



The Gift

by Lauraine Snelling

Excerpt provided courtesy of LauraineSnelling.com

“Cody, old horse, you look as lonely as I feel.”

Cody raised his head from the water trough and, his lower lip hanging loose as always, he dribbled water on Turner McNeally’s down vest.

“Boy, you sure could use a brushing.” Turner flipped the water droplets off his front and rubbed the leopard Appaloosa’s dirty white ears. “Dani would be on my case like you going after the last kernel of grain in the feed box.”

Cody snorted, sending smaller droplets in the direction of Mac’s face. Turner had lived most of his forty-two years known by the handle of Mac. He’d never cared for Turner, renaming himself even before he went to grade school. He drew a red print handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his face, brushing the water off his mustache, which matched his silver-flecked, sealskin brown hair. His daughter, Danielle, now away at college, teased him about the silver, telling him he looked distinguished.

“You about done or do I get another bath?”

Cody rubbed his forehead against Mac’s shoulder, leaving behind a sprinkle of white hairs on the red and black plaid flannel shirt. When the horse paused in his rubbing, Mac took the hint and scratched the broad plate between the horse’s eyes.

“You know, sometimes I get so I could drive clear to Chicago just to see her.” Or bring her back. He never could figure out why a country girl like his Dani would choose a big city college like Northwestern. Of course, it might have had something to do with the full scholarship they’d offered her. Danielle was not only pure grace on the basketball floor; she had a mind that considered physics child’s play and quantum physics pure fascination.

“Couldn’t stand in her way, now could we?”

Cody shook his head, both ears and lower lip flopping in the process. He nudged Mac again, a tad more firmly this time. After all, the fingers had ceased their motion, and the man had yet to stroke the black-dotted neck.

“All right, I get the point.” Mac took up stroking again, wincing at the cloud of dust and loose hair that followed his hand. Danielle. My Dani. How the light had gone out of his life after seeing her get on that plane at Los Angeles International Airport. It was almost as bad as when they notified him that his wife and son had been killed in a traffic pileup on Highway 58, down by Caliente. Well, not really, at least he’d see Dani before summer, God willing. He’d never taken good-byes for granted again, and ten years passing didn’t make them any easier. Nowhere had he read a guarantee that you would see someone you loved again after you said good-bye. Now he always said, “I’ll see you,” and he knew that to be true, whether here or in heaven. Only God knew which.

“Come along, Boy, let’s get you cleaned up and then I gotta go check on the cows.” He headed for the barn, the horse tagging along as he always did, his nose bumping the man’s elbow every few steps, as if to remind him he wasn’t alone.

After brushing the horse and pouring a can of feed in the black rubber tub in the manger, Mac carefully locked the gate behind him and headed for the truck. Driving out to the west pasture was easier than walking. Riding Cody would have done them both some good, but the truck was faster. Not that he was in a hurry or anything. He checked the float in the round stock tank, scooped out a couple handfuls of floating green algae, and counted the cows with their calves that grazed the ten-acre pasture. About time to switch them to the next section. If only the rains would come so he didn’t have to move the irrigation pipes again. While winter had come to much of the country, fall hung on here in the Tehachapi Mountains of California.

Back at the house, on the rear deck overlooking the wooded hills that rose from Cummins Valley, he automatically kicked the dust off his boots at the bootjack by the back door before he entered the darkened family room. If you don’t like the dark, you can’t blame anyone but yourself, he scolded himself. You’d think by now you’d remember to leave a light on. He flipped the light switch, ignoring the sorrow that still knifed through his soul and caught him unawares, even after all these years. As he knew by now, it would go away and sometimes the joy of their time together would sneak up and comfort him. He seemed to have no control over either.

Since Danielle, who’d become an excellent cook, left for school, he had decreed cooking a waste of time. He often made a large pot of something on Saturday and when he got tired of eating it, bagged the leftovers and threw the bags in the freezer. Each night, he took out whatever looked good and, within minutes, the microwave had his dinner hot. He’d rather read than cook any day—unless he had the pleasure of cooking for company.

Tonight he chose stew. When the oven dinged, he took his bowl to the table and wrote out an ad to run in the local paper. The Tehachapi News, unlike many weeklies, was worth reading.

Old horse needs young companion. He crossed it out and started again.

Old horse lonely.

Needs young companion.

Not for sale.

Not forever.

Just for fun.

He eyed the form and half-shrugged. Not bad and it would attract more attention in free form than straight paragraph. “Lord, You know what I need. What Cody needs. Surely You have just the perfect kid in mind. Boy, girl, doesn’t matter, but someone who needs us, too.” He scrubbed his forehead with callused fingertips. “Good thing I can talk out loud to You or someone coming in would think I’ve gone round the bend.”

Bungee, the cow dog with one blue eye, one marbled, rose from his place beside Mac and laid his head on the man’s thigh.

“You think that?” Mac stroked the gray, black, brown, and silver mottled fur and read over his ad again. Bungee only whimpered deep in his throat. “Well, Lord, unless You have something better in mind, I’ll turn this in tomorrow morning on my way to the Miller job.” He glanced at the calendar. To meet his bid, he only had three days left to finish the rough-in phase of the plumbing on the house in progress. “Should make that.” He stroked the dog’s head again and, using both hands, fluffed Bungee’s ears and rubbed his thumbs down the sides of the dog’s face. “I imagine you want to eat, too.”

Bungee brushed the aging hardwood floor with his fluffy bit of a tail and whined again.

Mac read the ad one more time. “Just for fun.” He nodded. “Sure as I’m sitting here, I hope it will be.”