

More Mischief

When she heard the ringing of the telephone, Tracy came inside from the veranda with a puppy cuddled in her arms. The puppies' eyes were all open now. She loved watching them romp and play on the lawn, chasing one of her old socks that she'd tied into knots.

"I'll get it!" Tracy called to Aunt Connie, who was busy bending over the drier in the laundry room. Tracy reached for the kitchen phone that was hanging on the wall beside the refrigerator and put the receiver to her ear. The puppy wriggled and squirmed in her arms and began licking her face.

"Laramie residence, Tracy speaking," she said, holding the receiver to her ear with her shoulder as she shifted the puppy in her arms. When the playful animal continued to writhe about, Tracy leaned down and placed him on the floor before he managed to slip from her grasp and injure himself.

"Hi sweetheart, it's Mommy." The voice of her mother came clearly from the other end, "How are things going there?"

"Good," Tracy replied. She sat down on the bench at the table, "How are you Mom? Did the doctor find out what is causing the pain?" She held her breath for a moment, worried at the pause that came from the other end.

"He said what I have is endometriosis." Although her mother's voice didn't seem concerned, the mere sound of the strange word left a hollow sensation in the pit of Tracy's stomach. Anything with an "osis" attached to the end implied something too scary to even think about.

"It isn't as bad as it sounds," her mother said, apparently sensing her daughter's fear through the extended silence from the other end of the phone.

"Then what is it?" Tracy asked. Her voice was just above a whisper.

"It just means that some specialized organ tissue inside of me is in the wrong place. It's located somewhere that it shouldn't be."

"What does that mean, Mom?" It was sounding more confusing by the minute. "Is it serious?"

"No, honey, as a matter of fact it isn't serious at all. It's really pretty simple. They are going to do a procedure called a D&C tomorrow. I'll have to take some medication for a while.

If the pain doesn't clear up and go away in the next few months, they may have to do surgery to remove the tissue, that's all. It isn't anything to worry about, honey. I'm going to be perfectly fine."

Her mother's voice was so cheerful that Tracy couldn't help but believe her. She let out her breath in a deep sigh, feeling as though a huge weight had just lifted from her chest. "That's great Mom!"

"Could I talk to your Aunt Connie? I need to tell her the results of the tests and let her know what's going on."

"Sure, I'll get her." Tracy sat the phone on the table and went into the laundry room to get her Aunt. While Aunt Connie talked to her mother, Tracy picked up the puppy that was scampering around underfoot and took him outside onto the veranda. By the time she put him in his box and came back into the kitchen, Aunt Connie had finished with the phone call and she was sitting at the breakfast nook, smiling.

"Wonderful news, honey! Your Mom will be released from the hospital the day after tomorrow. She'll go home with her friend Leslie for a few days, and then she is going to fly to Flagstaff to spend a couple of weeks here with us before the two of you fly back to Los Angeles."

"Then she's really going to be okay?" Joy was evident in Tracy's voice. She was so happy that she wanted to sing.

"She's going to be just fine." Aunt Connie chuckled at the expression of delight that flashed across Tracy's face with the news. Connie got up from the bench and came across the room to give her niece a hug and ruffle her soft, natural curls. "She'll be as fit as a fiddle in no time."

Tracy was relieved that her mother was going to be okay. She was happy as well that she was going to be able to spend a little more time on the ranch before she and her mother went back home to Los Angeles. There were so many interesting things she wanted to see and do on the ranch yet. Being on the ranch in the country certainly wasn't anything like living in the city.

"Now that my laundry is finished, would you like to take a horseback ride with me for an hour or so?" Aunt Connie asked. She turned to face Tracy before putting the glass she'd used for tea into the dishwasher. "I can saddle Lorado for you to ride. He's as gentle as a lamb," she said, sensing Tracy's sudden apprehension.

Tracy stood pondering the offer in silence for a moment with a look of uneasiness. “But I’ve never ridden a horse before.”

