *me* nervous. I keep waiting for an attack of cold feet or at least some doubts, but she’s eerily confident.”

Jack’s chest swelled with satisfaction. “Why wouldn’t she be? She knows I’ll take care of her.”

“I didn’t mean to imply otherwise. I just expect a bride to be nervous, no matter who the groom is.”

Placated, Jack nodded. “Your sister knows what she wants. I’m lucky she chose me.”

Lexi bent and picked up her bag, snapping it shut. “I’ll see if Dad can check on Marco tomorrow.”

Jack put a hand on her arm after she closed the stall door. “That’s not necessary. I’m sure your treatment of Marco is the same the doc would give.”

“Why are you here then, if you’re not checking up on me?”

Dammit, she had him. Jack let go of her arm. One of the men had mentioned she’d come to tend Marco, and he’d ridden straight in from the south range, pushing the bay to top speed. He couldn’t summon a handy excuse.

“That’s what I thought.” Lexi moved past him toward the door, her yellow ponytail swishing across her shoulders, sassy and dismissive at the same time.

“Lexi.”

She didn’t stop until they stood beside her truck. The idea of her in that rattletrap gave him indigestion. After the wedding, when they’d become family, he’d talk her into working in the doc’s office where she’d be safe seeing to small pets. Puppies and kittens would give her a nice break from horns and testicles.

A rider cantered into the yard with a calf across his lap. Sweat matted his dark curls to his neck and stuck his shirt to his torso. George Brooks looked even more miserable than the critter did, its thin body shaking with each weak bawl. Lexi put a hand to her eyes to shield them as she stared up.

“What’s going on, George?” Jack walked nearer to the barn where George stopped, Lexi

behind.

“Miz Lexi.” George took the time to tip his hat. “Nice to see you. How are you doin’ today?”

“Fine, thanks. And yourself?”

Jack cut in to the social hour before they began serving tea. “The calf?”

“His mama turned him away from the teat.” George hunched his shoulders. “Sorry, ma’am, for the language.”

She smiled. “I’m quite used to the word, George.”

“I introduced him around but couldn’t find no other new mama to nurse him.”

Jack lifted the calf down off the horse, frowning at the animal’s lack of weight. He held him steady by the neck rope while George dismounted.

“What do you want me to do with him, boss?”

Jack looked into the calf’s liquid brown eyes with their long lashes and hesitated. He didn’t consider the calf cute. He wasn’t a six-year-old like Annabeth, after all. He managed a ranch and dealt with life and death every day. Lexi’s assessing gaze pinned him as she guessed his next move. His shoulder blades itched.

At least George showed no interest in his decision, his gaze fixed past Jack in Lexi’s direction. The cowhand probably worried how she’d take it if he decided to put the animal down. Why anyone would consider her a delicate flower surprised the heck out of Jack. “It doesn’t look diseased.”

Lexi bent over the calf, cupping its face to inspect its eyes.

“You want I should hold him for you, Miz Lexi, so he doesn’t bite?”

Jack caught the surprise on her face before she erased it. “Thank you, George, but I should be fine. I’ve been around ornery critters before.”

Jack would have agreed with the cowhand’s caution except just then he caught the look she slanted his way. She meant *he* was an ornery critter? Jack shook his head at her and she tucked her smile under a soft chuckle.

He watched as she ran her hands down the calf’s legs and back up, then trailed her fingers along its ribs. His imagination followed, wondering what it felt like to have Lexi’s hands, firm and warm, travel across his muscles. When the calf shivered, Jack sympathized, close to shuddering in reaction himself. He noted George eyeing him and jerked back to reality. Marrying

her sister tomorrow.

“What do you think?” Jack pulled off his hat, swiped sweat and dirt off his forehead with his forearm before yanking it firmly back in place. “Calf gonna make it?”

Lexi nodded. “He’s thin but healthy enough. If he’ll take a bottle, he should grow up fine.”

“So you’re suggesting I assign an able-bodied cowhand to bottle-feed this one calf? Because my men have so much extra time?” Jack couldn’t believe the words coming from his mouth. He sounded like such a jerk. Lexi did that to him.

Her lips tightened, and she drew in a breath.

George shifted on his feet. “You need me here, boss?”

“I’ve got this.” Jack waved the man away and leaned closer to her. “Now look what you’ve done, scaring five years off that poor cowpoke.”

For a moment, she met his gaze, then looked at the retreating man. “Don’t be ridiculous. Which is what you’re being now and by having your men call you when I’m here. I’m a qualified vet tech. I work for my dad because he knows I’m the best in the county, not just because I’m his daughter.”

Jack nodded, not wanting to get into the never-ending argument about her qualifications. He didn’t doubt her education. “Then what do you recommend I do about the calf?”

She held up her hands to tick off the points on her fingers. “You can bottle-feed him. You can pen him for veal, but he’s been running on the range already and won’t be as tender as the market expects, so that’s a gamble. However, the meat would be choice enough to serve in your home. You can donate him to the 4-H or FFA and see if someone will adopt him as a project.” She put her hands on her hips. “Or you can shoot him in the face and save yourself all this trouble.”

Jack glanced at the calf’s big eyes and scowled. “You’re talking about several hundred dollars of beef there once he grows up.”

“If you put him back out with the herd and no one will let him suckle, he’ll sicken from starvation.”

He scowled, not needing ranching lessons from Lexi. Did she think him a simpleton?

“That’ll draw predators,” she continued, “and they may not stop at this one calf. They might decide the Rocking W provides good eats. I’d recommend against releasing him unless you find him a milk source, but far be it from me to influence your decision.” With a smart pivot, she

turned toward her truck, crunching gravel with each stomp of her boots. "I'm just a woman."

"Where are you going?" Jack called to her back.

"I've got other ranches to visit. Places where they listen to my opinion." She slammed the truck door and started the engine. "And I have no wish to see you put a bullet in that calf's brain."

He expected her to peel out and throw dirt in his face. She should know him better after two years of treating animals here. He'd never sacrifice good beef. Her outburst must have been for show because they sure didn't need another thing to fight about once they became kin.

Jack grabbed off his hat and slapped his leg with it. "Dammit, Lexi."

Her once-blue rusty pickup didn't slow, even though he knew Lexi heard him holler her name. How they'd get along as in-laws he couldn't imagine. Sparks flew when they got together, most likely because they brought out the worst traits in one another.

It was going to be one hell of a marriage.