Way Out West

Circle C Stories

Compiled by
Susan K. Marlow

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Acknowledgments:

The Circle C Adventures & Beginnings short-story writing contest is open to young writers ages 7 to 17. Over eighty entries from the U.S. and Canada (and one from Indonesia) launched the 2013 contest to a great start.

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

**Ages 6-9:** Jan May & Stephanie Reed  
**Ages 10-13:** Donna Patton & Colleen Reece  
**Ages 14-17:** Karla Cook & Heather Fitzgerald

It was a tough call! One judge said, “There were a lot of excellent and well-written stories in the ones I helped judge.”

And thank you, 2013 contest winners! Without your delightful imaginations, this collection would never have been compiled. Young authors’ names can be found with their story entries.

To learn how you can enter the 2014 story contest, email SusanKMarlow@gmail.com or visit Andi’s blog: www.CircleCAdventures.blogspot.com.
Contest Winners for 2013:

Names, ages, and locations have been listed as requested on the entry forms:

**Ages 6-9:**
1st Place: Carolyn Grace “Gracie” Olmstead, age 7
   Walla, Walla, Washington
2nd Place: Abbie Langman, age 8
   Elmvale, Ontario, Canada
3rd Place: Cora Raub, age 9
Honorable Mention: Kurt Schmucki
   Morgan Hill, California

**Ages 10-13:**
1st Place: Kara Teachman
2nd Place: Anne Morud, age 12
   Warren, Oregon
3rd Place: Kaylie Brase, age 12
   Oronoco, Minnesota
Honorable Mention (tie): Rebekah Huber, age 13
Honorable Mention (tie): Kayla Bjorn, age 9
   Utah

**Ages 14-17:**
1st Place: Emily “Calamity Rene” McConnell, age 17
2nd Place: Rebekah Eddy, age 15
   Port Orchard, Washington
3rd Place: Kathleen; Pullman, Washington
Honorable Mention (tie): Anna Teachman
Honorable Mention (tie): Lauren Stoner
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Andi squirmed in her seat and tugged at the itchy collar of her dress. She couldn’t wait for school to end so she could go home and play with her best friend, Riley.

“Class,” Miss Hall said, “It’s time to get ready for our Thanksgiving play.”

Andi perked up at her desk. She had seen her big sister, Melinda, do school plays, and they looked fun!

“I have very special parts for all of you,” Miss Hall went on. “We’ll start rehearsals on Monday. Have a good weekend. Class dismissed.”

Andi raced to the buggy and jumped up beside her oldest brother, Justin. Melinda climbed up beside her.
“Guess what, Justin?” Andi said. “I’m going to be in the Thanksgiving play!”

“Wow, honey!” Justin said. “That sounds exciting.”

“I can’t wait to get home and tell Mother. And Riley, and Taffy . . . and Pickles!”

As the buggy pulled up to the house, Andi pushed passed Melinda and jumped down.

“Andi!” Melinda scolded. “Don’t be so rude.”

But Andi kept running toward the house. She burst through the door and shouted, “Mother! Mother!”

“Andrea,” Mother said, “You don’t have to shout. I’m right here. Now, please shut the door and tell me what you have to say.”

Andi sighed. “Yes, Mother.”

But before Andi could shut the door, Melinda walked in. “Andi,” she said, “I’ve told you before, it’s rude to push past someone without saying ‘excuse me.’”

Her mother looked down at her sternly. “Andrea.”

Andi sighed again. *Why can’t everyone just leave me alone and let me say what I have to say?* she thought. She turned and said, “Sorry, Melinda.”

“I forgive you,” Melinda said.

“Now,” Mother said, “what did you have to tell me, Andrea?”

“I’m going to be in the Thanksgiving play!”

“How nice!” Mother said.
“Could I go and tell Riley?” Andi asked.
“Yes, you may.” Mother stirred the soup. “After you change out of your dress.”
“Thank you!” Andi ran up the stairs to her room.
“And don’t forget to hang up your dress!” Mother called to her.

Riley sat on a bale of hay by the corral. Their horses, Taffy, Coco, and Midnight came trotting up to the fence.

“Don’t worry,” Riley told them. “I brought carrots for you all.” Riley and Andi gave each horse a carrot. “So, what’s the big news, Andi?”

“In a minute, Riley,” Andi said. She reached in her pocket and pulled out her lizard, Pickles. “Now,” she said. “I’m going to be in a school play for Thanksgiving.”

“Really?” Riley said. “Hey, if you do really good, you might become a star in the theater.”

“A star?” Andi said. “I don’t want to fly in the sky!”

“No,” Riley said. “A star is someone who’s very popular—and rich.”

Andi’s mouth dropped. “Wow!” she said.

Just then, the dinner bell rang. “I can’t wait to tell everyone,” Andi said as she ran back to the house.
The venison soup smelled delicious as Mother filled each bowl. But Andi couldn’t wait to share her news.

“I’m going to be in the Thanksgiving play at school,” she announced. “And Riley said I might be a big star.”

Chad laughed. “You’ll make a great turkey,” he said.

Andi stomped her foot. “I’m not going to be a turkey,” she said. “I’m going to be a horse!”

Now, everyone laughed.

“Honey,” Justin said, “there weren’t any horses at the first Thanksgiving.”

“Yes,” Melinda added. “You’ll probably be an Indian, like the other young children.”

Andi jumped up from her seat. “I don’t want to be an Indian!” she yelled with her hands on her hips. “I want to be a horse!” Then she ran out the door.

