Beneath the Western Sky

Compiled by

Susan K. Marlow

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Acknowledgments:

The Circle C Adventures, Beginnings, and Goldtown Adventures short-story writing contest is open to young writers ages 7 to 17. The contest runs annually from September 1 through January 15.

A big thank-you to this year’s six independent judges, who are well acquainted with the “Andi” and Goldtown books and are authors and/or book reviewers. They judged entries in three categories:

**Ages 6-9**: Heather Fitzgerald & Judy Nill  
**Ages 10-13**: Rebekah Morris & Donna Patton  
**Ages 14-17**: Karla Cook & Colleen Reece

And thank you, 2014-2015 contest winners! Without your delightful imaginations, this collection would not have been compiled. Young authors’ names can be found with their story entries.

To learn how you can enter the 2015-16 story contest, email SusanKMarlow@gmail.com or visit Andi’s blog: www.CircleCAdventures.blogspot.com.
2014-2015 Contest Winners:

**Ages 6-9**

1<sup>st</sup> Place: Adahmariyah Kelley, age 8  
“Finding Pickles”

2<sup>nd</sup> Place: Aaremey Cathey, age 8  
“Andi’s Birthday Crisis”

3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Grace, age 9  
“The Gift”

Honorable Mention: Sarah Sargent, age 7  
“Cave Trouble”

**Ages 10-13**

1<sup>st</sup> Place: Grace Cary  
“Truth or Tale?”

2<sup>nd</sup> Place: Lauren Friesen, age 13  
“Andi’s Double Victory”

3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Lauren Thomas  
“Stolen”

Honorable Mention: Kaitlyn, age 13  
“They’ll Know Us by Our Love”

**Ages 14-17**

1<sup>st</sup> Place: Roseanna Martin, age 14  
“The Hidden Plot”

2<sup>nd</sup> Place: Jeseca Wheaton, age 16  
“Through Times Unclear”

3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Elizaveta Korobleva, age 14  
“Chad’s Great War”

Honorable Mention: Heidi Brown, age 15  
“No Greater Love”
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Category: 6-9
First Place

Finding Pickles
by
Adahmariyah Kelley, age 8

Adahmariyah is in the 3rd grade and home-schooled. She spends her days in Iowa painting, reading, and playing with her brother and sister. She loves horses, drawing, beading, and sewing pillows. She likes to make up stories and have fun with friends.

It was just after New Year’s Day. Aunt Rebecca was packing up her carpetbag to leave the Circle C ranch. Everyone was getting ready to take her to the train.

Andi decided to get her lizard, Pickles, from behind the stove. She was going to feed him a spider from the barn before they left. When she looked into the box, Pickles was missing.

“Mother, Pickles is missing!” Andi screamed.

Mother and Melinda came running. They looked in the box. Sure enough, Pickles was gone.

Melinda started yelling and jumping around. She was scared that Pickles would climb up her leg. “Andi, you have to find that little reptile! I don’t want it anywhere near me.”
Mother gave Melinda a look that said, *Calm down.* Just then Aunt Rebecca came down the stairs. “What is all this screaming about?”

Melinda screeched, “Andi’s disgusting little reptile got out of its box and is somewhere in this house.”

Aunt Rebecca’s mouth dropped open. “Elizabeth, you must teach your little girl that having lizards in the house is highly unladylike.”

Andi wished that Aunt Rebecca would stop being so bossy and that everyone would help her find Pickles. She grabbed Mother’s sleeve and started to cry. “Will you help me find Pickles?”

Before she could answer, Aunt Rebecca cut in. “No, no dear. We will be late for the train.”

Andi looked at Mother, hoping for a different answer.

“Your auntie is right,” Mother said. “We have to be going. Don’t cry. I’m sure we’ll find him when we return.”

Mother, Melinda, Andi, and Aunt Rebecca climbed into the buggy. The last time Andi rode in the buggy the wheel had come off and she had to bring Aunt Rebecca home riding a horse. She did not want that to happen again, especially with four people.

Andi’s stomach jumped. She felt sick while trying to hold back tears. She was worried about Pickles and about the buggy losing a wheel again. She’d rather stay home and find Pickles.
God, help me find Pickles. And don’t let the wheel come off, Andi thought.

Finally, they reached the train station. Andi looked over at Aunt Rebecca, glad that her visit was finally over. As she turned her head, she saw something moving inside Aunt Rebecca’s bag.

“Auntie, there’s something in your bag. It’s moving.” Could it possibly be Pickles? Andi thought.

Aunt Rebecca’s eyes opened wide. She opened the carpetbag but could not move a muscle more. “Here, Andrea. You get it out.”

Andi put her hand inside Aunt Rebecca’s bag and felt something smooth and scaly. She picked it up. There was her cute little lizard, Pickles. “Pickles, you’re here! I was so worried.”

Andi was suddenly glad she had come along. If she hadn’t, Pickles would have gone home with her aunt.

Aunt Rebecca looked over, disgusted at what she was seeing. “Oh, dear! I had a lizard crawling all over my clothes!”

Andi tried to hold in her giggle. “At least you didn’t take him all the way home with you. That would have been awful. I would have never seen my precious lizard again.”

Melinda spoke up. “What would have been awful is if Pickles got out in the train and all the people were terrified by the little beast.”

“Oh, Melinda,” Mother said. “We can be thankful that did not happen.”
Everyone smiled at the thought.
Just then the train whistle blew. Everyone hugged Aunt Rebecca good-bye and off she went.
Andi held Pickles close all the way home and whispered a little prayer. “Thank you, God, for keeping us safe on the way. But mostly, thank you that I have Pickles back and he’s not on a train for San Francisco.”
Andi’s Birthday Crisis
by
Aaremy Cathey, age 8

Aaremy lives on a small hobby farm in northern New York state. She loves horses, gymnastics, and playing with her pet goat, Birdy. Above all else, she loves the Lord!

When Andi was sleeping, dreaming about her lovely birthday, her brother Chad snuck in to get her birthday present, but suddenly dropped it.

_Crash!_ Andi fell out of bed, screaming because of the noise, not opening her eyes until her mother came.

Finally, she opened her eyes and seeing Chad, yelled at him. “Chad, I was having the best dream ever and you woke me up. Mother, Chad should be punished,” she whined.

“Sorry, Andi. I needed something important,” Chad said as he ran away from the room, slamming the door loudly.

Later, while Andi was outside snatching the eggs into a basket, she thought of something. She said to
herself, “Why should I be doing chores when it’s my birthday? Anybody can do my chores. Why me on my eighth birthday?”

She felt something scratching at her feet. When she turned around, there was Henry, that bad, bad rooster! Henry hopped up and started scratching at Andi’s boots and crowing at her.

She ran toward the gazebo, but before she could get there, she fell, scratching her knees and cracking the eggs. Even the special, gigantic, spotted egg cracked too, right in her overalls pocket.

“Oh, no! That egg was going to be for my birthday breakfast.” Andi got up and kicked the mean ol’ rooster away.

Andi’s overalls were disgusting, so she went inside and had to put pants on that did not fit. After she changed, she said, “Mother, can you make me a special birthday breakfast?”

Her mother did not answer her back. So, she cried out, “Chad, can you make me a special birthday breakfast?”

He did not answer either. Instead of a special birthday breakfast, Andi made a cold sandwich. “This is not a great breakfast at all. Where is everybody?” she exclaimed.

When Andi was done with her sandwich, she went outside to the barn but still couldn’t find
anyone. She went over to Taffy and gave her a nice, big pat.

Suddenly, she felt something jumping on her back. She twisted around and saw Dozer, the smelly pygmy goat buck, standing there.

“Oh, you nasty little goat, get away from me!” As she walked away to the door, Andi tripped over a bucket. As she lay there, Dozer sniffed all over her face.

She yelled in his face and tried to scramble away, “Ew, you ugly goat! Help! Where is everybody?”

When she got up, she quickly ran back to the house to take off her stinky clothes—again!

After that, Andi scampered out to the pasture to look for everyone. When she got there, she kept running because she saw cows, horses, and the big, red, mean bull . . . but not her family.

Andi hated the bull, so she didn’t stop running as she headed toward the forest. But she slipped in cow manure. When she looked down, there was pooh all over her pants.

“Again?” she hollered. “Where is everybody?”

Andi got up and swiftly went home again. When she changed her clothes, all she had left to wear was her bathing suit. She put it on and went onto the porch.

“This is the worst birthday ever!” she said. “Where is everyone? Don’t they care that it’s my birthday? I can’t believe that my family would act so rude.”
fussed. Then she prayed, “Lord, please help me find my family.”

Just then, a familiar voice shouted from the woods. “Andi, Andi, where are you?”

“Oh, Riley, thank goodness you’re here,” Andi said.

“Do you want to go fishing?” her friend Riley asked.

“Sure!” she answered. They scattered off to the pond.

As they got closer to the pond, Andi saw a table full of presents, decorations, and food. Everyone was splashing off the dock and into the pond.

Mother was there by the table, waving Andi over to her. She went to her mother and said, “Everything looks awesome! Is this my party?”

“Yes, it is. Happy birthday, Andi,” she said and hugged her.

“I couldn’t find anyone. Where were you all?” Andi asked.

“We were here, setting up the party,” Mother answered.

“You wouldn’t believe what happened to me! First, I went to get the eggs, and that mean-old Henry scratched my feet. I fell, cracking my special birthday egg. I had to change into clothes that didn’t fit.

“Then, when I went to the barn, that nasty old goat, Dozer, sniffed all over my face, and I had to change again.
“When I went to the pasture, the cruel, old bull was there. I slipped in manure and all I had left to wear was my bathing suit.”

“It’s all right, Andi,” Mother said. “Next time, don’t go into the pasture with the bull. We would surely not be in there. Oh, and by the way, I am glad that you got your clothes dirty.”

“You are? Why?” asked Andi.

“Because now you can go swim in the pond.”

“Yes!” yelled Andi.

As she ran to the pond, she thought about how God had answered her prayer. She had never prayed in the daytime before, only at night.

Now she knew she could pray any time.
One December afternoon, Andrea “Andi” Carter walked into Goodwin’s mercantile with a cheery greeting for Mr. Goodwin, the shopkeeper. He wasn’t behind the counter, so Andi began looking for a china doll for her mother for Christmas.

Andi hadn’t gone far when she spotted a lovely doll. It looked like her mother and was wearing a pretty lavender dress with light-pink rosettes.

“This would look very nice on Mother’s dresser,” Andi said.

She turned toward the counter, wondering if Mr. Goodwin was there yet. To her surprise, it was not Mr. Goodwin but a sour-faced man.
He took the doll and said, “Five dollars.”

Andi had been saving up for a doll for her mother for a long time, but she only had four dollars. She put the doll back on the counter and walked home.

That night after supper her older sisters, Kate and Melinda, came into her room to talk.

“Is something the matter, Andi?” asked Melinda.

“Sort of,” Andi replied. “I don’t have enough money to buy Mother a Christmas present.”

Kate said, “Well, why don’t we go to town tomorrow and look at Christmas presents?”

“All right,” Andi agreed.

The next day, the three sisters walked into the general store. The sour-faced man was at the counter again. Andi showed her sisters the doll she wanted to buy Mother.

Kate pointed to another doll that looked like Mother but was wearing a different dress. “This one is only four dollars,” she said.

“Thank you for showing me that,” Andi said. She took it to the counter.

The main grumpily took the doll from Andi, and she paid for it.

While her sisters were looking at a display of embroidered handkerchiefs, Andi wandered farther back into the store. Soon she realized she was in the storeroom.

“What’s this?” she exclaimed. A jeweled necklace was sitting in the top of an open box.
Just then the sour-faced man walked in. ”What are you doing in here?” he snapped.
Andi gasped.
“I'll teach you to keep from meddling!” the man exclaimed. He walked out of the storeroom and slammed the door shut.

Andi tried to open the door but it was locked. She sighed. She noticed the man did not have very much sense, though. The boxes were right next to her. She peeked into one. Lots of necklaces and more china dolls were inside. The china dolls, Andi noticed, were something like the store would usually sell.

But as for the necklaces, that was a different story.

Andi picked up a locket. She slid her thumbnail into the groove on the locket. She saw a picture of a young girl and a boy. Andi stared at it. Then she looked at the cover and saw the initials MT.

Andi realized from the grumpy man’s attitude and the picture and initials on this locket that the items in the box must have been stolen.

*All right, I need to tell my big brother Justin about this.* As she looked around in hopes of escape, Andi saw a window high up on the wall. She saw a small stepladder and dragged it over. She found a crate, and hoping there were no china dolls in it, she put it on the stepladder.

Andi climbed up onto the box and tried to smash the window with a shovel she had found in the room.
She saw a crack appear in the glass and banged a little bit more.

There was a hole just big enough for Andi to get through. She knocked out a few more pieces of glass. She found a blanket on the floor to wrap herself in.

Then Andi heard footsteps.

She gasped, jumped onto her makeshift stool, and slid out the window. Afraid the grumpy man was in the room, she threw the blanket on the ground outside the window and ran as fast as she could toward Justin’s law office.

Once inside, his assistant tried to stop her.

“It’s important!” Andi exclaimed and ran past him.

When she got into her brother’s office he sighed. “Andi, I am sorry Aunt Rebecca is here but—”

“It’s not that,” Andi said, laughing a little bit. She began telling Justin her whole story of what had happened at the shop.

“Widow Margaret Thasseler had her prized china dolls and valuable jewelry stolen, you know,” he said. “I am going to have to talk to the sheriff about this.”

A minute later, they were at the sheriff’s office. “Andi, tell him what you saw at the mercantile,” Justin said kindly.

Andi explained what had gone on.

The next morning, Christmas day, Andi woke up. She remembered last night’s events. Hopping out of bed she was excited for the upcoming Christmas celebration.
She thought about how the thief, who was the grumpy man, had been caught. Mrs. Thasseler was very happy that her jewels had been recovered. Andi learned that Mr. Goodwin had been visiting family for Christmas.

When she walked downstairs, Justin caught her and gave her a hug.

The family gathered around their Christmas tree to open gifts. Andi gave Mother a wrapped package.

Her mother opened it and pulled out the beautiful china doll. “Thank you, Andrea!”

Justin handed Andi a small package.

Andi opened it and saw a necklace with a small emerald pendant. She gasped. “Is this really for me?”

Justin nodded. “It is from Mrs. Thasseler.”

Andi smiled. She knew she would have a very special Christmas.
Sarah lives in Colorado with her nine siblings. She loves to learn new things and to read, especially the Circle C Adventures books! She loves Jesus and hopes someday to be a writer and a cowgirl with many children.

Chapter One

Andi Carter was walking down the stairs to the table where her family was talking.

“Good morning, Andi,” Mitch said.
“What’s for breakfast?” she asked.
“Eggs and hot cereal,” Chad said.
“After breakfast may I go riding with Riley?”
“Of course,” Mother said, smiling at her.

Andi ate breakfast quickly, but not too fast or Mother might scold her. After breakfast she walked outside and saw Riley feeding Midnight.

“You want to go riding to the creek?” Riley asked.
“No, I went there yesterday.”
“The cave?” Riley suggested.
“You mean it?” Andi asked in excitement.

