

ORPHAN CALF

CHAPTER 1

CIRCLE C RANCH, CALIFORNIA, FALL 1879

Andi Carter heard the soft cry before she saw what made it. “What’s that?”

“Huh?” Her good friend Cory Blake tossed his fishing line back into the muddy, shallow water. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Well, I did.” Andi dropped her pole on the creek bank and stood up. “It sounds like a lost calf.”

“A lost calf? Are you kidding me?” Cory squinted up at her. “This is a cattle ranch, Andi. Calves don’t get lost.”

“How would *you* know?” Andi said. “You’re from—”

Moo.

She gasped. “There it is again.”

Andi whirled and started toward the sound. When she rounded a clump of manzanita, a large brown-and-white cow swung her horns at Andi.

Andi stopped short and backed up a few steps. This mama meant business.

No wonder. Twin calves—one black with a white face and the other white with brown splotches—stood by the cow’s side, wobbly but determined to stay on their feet. With one more threatening swing of her short-but-deadly horns, Mama began lumbering back toward the herd.

The new calves hurried to catch up.

Andi sighed. *There's nothing prettier than the sight of newborn calves or foals.* This little family was no exception. The twins looked barely a day old. They were small, which wasn't unusual for a twin birth.

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

"What fish?" Andi shook her head in disappointment. "The creek is so low, I don't know why we bothered to come all this way." She shot a final happy glance at the cow and her newborns.

Moo.

Andi froze mid-step. That tiny sound had come from nearby. "Wait, Cory. I think there's another calf around here."

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

Andi ignored Cory's sensible words and took off running toward the tiny sound. Pushing past the tall, golden grass, she made a complete circle of the area. Then *oof!* She tripped over what looked like an old, blackened piece of oak tree.

The dead wood moved. *Moo.*

"Cory!" Andi brushed grass and twigs from her clothes and rose to her knees. She stared at the tiny calf. Where in the world had this baby come from? Where was his mother?

She shaded her eyes and spotted the cow and her twins. Both calves jumped and ran to keep up with Mama. "Triplet calves? That's impossible."

But her eyes told her a different story.

Cory dropped down beside her and whistled. "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 didn't tease Cory. Honestly, she had never heard of such a thing either. Chad or Mitch had never brought up the subject of triplet calves during supper conversations. "They must be really rare," she decided. "You know, like twin foals. If triplet calves are born, 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 mingled with the other cattle. If a cowhand circled this small herd, 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, the tiny triplet had been left behind. But why?

Andi stroked the calf's knobby head. "What's the trouble, little 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 nose forward. A tiny *moo* escaped.

Andi's heart melted, and she looked at Cory. "We've gotta get this calf out of the sun before he shrivels up and dies."

Cory's mouth dropped open. "You're kidding."

Andi scowled. This was the second time Cory had accused her of joking around. It wasn't funny this time. "No, I'm *not* kidding." She flipped a dark braid out of her face. "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.

But here? Out in the open? This was no hiding place. This was an oven.

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

Andi set her jaw. She knew what happened to abandoned calves.

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.

"Back to the ranch, of course. He can share Taffy's stall. She's hardly in it this time of year. I'll put fresh straw down, find some milk, and give this calf a fighting chance."

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

Something was wrong with calf number three.

"He looks kind of puny," Cory remarked.

"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 sighed and rose to his feet. "Sure, Andi. What do you want me to do?"

CHAPTER 2

The calf couldn't have weighed more than thirty or thirty-five pounds, but he was too heavy for Andi to lift. "I'll bring Taffy over," she said. "We 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'd most likely be dead by nightfall. If he didn't die outright, he would end up as a pesky coyote's supper.

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

"You can't have him!" she shouted at the ugly, red-headed vultures.

"Who are you yelling at?" Cory demanded.

Andi pointed to the sky. "They're always on the lookout for a dead critter. They'll pick the bones clean in less than a week. I can't stand vultures." She rose in a huff and stalked off toward the muddy creek, whistling for Taffy.

The faithful palomino mare looked up from where she grazed under an oak tree, whinnied, and trotted over.

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

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

Cory stood up when Andi and Taffy came to a stop. "I don't think he's gonna make it. He looks mighty weak."

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

It took Andi and Cory 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 still. Andi slipped onto Taffy's bare back and took the reins. "I'm going to go slow, so the calf doesn't slide off."

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

“Cory!”

