



Andi's Orphan Calf

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This Andi story was inspired by real-life events.

Chapter 1

Spring 1879

Andi heard the soft cry before she saw it. “Cory,” she whispered. “What was that?”

“What was what?” He plopped his fishing pole back in the water. “I don’t hear anything.”

Andi yanked her pole out of the creek and stood up. “Well, I did, and I’m going to find out what it was. It sounds like a lost calf or something.”

Cory twisted his neck and looked up at Andi, who towered above him. “A lost calf. Are you kidding me? This is a cattle ranch, Andi. Calves don’t get lost.”

Andi ignored him and started toward the sound. She rounded a clump of manzanita and stopped short. A big, spotted shorthorn cow was lumbering off toward the rest of the herd. Twins calves—one black with a white face, and the other with brown spots—hurried to catch up. They bawled, and Mama turned around and lowed back.

Andi grinned. Nothing was prettier than the sight of newborn calves or foals. This little family was no exception. The twins looked only a day or two old. They

were small too, which wasn't unusual for a multiple birth.

"I told you so," Cory said, coming up beside Andi. "A cow and a couple of calves." He shrugged. "I'm more interested in the fish that might be nibbling my line."

Andi shot a final, happy glance at the cow and calves and turned to go.

Mooo . . .

She paused. That tiny sound came from close by. "Wait, Cory." She wrinkled her forehead. "I think there's another calf around here."

Cory's gaze shot to the cow and twins and then back to Andi. "No, it must be an echo. She's got both her babies."

Andi wasn't listening. Instead, she made a complete circle of the area and nearly tripped over a small, black body lying in a clump of waist-high grass.

"Cory!"

She didn't wait for her friend to join her. She fell to her knees next to the tiny calf. He wasn't a newborn, even though his size said otherwise, and he appeared to be the same age as the two calves frisking behind the cow. If so, that meant—

"That's impossible!" she whispered.

But her eyes told a different story. "Triplet calves?" she said in a hushed voice.

Cory's eyes grew wide. "I've never heard of such a thing."

Andi suppressed a giggle. Even if triplets were as common as mountain snow, Cory would not have heard about it. He was a town boy.

She nodded and didn't tease Cory. Honestly, she had never heard Chad or Mitch bring up triplet calves during any supper conversations. "They must be really rare," she said in a soft, astonished tone. "You know, like twin foals. If

triplets do appear, one or more probably dies.”

A new thought whirled. *Maybe triplet calves aren't as rare as ranchers think.*

Andi gazed at the distant herd. Mama cow and her twins were mingling with the other cattle. If a cowhand circled these cattle, he would see exactly what he expected to see—cows and calves. He would not question if a twin might actually be a triplet.

No, this triplet calf on the ground had been left behind.

But why?

Andi stroked the calf's knobby head. “What's the trouble, fella? Can't you keep up?”

The calf looked at her with dark, alert eyes. He lay curled up in the hot sun, unmoving. Then he thrust his muzzle forward. A tiny *moo* escaped.



Andi's heart melted. She looked up.

“Come on, Cory. We have to get this calf out of the sun before he dries up.”

Cory's mouth dropped open. “You're kidding.”

This was the second time Cory had accused Andi of joking around. It wasn't funny this time. “No, I'm not kidding.” She brushed a dark braid out of her way.

“I’m perfectly serious.”

“Maybe you’d better leave him here. The cow will come back for him.”

Andi paused. Cory might have a point—even for a town kid. Cows often hid their calves and knew right where to find them later on. But here? Out in the open? This was no hiding place. This was an oven.

Worse . . . what if this calf truly was a triplet and too weak to follow the others?

Andi set her jaw. She knew what happened to abandoned calves, and it was not going to happen to this little fellow, not if she had any say-so about it. “I’m not going to leave this calf out here to die a horrible death under this blistering sun.”

“Where do you plan on taking him?” Cory asked.

“Home, of course. He can share Taffy’s stall. She’s hardly in it this time of year. I’ll put some fresh straw down and give this little fellow a fighting chance.”