“That’s okay, Lorado knows all of the rules. He was my first foal when I wasn’t much older than you are, and Daddy gave him to me when Drake and I were married.” Connie’s expression immediately displayed a far away look. “I wish you could have known your grandparents, Tracy. They would have truly loved you, and you would definitely have loved them.” Aunt Connie smiled before taking Tracy by the hand and leading her toward the barn.

Aunt Connie saddled the large red quarter horse named Lorado before she saddled Zeke, the horse she generally rode. After helping Tracy up into the saddle, she led her out into the circular driveway while trailing her own horse behind her by the reins. Once they were outside of the barn, Aunt Connie gave Lorado’s reins to Tracy while she mounted Zeke. “Why don’t we take a ride over to the reservoir? It’s such a peaceful place with all of the trees and the meadows in between.” Aunt Connie clicked her tongue as a signal to Zeke and the horse quickly obeyed, walking slowly toward the path beside the driveway.

“To guide Lorado, gently pull the reins in the direction you want to go.” Aunt Connie turned in the saddle to speak over her shoulder to Tracy. Zeke walked slowly forward. “And when you want to stop just pull up on the reins and say ‘whoa,’ and he’ll stop. When you want to go again, just shake the reins and click your tongue while gently tapping his sides with the heels of your shoes, and he’ll go.”

It sounded simple enough. Tracy shook the reins and clicked her tongue, tapping gently with her heels. Sure enough, Lorado’s huge frame began to move slowly forward and Tracy held her breath. Her heart was pounding a loud tom-tom in her ears. She followed behind her aunt slowly and they made their way up the path into the shade of the ponderosa. After a while, all she could hear was the heavy, muffled thud of the horses’ hooves clomping through the soft talc like dirt that covered the trail.

When she finally began to relax, the sounds of Tracy’s heart pounding ceased. She actually began to enjoy the feel of the huge animal’s movements beneath her. She gently swayed to and fro as they lumbered down the passageway that was etched between the trees and the shrubs of the forest.

When they finally came to the reservoir, Aunt Connie dismounted and led Zeke to the water’s edge and allowed him to drink. Lorado followed, wading out into the soft mud of the

reservoir with Tracy in the saddle.

“Too bad we didn’t think to put on our swimsuits. It would have been nice to take a swim before going back home,” Aunt Connie said. She laughed at the stricken look on Tracy’s face when Lorado inched his way out into the knee-deep water.

Tracy held her breath and merely nodded her reply to her aunt’s comment. With each step the horse took, she found herself leaning to one side. She was afraid she might fall and land face first in the water. Finally, when Lorado had noisily drank his fill, he trudged slowly back up the bank and out of the water. But then he turned around and headed back down the embankment again to eat the lush, tender grass that was growing at the edge of the reservoir. They were at such a steep angle that it made Tracy fear she might slide out of the saddle and over the top of the horse’s head. She held tight to the saddle horn until Lorado finally turned to follow Zeke back toward the ranch.

When Tracy and Aunt Connie got back to the barn, Tracy climbed down from the saddle to discover that she was extremely stiff and her muscles were sore when she tried to walk. She hadn’t realized just how tense she had been throughout the horseback ride, until she stood on the floor of the barn and took a few steps. At that point her legs felt as limber as rubber bands, and with each step, it felt as though the rubber bands weighed a ton.

“You’ll get used to the saddle after a few trips out.” Aunt Connie chuckled as Tracy limped along beside her. “Next time we go out we’ll wear our swimsuits, though, so we can take a dip. Your Mom and I used to swim in the reservoir every summer when we were kids.”

Tracy glanced up at her aunt, “Is the ranch where you and Mom grew up?”

“Yes.” Reminiscing, Aunt Connie smiled at the memories. “This was our parent’s ranch. Your grandparents left it to your Mom and I when they passed away. It became the Laramie Ranch after your Uncle Drake and I were married.”