“Never mind. I’ll grab our fishing gear and catch up. I might as well make sure your calf makes it back to the ranch without slipping off.”

“Thanks!” Andi called and gave Taffy the barest nudge. “Easy does it, girl. We are not in a hurry today.”

Cory caught up on his chestnut gelding, Flash, before Andi and her precious cargo had gone two hundred yards. Together, their horses plodded back to the ranch house at a snail’s pace. The sun beat down on Andi and the calf. She nudged Taffy. A faster walk might be wise. She placed one hand on the calf’s slumped body to make sure he didn’t slide off.

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

Cory swallowed. “Is he . . .”

“He’s alive.” Andi helped lower the small beast into Cory’s arms. “Can you carry him?”

“Sure. I lift grain sacks at the livery that weigh more than this calf. Lead the way.”

In no time, the calf lay on a heap of clean, fresh straw in Taffy’s stall. His eyes opened, and he looked around. The calf appeared grateful to be out of the sun and inside the much-cooler barn, but he did not stand up. He didn’t even moo.

A bad sign.

“Now for some warm milk,” Andi said matter-of-factly. “We need to find a bottle and a nipple.”

“Not me.” Cory shook his head. “I helped pack your calf home, but it’s time I got back to town.” He glanced up at the mid-afternoon sun and lowered the brim of his hat to shade his eyes. “See ya.”

Andi’s eyebrows rose. “Why can’t you stay and help me?”

“I don’t want to be around when your brother finds your newest pet.” He laughed, gave the calf a final pat, and hurried outside.

Andi slumped in disappointment, but thanked Cory anyway. Then she turned to the calf. "I reckon it's just you and me now. I'd best get you some milk, *pronto*."

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

A prize-winning bull calf sired by Prince Reginald, the sire of the Circle C herd, had been born too soon a few winters ago. Chad and Mitch hovered over the baby as if he were the prince of Egypt. The calf lived, much to the Carter brothers' relief, and went 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 an early calf had very little chance of dying without his permission.

Andi muffled a giggle at the image of a calf asking her brother's permission to die. Then she turned serious. "So, where did the boys keep that old bottle?"

Leaving the calf alone, Andi rummaged through the tack room but came up empty. She was pretty sure her brothers did not keep emergency livestock supplies up in the hayloft, but she looked anyway.

Andi knew only one more place to check. She left the horse barn and hurried to the dairy barn, where Cook and another cowhand milked the few cows the Circle C kept for their own use.

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! Seth, one of the milkers, was leading Plain Jane into her stanchion for a late-afternoon milking. He positioned his bucket under her bulging udder and shot spurts of milk toward half a dozen cats lined up near the Jersey cow.

“Seth!” Andi called, peeking around the corner. “Could I please have a few cups of milk?”

“Sure thing, Miss Andi,” Seth cheerfully replied. “Come on over.”

Andi carefully wound her way between the cats, who were happily washing their milk-sodden whiskers, and stood at Seth’s shoulder.

Zing, zing! Milk sprayed into the bucket.

A few minutes later, the cowhand poured a narrow stream of milk from the bucket into the bottle. “A funnel would work better, and be faster,” he said when warm milk dribbled down the outside of the bottle.

Andi nodded. “I’ll find one for next time.” She picked up the bottle and wiped the sticky milk off with her shirt sleeve.

Seth’s eyebrows rose. “Next time? *What* next time?”

“Well, uh, I’ve got a calf for a . . . a project, so I’ll need milk three or four times a day.”

Seth grunted. “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. “Not yet. Thanks for the milk!” She ran out of the milk house before Seth could express his surprise.

A minute later, Andi fell to the straw beside the calf. He turned his nose away from the bottle and let out a plaintive *moo*.

Andi dripped milk onto her fingers and stuck them inside 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 spat 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 an-

other. Soon, he had 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 daydreaming. She sprang to her feet and stumbled out of the barn, leaving the calf sleeping soundly. "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 under this baking sun?" He jerked a thumb in Taffy's direction. "See to her *now*."

Andi gasped at her oversight. "Right away, Chad."

Poor Taffy! In the face of the calf's needs, Andi had forgotten about her mare. Taffy looked miserable. Her head hung low, and sweat streaked her golden coat.

"I'm *so* sorry," she apologized, leading her horse toward the gate. "Let's get you back in your paddock. Plenty of hay, shade, and water there."