Just then, the calf tried to stand. He made it halfway to his feet, wobbled, and collapsed back on the ground.

Andi’s gaze flicked to the herd. Mama and the twins had pushed their way into the group. The calves, although lanky and uncoordinated, showed no signs of falling to the ground.

Something was wrong with calf number three.

“He looks kind of puny,” Cory remarked when the calf lay his head down and sighed.

“There’s nothing wrong with this baby that a little warm milk can’t fix,” Andi insisted. She jammed her hands on her hips. “Are you going to help me or not?”

Cory nodded. “Sure, Andi. What do you want me to do?”

Chapter 2

The calf couldn't have weighed more than sixty pounds, but he was still too heavy for Andi to lift. "I'll bring Taffy over," she said. "You can put the calf across her withers. Then we'll take it easy all the way home."

Cory looked doubtful, but he shrugged. "Whatever you say. It's your calf."

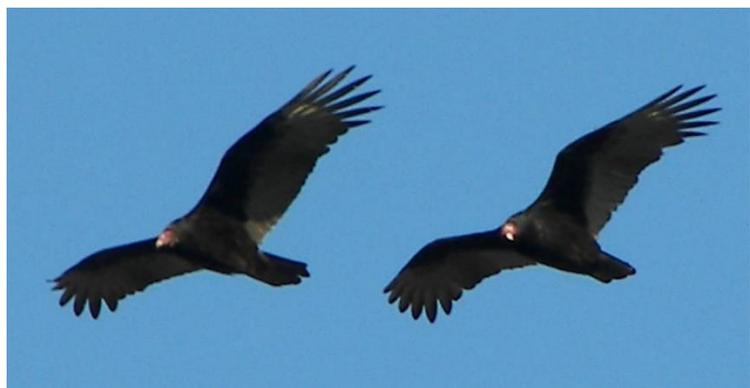
A sudden worry pinched Andi's thoughts. *What will Chad say?*

She pushed the worry aside. Under normal circumstances, she would leave the calf. Mama cow knew what she was doing.

Clearly, this situation was an exception. Even if Mama returned, the calf was too weak to stand up and nurse. The hot California sun would suck him dry in a few short hours.

He'll be dead by nightfall, Andi thought. If he isn't, he'll end up as some rotten coyote's supper during the night.

She shuddered and looked up. Two turkey buzzards were circling overhead. Did they sense an easy meal in their future?



"Not while I have breath in my body!" she shouted at the ugly, red-headed vultures. "You won't have him."

"Who are you yelling at?" Cory demanded.

Andi pointed to the sky. "They are always on the hunt for a dead calf or

anything else they can find. They'll pick the bones clean in less than a week. I hate them." She stalked off.

When Andi returned to the creek, she whistled for Taffy. The faithful mare looked up from grazing under the oak tree and trotted over.

"Come on, girl. We have work to do."

Taffy obediently followed Andi back to where Cory kept guard over the calf. Andi smiled to herself. In spite of his common-sense remarks, her friend was shading the calf with his body, protecting him from the sun's harsh rays.

He rose when Andi and Taffy walked up. "I don't think he's going to make it, Andi." He shook his head, "He looks mighty weak."

Andi's heart turned over. "We've got to try. Come on!"

It took three tries to sling the calf over Taffy's withers. He thrashed weakly then went limp. His eyes rolled back in his head, showing the whites.

Andi stroked him. "Don't be scared, little fella. It's for the best."

After that, the calf lay where Cory put him. Andi slipped onto Taffy's bare back and took the reins Cory handed her. "I'm going to go slow, so the calf doesn't slide off."

"Good idea," Cory said. "If he tumbles off, I think you'll kill him."

"Cory!"

"Never mind. I'll collect our fishing gear and Flash and catch up."

"Thanks!" Andi called and gave Taffy the barest nudge. "Easy does it, girl," she warned. "We are not in any hurry today."