“Then this is Mom’s ranch too?” Tracy wondered why her mother had never told her about the ranch.

“Yes it is.” Connie glanced down at her niece, taking Tracy by the hand and walking toward the house. “There are eighteen hundred acres of land on the ranch. That’s plenty of ranch land for the both of us. In fact, there’s another ranch house not far from the reservoir that belongs to us too.”

“Who lives in the other ranch house?” Tracy’s curiosity was piqued.

“No one lives there right now. Our foreman used to live there, but he moved to town with his family last fall. He has two high school boys, and he and his wife wanted to live nearer the school so it would be easier for the boys to attend football practice. He drives out to work on the ranch in the early morning now.”

As the two of them made their way up the steps and onto the veranda, Tracy noticed that the kitchen door was open. Through the narrow opening she could see what appeared to be small, white handprints on the dark tile squares of the kitchen linoleum.

“Oh no, Mischief!” Aunt Connie cried out when she spied the miniature human-like prints. She shook her head in dismay when her eyes fell upon the raccoon that was sitting comfortably in the middle of the floor like a chubby, stripped tailed Buddha. The animal’s hands were busily dredging into a bag of confectioner’s sugar that was lying open on the floor in front of her. The coating of sugar gave the raccoon the appearance of being garbed in a pale, white apron and gloves. The floor and walls around the pantry were covered with small handprints in sugar, as well as smears of raspberry jam from a jar Mischief had broken in order to eat the contents. The faucet in the kitchen sink made a whispering sound, dribbling a tiny stream. The raccoon had obviously learned how to turn the faucet on, whether by chance or through intelligence. Surrounding the sink were globs of jam and scattered clumps of soggy, wet oatmeal and Cheerios. It looked like something out of a housekeeper’s worst nightmare.

Aunt Connie stepped cautiously around the jam, sugar, and gummy cereal. After turning off the faucet and wiping the jam she’d gotten onto her hands from the handle onto a tea towel, she reached for the phone that was hanging on the kitchen wall. She dialed and then stood watching the raccoon that was still busy consuming her booty.

“Hello, Travis? This is Connie Laramie. Is Jason about?” She stood listening to the party on the other end for a moment. “Could you send him over here to get Mischief? She’s made herself at home in my pantry and there’s sugar and jam from stem-to-stern.” A grin spread across Connie’s face before she laughed out loud. After another moment of listening, she said goodbye and hung up the phone, still shaking her head at the mischievous raccoon.

“Whatever are we going to do with you, Mischief?” She bent down and scratched the fur on the raccoon’s head. The animal reached up, grabbed Aunt Connie’s wrist, and pulled herself up into Connie’s arms, leaving a trail of powdered sugar, oatmeal, and sticky jam smeared right up the front of Connie’s blue shirt.

“You’ve really outdone yourself this time, you little rascal!” Aunt Connie couldn’t help but laugh as she surveyed the disarray of cans, jars, broken packages of noodles, Cheerios, and oatmeal, all scattered around on the kitchen floor.

Tracy didn’t wait to be given instructions. It was obvious what needed to be done. She stepped around the mess and went into the laundry room. She came back out with the broom and dustpan, as well as a pail and the mop.

“Travis Talbert and Jason are on their way over,” Aunt Connie said. She stood with the raccoon held like a furry infant in her arms. “They can help clean up this mess!” She chuckled and then started laughing again. “This is worse than bobbing for apples in the hot tub, Mischief!” She scratched the raccoon’s head and Mischief reached up and grasped her wrist, nuzzling the palm of Connie’s hand as though expecting to find a treat hidden there.

“Nope! There’s nothing for you there, you little imp!” Aunt Connie said, still laughing.

In a matter of minutes a pickup truck had pulled up into the driveway and a tall, Levi clad man came bounding up the steps. “So you’ve come visiting again, have you Mischief?” the man asked. He reached out and took the raccoon from Aunt Connie and handed him over to a boy of about twelve, who had entered the room just behind him.