“You, sure. I don’t go there very much, but the idea just popped into my head.”

“Of course I want to, but first I’m going to go get Justin, because I don’t feel safe going there without an older kid.” Andi ran off towards the house.

Riley frowned at the thought of her not thinking of him as a big kid.

“Justin, where are you?” Oh, where is that boy? He should be done with chores by now, she said to herself.

“I’m in here. Just let me finish drying these dishes, okay?” he yelled back.

“Okay, I’ll be waiting by the front door.” Andi waited, full of excitement. She hardly ever went to the cave, and especially Justin didn’t. He was always so busy.

In a minute, Justin was out and meeting her. “Shall we go?” He smiled and caught hold of her hand.

“We shall.” She smiled back.

They walked off to where Riley was waiting.

“You two wanted to go to the cave with me, am I right?” Justin asked.

“Oh, yes. Let’s go,” Riley responded.

Andi looked up at Justin and started to skip along, still holding his hand.

Riley tied Midnight to the fence and walked away. On the way down they laughed and talked and giggled. (Well, Andi was the only one that giggled).
They walked along and found lots of cool things, like sparkly rocks and a pond with little toads in it, and huge autumn leaves, and the prettiest blue birds they’d ever seen.

Soon they were getting closer to the cave, and it was going to be getting dark. They all agreed that they were tired enough to stop and have something to eat.

Justin and Riley cleared an area for a small fire right by a tree, while Andi gathered the wood for it. She pulled out a bag of food that was in her pocket. Out of the bag came cheese, bread, a couple of apples, and a bottle of milk.

“You want some? Anybody?” she asked, not really wanting to share any of the milk. But she knew they would want some.

“Of course,” they responded.

“Oh, Justin, did you tell Mother we would stay out this late?” Andi asked as she started passing out the food.

“Yes, don’t worry. I told her on the way out of the house.”

The fire was set, and they all sat around the fire eating what was served for them.

“How did you know to bring the food?” Riley asked as he munched down a slice of white bread.

“While Justin was doing dishes I thought we could have a little picnic,” Andi said cheerfully. I knew we would need it at sundown. But she did not say that part out loud.
“We should get some sleep. It’s a big day ahead of us,” Riley said with a yawn.
“I agree, because I’m tired,” Andi said. She laid down her head, looked up at the stars, and fell asleep.

Chapter Two

Whoo, whoo!
What was that? Andi woke up “Justin! Where are you?” she said in a rush.
Justin was nowhere to be seen. It was just Riley, the only big person.
Andi walked back to her bed. She laid her head down and tried to sleep, but try as she might, she could not sleep. She could not stop thinking about Justin.
Andi thought something: maybe she could go look for Justin. But not by herself. No way! Andi would go with Riley. Then she would be safe on her journey.
But there was no way to get Riley awake.
Oh, well, I must get back to sleep. But how would Andi go to sleep?
At last morning came.
“Get up, Andi!” Riley said.
Andi woke up with a thud. Justin was still gone.
Andi and Riley had to decide whether to continue on to the caves or to go look for Justin. Though they felt afraid, they chose to go on with their adventure.
On they walked for another thirty minutes, until Andi shouted out, “The caves! I can see the path down to the caves!”

On down they walked, careful not to stumble on the rocks. Riley tried not to shiver as he almost certainly heard a growl up ahead. He had heard there were bears around here, and he was a little scared.

As the two approached the cave openings, they stopped and gave each other a look that showed they were nervous.

Justin was not there. So he could not protect them if they met with trouble.

They lowered their heads and ducked into the dark cave. Little bits of sunlight came through the cracks. Then . . .

*Roar, roar!*

What was that?

“Andi, I think that is a bear,” Riley said, trying not to shiver.

Then there it came: the bear of all the creepiest tales.

“Help! help!” Andi felt like she screamed for an hour.

Running out of the cave with Riley, they searched for which way to go. They started to the left, then Justin called to them from the right.
They turned around and ran as fast as they could go, slamming into Justin halfway up the path.

“That was the creepiest thing I ever saw,” Andi said to Justin, breathing very hard. “But I’m glad you’re here.”

The two recalled their scare to him. He was just smiling, like always.

“But honey, when I left I was just going to get more food. Then I heard screaming and I knew there was trouble.”

As the trio continued down the path at a fast pace, Andi and Riley wiped the sweat from their faces and said at the same time, “Yeah! Cave trouble!”
Category: Ages 10-13
First Place

Truth or Tale?
by
Grace Cary
Olathe, Kansas

Grace is a homeschooled teenager who spends her time studying academics, playing music, and helping with her family's small farm. When she's not reading or writing, she also enjoys photography, baking, card making, and dancing.

Leaning against the counter of Goodwin’s Mercantile one carefree, sunny afternoon, thirteen-year-old Andi Carter surveyed the jars of candy with a critical eye. An overflowing mountain of cheery, red-and-white striped peppermint drops danced in the tallest jar, and sparkling lemon drops lay scattered in the bottom of another. Hoar hound and wintergreen candies filled two other containers to the brim.

“Well, what should we share?” Andi turned and surveyed her good friend Rosa Garduño. “Peppermint drops? Lemon drops? Wintergreen or hoar hound?”
“You decide, mi amiga.” Rosa shrugged her shoulders. “I am fine with whatever you choose,” she added loyally.

Andi gazed at the red swirls on the candy. It had been her idea to stop at Goodwin’s for a little treat after a boring school day. She fumbled in her dress pocket. “We’ll take peppermint drops, Mr. Goodwin,” she requested. She pulled out a coin and plunked it on the counter.

Mr. Goodwin dipped out the peppermints and poured them into a little sack. “Here you are, ladies. Anything else I can help you with?”

“No, but thanks. My brother is probably waiting to take us home, so we better get going.” Andi handed the candy to Rosa and turned to leave. “Bye, Mr. Goodwin.”

“Adios,” Rosa chimed in. The door swung shut behind the girls.

As Andi and Rosa trudged along Tulare Street toward Justin’s law office sucking the minty candy, they came upon Mrs. Evans and Mrs. King. The portly women stood on the boardwalk, tongues wagging furiously as they caught up on the latest events.

“Oh, great,” groaned Andi.

Mrs. Evans and Mrs. King were the self-appointed town busybodies, and they never had a good word for anyone. “You’ll never guess what I heard yesterday!” Mrs. Evans cackled.

Emily King leaned forward in anticipation. “Do tell me, Millie.”
“Why, I heard news of young Justin Carter’s coming engagement to Laura Harris. Can you believe it?”

Andi, brushing past the busybodies, was caught completely by surprise. Startled, she froze in mid-step at the women’s words. *What did Mrs. Evans say?*

“Well, it’s about time,” Mrs. King huffed. “He’s been courting her for a considerably long time now.” She sniffed loftily. “Frankly, I was beginning to wonder when he would ask for her hand.”

“Very true, Emily. Such doings I never saw. And from such a respectable family too. Tsk, tsk.”

“Quite right. But this is a very good sign, indeed. I hear wedding bells pealing. Do you, Millie?”

“I surely do. Which reminds me, did I tell you what happened . . .” The biddies’ conversation drifted away on the spring breeze as they ambled down the street.

Stunned into silence, Andi stared after the retreating pair. A wave of coldness swept over her, and her mouth turned to powdery sawdust. A hard knot clutched her stomach. She clenched her fists and took a step after the two women. *What did they say about my brother?*

Rosa broke the uneasy silence. “Loco words, indeed.” She shook her head. “Do not pay attention to their foolish tales, amiga.”

In a daze, Andi turned and stared at her friend. “Rosa, I can’t just forget this.” Her voice sounded like a dull, lifeless echo inside a hollow barrel. “I need to
find out if this is true or not. My brother Justin? Courting Laura Harris? I can’t believe it.”

“Why not ask Señor Justin about this?”

Andi balled her hands into fists. “I can’t right now, Rosa. I’m too upset. If this gossip is really true, then I can’t figure out why I’m the last to know about it.” Suddenly, she felt horribly left out. “Does anyone ever think I might want to know about some of these things?”

Now that she had started talking, she couldn’t keep her mouth shut. “When Kate and the kids came back, I was infuriated that my family hadn’t told me our family secret. I hated discovering that I had a sister whom I never even knew about, and to top it off, a prodigal sister who was married to a swindler and stagecoach robber!”

She sighed. “Now it seems that the same thing has happened again. Those horrid busybodies spread this news around town, and I’m the last to find out. And my family? How could they keep this a secret from me?” A wave of frustration swept over Andi. Her throat constricted tightly and her eyes blurred.

Suddenly a warm, soft hand grasped her own. Rosa looked deeply in Andi’s eyes. “Do not be discouraged, Andi. Sí, you are upset at learning this so suddenly. But perhaps your brother has been waiting to tell you at the right time. Or maybe this is just a rumor.”

She squeezed Andi’s hand reassuringly.
“Thanks, Rosa.” With her free hand, Andi swiped at her eyes. “I think I’ll ride up to my special spot when we get home. I need some time to think.”

At that moment, the door to her brother’s private law office swung open. Justin Carter strode onto the boardwalk. “Hello, ladies. You ready for your ride home?”

The girls nodded. Andi climbed into the buggy and watched silently as her brother helped Rosa in. *I wonder if he’s ever helped that ol’ Laura Harris into a buggy.*

Justin took his place on the seat and chirruped to the horse. With a lurch, the buggy started down the street, heading out of town.

Andi bit her lip. *I bet Justin has taken Laura on buggy rides.*

“You’re as quiet as a mouse, Andi. How was school?” Justin’s attempts at conversation jolted Andi out of her thoughts.

“Oh, fine.” She slumped against the side of the buggy. This drive was not going well.

“We stopped at Goodwin’s Mercantile for candy after school, Señor Justin,” Rosa put in helpfully. The sack of peppermint drops lay forgotten in her lap.

“I see.” Justin slapped the reins against Pal’s back but made no further attempt at conversation.

As the horse sauntered home, his steady trotting served as a continual rhythm to Andi’s churning
thoughts. Is this true? Or is it a tale? Is this true? Or is it a tale? Andi heaved a sigh and propped her pounding head in her hands.

When the buggy finally swerved to a stop in the yard of the Circle C ranch, Justin spoke once more. “Need some help?” He jumped down and offered a helping hand to the girls.

Andi allowed Justin to assist her out of the buggy, but instead of following Rosa into the spacious, two-story ranch house, she immediately headed for the solace of the barn. As she shoved open the huge double doors, the comforting aroma of horses and hay wafted through the air.

“Hi, Taffy,” she called.

The beautiful golden horse whickered softly at the sight of her young owner.

Andi unlatched the door to Taffy’s stall and flung her arms around the mare. “Oh, Taffy, I have awful news. You won’t believe what I heard in town today.”

She hoisted a saddle onto Taffy’s back. “Let’s go riding, girl,” she said, leading her out of the barn.

Andi climbed up onto her horse’s back and gripped the reins. The palomino took off at a gentle lope and headed over the rippling fields toward the peaceful privacy of Andi’s special spot.
Half an hour later, Andi slid off her horse’s back and made her way toward the creek. She crouched at the bank and cupped her hands in the cool, clear water. Closing her eyes in relief, Andi gulped handful after handful of the refreshing liquid.

Then she stood up and leaned against Taffy, rubbing her gently. “I had to come up here, Taffy.” A sigh escaped through Andi’s lips. “While Rosa and I walked through town today, we overheard Mrs. Evans and Mrs. King talking about Justin. You won’t believe what they said.”

She tightened her jaw. “Supposedly, Justin’s about to ask Laura Harris to marry him. Of all the things those women could gossip about, who would have thought?”

Suddenly, an awful realization rushed over her. Andi gasped. “Is that why Justin has been spending more time in town recently?” She clenched her fists. “I don’t know if this is true or not. But if it’s true, then why hasn’t Justin told me? Does the rest of my family know this?”

Tears of frustration began to trickle down Andi’s face, and she buried her face in Taffy’s mane. The mare stood perfectly still as Andi embraced her.

“Oh, Taffy, I’m terribly confused. Could my brother really be considering marriage? Or is this just a tale that those busybodies are launching around town?” She choked and rushed on. “I couldn’t stand it
if Justin got married and moved away. Ever since Father died, he’s taken me under his wing. When Chad is furious at me, Justin always knows how to calm him down. And he listens to me when no one else will.” Andi broke into sobs.

Worn out from crying, Andi slid to the ground and buried her head in her hands. *Dear God, I’m so confused about Justin and Laura. Please help me understand whatever is going on and to trust You in this difficult situation. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

It was the last thing she remembered before falling into an exhausted sleep.

Back in the quiet library of the house, Justin Carter sat pondering his sister’s unusual behavior. *What’s bothering Andi?* he wondered. It was extremely unusual for her to be so eerily quiet. *Did I say or do something that hurt her?* A worry line creased his forehead.

“Justin.” His tall brother Chad blocked the doorway. “Have you seen Andi anywhere?”

“Not since we got home,” Justin answered. “What’s wrong?”

“Taffy trotted into the yard just now with an empty saddle. I’m almost positive that Andi rode up to her special spot this afternoon.” Chad looked grim. “I’m worried, Justin. How often does Taffy come home alone? Andi could be hurt, or something worse.”
“That’s not good.” Justin stood up, his face etched with concern. “I believe I’ll ride up to Andi’s special spot. I need to talk to her anyway.” He left the house and hurried to saddle his horse.

 Darkness had almost completely smothered the San Joaquin Valley and foothills, and the first stars twinkled in the sky when Andi awoke. “Taffy?” Andi murmured, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. She pulled herself to a sitting position and stretched. “Where are you, girl?”

 “Taffy?” Andi scanned the hills. “Oh, no!”

 She choked back a wave of shock and fear. Her beloved horse was nowhere in sight. Taffy apparently had headed home and left Andi stranded in the suffocating darkness. She frowned as she envisioned the excitement Taffy would create when she trotted into the yard with an empty saddle.

 Anxiously Andi stood up and scanned the horizon. Her eyes drifted to the barely visible peaks of the Sierra Nevada. This is what I get for forgetting to tie up Taffy. “I’m scared, God,” she blurted. “It’s almost fully dark. What horrible creatures are lurking about this terrifying night?”

 “Andi!” A faint call pierced the silence. A lone rider suddenly climaxed the hill and became silhouetted against the waxing moon. “Andi, where are you?”

 “Justin?” Andi raced toward the shadowy figure.
“Is that you, Andi?” Justin urged his horse forward and quickly reached his sister’s side. “Thank God I found you,” he breathed as he dismounted. “We were so worried when Taffy came home alone. What have you been doing, honey?” He put a gentle arm around his sister.

Andi chewed her lip and hesitated. “I came up here to think,” she finally answered.

“What’s the matter?” In the hazy moonlight Justin peered closely into Andi’s face. “You’ve been awfully quiet today, little sister. Is something wrong?”

“Please tell me,” Justin urged when Andi remained silent. “You’ve not been yourself, and I’m concerned.”

Suddenly Andi burst into tears. “On our way through town, Rosa and I overheard the town busybodies gossiping about you and Laura Harris. They said you’re going to ask for her hand in marriage.”