Cory caught up on Flash before they'd gone two hundred yards. Together, their horses plodded back to the ranch yard at a snail's pace. The sun beat down

on Andi's head. She nudged Taffy. A faster walk might be wise. She laid one hand on the calf's slumped body to make sure he wouldn't slide off.

An hour later, Andi and Cory dismounted in front of the wide double doors of the horse barn and met near the calf's lolling head.

His eyes were closed.

Cory swallowed. "Is he—"

"He's fine." Andi helped lower the small beast into Cory's arms then led the way to Taffy's stall.

Cory followed with the calf.

In no time, the exhausted calf lay on the straw, eyes open and looking around. He appeared grateful to be out of the sun and inside the much-cooler barn. He did not, however, stand up.

A bad sign.

"Now for some warm milk," Andi said matter-of-factly. "And a bottle and nipple."

Cory shook his head. "This calf is all yours now, Andi. I'm heading home."

"Why?" Andi's eyebrows rose.

"I don't want to be around when your brother finds your newest pet." He laughed, gave the calf one final pat, and hurried outside.

Andi slumped. Then she called after him, "Thanks for your help!"

Getting hold of a quart of milk was the easy part. Finding a bottle and nipple was a challenge. Andi could count on the fingers of one hand the last time she'd seen her brothers hand feed a calf.

A prize-winning bull calf out of Prince Reginald, the sire of the Circle C herd,

had been born a little too early a few winters ago. Chad and Mitch hovered over the baby as if he were the prince of Egypt. He had lived, much to the Carter brothers' relief, and gone on to be sold for over a thousand dollars as a feisty two-year-old.

When Chad put his mind to it, a sick foal or calf had very little chance of dying without his permission.

"So, where did they keep his bottle?" Andi wondered aloud. She muffled a giggle at the picture of a calf getting Chad's permission to die.

Scrounging through the tack room didn't help. Neither did the Carters keep emergency livestock supplies up in the loft. She looked anyway.

One more place to check, Andi thought. She left the horse barn and made her way to the dairy barn, where Cook and another hand milked the few cows the Circle C kept for their own use.

Success! In a corner of the milk house, along with all sorts of tanks and jugs and milking supplies, Andi found what she was looking for.

The glass bottle could easily hold two quarts. The black rubber nipple—although worn and unappealing-looking—would no doubt do the job.

Now, for the milk and . . . what luck! Joey, the other milker, was leading Plain Jane into her stanchion for a late-afternoon milking.

"Joey!" Andi called. "Could I please get a few cups of milk?"

"Sure thing, Miss Andi," Joey cheerfully replied.

Andi threaded her way between the half-dozen cats lined up near the pretty little Jersey cow and Joey.

Zing, zing, zing! Milk sprayed into the bucket as fast as Joey could milk.

A few minutes later, Joey carefully poured the milk from the bucket into the bottle's narrow neck. "A funnel would work better, and be faster," he said when warm milk dribbled down the outside of the bottle.

"I'll find one for next time."

Joey paused, eyes wide. "*What* next time?"

"Well, uh, I've got a calf for a . . . a project, so I'll need milk two or three times a day."

Joey grunted and finished filling the bottle halfway. "If you say so, miss." He removed his hat and scratched his head. "Does the boss know about this?"

Andi worked the rubber nipple over the bottle and ran out the door. "Not yet. Thanks, Joey!"

A minute later, Andi fell to the straw beside her new pet. He turned his nose away from the bottle and let out a plaintive, *mooo!*

Andi dripped milk onto her fingers and stuck them in the calf's mouth. He sucked and sucked and sucked. But he would not open his mouth for the rubber nipple.

She slumped down in the straw and stroked the calf's nose. Then she let him suck her fingers again. This time, she sneaked the nipple in next to her fingers and let go.

If the calf had not been so hungry, he might have spit the strange-feeling nipple out of his mouth. But Andi squeezed the nipple and let the warm, sweet milk touch his tongue.