“Tracy, this is Travis Talbert and his son, Jason.” Aunt Connie introduced the two with a nod toward Tracy. “And this is my niece Tracy.”

The man smiled and shook the hand that Tracy extended toward him. “I’m pleased to meet you Mr. Talbert,” she said.

“I’m pleased to meet you too, young lady.” The man turned toward his son who stood holding the raccoon, “and I see you’ve already met Mischief.” He shook his head at the raccoon with a grin.

Tracy nodded and followed Aunt Connie, Mr. Talbert, and Jason as they made their way out onto the veranda.

“Why don’t you take Mischief home while I clean up this mess?” Mr. Talbert asked, turning toward his son.

Jason nodded before starting down the steps. He stopped halfway down and turned back toward Tracy. “Would you like to come along? I see I won’t have to feed Mischief tonight before I lock her inside her cage. She’s been asleep most of the day. But she gets pretty active come nightfall. She’s a nocturnal animal, you know?” The boy came across as though he were

the voice of authority on the traits of raccoons.

“That’s a good idea, Tracy,” Aunt Connie said with a nod and a smile. “You two can take Mischief home and I’ll drive over there and pick you up in an hour. That will give the two of you a chance to get Mischief settled in.”

“Besides, it’s time for you to feed the animals, Jason. You can show Tracy your 4-H project,” Travis Talbert instructed his son. “And don’t forget to latch the padlock on Mischief’s cage.”

“Okay, Dad.” Jason turned toward Tracy with a proud smile. “I’m raising a calf for 4-H this year.”

Tracy was hesitant. She wasn’t sure she wanted to go along. After all, what did she know about raising calves?

Aunt Connie smiled and nodded again, coaxing her niece to go. “I’ll be there to pick you up in just a bit.”

Tracy followed Jason and the two of them walked down the road leading to the Talbert ranch that was half a mile away. At first neither of them said a word to one another. They just walked in silence. But after a few minutes of quiet, Jason finally spoke. “I’ll have to give Mischief a bath I’m afraid, she’s really a sticky mess.” He glanced down at the jam and sugar coated raccoon in his arms. Tracy nodded with her eyes fixed on the road ahead.

“You don’t talk much, do you?” Jason glanced in her direction, shifting the raccoon to rest on his hip.

“Not really,” Tracy murmured self-consciously.

“Where are you from?” Jason was curious, having never seen her at school.

“Los Angeles, actually Beverly Hills.”

“Oh, a rich girl!” Jason chuckled.

“I’m afraid I’m not a rich girl!” Tracy shot him a look of irritation. She didn’t much like being made fun of, and Jason’s grin implied he was making fun.

“Do you know the difference between a rich girl and a poor girl?” Jason cast a mischievous glance in Tracy’s direction as they walked.

“No, other than the fact that one doesn’t have as much money. So what’s the big difference?” Tracy asked with a hint of sarcasm.

“A poor girl has a can-a-pee under her bed, and a rich girl has a canopy over hers.” Jason

stopped in the middle of the road and laughed as the raccoon struggled to squirm out of his arms.

Tracy's expression was startled, as if he had smacked her. "Jason Talbert! You have a potty-mouth!" She stopped in the middle of the road and stood with her hands braced defiantly on her hips.

Jason walked a few steps further ahead before turning to look at her with a silly grin. "It was only a joke!" He gave a nervous laugh, instantly appearing embarrassed.

"Well it was a vulgar joke!" Tracy admonished, releasing her breath with a huffing sound. Her jaw was set hard in a display of anger with her chin stubbornly thrust into the air.

"I'm sorry." Jason's expression switched quickly from embarrassed to bewilderment. "It's a joke one of the boys at school told me. It didn't really seem all that bad to me."

"Well I guess that's a matter of opinion then, isn't it?" Tracy was incensed. She stood in silence for a moment longer before walking forward to catch up with Jason, who had turned and was now making his way down the road again.