She struggled to hold her sobs in. “Tell me it isn’t true, Justin. I don’t want you to get married and go away!”

Justin reached for his handkerchief and dabbed at Andi’s tear-streaked face.

Through blurred vision Andi saw her brother looking tenderly at her. He pulled her into a heartfelt hug and waited for her to stop crying.

“Andi, listen,” Justin said earnestly. “I’m sorry you had to overhear those gossips. I didn’t intend to hurt you by waiting to tell you my news.”
Andi’s sobs stilled. “You mean . . . you really are going to marry Laura?”

“I’ve been courting Laura for some time now, Andi. I feel she is the wife for me, so I am going to ask for her hand in marriage. As the Bible says, ‘a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.’ I’ve been waiting for the right opportunity to let you in on my news: you’ll have a sister-in-law.”

Andi chewed her lip. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“I promise I’m not going anywhere, honey,” Justin assured her. “I’ll bring Laura out here to the ranch, and we’ll live in a house a stone’s throw away. I will continue to work in town and pick you up from school. I’ll still be here for you, Andi.”

Andi dabbed at her eyes with Justin’s handkerchief. “That’s a relief.” Now that her brother had calmly answered her questions, she felt a little silly about getting so upset. If only I had listened to Rosa’s sensible advice.

Justin grinned. “That’s more like the sister I know and love.” He reached for her hand. “Let’s head home. Mother’s going to be worried if we don’t arrive shortly.”

“You bet, big brother.” Andi breathed a sigh of relief as she climbed up in the saddle behind Justin.

As the horse jogged off toward home, she leaned her head against her brother’s strong back and closed her eyes. Thank you, God, for such a caring brother.

And for a new sister-in-law.
“I now pronounce you man and wife.” Reverend Harris beamed as he gazed proudly at his daughter and son-in-law.

Andi hastened after her mother, brothers, and sister as they swept to the front to congratulate the glowing newlyweds.

“I’m so happy for you both!” Beaming with pride, Elizabeth Carter pulled Laura into a motherly hug.

Chad seized Justin’s hand and pumped it up and down. “Congratulations, brother.”

“Welcome to the Carter family.” Andi smiled shyly, stepping up to the bride.

Laura chuckled merrily. “Thanks, Andi. I’m so excited to finally have a sister-in-law. We’re going to have many special times together. “

Andi gave her a gentle embrace. “Laura, I’m really glad you are now part of our family.”

“Me too.”

Andi let out a contented sigh. She still had her wonderful brother, and she had gained a sister-in-law. No one could ruin this lovely day, not even the town busybodies.

All was right in life. And it was just about time for some cake.
Grandma Andi and I sat on the porch knitting. Actually, Grandma was knitting. I was thinking about the bully at school who always pulled my braids and teased me.

“Grandma,” I asked at last, “did you ever really hate someone?”

Grandma smiled at me. “Are you thinking about Nathan, Cassie?”

I nodded.

She smiled a knowing smile and began to tell me a story . . .
The trouble began in June. School was almost out for the year, and we were having a final spelling bee. I usually won quite easily, but this year was different. The son of the new blacksmith in town, Benjamin Forbes, proved to be a diligent scholar. I was hard put to beat him.

Finally, on the last word, he messed up.

“Parallelogram,” said Mr. Foster, our teacher.

“Parallelogram. P-a-r-a-l-e-l-o-g-r-a-m.” Ben spelled out carefully.

“Wrong,” said Mr. Foster. “Andrea, can you spell it?”

I could and did. I won both the admiration of my friends for spelling down a boy and a look of hatred and spite from Ben.

“You’ll pay for that, Miss Carter,” he muttered to me on the way out.

I ignored him and caught up to Rosa and Cory.

“Are you racing on the Fourth, Andi?” Cory asked me.

I nodded. The race he was referring to was part of the Independence Day celebration that year. “Yup. Taffy and I have been practicing since the race was announced. It took a while to talk Mother into it, though. Are you?”

Cory laughed. “You bet I am.”

We were interrupted by Justin’s arrival.

“See you tomorrow!” I called to Cory. On the way back to the ranch, Rosa and I told Justin about the spelling bee.
He looked grim when I told him of Ben’s threat. “Andi, Mr. Forbes is very particular that his son does well in school. You may not think Ben can do anything, but you don’t know his father like I do. I’d watch out if I were you.”

I nodded and pushed the incident to the back of my mind. I’d taken care of bullies before. A determined punch usually worked wonders.

When school let out for the year, I found my time divided mainly between doing chores and preparing Taffy for the race. She seemed to be getting faster daily. Even Chad would pause in his work to watch her run.

Independence Day dawned bright and clear. Although I would be riding, I had to wear a dress. As I started out to the barn after breakfast to prepare Taffy before we left, Justin stopped me.

“Andi, apparently Ben is going to be racing too. Just be cautious, okay? He might try to do something funny.”

I agreed and raced out the door, wondering why Justin seemed so concerned. Ben wouldn’t dare do anything mean, not with so many people around, I reasoned.

I brushed Taffy until she gleamed and braided her mane and tail. By the time our family set out for Fresno, I was sure Taffy was the cleanest horse in all of California, if not the world.
We arrived in good time at the fairgrounds, where the festivities were to be held. Mother secured a spot for us while Chad tended to the horses.

I noticed Ben in what appeared to be a serious conversation with Johnny Wilson. He had returned from military school recently, so I didn’t know if he had changed or not.

*Uh-oh,* I thought. *Johnny and Benjamin are a bad combination. I bet they’re going to play a trick on somebody.*

Just then Ben saw me, so I turned away.

With the speeches over, it was time for the race. *God, please help me in this race,* I prayed before lining up at the starting line with eight other riders, Ben included.

“On your mark, get set, go!” shouted Sheriff Tate, who was the judge.

The race was a big circle around the town. People lined either side of the course, cheering for their favorite rider. Taffy was full of energy, and it was no problem to urge her on.
We gradually began to pass the other riders until we were in the lead. The bank, the church, and the mercantile store were a blur as we came closer and closer to the finish line.

Soon we were ten feet away from it.

“You can do it girl,” I told Taffy, urging her on.

But Ben swept past us and crossed the finish line a moment before Taffy stumbled and collapsed. I was thrown from her a few feet away. Fortunately, I wasn’t hurt and was able to jump out of the way of Cory’s horse.

Justin ran to my side, concerned if I was hurt.

“Not hurt, just a little shaken up.”

Chad checked Taffy over and discovered that her foreleg was swollen. By this time the sheriff had called the race to a halt. As I stroked her head, I noticed a rock a few feet way.

“I bet she tripped over that,” I said, pointing to it.

Chad looked. “That’s a pretty big rock. I wonder how the sheriff missed that.”

With a strip of cloth that somebody supplied, Chad bandaged Taffy’s foot and tied her to the wagon. As we prepared to head back to the ranch, Sheriff Tate announced the winners.

“First place goes to Benjamin Forbes on Comet; second place to Andrea Carter on Taffy; and third place to Cory Blake on Flash.”

I was shocked until I realized Taffy had fallen across the finish line. I accepted the prize, a small trophy, and climbed into the wagon.
Back at the ranch, Chad was able to examine Taffy more closely. Her foreleg was swollen, and she was unable to walk properly. Chad put a poultice on her and I made her comfortable in her stall.

“You won’t be able to ride her for a while, Andi,” Chad told me. “And we’ll have to keep her off that leg.”

“How long will it take for the swelling to go down?” Mother asked that night.

Chad shrugged. “A few days to a few weeks. Providing nothing else happens, Andi should be able to ride her in a month.”

_A month!_ I ate supper in silence, wondering how I would have any fun until she was well enough to be ridden.

Chad seemed to read my thoughts. He promised me that tomorrow he would let me pick out a horse to ride until she recovered.

The next day Chad was as good as his word. I picked out a dun mare named Glossy. It was nice to have a horse to ride, but it wasn’t the same as riding Taffy.

A few weeks went by, and it became apparent that Taffy had gone lame in one leg. I gave her all my attention and care, but she still couldn’t walk.

One day after the church service was over, Johnny Wilson approached me. He told me that Ben had come up to him before the race and tried to talk him into playing a prank on me.
When Johnny refused, Ben grew angry and said he’d do it without him. Johnny said he had been near the finish line and had seen Ben throw something in front of Taffy.

*It must have been the rock I saw, I thought.*

I thanked Johnny and went to sit in the wagon. So, *Ben threw that rock on the ground to get back at me for beating him!* I was furious with him. *What a mean, low-down, rotten thing for him to do. He should just wait ’til I tell my brothers!*

I waited until we were out of town before bringing up the matter. As I had expected, Justin frowned, Chad was as furious as I was, and Mother, Mitch, and Melinda were skeptical.

“Are you sure? Maybe Johnny’s mad at Ben, and this is his way of getting back at him,” Melinda offered.

I scowled at her, but before I could speak, Chad spoke up.

“How would getting Andi mad at Ben accomplish anything? Besides, I did see the two boys talking together before the speeches. If Ben thinks this is a joke, he’s got another think coming.”

Justin added his two cents. “Andi told me Ben threatened her after she beat him in a spelling bee. Maybe this is his idea of retaliation.”

Mother calmly said we would look into the matter, and that put an end to the discussion.

I didn’t stop thinking about it, though. The next day I rode into town with Rosa. Mother wanted some thread for a new dress, and I was looking for an excuse
to talk with Johnny Wilson.

Halfway to Fresno, Glossy suddenly shied. After I got her under control, I saw a brown thing lying by the side of the road. A closer look revealed it was Ben, the last person on earth that I wanted to see.

As I prepared to ride on, he cried out, “Help!”

Suddenly, I remembered the text Reverend Harris, the minister, had spoken on yesterday. *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you* ran through my mind. Struggling with my conscience, I finally turned Glossy around. “We’d better help him.”

Rosa’s eyes widened. “Help him, mi amiga?”

I nodded slowly. “Remember what Reverend Harris preached on yesterday? If Ben doesn’t count as an enemy, I don’t know who does.”

As we reached Ben, he looked up. A look of surprise registered on his face. “Why are you helping me?” he asked.

“I reckon because of what Reverend Harris said yesterday about loving your enemies,” I answered slowly. I was suddenly glad I’d stopped.

“I guess you might not believe me, but I was on my way out to your ranch to apologize to you about the race. I was so mad at you for beating me at the spelling bee that I wanted to hurt you. I knew the best way was to hurt Taffy.”

“I know,” I said. “I figured so. Johnny told me yesterday that you threw the rock. I forgive you, anyway. What’s wrong?”

He grimaced. “Comet threw me, and I think I
sprained my ankle. He bolted, and I wasn’t able to get up.”

I looked at Rosa. “Do you think you can ride?” I asked him. “Rosa and I can ride double, and you can ride Glossy.”

He nodded. “Thanks.”

As we rode up the driveway, I was stunned to see Chad walking Taffy on a lead rope. I quickly dismounted to ask Chad what was up.

“She was bored and restless in her stall, and the swelling’s gone down a lot, so I decided to take her out and see how she’d do . . .” His voice trailed off as he noticed Ben. “What is he doing here?”

I laughed at the look on his face. “Oh, Ben was thrown from his horse and hurt his ankle, so I brought him home.”

Chad looked carefully at me. “Okay,” he said at last. Sending up a prayer of thanks that Taffy was better and that I had forgiven Ben, I bounded up the porch steps.

“Mother,” I called, “I didn’t get your thread, but I have a patient for you!”

When Grandma Andi finished her story, I thought again about Nathan. He’s not nearly so mean as Ben was! Yet Grandma still helped Ben.

“I guess I could forgive Nathan and be nice to him,” I admitted slowly.
Grandma smiled. “I’m sure the Lord will bless you for it, Cassie.”
He did. And Nathan never bugged me again.
Category: Ages 10-13
Third Place

-7-
Stolen
by
Lauren Thomas, age 13

Lauren is homeschooled and currently in the 8th grade. She plays classical guitar and loves anything that has to do with horses. She loves to read and write for fun.

I win again!”

Thirteen-year-old Andrea Carter grinned at her friend Cory Blake as he pulled his chestnut gelding to a halt next to her palomino mare, Taffy.

Cory scowled and pushed a strand of sandy-blond hair out of his sunburned face. “How come you always win our horseraces?”

Then he broke into a grin. “Look, Andi! Here comes the train.”

Sure enough, the huge, black locomotive was snaking its way down the tracks. It
screched to an abrupt halt outside the small train platform in Fresno, California.

The two friends watched the general hustle and bustle as the travelers hurried on and off the passenger car.

A young Mexican man with a rigid face and large, sad, brown eyes approached them. “Do you niños know where the Carter ranch is?” he asked in heavily accented English. “I came here to find work, and I heard on the train that they need a few extra ranch hands.”

“You asked the right person,” Andi declared. “My family owns the ranch.”

The man’s grave countenance softened a little, though he did not smile. He extended his hand. “The name’s José Garcia.”

José rented a horse from the livery. After the long ride to the ranch, they pulled their horses to a halt in front of the Carter stables. Chad was fastening a well-worn, soft-leather bridle on his mount.

Andi hailed him with a greeting.

He looked up from his work. “Who’s your friend?” her brother questioned in his usual blunt manner.

“This is José. He’s looking for work,” Andi replied.

Chad looked relieved. It was harvest, one of the busiest times of year, and they were especially short-handed. He gave Mr. Garcia a good look over. “You’ve got yourself a job.”

They fell into conversation, and Andi excused herself, leading Taffy into the stables. The musty 50
scent of sweet hay overwhelmed her. She always felt at home in the barn.

Andi unsaddled Taffy and brushed her until she shone. She slid her fingers through Taffy’s luscious, cream-colored mane and let her hand slip down along the horse’s smooth back. She noticed the beginnings of her mare’s thicker fall coat growing.

It was a painful reminder that the sweet, sun-soaked days of summer were drawing to a close and school was starting in little more than a week.

*At least tomorrow is Saturday.* That was a comfort.

Andi opened her eyes and snuggled deeper into her colorful patchwork quilt. Dappled morning sun poured in through the open window, as did a stream of crisp fall air that seemed to be calling her to get out of bed. The smell of frying bacon wandered up the staircase and further beckoned her.

She tossed aside her bedcoverings (not bothering to straighten them) and slipped on a well-used, golden-calico dress. She twisted her hair into a braid with a practiced hand and lightly trotted down the stairs.

Her mother, Elizabeth, and older sister Melinda were already seated at the breakfast table when she arrived.

“Hello, Andrea,” her mother greeted her with a pleasant smile.
“Hello, Mother,” Andi replied, pulling up a chair and spearing a forkful of bacon.

“You’d better hurry and eat,” Melinda said. “I don’t want to be late for the train.”

“What train?”

“Don’t you remember? Justin’s coming home today,” Melinda answered.

Justin! Andi had completely forgotten. Justin was often away on business. To her it felt like he traveled more than he was home.

“Oh!” Andi exclaimed, nearly knocking over the pitcher of cream she was reaching for. She couldn’t wait to see her brother. She swallowed her last bite of crispy bacon and shoved aside her plate.