He chewed and mouthed it, but then he took a suck. Then another. Soon, he sucked the bottle dry. His head sank to his front legs, as if the act of drinking three

cups of milk had worn him out.

“You poor thing,” Andi whispered. “You rest now.” She made herself comfortable and spent the next few minutes petting the calf and talking to him.

The calf fell asleep.

Chapter 3

“Andi!”

Chad’s shout yanked Andi from her dozing. The calf didn’t stir. He was sound asleep at Andi’s feet.

Andi quickly rose and stumbled out of the barn. “What do you want?”

Chad spun around. “Oh, there you are. What do you mean by leaving your horse ground-tied in the middle of the yard for half the afternoon?” He jerked a thumb in Taffy’s direction.

Andi gulped. *Uh-oh!* Poor Taffy!

In the face of the calf’s needs, she had forgotten about her mare. Taffy looked miserable. Her head was down and sweat streaked her golden coat.

“I’m sorry, Taffy,” she apologized, leading her horse toward the gate. “Let’s get you back in your paddock. Plenty of hay and water there.”

She peeked behind her shoulder. Big brother was watching her intently, with his arms crossed over his chest.

He thinks I’m up to something.

His next words confirmed it. “What were you doing in the barn? Did you find

a new litter of kittens and get distracted?”

Well, the distracted part was right. “Not exactly.” Before she changed her mind, she blurted, “I found a calf up by my special spot. He’s one of—”

“You *what?*” Chad’s arms dropped to his sides and he hurried over.

“A young calf,” Andi explained. “Probably not more than two days old. I watched his mama and the other two calves head back to the herd. She left one behind.”

Andi could tell Chad was counting in his head. “A *triplet?*”

She nodded. “He’s weak and can hardly stand up. Cory helped me bring him home.”

Chad let out a long, weary breath. “Where’s the calf?”

“In Taffy’s stall.” She grabbed his hand. “Come and see.”

“Oh, yes,” Chad said. “I plan to.”

He followed her into the horse barn and stopped just outside Taffy’s stall. The



calf was awake.

“He’s standing up!” Andi gasped in happy surprise.

“Yes.” Chad said nothing more, but the look on his face told Andi it was not good news.

The calf was standing, all right, but he was hunched up

in an unnatural position. While she watched, he took three shaky steps and fell

down.

“No wonder the mother left him,” Chad said softly.

“What’s wrong with him?” Andi asked.

Chad sighed. “You should have left him alone, little sister. If he’s a triplet like you said” —he shook his head in disbelief— “then chances are he didn’t get all the nutrients he needed before he was born.”

He looked at Andi. “You saw the mother and two other calves? Could you find them again?”

Andi nodded. “Yes. The mother is a brindle brown and white. One of the twins is a white-faced black calf. The other is a brindle like the cow.”

Chad nodded his approval. “I’ll send somebody out to the herd in that part of the ranch and double-check to make sure the other two calves are all right.” He took a deep breath. “But this one . . .”

Andi’s breath caught. “No, Chad! He’s going to be fine. He drank a few cups of milk not too long ago.”

“Andi . . .” He paused.

Tears stung the inside of Andi’s eyelids. She knew exactly what rancher-brother was going to say. There was no use putting all the time and energy into a calf that was doomed to die.

“A weak calf has many hurdles to overcome,” Chad said gently. “It’s not worth it. It’s better to let nature take its course, which is what would have happened if you and Cory had not been nearby. The calf would have fallen asleep, and the coyotes would have cleaned it up, and—”

“No!”

Chad squatted down and examined the calf. When he stood up, his look was grim. "This fella is less than two days old," he said thoughtfully. "He probably didn't get the cow's first milk. If he didn't . . ." His voice trailed off.

"I know," Andi said. That all-important, creamy-yellow first milk could make the difference between life and death. She looked up at her brother with imploring eyes. "Can't you—"

"Not a chance." He held up his hand to stop Andi's request. "No cowhand is going to tromp around the herd looking for a fresh birth so he can milk a wild cow of her first milk." He choked back a laugh. "But nice try."