Andi had no sooner settled Taffy in her paddock than she realized Chad had not gone back to his ranching duties. Instead, her big brother stood 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?"

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 newborn calf," Andi explained. "Probably not more than a day old. I watched his mama and her other two calves go back to the herd. She left one behind."

Andi could tell Chad was counting in his head. "A triplet?" He sounded astonished.

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."

Andi led her brother into the barn and stopped just outside Taffy's stall. The calf was awake. She grinned in happy surprise. "He's standing up!"

"Yes." Chad said nothing more, but the look on his face told Andi that something was wrong. She looked closer.

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 cow left him," Chad said softly.

"What's wrong with him?"

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."

Chad bored his blue gaze into Andi and changed the subject. "You saw the cow and two other calves? Could you find them again?"

"Of course. The mother is brown, with big white splotches on her left side. One of the twins is a white-faced black calf. The other is brown and white, 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 . . ." His words trailed away.

Andi's breath caught. "No, Chad. He's going to be fine. He drank a few cups of milk not too long ago."

"Andi . . ."

Tears stung the inside of Andi's eyelids. She knew exactly what her rancher brother was going to say. *There is no use putting the time and effort into a calf that is 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 found him. The calf would have fallen asleep, the coyotes would have cleaned—"

"No!"

Chad squatted down and examined the calf. When he stood up, his look turned grim. "This fella is no more than a day old," he said thoughtfully. "He probably didn't get the cow's first milk. If he didn't, he has no chance at all."

"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 pleading eyes. "Maybe Wyatt or Jake could—"

"No." He held up a hand. "I'm not asking anyone to tromp around the herd, chasing after a wild cow for her milk." He choked back a laugh. "Not even the most loyal cowhand would agree to such a numbskull—not to mention risky—idea."

"I'll do it myself then," Andi argued. "I know just what the cow looks like. I'll bring a pail—"

"Oh no you won't," Chad cut in. "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 when he dies, I'll take him back to the range. Nature will clean it up. Do you understand?"

Andi didn't answer. Those big, ugly buzzards came to mind. She choked back a sob and looked at the calf.

"Do you understand?" Chad repeated.

Andi clenched her jaw and nodded.

"Good." Chad turned on his heel and left the barn.

Andi squatted next to the calf and whispered, "You're going to live, little Sweetie Pie. You just have to!"



An hour passed and Andi had not left the stall. She sat next to the calf, his head cradled in her lap. She was thinking—hard. Did she dare defy her brother and go after the mama cow? Would the huge bovine let her come within ten feet of her udder?

Probably not, Andi admitted silently. She hugged the calf. "I'm sorry."

Just then, Chad appeared. He opened the bottom half of the stall door and stepped inside. "Here." He held out a bottle. It was full of a thick, yellow liquid. "Lucy Belle dropped her calf late last night. Cook told me this morning, but I forgot about it until a little bit ago. He was willing to milk out some of the first milk for your calf."

Andi jumped up and threw her arms around Chad's waist. "Oh, thank you!" It was an unexpected gift to learn one of the dairy cows had just freshened.

"It's not a miracle cure," Chad warned her. "The calf won't bounce to his feet after drinking it." He pulled Andi away and put the bottle in her hands. "But it gives the calf a fighting chance." He tousled Andi's hay-strewn hair and left the barn.

Glowing with gratefulness, she turned to the tiny black calf and held up the all-important bottle of milk. "Well, little fella," she crooned, "it looks like you might make it after all."