Shortly afterward, they were all seated in the wagon and on their way to Fresno. They arrived just as the train was once again pulling to a halt at the platform.

The passengers came pouring out. Justin exited near the rear.

But he wasn’t alone. Alongside him strode a tall man in a well-pressed suit. Blond whiskers with streaks of grey protruded from the man’s face.

Justin spotted his family and hurried over. After greeting them all warmly, he introduced the man as Mr. Frank Morris, a client of his who was moving to Fresno.

“Very pleased to make your acquaintance.” Mr. Morris smiled politely.
“Mr. Morris has invited us to visit him in his new home,” Justin stated. “I trust you have no other plans?”

“Of course not.” Elizabeth smiled graciously. “We would be glad to come.”

After a considerable ride, they came to a stop in front of Mr. Morris’s house. It was a lovely farmhouse with a wraparound porch. Three stunning, jet-black horses were grazing placidly in a pasture nearby and provided stark contrast to the immaculately white house.

Andi could not hide her delight at the lovely little farm. This seemed to please Mr. Morris very much. He guided them into his house and told them captivating stories about his extensive travels over coffee and biscuits.

The afternoon wore on. Before Andi knew it, they were bidding him good-bye. As they were walking out the door Mr. Morris held Andi behind. He handed her a polished, little wooden box with the image of a running horse on it.

It was the most beautiful thing Andi had ever seen. “Mr. Morris!” Andi said. “Thank y—”

“Now, now, none of that.” He cut her off with a smile, giving her a gentle shove out the door.

After a lengthy stop in town, the buggy carrying the Carter family pulled up to the ranch house. José, the new ranch hand, ran up looking extremely distraught.
“Señor Chad! Esto es muy malo! Los ganados se han ido!” He rattled off in his native language, his usually sleepy eyes looking surprisingly alert.

“Slow down,” Chad said. “What’s going on here?”

José took a deep breath. “At least twenty head of cattle that were out grazing on the range are gone! We cannot find them anywhere! It is very bad.”

Chad chewed his lip thoughtfully. “It’s possible they just wandered off.”

“No, señor,” José began again. He looked so comically distressed that, despite the problem, it made Andi want to laugh.

“I’ll take a look,” Chad interrupted before José could go on. He swung himself out of the buggy and went with José.

Rather than follow the rest of her family inside, Andi leaned against a large oak tree next to the house and watched the brown leaves drop one by one, fingerling the box that Mr. Morris had given her. The moist soil smelled earthy and refreshing.

She sighed contentedly. Somewhere in the distance a horse whinnied, reminding Andi that she had a heap of chores waiting for her in the barn.

And for once, she thought, I’m going to do them.

It was several hours before Andi was done with her chores. When she finally swung the front door shut with an exhausted sigh, she was surprised to see that Chad was already home from the range. He did not look happy.
She was just in time to hear the last snatches of a conversation between him and Mother.

“José was right. We can’t find those cattle anywhere. It’s possible they’ve been stolen.” Chad sounded as mad as a rattlesnake, so she decided she’d heard enough. Instead, she slipped past them and climbed up the stairs to her room.

*Stolen?* She had, of course, heard many tales of cattle rustlers stealing cattle from the range, but she never thought it would happen to her own family. She couldn’t help but feel a tiny tinge of excitement.

Over the next few days, José reported more and more missing cattle until the total number was dangerously nearing the seventies and eighties. Something had to be done.

Andi was becoming suspicious of José. He seemed to always be the first person to know when cattle disappeared. Besides, the cows had not started to vanish until he arrived.

She decided to find out for herself. It was midday, and all the ranch hands were busy. Trying not to draw attention to herself, Andi walked across the dusty yard to the bunkhouse, where the ranch hands slept.

She creaked open the sun-bleached door and stole over to José’s bunk. From under it she slid out a small, black chest with the initials J.G. inscribed on the top and opened it.

Andi felt a stab of guilt for looking at José’s personal belongings, but she quickly shoved that to
the back of her mind. Sifting through old photographs, tools, clothes, and other various articles, something caught her eye.

Andi gasped as she pulled out a small sack full of greenbacks. She immediately flew to assumptions. José is selling cattle stolen from the ranch!

Just then she saw the brass door handle slowly turning. She gasped.

José walked in and gave a surprised jump when he saw Andi.

Without giving it a second thought, Andi let loose a slew of words. “So, you’re the one who’s been stealing the cattle! How could you? Just so you could get a lousy bag of money!”

With that stinging remark, Andi flew past him and slammed the door. Hard.

Halfway across the yard, Chad intercepted her. “Whoa there, little sister,” he said grabbing her by the shoulders. “What were you doing in the bunkhouse?”

She stared at him indignantly. “None of your business.”

Chad rolled his eyes and continued. “I was just going to let you know about the stakeout. But since you aren’t interested . . .”

“Wait! No! What stakeout?” Andi’s voice lost all traces of anger.

“Tonight. Mitch sweet-talked Mother into letting you tag along. I hope we can find out who’s stealing our cattle.”
As Chad walked off, Andi wondered if José could be caught in the act.

“Shhh,” Chad reprimanded Cory, who, after hearing about the stakeout, stubbornly insisted on coming along.

“Sorry,” Cory whispered meekly.

Chad, Mitch, Andi, Cory, and Sherriff Tate were all crowded into a low-lying sagebrush thicket, watching the herd of cattle.

Andi had discovered that she was much less interested to see if the culprit would turn up at 1:00 in the morning on the range than she had been the day before. Raindrops were steadily plunking on the ground, and the frequent lowing of the cattle was barely enough to keep Andi awake.

It felt like they had been there forever, even though it had only been two hours. She was thinking how nice it would be just to close her eyes for a minute, and she slowly drifted off to sleep.

Andi was awakened by a sharp prod in her ribs from Cory. She wisely kept her mouth shut. Craning her eyes to the very edge of the clearing, she thought she could detect subtle movement.

*It must be José!* she thought.

But when the man stepped out into the moonlight, rope in hand, they all gasped in surprise.

“M-Mr. Morris!” Andi stuttered.
Sure enough, it was not José, but Frank Morris who was standing before them.
Andi looked at Chad, who looked as dumbfounded as Andi felt.
Sherriff Tate regained his wits and stepped forward to clip a pair of handcuffs on Mr. Morris.
“Wait.” Chad stepped forward.
The sheriff shrugged his shoulders. “The law’s the law.” He turned to Mr. Morris. “You’re under arrest.”
Suddenly Mr. Morris spoke up. “Can you ever forgive me? You”—he motioned to Chad—“and your family have all been so kind to me. But I guess somewhere in my travels I got mixed up with the wrong people, and now I’m paying for it.”
“Of course we forgive you,” Andi said softly.

Despite being awake most of the night before, Andi woke up at the crack of dawn the next day, dressed, and headed straight out to the bunkhouse. She found José inside, lacing up his mud-caked boots.
“José . . .” She approached him. “I am so sorry about yesterday. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions about you selling our cattle for money.”
Andi had expected him to be mad, but instead he just chuckled softly. “Stealing cattle? Of course not, señorita. The money you saw was from the job I have been working on my days off so I can send money back to my sick mother in México.”
That explains why he always looks so sad, Andi thought. “Will you forgive me?”

“Of course.” For the first time since Andi had met José, he smiled.
God has given Kaitlyn a love of reading, writing, and spending time with her family of eight. During her free time, Kaitlyn enjoys crocheting, playing piano and guitar, acting, singing, and photography/videoing.

Chad, a letter came for you today,” Mrs. Carter said when her sons entered the house for their evening meal.

“Thanks, Mother.”

Chad ripped the envelope open. Reading the contents, his face broke into a wide smile. “Justin, do you remember me telling you about Jeremiah Coulter, better known as Jem?”

Justin thought for a moment. “The name sounds familiar. Ah, yes. Your trip to Goldtown with Father.”

Chad nodded.


“Remember? You met him at Father’s funeral. But right now, let me tell you about this letter.”
Chad waved his letter in the air. “Jem and I have been corresponding over the past years, ever since he came to Father’s funeral. I received a letter from him today inviting us all to visit him in Goldtown.”

“What’s all the excitement about Goldtown?” Andi demanded, becoming frustrated.

“It’s an old mining town,” Chad replied. “From what I’ve heard from Jem, the gold has been long gone, but there are still people living there. It’s amazing the town wasn’t abandoned years ago. But now I can go see for myself.”

“I think it would be wonderful to go, Chad,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “Your Aunt Rebecca knew Jem’s Aunt Rose in Boston, where they were good friends, despite their fifteen-year age difference.”

“I say we all go, and soon,” Melinda exclaimed. “I haven’t been on a trip like that in a long time.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

After a short discussion, it was settled. “I’ll send Jem a wire saying when we’ll arrive,” Chad volunteered.

Andi went to bed that night feeling excited, thinking about all the adventures she could have in an old mining town.

But little did she know that however much she imagined, it didn’t compare to what was coming.
“After this I don’t want to see another stagecoach for the rest of my life!” Andi exclaimed as they bumped and jolted down the dusty road.

Mitch grinned and said, “Don’t get too tired of it yet. We have to come back this way, you know.” His eyes twinkled, and he chuckled as Andi groaned.

“How couldn’t they build a railway out here?” That made her brothers laugh.

Finally, the stage pulled into Goldtown. As Andi jumped down, she looked around for anyone she recognized.

Chad quickly followed.

“Chad!” a young man called, running toward them from down the street.

“Jem!” Chad exclaimed, a huge grin on his face. Slapping his old friend on the back, he turned to his siblings. “Jem, you remember Justin, Mitch, and Andi?”

Jem nodded. “Nice to see you again. Where’s your mother and other sister?”

“Melinda came down sick this morning, so Mother stayed with her. But here we are. Nothing like sibling bonding time.”
Andi slugged Chad’s arm playfully and grinned up at him. “Sure, laughing at my misery in a bumpy stagecoach is wonderful bonding time,” she said sarcastically.

Jem laughed. “Come to my house and I’ll introduce you to my family.” He led the way down the street and out of town to a one-story, white house with a white picket fence around the front yard.

A small woman with light-brown hair and hazel eyes came out the front door with a baby on her hip.

“Justin, Chad, Mitch, Andi, I’d like you to meet my wife, Charlotte, and my son, Jesse.” Jem proudly took his son in his arms.

“Jem, if you’ll just point us to the nearest hotel, we’ll go get settled in,” Chad said.

Jem gave them an apologetic look. “I’d invite you to stay at our house, but I’m afraid we don’t have enough room.”

Chad waved off his friend’s statement. “It’s fine. No problem,” he said.

Later, when they stepped inside the hotel with their baggage, Andi heard the cry.

“No! Please don’t hurt me! I didn’t mean to. I’ll work hard to pay for it. Honest, I will!”

“You’ll pay for it, all right,” a gruff voice replied. “And after you pay for it, I guarantee you’ll never break any of my glasses again!” The sound of slapping followed.

“Justin, we have to do something!”
Without waiting for a reply, Andi rushed toward the sound. Entering the hotel’s kitchen, she saw the cook beating a boy about her own age. Andi ran to the man and yanked on his raised arm.

The cook turned and grabbed her, his eyes shooting sparks. “Why, you little . . . I’m gonna . . .” His voice trailed off when he saw three men step behind Andi.

“You’re going to what?” asked Chad in a low tone.

“Excuse me, but wh-what are you doing here?” the cook demanded, clearing his throat nervously. “This is no concern of yours. That is, you wouldn’t let a boy break one of your valuables, would you? He’s been lazy and not doing enough work for a long time, and it’s about time he learned to do something.”

“Sir, I might say that a very small whipping might be good for a lazy man,” Justin said. “But to whip a boy? And what business do you have with this girl?”

“Well, she was interrupting me. That is, uh—”

“He was mad that I got in his way, so it’s a good thing you finally came and helped, Justin.”

“Andi, it’s not polite to interrupt,” Justin said, despite the look she gave him. He winked at her, his eyes twinkling.

Turning to the cook, Justin said, “My brothers are not as patient as I am. If I turn them loose on you, I don’t know what they’ll do, especially since you were about to beat our sister.”
The cook paled. “I-I didn’t know she’s your sister, gentlemen. How about we just go about our own business and forget this whole thing?”

Mitch looked annoyed. “Not a chance.”

Chad glared at the cook, his face red with outrage. “I’d like to teach you a thing or two. Let’s go out back and fight this out, man to man.” He shoved the cook out the back door.

Mitch followed closely behind.

The first punch was delivered by Chad, who was quickly aided by Mitch. Together they made short work of the cook.

Then the sheriff showed up. “What’s going on here?” he demanded. “Mr. Bates, what happened?”

Mr. Bates pointed a shaky finger at Chad and Mitch. “Sheriff, these . . . these brutes accused me of child abuse, forced me out into this alley, and attacked me. I insist that you arrest these men.”

Sheriff Coulter turned to Chad and Mitch. When he saw Chad, he nodded a greeting. “Hello, Chad. I heard you were coming to town. I’m sorry to meet you under these circumstances. What happened?” he asked.

“He was whipping this poor boy right here—” Chad looked around for the boy, but he had vanished. “He was right here a minute ago!”

The sheriff looked unconvinced. “Who started the fight?”
“I did,” Chad said, not looking one bit sorry. “I don’t care what he says. This cook—or Bates, as you call him—is guilty as charged.”

“Sheriff, I insist you arrest these men,” said Mr. Bates, who remained on the ground nurturing his “wounds.”

Andi rolled her eyes. He didn’t look that hurt.

“Chad, I’m sorry to have to do this, but since Bates is pressing charges, I have no choice.” He handcuffed Chad and Mitch.

Andi grabbed Mitch’s arm. “Please, Sheriff! Please don’t take them away! Don’t—”

“Andi.”

Looking up, Andi saw Mitch looking down at her. “It’ll be all right.”

Chad nodded in agreement.

With tears in her eyes, Andi watched her brothers being led away. At least Mr. Bates didn’t have Justin arrested, she thought. As if he could!

Bates groaned and rose to his feet. Suddenly, he whirled on Justin and Andi and pointed a gun at them.

“Stay where you are and don’t try anything funny!” he commanded. “You didn’t think I’d let you get away, did you?” He smiled smugly. “Now that I’ve got you, I—”

Suddenly, Bates screamed with pain then fell to the ground, unconscious.
Andi stared at him in disbelief. Then looking up, she saw the boy that Bates had whipped, a club in his hand.

“You folks all right?” he asked.

Justin nodded. “I think so, but it’s a good thing you came back. Who knows what he might have done.”

“Probably would have killed you,” the boy said bluntly.

Andi shuddered. *Thanks, that makes me feel a lot better,* she thought sarcastically.

Justin turned to the boy and asked, “What’s your name, son?”

“Danny.”

“Does Bates beat you often?”

“Oh . . . a fair amount. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.” Danny turned on his heel and walked out of the alley.

Andi ran after him. “Danny, wait!” She grabbed his arm. “You’re a witness to what happened. You’ve got to help us get Chad and Mitch out of jail.”

Danny shrugged. “A kid like me wouldn’t make much of a difference. But if it means that much to you, I reckon I can meet you at the jail in the mornin’, say about nine o’clock?”