"Please?" Andi pleaded. "I'll do it."

Chad's eyebrows rose. "Oh no, you won't. A cow's kick is powerful, and those horns are there for a reason." He shook his head. "I'll let you keep the calf, but I don't want to hear any more about it. When he dies, we'll take him back to the range. Nature will clean it up."

Andi's eyes stung. Those big, ugly buzzards came to mind. She choked back a sob and looked at the calf. "He's going to live."

Chad turned on his heel and left the barn.

An hour later, Chad was back. Andi had not left the stall. She sat next to the calf, with his head cradled in her lap.

"Here." He dropped a bottle in the straw. It was half full of thick, yellow liquid. "I'd forgotten that Cook told me Lucy Belle dropped her calf late last night. I managed to get a bit of first milk from her. It's the best I can do."

Andi gasped her surprise. Then she sprang to her feet and threw her arms

around Chad's waist. "Oh, thank you!" Indeed, it was an unexpected gift to learn one of the milk cows had just freshened.

"It's not a miracle cure," Chad warned her. "He won't bounce to his feet after drinking it." He pulled her away. "But it at least gives the calf a fighting chance."

Andi nodded. Then she urged the calf to his feet for this all-important meal.

"Well, little fella," she crooned. "Looks like you might make it, after all."

Chapter 4

Every day for a week, Andi faithfully fed Sweetie Pie. She ignored her brothers' (and even Melinda's) teasing about such a silly name for a bull calf.

However, Sweetie Pie's name suited him perfectly. He nuzzled Andi when she sat by him. He stood up when he saw her. He drank every drop and butted against her knees for more milk. He let Andi hug him and stroke him to her heart's content.

But that was the extent of Sweetie Pie's movements. As soon as Andi coaxed him out of the barn with the last few drops of milk, the calf found a shady spot and dropped to the ground.

"I don't understand it," she told Chad, who had softened considerably when he discovered the calf might live. "When I ride out on the rangeland, I see calves walking around, sometimes even frisking and leaping. Sure, they sleep a lot. But not as much as Sweetie Pie. He just lies around between feedings. He lies around all day long."

“It’s too much work for him to keep moving, and he has no *reason* to keep moving,” Chad replied thoughtfully. “You might try tying a rope halter and see if you can lead him around a few times a day.”

So, Andi found a length of soft, narrow rope and made a halter. Sweetie Pie didn’t protest when she tied the halter around his head. She knew he wouldn’t agree to being dragged across the yard so Andi looped a length of rope around



Sweetie Pie’s back end. When she tugged on his lead line, she also tightened the rope around his hind quarters.

It worked wonderfully well. Just like it worked on a foal she might teach to lead. The trouble was, when Sweetie Pie had enough,

he just flopped to the ground right

Exercise time is over! his eyes told Andi. Then he sprawled out on the ground and went to sleep. When it got too hot, Andi had to lure him into the shade or back to his stall.

Poor, lonely Sweetie Pie!

Two days later, Andi looked the calf over. He was drinking milk but he didn’t seem to be gaining any weight. It was no fun feeding a calf who did nothing but

lie around. Would he ever stand up long enough to graze?

“Oh, Sweetie Pie,” Andi mourned after his mid-day feeding. “What am I going to do with you?”

“*Mooo*,” the calf answered.

He plopped down and spread out under the warm morning sun, limp as a wet rag. His eyes closed. Soon, he was a sleep.

Tears stung Andi’s eyes. Chad was right. This little calf was not thriving. But what else could she do? Was there any hope?

That afternoon, Chad found Andi in the barn, sitting next to Sweetie Pie. “You’ve done nothing but tend this calf for nearly two weeks,” he said. “I applaud your stick-to-it-ness, little sister, but your chores are being sorely neglected.”