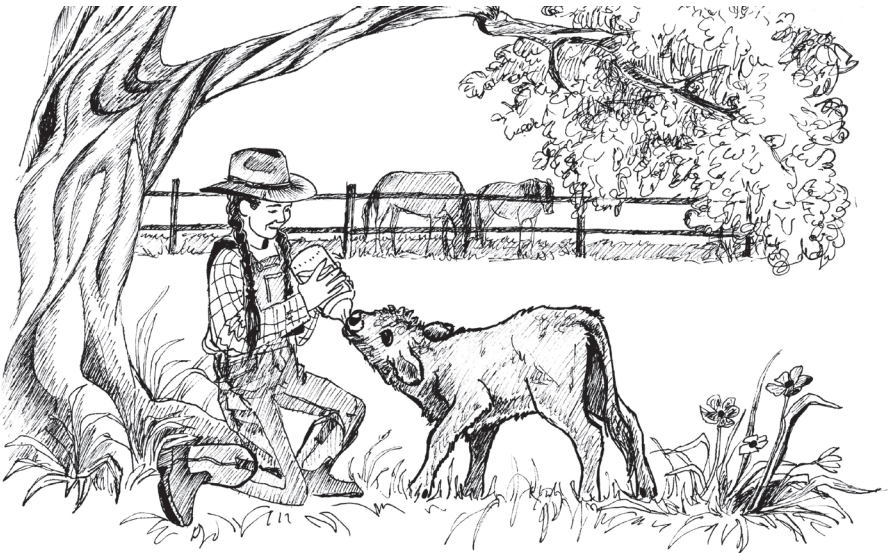
CHAPTER 4

Every day that week, Andi faithfully fed Sweetie Pie. She turned a deaf ear to her brothers'—and her sister, 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 range, I see calves running around, sometimes frisking and leaping. Sure, they sleep a lot. But not as much as Sweetie Pie. He just lies around between feedings." She sighed. "He lies around all day long."



"It's too much work for him to keep moving, and he has no reason to move," Chad told her. "You might try tying a rope halter and see if you can lead him around a few times a day."

"That's a great idea, Chad. Thanks!"

The next morning, Saturday, was a perfect day to help Sweetie Pie get moving. Andi found a length of soft, narrow rope and made a halter. The calf didn't protest when she tied the halter around his head, but she knew he would not like being dragged across the yard.

Instead, Andi looped a rope around Sweetie Pie's back end, just like her brothers did to train a foal to lead. When she tugged on his lead line, she also tightened the rope around his hindquarters and gave a gentle pull.

It worked wonderfully well, just like it worked on the foals. Sweetie Pie followed obediently. But not for very long. When the little calf had had enough, he flopped to the ground right where he stood.

Exercise time is over, his tired eyes told Andi. He sprawled out on the ground and went to sleep.

Andi always made sure she ended Sweetie Pie's brief walks under a shade tree. Once he plopped to the ground, he was too heavy to carry back to the stall.

Poor, lonely Sweetie Pie!

Near the end of her second *long* week of caring for the calf, Andi looked him over. He sucked his bottle dry at every feeding, but he didn't seem to be gaining weight. Worse, it was no fun feeding a calf who did nothing but lie around. Would he ever stand up long enough to nibble the grass or run and leap?

"Oh, Sweetie Pie," Andi moaned after an early morning feeding before school. "What am I going to do with you?"

Moo. The calf sprawled out on the straw, limp as a wet rag. His eyes closed. Soon, he was asleep.

"Rufus often buys calves at the livestock auction," Chad said. "He can't afford anything of quality, but I was thinking . . ." He paused.

"What?" Andi demanded.

"Well, it appears to me that this 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 raised right could improve Rufus's 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 had imagined. It might be nice to let a mama cow suckle the calf. It also might be just the thing to perk up Sweetie Pie.

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

Chad nodded. "I ran into Rufus in town the other day. 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 to pick up another calf or two."

"Do you think his cow would accept Sweetie Pie?"

Chad cringed, like he did every time she said the calf's name. "Why don't we ride over and ask him? If he says no, we'll bring the calf back."

"Right now? Today?"

Chad nodded.

Andi frowned. Then after long consideration, she agreed.

A few minutes later, Chad hitched up the wagon and settled Sweetie Pie in the back on a pile of gunnysacks. Andi climbed over the side and into the wagon bed.

"You're riding back there with the calf?" Chad asked. "All the way out to the Tartar spread?"

Andi nodded. "I don't want Sweetie Pie to get scared."

"Suit yourself." Chad climbed onto the high wagon seat, lifted the reins, and let go of the brake. "And hang on."

CHAPTER 5

It was a long, hot drive out to Rufus Tartar's Rocking T ranch—if Andi could call a dozen head of cattle a real ranch.

It didn't look like much of a ranch to Andi. The Rocking T looked more like the hillbilly Hollister place up in the foothills. She'd seen it more than once when she visited her friend Sadie, and this place looked similar. Only, Mr. Hollister was a sheepherder, not a cattle rancher.

As they drew closer, the outbuildings Andi saw on the Rocking T were small but in a good state of repair, unlike the Hollister place. The cottage was painted a cheerful yellow, with white shutters. Flower boxes lined the windows.

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 to the horses.

"Mighty fine horses, mister," the older of the two boys said, all smiles. He looked about six years old. "Can I pet 'em?"