Andi nodded. “Great! Thanks, Danny.” She hurried back to Justin. “He said he’ll meet us at the jail in the morning.”
Justin smiled. “Leave it to you to set things right again,” he said. “Now, let’s get back to the hotel and get a good night’s sleep.”

“I wish Mother were here,” Andi said wistfully. “I’m glad she stayed home to take care of Melinda, but why did Melinda have to get sick now?”

“I don’t know, honey,” Justin replied. “Now, help me get Mr. Bates inside, and then we’ll go.”

“What’s this all about?” Andi wondered aloud as the buggy stopped at the back of a crowd in front of the sheriff’s office. Without waiting for a reply, she jumped out of the buggy.

Running into the building, Andi stopped short. Chad sat on a chair, his arm in a sling and a crutch at his side.

“Chad!” she cried, running to him and clutching his good arm. “What happened? Are you all right?”

“Well, little sis, I reckon I’m as ‘all right’ as I can be, after being shot in the shoulder and leg. Mitch, on the other hand, didn’t come out of it as well as I did.”

“What do you mean? What happened? Chad, tell me!”

Chad’s eyes looked tired, but they were still smoldering with anger. “I’ll tell you what happened. While the sheriff was out on patrol, someone broke in and started shooting at us. It’s a miracle we’re still alive.”
“You said we,” Andi said. “Does that mean that Mitch is all right too?”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say that he’s all right . . .” Chad paused when Justin walked into the room. Danny and Jem, who had been informed, were right behind him. “Mitch hasn’t woken up yet.”

Tears blurred Andi’s eyes. “Can I see him?”

“He’s at the doctor’s office down the street. I figured you’d come this morning, so I came back to meet you,” Chad said.

Andi rushed out of the office and down the street. Entering the doctor’s office, a man of medium height greeted her.

“Hello, I’m Doc Tucker, but you can call me Doc. What can I do for you?” he asked.

“I’m looking for my brother Mitch. I heard you’ve got him here.”

“If you’re talking about the young man that was brought in here with a bullet wound, he’s in there.” Doc pointed to a door leading into another room.

Andi rushed into the adjacent room and found her brother lying on a bed.

I guess people don’t realize how much they appreciate someone until they know that they might be losing that someone . . . or have already lost them.

God, please make Mitch well! He’s got to be all right; he’s just GOT to!

Laying her head on her brother’s still form she closed her eyes. Slowly, a tear trickled out of one eye, then another.
Feeling a hand touch her head, Andi looked up.
“Don’t cry on account of me,” Mitch said in a weak voice. “I’ll be all right.”
“Mitch!” Andi squealed. “You’re awake! I can’t believe it.”
Turning to rush out of the room and notify Doc, she stopped short. Standing in the doorway was a man she had never seen before. He was pointing a gun at them.
The man’s eyes filled with tears. “I’ve never seen love like that.” He took a deep breath. “Mr. Bates sent me to finish you off when he found out I didn’t get the job done last night, Mr. Carter. But I-I don’t think I can do it now.”
The door to the outside of the building opened. Justin, with everyone else, including Sheriff Coulter, following close behind, entered.
Chad stopped short when he saw the man. “Who are you?” he asked suspiciously.
“My name is Caleb Phelps. I—”
“Mitch!” Justin hurried over to his brother’s side. “You’re awake.” He grinned as he knelt beside the bed. “How are you feeling?”
“Oh, still a little weak, but I think I’ll live.”
Chad still stared at Caleb Phelps. “What business do you have with that pistol in here?” He gestured to the gun in the man’s hand.
“Mr. Bates sent me to finish Mitch—I think that’s what you called him—off.”
He explained everything. “But I just couldn’t kill him, what with the love his sister has for him,” he said. “If she hadn’t been there, I probably would have killed him.”

Andi murmured something unintelligible.

“What did you say, Andi?” asked Justin.

“Oh, I was just quoting a Bible verse I read this morning: ‘By this all will know you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.’ I’d say that fits pretty well here.”

Everyone agreed.

That night Andi went to bed feeling more content than ever. Her brothers were safe. In a few days they would go home, when Mitch was well enough to travel.

_God, she prayed silently, Thank you so much for the family You have given me. I don’t know what I would do without them._
Category: Ages 14-17
First-Place

~9~

The Hidden Plot
by
Roseanna Martin, age 14
Philadelphia, New York

Roseanna lives on a farm and owns an Arabian mare named Sea Star. She loves nature, story writing, sports (especially ice hockey), and music.

It’s not right, I tell you!” Mr. Owens shook his head, rubbing his long, gray whiskers.

“I’d just like to give that judge my opinion,” added Mr. Gray, tapping the ash from his cigar.

“I’d like to know why a judge in San Francisco made the decision. Or why the funeral was only for the closest friends and family, for that matter. The Wilsons seem pretty tight about it.”

The item of controversy was a headline in the Fresno newspaper. It was an obituary with a story on how the judge refused to change Peter Wilson’s will because Peter never signed to the changes.
“So, Peter supposedly tried to give his money to Johnny after promising it to you?” Chad raised his eyebrows at Mitch.

“I don’t really want to talk about it.” Mitch quietly laid down his fork.

Justin leaned over to Chad. “A well-written article, but I wish there was a less-complicated way to do this.”

Andi was still staring at Mitch. He and Peter had been such good friends.

*This has to be so hard for him . . .*

A few days later, Chad went with Mitch to retrieve the money. To Andi’s surprise, he brought it all home. She asked him about it as he hopped out of the buggy.

“Well, you just never know with the banks these days. I’d like to have a little cash outside a bank.” He grinned and pulled two sacks out of the buggy.

“Mitch, that’s a lot of money!”

“Don’t worry, sis. I have a good hiding spot.”

Andi nodded, smiling. But when Mitch turned to go into the house, her smile faded. This wasn’t quite like Mitch to be paranoid like this. *But,* she remembered, *I’m sure the past few days have been hard on him.*

She shook her head and followed Chad into the barn. “Why did you bring the money home, Chad?”

He turned from hanging up the harness. “I think Mitch is just a little shook up about the whole thing. Most of the people in town think Johnny should have
gotten the money, since he went to that reform school."

“Do you really think Johnny’s different now?”

“I think it’s too soon to tell. But the Wilsons aren’t very happy about it, and since they own the bank, Mitch would just rather do it this way. Happy, sis?”

“Sure, Chad. What would I do without big brothers?” She gave him a hug and headed out of the barn.

“I don’t know what you’d do, or what I’d do without a little sister . . .”

Andi grinned and opened her mouth to speak, but Chad wasn’t finished.

“. . . to muck stalls for me. Here’s a pitchfork.”


“You must be Johnny.”

“Yes. To business. You know about my brother.”

“Yes?”

“I want to know of anyone who can help me get my money back.”

“It’ll cost you.”

“I know that. I’m prepared to give a quarter of it for revenge.” Johnny’s eyes glinted.

“Make it a third and you’ve got a deal.”
“A third? That’s not . . . Well, okay, okay,” Johnny agreed.

“And how do I know I can trust you?” the man asked, his cowboy hat pulled low over his face.

“How do I know that I can trust you, for that matter?” Johnny shrugged. “You probably did a little background on me before you agreed to meet.”

“Maybe I did. You haven’t exactly had a bright past for someone from a family like yours.”

“Past is past. My pop sent me to reform school. Everyone thinks I’ve changed. I mean to keep them thinking that until I can leave with my money.”

“Okay. Next meet will be arranged.

“Do I get in on the plans?”

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with, boy.”

“I’ll be in touch then.”

At sixteen, Andi was glad to be out of school, although sewing, baking, and cleaning all day long was no better. At least she got part of her afternoons off.

One rainy afternoon she decided to ride to town with Chad for some supplies instead of riding Taffy.

“Sorry, girl.” She patted her horse’s neck. “I need some thread for my new dress. Oh, Taffy, I just hate sewing. Baking is okay, but sewing? I spend more time taking out seams than I do putting seams in.”

“Andi, I’m leaving!”
“Coming, Chad!” Andi gave her horse one last pat and left the barn.

In town, Chad dropped Andi off at the general store and left her to do her shopping. Andi sighed and entered the store. She bumped into someone as she turned into an aisle.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she apologized quickly.

Johnny Wilson stood before her. “Sorry, I didn’t see you,” he stammered. “Hey, Andi, it’s been a while.”

Andi was shocked. Johnny was almost friendly. But it would take more than that to convince her he’d changed. “Um, hi,” she replied slowly.

“So, what’s happened since I left? Are you still in school?”

“Nope, I’m finally done with that.” Andi managed a grin.

“Hey, I need to go. Sorry.” Johnny suddenly seemed to catch himself.

“Okay. Nice seeing you,” Andi said. She stared after him. Either he had changed, or he was a really good actor. She shrugged and continued her shopping.

The next few days were uneventful, but Andi was a little nervous. Something was in the wind. She told herself to stop being silly, there was nothing wrong. But she couldn’t shake the nagging feeling.

One evening Melinda convinced Andi to go along to a sewing circle. Andi wasn’t sure why she ever agreed, but she had promised, so she went. She had 76
to wear a fancy dress, and it was hot and stuffy in the room where the ladies sat.

The ladies talked and gossiped till finally Andi felt she would suffocate. She told Melinda she was going to get a drink of water and left. She stood out in the street in the cool, late-evening air. She felt like running over to Cory’s place, but Melinda would miss her.

There were no other people out on the street, except for one person with his back to Andi, walking down the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street.

He stopped and looked around as if afraid of being seen. Andi’s dress was dark blue and she stood in a shadow, so he didn’t see her. He slipped into an old, deserted building at the end of the street.

Andi couldn’t help but wonder if he was up to something. Before she knew it, she was gliding silently down the street. She would peek inside and hurry back. She chided herself for being so curious, but he really had looked suspicious.

She crept up to the window and was about to peek in when she heard low voices. She strained to hear what they were saying.

“. . . can’t take that chance . . .”

“You’re sure this is foolproof? What about . . .”

“I know the layout of the place . . .”

Andi was shocked. Johnny Wilson! Changed? Not much! She bent her head to the wall again.

“. . . only way to crack it . . .”
“They will head in to get the money and then . . .”
“. . . next meeting at the old . . .”

Andi couldn’t quite catch the next words, but she knew they would be coming out soon. She hurried up the street and around the corner, straight to the sheriff’s office. She glanced around and entered. To her surprise, Justin sat chatting with Sheriff Tate.

“Justin? I thought you were at Virginia’s place with the teachers.”

“I just dropped by to see Sheriff Tate. What about you? I thought you’re at the—”

“Oh, Justin, I just overheard something.”

Justin and Sheriff Tate exchanged glances.

Andi told them what she had heard. “I didn’t catch where their next meeting was going to be, though.” She paused for breath.

“Justin?” Sheriff Tate looked at him questioningly.

“I think we should.”

Sheriff Tate turned to Andi. “Andi, you stumbled onto a plot to rob your family.”

Andi’s mind reeled. “You knew about it?”

“Yes. In fact, we planned it.”

“Andi,” Justin continued, “Sheriff Tate has been trying for a long time to catch a band of criminals. They are wanted in five states for murder, bank robbery, and more. This was our opportunity to catch them, and Johnny Wilson’s opportunity to prove he is capable of something great. This whole thing was set up.”
“You mean Peter Wilson isn’t even dead?”
“No, he’s not. It was all staged.”
“What about the money? Is it real?”
“Yes. Just in case something should go wrong, Johnny would still be safe.”
Andi was amazed. So Johnny really had turned over a new leaf. Now that was shocking!

Andi’s surprise at the revelation was equaled only by her suspense for the robbery. It was planned to take place in two days.

Now, everything made sense: Mitch’s odd behavior, Johnny’s friendliness. Even Justin’s comment about the newspaper article.

Andi asked Justin if he planned to tell Melinda and Mother. He said he had originally planned not to, but had thought better of it and was going to tell them the night before the robbery.

Andi found it a little difficult not to let on to Melinda about anything that had happened that night, but she went along as if she knew nothing was out of the ordinary.

Jim, a.k.a. Jimmy Gordon, sat at a small table cleaning his guns and going over the plan again and again in his mind.
They had eight men, not including Johnny, who sat in the next room with the others. That would be enough to overpower the Carters if needed.

Now, about the—

“Hey Jim! Message from Connor!” called a voice at the door.

“From Connor? All right, come on in.”

A short man walked in. He looked as if he had ridden hard for a long way. He tossed an envelope to Jim and grabbed a chair. He plopped down and took a long swig from his canteen as Jim read the note:

Jim

I had a bad feeling about this job. Then today one of my contacts saw none other than PETER WILSON in San Francisco. You’re in big trouble, Jim. Let me know if you need anything.

Connor

Jim’s face reddened. He slowly rose to his feet. “Ryan, secure all the doors and windows. We’ve been set up.”

Justin sat with Sheriff Tate in the sheriff’s office, discussing the details of their plan. A knock sounded at the door. Justin opened it.
“Is Mister Sheriff here?” asked a boy who looked about eight years old. “A man said to give this to him.” He held out a folded note.

Justin took it. “Thank you, little man.”

The boy tipped his hat and ran back down the street. Justin handed the note to Sheriff Tate, who unfolded it and read it aloud:

> Your plans have just changed, Sheriff. We’ll make a trade: your spy for our money. Leave the money at the deserted Cheney house. Let us retrieve it and leave without being followed, or you forfeit the life of your spy. If the money is not left within four hours, he is dead.

Sheriff Tate stared at Justin. “How did they find out?”

“That’s beside the point.” Justin rose. “How will we get Johnny back without losing the money and every trace of our criminals?”

Johnny sat in a dark room alone. A tiny crack in the boarded-up window revealed a sliver of light. He
couldn’t bear the waiting. Would they rescue him? Would they care enough about him to risk the money? After all, he had never given people any reason to like him.

Even if they did deliver the money, would it be in time? Would the robbers keep their word and return him alive?

Johnny finally had to force himself to stop worrying. It would only make everything worse. He needed to keep his cool.

Back in town, Chad, Justin, Mitch, and several other men met in the sheriff’s office. Sheriff Tate began. “First, what are our options?”

Mr. Gray shook his head. “Not enough time to get fake money printed.”

“If we surround the place we risk losing Johnny.”

“We can’t give them the money. There’s always the chance of them getting away.”

“What if we just put papers in the bags and some money on top?” Chad suggested.

“Now, there’s an idea.” Sheriff Tate rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“All right, it’s worth a try. But those robbers will be mad as hornets when they find out. We just need to get Johnny away safely and catch those men before they get far.”
Chad glanced around hesitantly. He knew there were over twenty men hidden in the surrounding brush, but he still felt exposed. He carried the two sacks of money up to the old house. He tried to open the door, but the handle broke when he turned it.

He pushed, and the door fell flat with a loud bang. He set the money just inside the door, forced himself to walk back to his horse slowly, and then mounted and rode off.

As soon as Chad was out of sight, he dismounted and led his horse into the brush, taking care to be as quiet as possible. Once he was well hidden in the trees, he tied his horse and crept up the bank to where he had a good view of the road.

Then he sat down to wait.