Andi cringed. Big brother was right about that. Taffy’s stall needed a good mucking out. The mare’s water trough was only a quarter full. Green algae floated on the surface. Andi hadn’t scrubbed it out for a couple of weeks.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “This calf takes up all my time and worry.”

Chad nodded. “That’s not hard to figure.”

He shifted his weight and softened his voice. “What if I were to tell you about a small rancher some ways away from here that would be more than willing to take the time to see to it that Swee” —he cleared his throat— “I mean this calf lived to be a well-grown steer, or maybe even a bull?”

Andi grew wary. “What do you mean?”

“Listen, Andi. This calf needs more than a young girl hovering. He needs other cattle. Rufus Tartar has a small spread —only a couple dozen head. He has a couple big cows that suckle orphan calves.”

In spite of herself, Andi’s ears pricked up.

“Rufus buys unwanted calves at the livestock auction,” Chad went on. “He can’t afford anything of quality, but I was thinking . . .” He paused.

“What?” Andi demanded.

“Well, it appears to me that this young calf—although mighty weak—comes from quality stock. Rufus can’t afford to buy calves from us, but if you were willing to give him this one, I bet he’d be pleased as punch. A Circle C bull calf, if raised right, could improve his herd.”

Andi chewed on her lip, deep in thought. To tell the truth, caring for Sweetie Pie was turning out to be much more work than she thought. It might be nice to let a mama cow suckle the calf. It might be just the thing to perk Sweetie Pie up too.

“Does he have a mama cow looking for a calf to suckle?” Andi asked at last.

Chad nodded. “I ran into Rufus in town. Says he’s about ready to wean a couple of calves from one of his cows, but she’s still plenty fresh. He’s headed to the auction on Saturday.”

“Do you think his cow would accept Sweetie Pie?”

Chad cringed at the mention of the calf’s silly name. “Why don’t we ride over and ask him? If he says no, we’ll bring the calf back.”

After long consideration, Andi agreed.

Chad hitched up the small wagon, and Andi settled Sweetie Pie in the back on a pile of gunny sacks. She sat down beside him.

“You’re riding back there?” Chad asked. “All the way to the Tartar spread?”

“Uh-huh,” Andi replied. “I don’t want Sweetie Pie to get scared.”

“Hmmm.” Chad slid onto the tall wagon seat and let go of the brake.

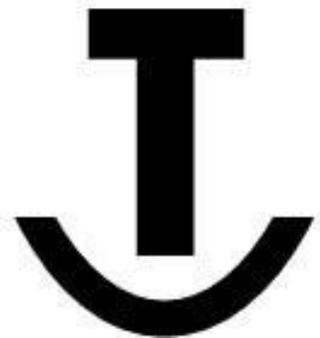
“Giddup!”

Chapter 5

It was a long, hot drive out to Rufus Tartar’s Rocking T ranch—if you could call two dozen cows and calves a ranch.

To Andi it looked a bit like the Hollister place up in the foothills, only that was a shepherd’s place. The outbuildings were small and in need of repair, but the tiny house was neat and painted a cheerful yellow, with white shutters.

When Chad pulled up and set the brake, a young man met him. Just behind followed a young woman and two small children. The little boys jumped off the porch steps and ran up to the horses.



“Mighty fine horses, mister,” the older of the two said, all smiles. He looked about five years old. “Can I pet ‘em?”

Chad swung down. “Sure.”

While the two little ones patted and petted the horses, Chad stepped over to talk to Rufus. He pointed to Andi in the wagon and kept talking.

Rufus’s eyes widened. He and his young wife hurried over to the wagon.

“This is my sister Andi,” Chad said. “She’s been caring for this calf for nearly two weeks. But honestly, he needs a new home. And a different mother. He’s not gaining any weight.”

“Sweetie Pie is lonely,” Andi said. “He lies around all day and doesn’t seem to take much interest in life.”

“Like I explained,” Chad went on, “he’s no doubt a triplet and has never thrived. If it wasn’t for Andi, he’d not have made it past the first two days.”

“He’s a looker,” Rufus said thoughtfully, “for all his scrawniness. He’s got good blood.”