"So what do you do for fun in the city? Do you go to rock concerts and fancy ice cream parlors?" Jason asked in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"No, I don't go to rock concerts or ice cream parlors. I go skating sometimes at the Mall, or I go swimming, or I play tennis."

"At a country club no doubt." Jason remarked as though stating a matter of fact, shooting a sidelong glance in her direction.

"Not hardly!" Tracy was becoming even more irritated with his attitude. "You make it sound as though everyone who lives in Beverly Hills is shallow minded and hangs out all day at a country club." She stopped walking and put her hands on her hips and glared at him again. Jason stopped and turned to look at her in silence.

"Nothing could be farther from the truth, Jason Talbert! I've never even been to a country club, much less hung out at one. My Mom and I have been staying with my mother's friend in Beverly Hills, only until my mother can get her health problems taken care of."

"What's wrong with your Mom?" Jason voice suddenly took on a serious tone.

"She has something called endosis, or something or another." Tracy couldn't remember the name, but it really didn't matter. She didn't figure it was any of Jason's business anyway.

"My Mom died when I was one and a half." Jason's voice came in a hushed tone of deep sadness.

“I’m sorry.” Tracy admitted in a lowered tone of voice. She instantly felt guilty for being so spiteful. “I didn’t know.”

“I really don’t remember her, but Dad says she was a really great person. I have pictures of her, but that’s about all.”

The two walked on for a bit in silence. “So, where’s your Dad?” Jason asked with his words breaking into the quiet.

“The last I heard, he lived in Florida. He remarried when I was only a baby, after he and Mom divorced. He has a new family now. Mom says he’s a free spirit who was tamed by a little woman with big plans, whatever that means.”

“Yeah,” Jason said with a laugh, “whatever that means!”

When the two arrived at the Talbert ranch, Jason led the way to the back porch where there was a laundry sink. He filled the deep sink with warm water and proceeded to bathe the raccoon that was anything but cooperative. She kept thrashing around and trying to climb out of the sink. Jason finally managed to wash all of the sugar and jam from the animal’s fur. He dried Mischief off with a towel that was hanging beside the laundry sink before placing her inside her cage with the padlock securely in place.

“That’s the only way I can keep her inside her cage,” Jason said, clamping the lock closed with an audible click. “She learned how to pick the combination lock, so I use the padlock that takes a key now. This morning I forgot to padlock her in after I fed her some carrots. I guess she doesn’t like carrots much lately, so she went over to your Aunt’s house to find something to eat that was a little more to her liking.” He chuckled and shot Tracy an amused glance.

“She’s certainly funny.” Tracy laughed and stooped down to watch as Mischief put her hands into her water dish and then proceeded to “wash” a slice of apple Jason had given her, with hands appearing almost human.

“Did you know they wash their food before they eat it? It’s not out of cleanliness, though. They don’t produce saliva, so wetting their food helps them to swallow it,” Jason said as he stood beside Tracy to peer into the cage as well.

“I don’t think she washed the powdered sugar though.” Tracy contributed with a laugh. “That would have really made a mess!”

“She probably did wet it, because sugar is so dry, she couldn’t swallow it otherwise.”

Jason stood up and turned to leave the porch, “Come on, I have to feed the calves before my dad gets back. I’ll show you Cinder. He’s a black Simmental-Angus cross that I’m raising for 4-H to enter in the Coconino County Fair this year.”

Tracy followed behind and Jason led the way to the barn. On their way, she noticed numerous black cattle that were standing around in a corral beside the barn. When they approached, one of the smaller cattle with a white blaze in the middle of its forehead, made its way to the railing of the fence in a separate sectioned off area.

“That’s Cinder,” Jason said. The half grown calf advanced the fence, emitting a deep, lowing bellow. “He’s letting me know that I’m a little late in feeding him.” Jason chuckled. “He would eat twenty-four-seven if you let him.” He reached across the top of the wooden, split-rail fence to stroke the calf’s head between the ears. The calf lowered his head in a bidding for more stroking before Jason stepped away.