An hour later, a rider came down the road. He passed Chad heading toward the old house. A few minutes later, he passed again, this time galloping, his saddle bags bulging with the money.

Chad waited till he was around the bend, then he mounted Sky and started to follow at a distance, keeping just out of sight.

Johnny gave up straining his arms against the ropes that bound him and fell back against the wall. His head was pounding, and he had never been so thirsty. He tried to call for someone to bring him water, but only a moan came out through the gag.

He wished he knew how long it had been. Two
hours? Three?

He started as the door opened and Jim entered. “So, how’s our little traitor doing?”

Johnny mumbled something. Jim took off his gag and untied him.

“Water!” he rasped hoarsely. Jim provided a canteen. When Johnny had finished the canteen, Jim spoke again.

“It’s been almost four hours. My man hasn’t returned with the money yet.”

Johnny’s heart sank.

“Hey, boss! Ryan’s back!” came an excited voice from the next room.

Jim strode out.

When he returned, he sliced Johnny’s bonds. “You’re free. But you can’t leave until we’re gone, understood? And I’m not leaving you a horse.”

“I can’t walk all the way back!” Johnny cried.

Jim grinned. “Gives us time to escape. Good luck, kid.” With that, he and his men mounted their horses and were gone.

Johnny noted which direction they had taken. As soon as they were out of sight, he left the shack behind and started to run. Then, out of nowhere, Chad Carter stepped in front of him.

Johnny grabbed a tree to stop himself. “Chad? How . . .” He heard a noise and looked up.

All around him, men were dropping from trees and crawling out from under bushes. Once they were all assembled, Sheriff Tate stepped forward. “All right.
Johnny. Can you carry on with us?”
“Yes, I’m fine.”
“Okay. From here we follow the band, surround, and overtake them. Men, to your horses.”

The posse split up and began the pursuit. An hour later, they were all in position. But before they had time to attack, Jim’s horse stepped in a groundhog hole. He stumbled and threw Jim. He wasn’t badly hurt, but the money bags spilled open.

When the men saw what was actually in the bags, they were outraged. They had only checked in the tops of the bags. They stopped to decide what to do, which gave the posse an opportunity to make their move.

Within minutes, all eight of the criminals were in handcuffs.

Johnny Wilson was a hero, and the Fresno newspaper wasn’t the only one running the full story. Johnny got a huge reward, and Peter was able to return home from San Francisco.

Andi met Johnny in town a few days later. “Hey, Johnny.”
“Hi, Andi.”
“So, how’s it feel to be a hero?”
“It feels like I made up for the person I used to be. I was so angry at Father when he sent me away to reform school, but it gave me time to think. I realized where the way I was going would take me. It was good for me, even though it was hard.”
“Wow! So, what are you planning to do now that you’re back?”
“I’m going back to school.”
Andi’s jaw dropped.
Johnny burst out laughing. “No, I’m actually going into business with Peter. We’re going to buy a small ranch on the other side of Fresno.”
Andi grinned. If Johnny was excited about going to work on a ranch, either he didn’t know how hard the work was, or he was not the lazy, shiftless Johnny she once knew. Either way . . .
“I think it’ll be good for you.” She tried to suppress another grin, but without success.
“I think so too,” Johnny admitted. “Though I never thought I would ever say such a thing.”
Andi laughed. It felt good to laugh after the suspense and stress of the past week. She was about to ask Johnny what he was doing that afternoon when Cory walked up from behind.
“Hey Johnny, Andi! Are either of you as hot and thirsty as I am?”
“I am!” they both exclaimed.
“Ice chips and lemonade are on me!” Cory held up a quarter.
“That would sure hit the spot right now.” Johnny wiped his forehead.
Andi stood up, and the three of them walked into Goodwin’s store together.
Andi yawned and glanced out the window. It was a rainy spring day, and she was stuck inside the schoolhouse while Mr. Foster explained the finer points of English grammar.

Her gaze traveled around the room, and she caught Cory’s eye as he gave her a slow wink. He knew how much she hated grammar. She grinned at him and looked up just in time to catch Mr. Foster’s warning look.

Next to her, Macy was working diligently. They had become close friends ever since their incident
with the stolen horses and Macy’s brothers.

Andi turned back to her slate. If she was going to graduate from the eighth grade in three weeks, she would have to know enough to pass the final test. And, unfortunately, that included grammar.

Chad walked into his room and let the door close quietly behind him. When Mother had gotten the telegram from Aunt Rebecca and Kate, he had been the one chosen to travel to San Francisco.

He had hoped the matter could be settled quickly, and without a lot of fuss or people knowing about it. He could see that would be impossible now.

How Chad wished Justin was here! He might know how to somehow make sense of the whole mess. With a sigh he sat down heavily on the bed and put his aching head in his hands.

Justin sighed as he closed his file. It had been a long day, and there wasn’t much hope that it would slow down for the next couple weeks. He was worried about his sister Kate.

When Mother had gotten the telegram from her about Levi’s disappearance, Justin had known he couldn’t go. He was busy with a case, as well as having to take care of his wife, Lucy, who hadn’t recovered well from the birth of the baby and was still very weak.
He smiled at the thought of the baby. *His* baby. Samuel James Carter was a happy, healthy baby who was his pride and joy.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. “Come in.”

Tim, his clerical assistant, entered. “A telegram for you, Mr. Carter,” he said, crossing the room and placing the piece of paper on his desk.

“Thanks, Tim. When you finish organizing the legal papers for this case, you can go on home. I’ll lock up tonight.”

Tim nodded and left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

When he left, Justin unfolded the single slip of paper and, glancing at the bottom, noticed it was from Chad. He quickly scanned the three, short sentences and sighed.

He dropped his head into his hands in a silent gesture of resignation as the single slip of paper fluttered to the ground.

Andi bounded down the school steps. The rain had slowed to a slight drizzle. She decided to head over to Justin’s office and see if he was finished. She had plenty of time, after all. School had gotten out an hour early because Mr. Foster had a teaching conference he was planning to attend.

As she walked along, she thought about Chad’s sudden departure from the ranch. *I wonder why Chad...*
left so suddenly yesterday. Mother didn’t say and neither did Mitch . . . or Melinda.”

She sighed. At fourteen she was sure she was old enough to be included in the adult conversations.

Turning the corner to her brother’s office, she ran into someone and nearly fell over.

“Miss Carter, please do everyone the pleasure of watching where you are going.”

Andi looked up, annoyed. That voice could only belong to one person—Tim, her brother’s clerk. She got up, ignored him, and walked toward the door.

“Your brother is busy. I wouldn’t advise seeing him right now.”

Tim’s voice trailed after Andi as she opened the door and walked inside. She tiptoed slowly through the lobby and opened the door to the office, planning to surprise Justin.

What she saw made her gasp in surprise.

Justin, her strong, confident older brother, sat at the desk with his head in his hands looking dejected and lonely. “Justin, are you all right?”

Justin looked up and managed a smile. “I’m all right, honey. I just heard from your brother.”

“From Chad? What’s wrong? What isn’t anyone telling me?”

Justin sighed. “Mother got a telegram from Kate and Aunt Rebecca yesterday. Levi’s gone missing. There was a ransom note left on the front porch of Aunt Rebecca’s house. It seems as though Troy kidnapped Levi and wanted a ransom for him.
“Chad went to take the ransom. But I got a telegram today . . .” Justin trailed off.

Andi looked around and spotted the piece of paper on the floor. Quickly she snatched it up and read:

```
WESTERN UNION

JUSTIN CARTER  March 10, 1882
FRESNO, CALIF.

TROY LEFT TOWN WITH THE RANSOM AND
LEVI STOP SAID TO NEVER EXPECT TO
SEE EITHER OF THEM AGAIN STOP NOT
SURE WHAT TO DO NEXT STOP

CHAD
```

The thought of Levi being kidnapped by Troy made Andi furious. “Justin, we can’t just leave Levi with him!” she exclaimed, turning so quickly that she knocked a file of papers off her brother’s desk.

“Andi, calm down. We’re not planning on leaving him. I’m going to get Melinda to stay with Lucy and the baby. Then I’ll go to San Francisco, and Chad and I will try to figure something out. Right now we need to get home and tell everyone what happened.”

Justin picked up the papers that had scattered all over the floor and tried to restore some sense of order
to them. “Why don’t you hitch up the horses to the buggy while I go and reply to Chad’s telegram?”

Andi nodded and started off in the direction of the livery.

Justin finished organizing the papers then headed over to the train depot. As he opened the door, the clerk’s voice called out. “There’s another telegram for you here, Mr. Carter. I was just about to bring it over to your office. It looks like it’s from San Francisco.”

Justin nodded politely and reached across the counter for the slip of paper. He quickly opened it and read:

```
WESTERN UNION
JUSTIN CARTER March 10, 1882
FRESNO, CALIF.
MAN OF TROYS DESCRIPTION SEEN AT BAR IN MODESTO YESTERDAY STOP BEEN THERE 2 DAYS STOP POLICE ARE LOOKING BUT NO SIGN OF LEVI WITH TROY STOP
CHAD
```

Justin quickly stuffed the paper into his pocket as he heard Andi’s steps on the boardwalk.
Andi sighed as she brushed Shasta’s mane. Once they had gotten home, things had happened quickly. Justin had left for San Francisco, and Mother had gone with him to be with Kate. They had dropped Melinda off to stay with Lucy before they left.

That left Mitch and Andi alone on the ranch.

Andi could tell that Mitch wasn’t sure if it would work out very well. With him out on the range all day, she would be on her own until supper.

She slipped the bridle over Shasta’s head and led him out into the bright sunshine. Grabbing a handful of his mane, she mounted then urged Shasta into a canter. Not really caring where she went, she let Shasta gallop while her mind wandered.

How was Levi? How was Kate holding up? Had Justin told her everything? Why did she still feel like there was something she hadn’t been told?

She snapped back to reality when Shasta skidded to a stop, nearly throwing Andi off the colt’s back.

Justin sighed as he leaned his head back against the rapidly moving railroad cars. Mother had fallen asleep after the first couple of hours. He was glad. She needed the rest, and he didn’t mind having time just to think.

How in the world would they find Levi? Troy had at least a two-day head start, and they had no idea
what direction he was traveling or where he planned to go.

Justin’s thoughts wandered back home. He knew Andi was upset about being left at the ranch. He just hoped she wouldn’t find out about that last telegram from Chad. There was enough for her to worry about without knowing that Levi had been left alone for two days while Troy had gotten himself drunk at the bar.

Andi looked at what was lying in front of her and gasped. It couldn’t be! She quickly dismounted Shasta and knelt by the still form.

Levi lay on the ground with his leg bent under him at a strange angle. His face was an unnatural purple color—as though he had been hit repeatedly—and his hands were cracked and bleeding.

Andi looked around. She had ridden far from the ranch and was at the edge of the Carter property.

_I need Mitch, but I can’t just leave Levi here like this!_

Before she could decide what to do, Andi heard galloping hoof beats coming across the field. Looking up, she saw Mitch riding toward her on Chase.

She ran toward him.

“Mitch, Mitch, it’s Levi! He’s . . .” Her voice trailed off as the rider approached. It was Chase, but it wasn’t Mitch.

“Well, it’s good to see you again, little sister,” Troy said in a mocking tone as he dismounted. “I see you 94
found my son. Rather unfortunate for you, since now I'll have to take you too.”

Andi clenched her hands. “You won’t take him. He’s sick and hurt.”

“At least I won’t have to fight him as well as you. You Carters sure are fighters. Your brother Mitch can be violent!” He rubbed his jaw, which Andi noticed was turning a dark purple.

“Mitch? What have you done to him?”

Troy chuckled. “Oh, don’t worry. It wasn’t planned. I just came to the ranch looking for Levi. Unfortunately your brother saw me and—”

“What did you do to him?” Andi interrupted.

“Well, he’s got a black eye and—”

“How dare you touch my brother!” Andi’s eyes flashed as she lunged at Troy, who was holding both Chase’s and Shasta’s reins, blocking off any way of escape.

Troy easily dodged her, then roughly pushed her to the ground. “It seems you haven’t changed. Still feisty as ever.”

Andi, who had landed on top of Levi, glared at Troy. Then she turned her attention to her nephew. Even when she fell on him, he hadn’t moved. She quickly grabbed his wrist and checked his pulse. For a terrified moment she could feel nothing. Then, to her relief, she felt a slow but steady throb.

“He needs to get to a doctor.”

Troy shook his head. “You know how many sheriffs they’ve got out after me? I’m not going to get
myself caught.”

“Listen to his breathing. Do you want to get arrested for murder as well as kidnapping?”

Troy jerked Andi by her arm. “You need to watch what you say and shut your mouth, girl. I’m not gettin’ arrested!” He let go of her and turned to Levi. Sure enough, his breath was coming in short, labored gasps. “All right. I’ll take you both with me into Visalia. There’s a doctor there.”

“Visalia. Why are you going south?”

“Why do you think? I’m a wanted man all across the United States. But Mexico . . . that’s where I’m headed!”

Chad sat in the depot and waited for the train. So, Andi had been left behind. He chuckled to himself. She would hate that, but it was the safest place for her.

“She always means well, but I have a feeling that if she’d come we would be looking for two children, not just one. She does always seem to get into the thick of things.”

“What was that, sir?”

Chad turned to the clerk. “Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself.”

“Well, if it’s of any interest to you, the train is just pulling in.”

Sure enough, the whistle sounded just outside.

Justin had disembarked by the time Chad got
outside. He greeted his brother with a warm handshake. “Don’t worry, Chad. We’ll find him.”

Chad nodded then turned to help their mother disembark. “Aunt Rebecca and Kate will be happy to see you, Mother.”

She turned to him. “And how are you doing, Chad?”

He sighed. “I’ll be all right. Just glad when this is over with.”

The sun was low in the western sky as Troy stopped the horses just outside of Visalia. “All right, you go on into town and get the doctor.”

Andi stopped. “Get the doctor?”

“Well, you weren’t thinking I was going into town, were you?”

“And what if I decide get the sheriff?”

Troy glared at her. “I’m not that stupid. If you want to see your nephew alive and well, you’ll go straight to the doctor’s and come right back.”

One look at Levi’s face was enough for Andi. There was no way she could let him suffer because of Troy. She quickly mounted Shasta and galloped off toward the town.

Micah Wilson exited the mercantile. Walking to his horse, he placed the small bundle inside the saddle bag. Suddenly, a flurry of hoof beats sounded. Turning, he saw a young girl ride up.
Must be a visitor. I don’t remember seeing her around here before, he thought as he placed a foot in the stirrup and mounted.

“Sir, can you tell me where the doctor’s office is?”

Micah turned, suddenly realizing that the girl was talking to him.

“Sure, It’s the seventh building on the right,” he said. “Do you see it? The one with the light in the window.”

“Thanks!”

“Are you all right?”

“Well . . . it’s . . . I’m just trying to . . .”

Okay, something is going on here, Micah thought. “Are you in trouble?”

She looked at him as though trying to figure out if she could trust him. “I-I just have to get the doctor,” she yelled over her shoulder and galloped down the street.

Micah wheeled his horse around and started toward the sheriff’s office.