“The best,” Chad said, grinning. “Is there any chance you might have a cow that could take the calf?”

Rufus scratched his chin. “Well now, Chad. I’d like to give it a try, but I just can’t afford to buy anoth—”

“Who said anything about buying this bull calf?” Chad cut in. “It’s Andi’s calf. She wants to give him to you. She’s hoping he’ll do better with a cow and other calves around. Frankly, I don’t have the time or means to mess around with it.”

Mrs. Tartar’s eyes sparkled. “We would certainly like to try, Mr. Carter. We’re

just weaning a couple of calves off Jitterbug.” She peeked over the wagon’s side. “I think she’d take on Sweetie Pie.”

Jitterbug? Andi stifled a giggle. *I wonder if they name all of their cattle? Or just the cows?* She jumped out of the wagon bed.

Chad gathered Sweetie Pie up in his arms. “Where to, Rufus?”

Smiling, the entire Tartar family led Chad, Andi, and Sweetie Pie to a ramshackle building with a large paddock behind. Rufus took the calf from Chad and entered the paddock.

Either Sweetie Pie was determined, or Jitterbug was the most laid-back nursing cow Andi had ever seen. When Rufus set Sweetie Pie down, he didn’t flop to the ground. No, he was too hungry. Andi had missed his mid-day feeding and had not brought along the bottle.

Sweetie Pie knew what he was after. While Mrs. Tartar held fast to Jitterbug’s halter, the calf reached between the cow’s hind legs and fastened onto a teat. Jitterbug jumped, but Mrs. Tartar soothed her.

And that was that.

When Mrs. Tartar let Jitterbug walk away, Sweetie Pie followed. He didn’t lie down. He didn’t stand still. No, he hurried to catch up, grabbing a snack along the way.

“That’s . . . that’s amazing,” Andi whispered.

“Jitterbug is our best nursing cow,” Rufus explained. “She has her own calf every couple of years, just to keep her fresh, but she’s got the heart to share her milk with half a dozen other calves year-round.” He smiled proudly at the cow.

Jitterbug was just about the ugliest cow Andi had ever seen. She looked

nothing like pretty Plain Jane or Lucy Belle, the Circle C Jersey cows. One horn was broken off, and Jitterbug's hips protruded through her scruffy black-and-white hide.

Rufus chuckled at Andi's expression. "The old gal ain't much to look at, that's a fact. Got her cheap at the livestock auction four years ago. She looked worse then but I pulled her through. She's been grateful ever since."

He pushed his hat back off his forehead. "Got some Holstein in her, I'd wager. Gives plenty of milk for a couple calves at a time, all year long."

He slapped Jitterbug's bony flank. "Good girl. This here's your newest baby. Tend him well."

In response, Jitterbug turned her big, partly horned head around and looked at Sweetie Pie. Then she lowed, long and deep. A minute later she gave him a tentative lick or two.

Even Chad looked impressed. "Never seen it done quite that effortlessly," he admitted. He reached out his hand. "Thanks, Rufus. Andi and I are grateful."

"Yes," Andi said quickly. "I was really getting worried about Sweetie Pie." She grinned. "He looks very pleased with himself, and he hasn't laid down yet."

"The more he moves, the stronger his legs will get," Rufus said. "We'll keep Jitterbug and Sweetie Pie in close quarters for a day or two, just to make sure she bonds with the little fellow. I'll set Teddy to watch over them."

At his name, the oldest boy scurried to his father's side. "You watch Jitterbug and her newest calf like a hawk, boy. If Jitter even waves a horn at that little fellow, you know what to do."

"Yes, sir," Teddy replied and hiked himself up to the top railing. "But she's

never turned away a calf before, Pa.”

Rufus ruffled Teddy’s hair, and they turned to go. “Thank you,” he said again when Andi and Chad were settled on the wagon seat. “I’ll let you know how the calf does.”