Jason and Tracy entered the barn where he filled a bucket with grain. “If you’ll toss this grain into the wooden trough just over the fence, I can get a few flakes of hay.” He held the bucket out to Tracy. She grasped the handle of the bucket and waited until Jason had picked up an armload of alfalfa that actually smelled sweet as he separated it from the bale. The two of them exited the barn and Jason tossed the alfalfa into the wooden trough as Tracy emptied the bucket into the trough’s gutter at the opposite end.

It didn’t take long before the young steer made his way to his dinner while Jason proceeded to feed the other cattle in an adjoining pen. When he completed the task of feeding the animals, Jason climbed onto the top rail of the fence that enclosed the young steer he was raising.

“Have you ever raised a Fair animal?” he asked, straddling the rail.

Tracy climbed up to sit on the fence beside him. “No, I’ve lived mostly in apartments where there isn’t anyplace to raise an animal. I always wanted a horse, though. Aunt Connie let me ride Lorado this afternoon. That’s the first time I’ve actually been on a horse.” She glanced toward the boy who was sitting on the fence beside her. Wondering whether she might have divulged a little too much about her personal side.

“Cinder is my first calf.” Jason reached down from the rail to pet the bovine between the ears, causing the animal to lift its head, distracting it from its dinner. “I’ve always raised swine every year. But I decided this year I wanted to raise a steer.” There was a twinkle of pride in his

eyes and he stroked the calf's black head before raising his gaze to meet Tracy's.

"Would you like to come over tomorrow and help me give him a bath?" He continued petting the steer's head. The calf belched loudly before continuing to devour the alfalfa and grain.

Somehow giving such a large animal a bath seemed comical to Tracy. She wondered what kind of tub you would use to bathe a cow? "How do you give him a bath?" She tried not to laugh at the sudden mental image that flashed through her mind of a huge bathtub with the calf perched inside, surrounded by a thick cloud of bubbles.

"I put a halter on him and tie him to the eyehook on the wall of the barn over there." Jason pointed toward a round, metal ring that was attached to the side of the barn. Beside the ring was a faucet with a short length of hose attached. Under the faucet was a square slab of concrete that formed a platform, with a drain in the center of the sloped floor.

"He generally likes his bath," Jason assured her. Tracy looked apprehensively toward the animal that was obviously quite a bit larger than a raccoon, while remembering the struggle Mischief had just put up during her bath.

"I wouldn't mind watching you give him a bath," Tracy elaborated, "but I don't think I want to help."

Jason laughed. City girls appeared to be strange creatures, especially when it came to being exposed to living things that were much larger than a breadbox! Most of the girls he knew from school wouldn't think twice about helping him bathe Cinder. Although he knew of a few that might balk, the majority of the girls he was acquainted with were raised on ranches the same as he was, where handling animals came second nature.

"It's okay if you don't want to help." Jason smiled with an expression of sympathy for her apprehension to try something unfamiliar. "You can come over around four and watch me give him a bath and brush him out before I put him through his paces."

"What do you mean, put him through his paces?" Tracy flashed him a puzzled expression that crinkled her brow.

"I have to teach him to lead. That means for him to follow beside me on a rope. Kind of like walking a dog on a leash." Jason displayed a sense of authority on the subject. "He has to learn to turn in the direction I want him to turn, and to follow beside me without bolting or trying to take off. There will be a lot of noise at the Fair. I always turn the radio up really loud in the

barn when I'm working with him so that he gets accustomed to the loud sounds of music and voices. That way maybe he won't bolt and run when the judges talk over the loud speakers at the Fair when I'm showing him in the arena. It's called conditioning. If you come over at four you can meet my friend Kaitlyn, too. She lives on the ranch down the road. She'll be here too. She wants to watch me give Cinder a bath and walk him." Jason glanced over his shoulder toward Tracy and noticed his father and Connie had pulled up into the driveway near the ranch house.

