

The kids pressed against the hog panels, fingers entwined in the wire. The shorter ranch hand stood in the midst of the kids, the lead rope in one hand with a calf contentedly munching on the grass. But it was the man and boy inside the pen with the other calf that caught her attention.

She sighed deeply and smiled. Aidan had let Toby get in the pen with the calf. Her son's eyes sparkled with excitement as he ran his hands over the red hair of the animal. When she'd met Aidan at the store, she'd known he was something special, and here he was, going the extra mile to make Toby's birthday the best it could be. As she watched, Aidan leaned down and spoke into her son's ear. Toby nodded eagerly.

Aidan grabbed Toby under his arms, scooped him up and deposited him on the calf's back. Aidan stepped back against the fencing. The calf quivered a moment, flipped its tail back and forth then sprang into action. It spun in a circle, put its head down and bucked forward once, twice, three times. Toby hunkered down, his arms wrapped around the animal's neck as it bawled its displeasure at being ridden. Gina watched, rooted to the spot, unable to believe her eyes.

The calf bolted forward, then lowered its head and planted his front feet. Toby tumbled forward over the animal's head and hit the ground with a dull thud.

That sound jolted Gina out of her frozen state. She leapt off the back step and ran across the yard. The crowd of kids parted as she pushed her way through, then she yanked the fence open and shoved Aidan out of the way. She dropped to the ground next to her son. She touched his back as he pushed himself up. He lifted his head and looked at her, blood at one corner of his mouth.

"Oh, my God!" Gina wailed. She ran her hands over his body, down his arms, down his legs, then gingerly touched his mouth. Her blood pounded in her ears. For a moment, she felt as if she might pass out. He grinned. "Did you see me, Mom? That was awesome!" One of his front teeth was gone.