“Thank you! Bye!” Andi’s heart filled with gratitude—to Chad for finding a solution to Sweetie Pie’s situation. And to Mr. and Mrs. Tartar, for taking the calf for their own.

Andi gave Chad a quick hug as the wagon jerked into motion. “That’s awful nice of you, Chad,” she said. “You must really like Sweetie Pie to go to all this trouble to find him a good home.”

Chad smirked. “Mostly, I had to find a way to get a calf with the name of Sweetie Pie off the Circle C, before we became the laughing stock of the entire valley.” But he was smiling at Andi.

She laughed and settled down for the long ride back to the ranch.

Chapter 6

Andi was so busy during the following weeks that she forgot all about Sweetie Pie. Besides, it was so far to the Rocking T that Andi would never go there on her own, especially not to check on a calf.

Chad told her a month later that he’d seen Rufus in town. According to the small rancher, the calf was growing like a weed. He’d grown strong and followed Jitterbug all over the pasture. Rufus had not gotten another calf, so Sweetie Pie got

all of Jitterbug's milk.

With that good news, the memory of Sweetie Pie faded.

A year later, Andi and her family strolled down the livestock aisles of the California State Fair. This year, Circle C horses, bulls, and cows had won their usual ribbons. Andi stayed far away from the pen that held Cicero, their newest two-year-old bull. He was already mean-looking. She didn't like the looks of him, even though the judges did.

The next row over held the yearling bulls. Pens and pens of young bulls from all over the state. Andi shaded her eyes against the glare coming through the wide-open doorway of the livestock barn. What in the world was that commotion?

She left her family and hurried over to a pen that was surrounded by a dozen admiring fans. Inside the pen, a shiny black yearling stood. His eyes were clear and bright, and his coat was black and shiny as coal. Children as young as five or six were—

Andi gasped. The kids were petting the animal.

Other fair-goers were smirked and pointed to a large sign hanging on the railing.

SWEETIE PIE, ROCKING T RANCH

Andi's mouth fell open. Sweetie Pie? Here? At the state fair?

What was more astonishing was the large blue ribbon that was fastened to the railing just below the sign. First place!

Just then, Chad brushed up against her. "Come on, Andi, let's go."

"Chad!" The words whooshed from Andi's throat. "Look. It's Sweetie Pie."

Chad took a closer look. Then he started laughing. “Well, it sure is. Looks like Rufus kept his name.” He chuckled. “I guess it’s not such a bad name for a prize-winning bull.”

He shook his head. “Not a bad name at all.”

Author’s Note: Behind the Story

Sweetie Pie’s real name was Stormy Night. He was found—a few days old—on the California range land behind the Ross Ranch’s property. Weak at first, the oldest girl, Ellie, fed him from a kitten bottle (for real!).

The calf’s mother returned that afternoon, but it was too late for her. She died that night, and the vultures quickly found her.

Stormy Night soon found a new home in the tack room on the Ross Ranch. A calf bottle replaced the kitten bottle, but Stormy Night did not thrive. He ran after his bottle, but that was all. He lay around the rest of the day and soaked in the sun. He started out at 65 pounds but had gained only 2 pounds by the end of a couple of weeks.



This was the Ross kids' first experience with raising day-old calves, and it was not going well. Especially when a rancher friend saw Stormy Night and said he was an "acorn calf," the victim of his mother eating valley oak acorns while she was carrying the calf. He had large joints, short legs, was hunched over, and not energetic.

The rancher said Stormy Night would never do well.

The kids did not give up on Stormy Night. Finally, their pastor—who raises calves on nursing cows—offered to take Stormy Night. He'd had success with past acorn calves and was willing to give this calf a chance.

It was a miracle at first. Stormy latched on to the mama cow, and he perked up and followed her around, just like Sweetie Pie. The two bonded. For two or three weeks it looked like all would be well. Then suddenly, for no apparent reason, Stormy Night came down with a bad case of scours and died. Just like that.

I gave Andi's orphan calf, Sweetie Pie, a much happier ending.