"Sure." Chad swung down and tied the horses to the hitching post.

While the boys 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 the calf for two weeks, but he's not gaining much weight. He needs a new home and a different mother."

"Sweetie Pie is lonely," Andi added. "He lies around all day and doesn't seem to take much interest in life."

"Like I explained when I saw you in town," Chad said, "the calf is probably a triplet and has never thrived. If it hadn't been for Andi, he'd not have made it past his first two days."

"For all his scrawniness, he's a looker," Rufus admitted thoughtfully. "I can tell right away he's got good blood."

Chad grinned. "The best. You mentioned you might have a nursing cow that could take on a new calf, didn't you?"

Rufus nodded and scratched his chin. He looked uncertain. "Well now, Chad. I'd like to give it a try, but I can't afford to buy a Circle C calf."

"Who said anything about *buying* this bull calf?" Chad asked. "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 to look after this calf." He looked at Andi. "And neither does my sister."

Mrs. Tartar's eyes sparkled. "We would certainly like to give it a try, Mr. Carter. We're just weaning a couple of calves off Petunia." She peeked over the wagon's side. "I think she'd take on Sweetie Pie."

Petunia? Stifling a giggle at the flowery name for a cow, Andi climbed out of the wagon and stood next to her brother.

Chad reached into the wagon bed and gathered Sweetie Pie up in his arms. "Where to, Rufus?"

Smiling, the Tartar family led Chad and Andi to a large lean-to that opened into a paddock. Rufus took the calf from Chad and entered the paddock.

Either Sweetie Pie was determined or Petunia was the most laid-back nursing cow in all of California, because when Rufus set Sweetie Pie down, he didn't flop to the ground. No, he was too hungry. Andi had not thought to bring along his bottle.

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

And that was that.

When Mrs. Tartar let Petunia walk away, Sweetie Pie followed. He didn't lie down. He didn't stand still. Instead, he hurried to catch up, grabbing a snack at Petunia's teat along the way.

Andi's heart swelled with happiness at her little calf's good fortune. "That's amazing."

"Petunia 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 a few other calves year-round." He smiled fondly at the cow.

Petunia 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 had broken off, and Petunia'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 five years ago. She looked worse back 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 o' calves at a time, all year long."

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

In response, the cow 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.

Even Chad looked impressed. "Never seen it done quite that effortlessly," he admitted, reaching out to shake Rufus's hand. "Thanks, my friend. Andi and I are grateful."

"Yes," Andi agreed. "I was really getting worried about Sweetie Pie." She grinned. "He looks very pleased with himself, and he hasn't dropped to the ground yet."

"The more he moves, the stronger his legs will grow," Rufus said.

"We'll keep Petunia 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 older boy scurried to his father's side.

"You watch Petunia and her newest calf like a hawk, boy," Rufus told him. "If she even waves a horn at her new calf, you know what to do."

"Yes, Papa." Teddy hiked himself up to the top railing and sat down. "But she's never turned away a calf before."

Rufus ruffled Teddy's hair, and the others turned to go. "Thank you," he said 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. She gave her brother a quick hug as the wagon jerked into motion. "That's awful nice of you, Chad. 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."

In the quickly fading daylight, Andi could just make out Chad's smile. He was teasing her, like always.

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, the Rocking T lay so far up in the foothills that Andi would never go there on her own, especially not to visit a calf.

Chad told her a month later that he'd seen Rufus in town. "He says your calf is growing like a weed. He follows Petunia all over the

pasture and romps with the other calves. The Tartars never bought another calf, so Sweetie Pie”—he cringed—“gets all of Petunia’s milk.”

With that good news, the memory of Sweetie Pie faded from Andi’s mind.



ONE YEAR LATER, AUGUST 1880

Andi and her family strolled through the livestock barns at the California State Fair. This year, Circle C horses, bulls, and cows had won their usual ribbons. One of Chad’s stallions had won the big race the day before, and her brother was in an especially good mood.

Looking at livestock didn’t seem quite as exciting as watching a race, but the colorful ribbons gave Andi a sense of pride in her family’s livestock and ranch. She stayed far away from the pen that held Magnus, their newest two-year-old bull. She didn’t like his looks, 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 streaming in through the open double doors of the livestock barn. What in the world was causing all that commotion?

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

Andi gasped. The kids were petting this huge animal.

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

SWEETIE PIE, ROCKING T RANCH.