Andi took no time in persuading the doctor to come. They soon arrived at the makeshift campsite Troy had set up. Before the doctor was able to dismount, Troy walked over and placed a loaded gun to the doctor’s back.

“Now, tell me, Andi. Did you do anything else in town other than get the doctor?”

“No! I just asked someone for directions to the
doctor’s office and came straight here. Please, Troy, let him look at Levi!”

Troy lowered the gun and nodded. “He’s over this way. And . . . he’s not breathing too well.”

Andi turned to Troy, startled. Was that a father’s compassion in his voice?

“Oh, no!” The doctor sighed.

“What is it?” Troy asked.

“Well, apart from the fact that his leg is badly broken as well as his wrist, and his face is badly bruised, it seems he’s contracted pneumonia. There may also be some internal injuries. I can’t quite tell yet.”

“What? All that? How is it possible!” Troy exclaimed.

“Well, he obviously fell, which caused his wrist and leg to break. As for the pneumonia? Has he been outside for a while? It’s been rainy and damp. Even a couple of hours outside could have caused him to contract a cold, which in his case quickly deepened into pneumonia.”

“Is there anything you can do for him?” Andi asked, trembling.

“I can make him comfortable for now, but that’s about all.”

“Do it!” Andi cried. “Whatever you have to do to
save him.”

The doctor turned sympathetically to Andi. “I’ll do all I can, but I need to get him back to my office. There is little I can do here.”

Before anyone had time to answer, there were a flurry of hoof beats in the distance.

Troy roughly jerked Andi’s arm and pulled her to him until his face was nearly touching hers. “You told me you went straight to the doctor’s. Now, what’s this? Did you invite the sheriff to the party?”

He threw her hard, causing her to land in a splatter of mud. Quickly, he mounted his horse, yanked his pistol from his holster, and fired a shot toward the approaching sheriff and deputies. Then he pushed his horse into a gallop.

*What in the world?* Andi thought as she stood up and awkwardly brushed off the mud that clung tightly to her split riding skirt.

“Hey, you all right?”

Andi turned to see a young man ride up beside her. It was the same person she had asked for directions to the doctor’s.

“Y—yes, everything is fine. Was it you who got the sheriff?”

He nodded. “After you left in such a hurry for the doctor, I thought something might be wrong.”

Suddenly, the doctor appeared behind them. “I need to get the boy back to my office. Micah, can you go into town and get a wagon to transport him?”

Micah nodded. “I’ll be back as quick as I can.”
Andi turned at the sound of gunshots. The sheriff had caught up to Troy, who fired off a startled shot before his right arm got hit with a bullet.

There was a short scuffle as the sheriff grabbed the reins of the horse, causing Troy to fall. Quickly one of the deputies landed on top of him and handcuffed his hands behind his back.

Andi turned from the sight. As much as she hated to see someone get arrested, she was relieved that Troy would, once again, be behind bars and unable to hurt Levi or anyone else.

Justin jumped down from the buggy and hurried inside the doctor’s office while Chad tied the horses to the hitching post.

Just yesterday a telegram had come from Mitch saying Andi was missing, followed only hours later by another telegram saying Levi and Andi had both been found and were in Visalia.

“Are you Justin? Justin Carter?”

Justin turned as the middle-aged doctor walked over to greet him.

“I am. How is Levi doing?”

“Oh, he’s coming along all right. Andi’s been with him ever since he’s been here, and Mitch has been here every spare minute as well. In fact, he’s here now.”

The doctor ushered him down the hallway then into a small room. On the bed lay Levi. Andi sat next
to him, and Mitch was on the only chair.

“Justin, you’re back!” Andi jumped up and gave him a hug.

Justin chuckled. “That I am. How’s our patient?”

Levi grinned as Justin ruffled his hair. “I feel much better today. The doctor said I could go home tomorrow, but I’ll still have to have these awful splints on for the next six weeks.”

Mitch then chimed in. “But when they come off you’ll be good as new.”

Justin agreed. “Healing takes time. God created our bodies in a wonderful way. They have the ability to repair themselves like nothing else on earth.” He turned to Andi. “And how are you doing?”

“I’m all right. I’m just glad that Troy was arrested and can’t hurt us anymore. Is that wrong, Justin? To be thankful that someone is in prison?”

Justin sighed. “That’s a complicated question. The Bible tells us not to wish anyone ill, but in this case I don’t think that’s what you’re doing. He got what he deserved, and you’re thankful that no one else will get hurt by him.

“It says in Proverbs 21:15, ‘It is joy to the just to do judgment: but destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity.”’

Before Andi could reply, Chad entered the room. “I just have one question,” he said, crossing his arms. “Why is it that no matter what happens or where we are, Andi always ends up right in the middle of what we were trying to protect her from?”
Justin and Mitch grinned, but Justin was the one who answered. “Because she’s our Andi, and I wouldn’t want it any other way. Well, except for when it’s dangerous,” he said, giving her another hug.

Two days later everyone was reunited at the Carter ranch. Aunt Rebecca, Kate, Hannah, and Betsy had taken the train as soon as they’d gotten the news about Levi.

Mother had decided that she wouldn’t let Andi out of her sight for fear of all the trouble she would get into.

After an early supper, everyone retired to the parlor. Andi was quietly amusing Hannah and Betsy. Mother, who was holding baby Samuel, Aunt Rebecca, Kate, Melinda, and Lucy were talking together quietly. Mitch and Chad were playing a game of checkers while Levi watched intently.

Justin stood up. “I’d like everyone’s attention please,” he said, smiling. “This past week has been a whirlwind of events. First Levi went missing, then Troy came into the picture, and then Andi was kidnapped, as well.

“I’m just so thankful that everyone is now back together and safe. It’s times like these that I truly see Romans 8:28: ‘And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.’”
“Thank you so much, Justin,” Mother said. “It is always a blessing to know that when times get tough, we always have the tried and tested Word of God to stand on. He always does make all thing work together for good to them that love Him.”
Elizaveta (Elizabeth) is an energetic homeschooler who loves to write adventurous stories of days past. Her contagious humor adds a touch of spice to everything she does. But most of all, her love for the Lord shines through.

Thirteen-year-old Chad Carter whistled a happy tune as he pounded up the school stairs. Last day of school, he thought happily. Even chores seemed more interesting than sitting in a stuffy schoolroom beside Freddy Stone.

At the thought of that annoying brat, Chad’s merry spirits dampened. He hated nothing more than having to sit beside that mean, lying, city-slicker greenhorn.

Freddy always acted like a goody-goody in front of adults, but he was always downright mean to kids, especially to Chad.

“You looked happy at the breakfast table this morning. Why the sour look now?” asked Justin.
Chad turned to his fourteen-year-old, older brother Justin. "I was happy because today is the last day of school and then we will have a good, long summer break," he answered. "But even knowing that today is the last day, I don’t think I can stand another day sitting by Freddy Stone."

“He drives me crazy with his rotten character. He’s always good in front of Miss Hall, but when she’s not looking he becomes nasty, and meaner than Henry the Eighth.”

Justin eyed Chad at the mention of their horrid rooster and stopped as they neared the schoolroom door. “Well, I think you can make it through one more day. Just think of it, only one more day and you’ll get rid of him for the summer.”

Chad grunted. “I think I’ll get rid of him permanently if he does something bad to me today,” he said. “Or I’ll just run away from school.”

Smiling, Justin turned to Chad and said, “No time to run, ’cause here we go.” He opened the door and entered the schoolroom, walked to his seat, and sat down.

Chad sighed, took a deep breath, and walked to his seat. Stealing a glance at Freddy, he saw an innocent smile on that monkey face.

Chad smiled back coldly. Let him contort his face into a mean gorilla grin, he thought determinedly. Nothing is going to ruin my last day of school.

Getting out his books and setting them on the desk, Chad sat down. But as soon as he sat down,
something sharp pierced through his pants.

He yelped. Jumping up, he put a hand to his hurting backside.

Miss Hall whirled around and looked at Chad. “What’s wrong, Chad?”

Chad slowly and gently pulled out the sharp object and tried to smile sweetly at his teacher. “Oh, nothing . . . uh . . . Teacher,” he said, trying to sound convincing. “It’s just . . . uh . . . I was so happy that today is the last day, I couldn’t help myself.”

Miss Hall looked at Chad a while, as though not believing him, but then nodded and turned back to writing on the blackboard.

Grinding his teeth together, Chad sat down, still holding the mysterious object in his hand. Opening his hand, he saw a sharp pin. Chad was outraged! Stealing a glance at Freddy, he saw an evil smile. Of course it was Freddy. Who else would be so mean?

There was no time to yell at Freddy, though. Class had begun. Chad could not concentrate on what the teacher was reading to them; he kept thinking of what would happen to Freddy during recess time.

Miss Hall’s voice jerked Chad out of his thoughts. “You may now open your desks and begin copying down the language rules from the blackboard.”

Chad put his hand on the lid and tried opening his desk. To his great surprise and horror, the desk would not even budge, much less open. Chad fingered under the desk lid.

_Aha, he thought, there’s the problem._ The lid of his
desk was glued shut. *Probably Freddy’s masterwork,* he mused. Taking out his pocketknife, Chad moodily cut through the glue and opened his desk to take out a sheet of paper.

As if to make Chad’s day more miserable, the sun hid behind the clouds, making it dark and impossible to see the contents of his desk. A silence fell over the schoolroom; everyone was busy, quietly doing their classwork.

With his hand, Chad quietly felt around the desk, trying to find his writing paper. His fingers touched something strange. He pressed down on the odd object.

Suddenly there was a *snap!* and Chad felt searing pain radiate into his fingers. He screamed and jumped out of his chair. Bringing his hurting hand to his face, he saw a rusty mousetrap attached to his fingers.

Miss Hall looked up from her papers and frowned. “Young man, what is the meaning of this ruckus?” she demanded.

Chad showed her his hand.

Miss Hall paled at the sight. She got up and slapped a ruler against her desk. “Who did this?”

Chad quickly pointed to Freddy.

Miss Hall raised her eyebrows. “*Freddy?*”

She looked unconvinced.

Chad nodded.

Miss Hall shook her head sadly. “Freddy, you
always seemed like a good boy. Didn’t you realize the danger of Chad having broken fingers? Please apologize to him, and you will stay after school as a punishment.”

Chad tried putting on his most pitiful expression during Miss Hall’s speech. In truth, he did not have to fake much. The pain was great, but the wanting for payback was even greater.

Freddy mumbled an apology and looked down, but not fast enough to hide his evil grin.

Chad saw it and gathered all of the strength he could muster to keep himself from punching Freddy’s ugly face. One thing was clear now. Freddy Stone was Chad’s sworn enemy.

This meant war!

Chad got the rest of the day off from school. This is at least one good thing that happened today, he thought. In the evening, the family gathered around the table for dinner. Chad’s fingers still hurt like blazes, even though the doctor checked out the fingers and said nothing was broken.

Chad looked sourly at his meal. He did not feel like eating, especially not with his left hand. To make matters worse, Mother said that they had invited guests for dinner tomorrow. Chad did not feel like entertaining any guests at all. He was still upset with Freddy and his terrible pranks.

Chad sat bored, slowly eating his food. The
usually interesting topics about horses and roundups did not interest Chad at all today. Finally, he decided to change the subject. He waited until the talking stopped.

“So, Mother,” he said. “Who are you inviting tomorrow for dinner?”

Elizabeth Carter looked at her husband, James. He nodded. She took a deep breath and smiled. Chad took a deep bite of beef and started chewing, waiting for the news.

“Your father and I,” she began, “think it would be the Christian thing to do if we invited the whole Stone family for dinner tomorrow night.”

Chad choked on his piece of beef. “You’re going to do what?”

Mother smiled and answered, “Invite the whole Stone family for dinner, of course.”

Chad’s mouth dropped open. Life seemed like a nightmare right then. Chad moaned. This will be the worst weekend of my life, he thought. Unless . . . unless I teach Freddy Stone some manners.

As the thought pleased him, a mischievous smile crept up Chad’s face. Yes, he would teach Freddy a good lesson, one that the boy would not likely forget his whole life.

It was Saturday evening when the Stone family came. Chad pasted a smile on his face and welcomed Freddy as if nothing had happened between them in
school.

After the welcome, the families went into the dining room and sat down to eat. The adults talked merrily, leaving Chad and Justin to talk to Freddy.

All three boys ate in silence.

Mother suddenly turned to Chad and Justin. “Why don’t you two show Freddy around the ranch,” she said. “I’m sure you three can find something interesting to do around here.”

Justin looked at Chad and gave him a slight nod. “Why don’t you two go on,” he said, standing up. “I’ll be right there in a minute. I just have to check up on a few things.”

Elizabeth looked at him questioningly but said nothing.

Chad turned to Freddy. “We have a lot of interesting things around here. How about we start with the barn?”

Freddy nodded and mumbled something about the dust and dirt.

Chad tried not to smirk and said nothing. Dust and dirt were the least-feared things on the Circle C ranch. He led Freddy to the barn. The boys stopped outside one of the empty horse stalls.

“So, Carter,” Freddy said in his nasally voice. “Is your backside still hurting from the little episode in school?”

Chad tried not to growl and answered back, “What hurts and doesn’t hurt is none of your business. You might be two years older than me, but
you can’t scare me, Freddy Stone.”

“Oh, yeah?” sneered Freddy. “Bring it on, pipsqueak.” He made a scared face. “Ooohhh, I’m so scared of ninny Chad.”

That was the last of Chad’s fuse.

He lunged at Freddy and threw a solid punch in the boy’s face. Freddy howled in pain, falling to the ground.

Chad was on top of him in a second, tying up the brute with a lasso. “We’ll see who’s the ninny now!” he declared.

Freddy swore.

“And,” Chad added, “I’ll teach you to speak politely in the company of horses.”

With those words, Chad began stuffing Freddy’s mouth with dirt and small pieces of hay.

Freddy tried to wriggle away, but all was in vain. With Chad tying up Freddy with a lasso and his mouth full of dirt and hay, there was no way to get out.

“Now, for the last straw,” said Chad. Taking Freddy by the waist, he dragged the bully toward the
horse trough.

“You’re heavier than I thought,” Chad said, grunting with strain. Then, with all of the strength he could muster, he picked up the bully and threw him into the icy water.

“That’s what you get when you pick on the wrong person, you oversized baseball!” Chad yelled.

Freddy came up spluttering and coughing, but his usually mean eyes were filled with horror. Then to Chad’s great surprise, the bully took a mouthful of air and . . . screamed.

Chad closed his ears with his hands and rolled his eyes. The kid screamed like a girl. He wondered how long it would take before Freddy ran out of breath. *His screaming will bring half of Fresno to the Circle C,* Chad thought.

Well, it did not bring half of Fresno, but it surely brought the parents outside. James Carter looked at the two boys, and his eyes immediately darkened. He shook his finger at Chad. “You, young man, will pay for this dearly.”

Chad stood by the bed and continuously rubbed his backside. The door behind him opened, and he heard a soft laugh. Turning, he saw Justin standing by the door with his arms crossed.

“You sure made Freddy pay dearly for those small pranks at school, brother,” Justin said.