"I'll have to ask my aunt if it's okay for me to come over tomorrow." Tracy saw her aunt and Jason's father too. She climbed down from the fence and Jason jumped to the ground and joined her. The two advanced toward the house where Aunt Connie and Mr. Talbert now stood beside the porch.

"Have you finished feeding?" Mr. Talbert called out as Jason approached.

"Yes, Cinder is fed and so are the others in the corral." Jason brushed the knees of his jeans with his palms to disperse the particles of alfalfa that were still clinging to the denim fabric.

"Are they watered as well?" Mr. Talbert raised his eyebrows in anticipation of the expected negative answer.

"No, I haven't watered them yet. I have to clean out their troughs, remember?"

With that Travis Talbert chuckled. "Just checking up on you son. I was wondering if you would remember on your own. While you and Tracy clean out the watering troughs, Connie and I will be in the garden gathering vegetables. You don't think we'll miss a few zucchini, do you?"

Jason laughed at the comment. "Nope! I suspect not dad, we have squash coming out of our ears lately. There are so many 'zukes and cukes, I could puke." He laughed at what he thought was a humorous anecdote. His father merely raised his brow as he shook his head. It seemed that the few zucchini and cucumber vines they planted that spring had managed to produce in abundance. There was always plenty to spare. Despite the rabbits and the deer that ate their share, and the portion they always fed to the pigs.

It didn't take long for Tracy and Jason to scrub and hose out the water troughs before refilling them with fresh water. When the chore was finished, Jason checked to see whether Cinder had finished all of his grain. When he found a portion of the feed was still lying in the bottom of the trough, Jason coaxed the calf to come back and finish the rest of the grain by drizzling a small amount of water and molasses over the top of it.

“He likes the molasses,” Jason explained as the calf eagerly devoured the remaining kernels of corn and oats. “It’s important that he cleans up all of his food. If he doesn’t, he might not make weight come Fair time.”

“He looks plenty big enough to me!” Tracy watched Cinder licking up the remaining glistening particles of molasses from the wooden surface. The calf’s tongue licking the bottom of the trough generated a sound as though it was sandpaper on wood.

“Oh, he’s big enough right now for sure. But when we load him into the stock trailer to take him to the Fair he could lose as much as fifty pounds. Stress does that to cattle, you know? He has to weigh in at least 1,000 pounds. When we weighed him last week he was at 1,200 pounds, which is ideal for Fair weight. But I want him to put on at least fifty more pounds. A hundred more pounds would be even better yet.” Jason reached out and affectionately stroked the calf’s neck with a twinkle of pride in his eyes.

“Dad drove all the way to New Mexico last summer, just a week after last year’s Fair, to buy Cinder from a rancher who has exceptional breeding stock.” He turned toward Tracy who was standing beside him. “Would you like to pet him?” He fully expected her answer to be “no.”

She stood, dumbfounded, for a matter of moments, obviously apprehensive of making physical contact with an animal that was so large.

“Come on, he doesn’t bite!” Jason laughed and continued to stroke the calf’s head. “He’s as gentle as a lamb, really.”

Tracy wasn’t certain she would be receptive to petting a lamb, much less a steer. She cautiously reached out and barely touched the black coat of the calf. A look of surprise spread over her face. “Oh, he’s so soft!” Her words were in a whispered tone as she stroked the animal’s neck. Slowly, Cinder turned his head toward the duo and Jason reached out and rubbed the steer’s nose.

“That’s because I bathe him regularly and give him different oils in his feed to make his coat glossy and smooth. It helps make his hair grow so I can train it with a brush to go in the right direction instead of going all wily and curled.” Jason laughed with a shimmer of glee in his eyes. He was convinced that city girls were certainly uneducated when it came to animals.