Chad smiled and nodded.
“And I bet that whipping hurt a lot too.”

Chad winced and nodded again. “But it was a fair price to pay for entertaining that greenhorn in a way he’d never forget,” he said. “Really Justin, you should have seen his face when I dumped him. I think I’d do it again just to see his face.”

Justin stood silent for a moment. Then he unfolded his arms and smiled. “I have something to say that will completely make your day,” he said mysteriously.

Chad stopped rubbing his backside. “What?”

“Well,” Justin said, “while you were entertaining Freddy, I happened to listen in on the adult conversation.” He smiled wider. “Mr. Stone was telling Mother and Father that they are going to move to San Francisco.”

Chad couldn’t believe his ears. Freddy moving away to San Francisco meant no more school with him. He whooped with joy.

“I told you,” he said, facing Justin triumphantly. “I told you I could get rid of Freddy permanently!”
Category: Ages 14-17
Honorable Mention

No Greater Love
by
Heidi Brown, age 15
Deer Island, Oregon

Heidi lives with her family in a small town in Oregon. She started writing more for school about a year ago, and she enjoys thinking of story plots. She really got into writing because she is recovering from juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and can’t do a lot of other things.

Chapter 1

Eighteen-year-old Andi Carter slowly walked into the Carter’s two-story ranch house. She had just rubbed Taffy down after a long ride around the ranch. The late afternoon sun was shining down, making the gorgeous April day even more beautiful.

Suddenly, two strong arms grabbed her around the waist, picked her up, and twirled her around. Andi screamed and let a foot fly at the offender.

“Ouch!”

The arms let go, and Andi was dropped into the
Mitch! What’s the big idea?” Andi sputtered, glaring at her brother.

“Ouch,” Mitch said as he held his foot and grimaced, “You pack a hard kick, sis.”

“Sorry, but you can expect that when you sneak up and grab me like that.”

“I’ve got two big pieces of news. But now I don’t think I’ll tell you.” Mitch grinned at her.

“Mitch,” Andi pleaded, “Just tell me.”

“Melinda’s baby is here,” Mitch announced.

“Really? Melinda’s baby is here?” Andi felt slivers of excitement go down her spine. “Well? Don’t keep me in suspense. Is it a girl or a boy?”

Mitch looked at her seriously. “You’re not going to like it.”

“No!” Andi moaned. “It can’t be a boy.”

“Sorry sis.” Mitch grinned. “You’ve got another nephew.”

“I was so sure it would be a girl.” And rolled her eyes. “I’ll get you your two dollars in a second.”

“It was your idea to wager on Melinda’s baby,” Mitch reminded her with a smile. “And now it’s even.”

“Two nephews and two nieces,” Andi said, contemplating. “That makes me feel old. What’s your other piece of news?”

“Jack’s back.”

“Oh, it’ll be nice to see him again,” Andi said. Jack Goodwin had gone away two years before to live with
his aunt and uncle in Sacramento.

As they entered the house, Justin walked up to Andi. “So, how does it feel to be an aunt yet again?”

“Feels old.” Andi laughed. “Does this nephew have a name?”

“Mitch didn’t tell you?” Justin grinned.

“Nope, what is it?” Andi asked.

“James Nathaniel Knight,” Justin announced, “James after Father, and Nathaniel after Marcus’s father.”

“That’s nice,” Andi commented.

Six months before, Melinda and her husband, Marcus, had moved to Carson, a small town about four hours away by stage. Andi missed her big sister’s company and hoped to visit her soon. And now she had an excuse—to see the baby.

“Andi.” Mitch’s voice jerked her out of her thoughts.

“Oh, sorry. What did you say?”

“I asked if you were still considering going to see Melinda,” Mitch inquired.

“Yes,” Andi replied. “I really want to go and see the baby and help her out.”

“Well, Mother might let you go if you had an escort,” Mitch suggested.

“Oh, could you go with me? Please, Mitch?” Andi pleaded.

Mitch hesitated. “Sorry, sis, but I don’t think Chad can spare me this time of year.”

Andi turned to her oldest brother, “Justin?”
“Sorry, Andi. I’m real tied up in a case right now,” he replied.

Andi looked downcast. “Well, I better go get dressed for dinner.”

She walked slowly up to her room. Surely there was some way she could go see Melinda. Andi slowly pulled on a lavender dress as she thought about the problem. She deftly took down her hair from the bun and ran a brush through her dark-brown tresses.

If none of my brothers can take me . . . Of course! Cory can take me!

Andi rushed down the stairs and entered the dining room. “Hello Andrea,” her mother said calmly. “Did you have a nice ride?”

“Oh, yes, Mother. It was lovely,” Andi said. After prayer, she began, “Mother?”

“Yes, Andrea?” Elizabeth replied, turning to look at her youngest.

“Do you think Cory and I could go see Melinda and the baby for a few weeks?”

“Why, I don’t know,” Elizabeth responded slowly. “I suppose that might work, if Cory can spare the time.”

“Oh, thank you, Mother,” Andi said gratefully.

Now if Cory can only get away for a few weeks.
Chapter 2

Early the next morning, Andi saddled Taffy and headed for town. The sun was out, and it was another beautiful spring day. Andi felt glad to be alive and a part of it all. The birds sang merrily, and Taffy’s hooves made *clip-clop* sounds on the dirt road.

When they arrived in Fresno, Andi carefully guided Taffy over to the livery where Cory worked with his pa. Seeing Cory out front taking a horse out of harness, she called to him, “Hey, Cory.”

Cory looked up with a grin. “Hey, Andi, haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Yeah, Chad’s been keeping me busy on the ranch. Melinda had her baby.”

“Boy or girl?” Cory asked.


“What?” Cory grinned, “You want me to entertain him when he’s old enough to annoy you.”

“No, silly,” Andi said. “I wondered if you had the time to take a couple weeks off and go with me to see Melinda and the baby.”

Cory took off his hat and wiped the sweat off his forehead, “Sorry to disappoint you, Andi, but Pa has me working so hard that I can barely take a day off to go fishing. I doubt that he’d be all right with a couple of weeks.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks anyway, Cory,” Andi replied, disappointed.
“Howdy,” a young man on a horse said as he drew up to the two.

“Jack!” Cory and Andi exclaimed simultaneously.

“Well!” Jack chuckled. “I guess you haven’t forgotten all about me.”

“How could we?” Cory grinned. “Mighty good to see you.”

“You too,” Jack replied, “You looked like you were having a serious discussion when I showed up.”

Andi quickly explained what they had been talking about.

“Well, I’ll have a few weeks off before I start working with Pa again at the mercantile. Why don’t I just take you, Andi?”

“That’s mighty nice of you to offer, Jack. I just might take you up on that,” Andi spoke up.

“Course I’ll have to talk it over with Pa,” Jack said. “But I don’t see why it wouldn’t work.”

“I’ll talk it over with my mother tonight and see you tomorrow, Jack,” Andi said. “But I better go now. See you later.”

Elizabeth didn’t have any objections and neither did Mr. Goodwin, so preparations were made for the trip. On the day that they were to leave, all the Carters and Jack’s pa were with them waiting for the stagecoach.

“You take care of her now,” Chad addressed Jack. “See her safely to Melinda’s house and back.”

“I will,” Jack solemnly promised.

“You take care now, Andrea, and give Melinda all
my love and make sure to give her those baby clothes we made,” Elizabeth admonished her daughter.

“And give that nephew of mine a big hug from his Uncle Mitch,” Mitch added with a smile.

“I will. Goodbye!”

“Goodbye,” everyone shouted as the stage pulled away.

“Well, we’re finally on our way,” Andi said, grinning. “I was afraid they’d change their minds and make us stay.”

Jack grinned back. “I don’t think they’d go that far.”

They passed the time quickly, chatting and catching up with what they had both been doing the past two years. A few hours later they stopped for lunch. They shared the large picnic lunch Elizabeth had packed and then climbed aboard the stage again.

“The scenery is lovely,” Andi commented. The trees were budding and the flowers coming up. Away in the distance she could see the beautiful, snowy mountains.

Suddenly, there were gunshots and the sound of horses pursuing the stagecoach. Jack whipped out his
pistol and peeked out the window.

The coach jerked to a stop, and a coarse voice yelled, “The driver’s dead. And if ya know what’s good for ya, you’ll come on outta that coach with your hands up.”

Jack answered with a gunshot out the window. “Get down Andi!” he yelled.

Andi started to slide past the seat when she heard a volley of gunshots. Jack threw himself on top of her and toppled her to the ground. Then he lay limply on her.

“Jack!” Andi cried. “Are you all right?”

There was no answer. Two gunshots echoed and everything was quiet.

Andi carefully pushed Jack off of her and examined him. There was a pulse. She peeked out the window and saw two bodies lying on the ground. A cowboy was examining them.

Andi snatched up Jack’s pistol and opened the door. “Drop your gun and put your hands up,” she commanded.

The cowboy startled at her voice then quickly dropped his gun. “Ma’am, I heard gunshots and saw these fellows shooting at the coach, so I snuck up behind them and shot them,” the cowboy explained.

“You expect me to believe that?” Andi shook her head. “No, you just stay right where you are.” Then she heard a slight moan.
Forgetting the cowboy, she rushed to Jack. “Please, Jack, open your eyes,” she pleaded.

Jack groaned again and opened his eyes slightly. “Jack!” Andi exclaimed.

“Andi,” Jack said weakly, “I can’t take care of you anymore. You have to go to Melinda’s alone. I’m going home.”

“Yes, Jack.” Andi smiled slightly. “We’ll get you to the doctor and take you home.”

“No,” Jack whispered. “I’m going home to heaven.”

“No!” Andi cried. “You can’t! You have to be all right.”

Jack reached out shakily and took her hand. “It’s going to be okay, Andi. What could be better than going to Heaven to be with my Father?”

“Nothing, Jack,” Andi said quietly. “If you want to go, I’ll not hold you back.”

“He’s calling,” Jack whispered.

Then Jack went limp.

Andi knew Jack had gone home. “Goodbye Jack,” she whispered. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

Chapter 3

Andi wept as she thought of how brave Jack was. He had saved her life but lost his own.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” she heard from behind her. The cowboy was standing there with his hat in his
hands.

“Thank you. I am sorry I didn’t believe you,” Andi said tearfully.

“I don’t blame ya none. By the way, my name’s Matt Brinder,” he said. “The driver’s dead, but I’ll tie my horse to the back of this thing and drive ya to wherever you’re going.”

Andi hesitated. “Oh, I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking. I’m volunteering,” Matt said as he walked over to his horse. After tying his horse to the back of the coach, he roped Jack’s body on top of it and climbed into the driver’s seat.

As the coach begin to move, Andi’s tears flowed. She put her head in her hands and cried until she fell into a deep sleep.

The sound of the coach door squeaking open woke her. She winced as the light hit her eyes. “Ma’am? We’re here in Carson,” Matt said as he peeked in.

“Oh, thank you,” Andi said quietly.

She quickly alighted from the coach and looked around. Thoughts of Jack sprang to her mind, and she blinked back unbidden tears. Matt put her trunk on the ground and inquired if someone was coming to meet her.

Andi nodded and looked around again for Melinda.

“Andi!” a voice called.

Andi quickly turned around and saw Marcus
standing there. “Marcus!” She ran into his arms crying.

“Andi, what’s the matter,” he said, hugging her tightly.

“There was a stagecoach holdup,” she wailed. “And Jack’s dead.”

“What?” Marcus sounded stunned.

Matt stepped forward and quickly explained the situation.

“Oh, Andi, I’m so sorry,” Marcus said softly.

“I’m gonna head to the sheriff’s office and get things straightened out,” Matt told them.

“Yes, thank you for all you’ve done,” Marcus gratefully replied.

“My pleasure.”

Andi cried and clung to her brother-in-law for several moments. Then they walked slowly to the buggy. On the way out to Marcus and Melinda’s house in the country, Marcus quietly asked about the family and updated her on baby James.

When they reached the house, Andi stepped down from and buggy and headed for the house. The door opened and Melinda stood there smiling happily. “Andi!”

Andi ran into her sister’s arms and burst out crying yet again.

“Andi, what’s wrong?” Melinda stroked her hair and hugged her.

Andi calmed down and quietly explained what had happened.
“Andi,” Melinda said softly, “I’m sorry. But remember that Jack is in a better place.”

“I’m trying,” Andi whispered, “but I feel so bad. I should have died, but he took that bullet.”

Melinda put her arm around Andi and walked into the house with her. “I know, but remember John 15:13: ‘Greater love hath no man then this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’”

Andi smiled through her tears, “That’s what he did. He laid down his life for me.”

“He was a brave man,” Melinda added.

The sisters walked slowly into the house, where Melinda showed off the sleeping baby James. He was so cute with pink cheeks and one little hand under his head.

“He’s adorable,” Andi whispered. “I just wish Mother could see him. Oh, there are some baby clothes in my trunk that Mother made for him.”

Andi quickly pulled the key from its place on a ribbon around her neck and opened the trunk Marcus had brought in.

Melinda exclaimed over the baby clothes as Andi pulled them out of the trunk. “These are so beautiful,” she said.

“Mother made most of them,” Andi gave credit.
“These are going to be so handy.” Melinda sighed contentedly. “But you must be exhausted, Andi.”

“I am feeling a bit tired,” Andi admitted.

“I'll show you to the guest room. Right this way,” Melinda directed.

When Melinda left, Andi lay down on the bed. She was exhausted. For the second time she cried herself to sleep, thinking of how brave Jack was.

Almost a week later, Andi sat in church back in Fresno for the memorial service remembering Jack and his sacrifice. She quietly cried as Reverend Harris spoke about Jack. Then Mr. Goodwin walked slowly up to the platform.

“You all knew Jack,” he said. “I knew that he loved Andi as he would have loved a sister. He felt responsible for taking care of her on that trip. He never would have forgiven himself if anything had happened to her. Jack made a brave sacrifice. I will miss my son very much, but Jack is now with his true Father. And that is where he most wanted to be.”

Andi cried when Mr. Goodwin finished. It was true. From talking to Jack, she knew there was no place he’d rather be then with his true Father. And that was where he was now, with him and Jesus face to face.

“Thank you, Jack,” she whispered. “I'll see you up there.”
CIRCLE C BEGINNINGS
(AGES 6-8)
Andi’s Pony Trouble
Andi’s Indian Summer
Andi’s Fair Surprise
Andi’s Scary School Days
Andi’s Lonely Little Foal
Andi’s Circle C Christmas

CIRCLE C ADVENTURES
(AGES 9-14)
Andrea Carter and the Long Ride Home
Andrea Carter and the Dangerous Decision
Andrea Carter and the Family Secret
Andrea Carter and the San Francisco Smugglers
Andrea Carter and the Trouble with Treasure
Andrea Carter and the Price of Truth
Andrea Carter’s Tales from the Circle C Ranch (new!)

CIRCLE C MILESTONES
(AGES 12+)
Thick as Thieves
Heartbreak Trail (July 2015)

GOLDTOWN ADVENTURES
(AGES 8-12)
Badge of Honor
Tunnel of Gold
Canyon of Danger
River of Peril