Early the next morning, Justin woke Andi up.

Andi sat up in her bed and yawned. “What is it, Justin?” she asked.

“Get dressed,” Justin said with a tricky smile. “We’re taking a little trip today.”

Andi hopped out of bed. “Really?” she said. “Where are we going, Justin?”

“It’s a surprise,” he answered. “I’ll be waiting downstairs, so hurry up.”
Andi dressed and hurried downstairs. She ran to the door, but Mother stopped her.

“Andrea,” she said, “you have to let Melinda fix your hair, and then eat breakfast before you go.”

It felt like torture, but Andi obeyed.

After a long, long ride, Andi saw pole houses up ahead. Andi sat up straight.

“Are we going to the Yokut village, Justin? Is that the surprise?”

“You guessed right,” Justin said.

People came to greet them as they rode into the village. Andi recognized their friend, Lum-pa. Justin dismounted and helped Andi down. Then Justin unloaded the packs of food and gifts.

Lum-pa said something in the Yokut language, and the people cheered. “We will have a feast,” he told Andi. “To thank you for your gifts.”

A little Yokut girl peeked around Lum-pa.

“Choo-nook!” Andi said. Andi and Choo-nook had become best friends last summer. Choo-nook was wearing the red ribbon Andi had given her.

Andi pointed to the necklace Choo-nook had given her. “I’m wearing my necklace too,” she said.

The girls giggled and then they ran off to play. Choo-nook introduced Andi to her sister, Flowing River. The girls played Yokut games, ate wonderful food, and danced into the night.

Flowing River gave Andi a beautiful bracelet of shells, feathers, arrowheads, and a rattlesnake rattle.
Andi happily gave Flowing River the blue ribbon from her hair.

Flowing River danced with joy. She finally had a ribbon like her big sister!

That night, Andi, Choo-nook, and Flowing River sat around a big fire. Andi snuggled into Justin sleepily. She was very happy.

“Justin?” she asked. “Is this what the first Thanksgiving was like?”

“It sure is, honey,” he said.

“Except, no horses?” she asked.

“No horses.”

Andi smiled at her friends. “I’m going to be the best Indian girl in the play,” she said.
Andi lifted her head and smelled the air deeply. The cool, crisp, autumn air filled her nostrils. Everything was perfect this time of year. The hot, blistering months of summer were over, and the coolness of fall had swept over California, bringing relief to everyone.

Andi glanced over at Rosa, who was having a horrible time getting her horse to behave.

“Mi amiga!” Rosa called. “Can you help me with Muñeca?”

Andi laughed. “Of course, Rosa! Do you remember what she did to Mitch?”

Rosa giggled a little bit and answered, “Sí! I remember when she sent him flying across the corral!”

“She has a temper, so it is best not to ask too much from her.” Andi reined Taffy to a stop and chewed on her lip thoughtfully. “Maybe if we gallop the horses for a while, Muñeca will calm down,” she suggested and began trotting Taffy down the trail.
“Wait!” Rosa called frantically.
Andi stopped Taffy and turned to look at Rosa.
“Wait? For what?” she asked.
“We had a bad rainstorm last week, and some parts of the trail could have been washed out, or the ground could be slippery.” Rosa looked at Andi and asked, “Can we just walk them instead?”
Andi smiled. “I had forgotten about that. Rosa, thank you for reminding me. It would be horrible to have one of the horses slip!”
“The leaves are so pretty when they are starting to turn colors. Too bad we don’t have more trees with leaves and fewer trees with needles.” Rosa looked at the scenery wistfully and mused, “This season is so nice that I almost wish it was always autumn.”
*Muñeca* started misbehaving again, and Rosa had to focus on controlling her.
Stillness fell over the forest as the horses walked along side by side, clearly enjoying their exercise. Suddenly, a forest hare darted out from the bushes and crossed the path in front of Taffy and *Muñeca*.
Rosa managed to get control of her horse, but Taffy was caught so off guard that she spooked and went galloping down the trail.
Everything happened so fast that Andi couldn’t get control over Taffy. As they went around a bend, part of the trail disappeared and became a giant slope leading to a small bed of rocks.
Before Taffy had time to react, they found themselves falling down the slope. Andi felt herself being launched from Taffy’s back and landing hard on the ground. After that, she couldn’t comprehend anything.
A few blurred images waved in front of her face, and then she slipped into unconsciousness.

Andi awoke after a few moments to a horrible headache. When she opened her eyes, Rosa was staring at her with a worried look on her face. Andi groaned and rolled on her back. She couldn’t remember what happened after she fell down the hill.

Rosa smiled a smile of relief. “It is good that you are alive. I thought you were going to die. It all happened so fast! After Taffy spooked, I did my best to catch up with you, but Taffy was running too fast. When I finally caught up to you, all I saw was you and Taffy lying on the ground. I was worried that you were dead!”

“Is Taffy okay? Was she hurt very much?” Andi asked with concern in her voice.

“I am afraid that she may not have fared as well as you.” Rosa sighed deeply. “I don’t think that she hurt herself very badly, but I do not know. I was so worried about you that I forgot about Taffy.”

Andi limped over to Taffy, who was struggling to get up, obviously in pain. She tried to calm Taffy down, but the horse was so frantic that Andi couldn’t get her to stop thrashing around. She turned to Rosa and asked, “Can you quickly go get help?”

Rosa turned on her heels and ran over to her horse. She mounted up and galloped away, leaving Taffy and Andi alone. Taffy limped around a bit, obviously having hurt her front left leg.
Andi felt a tear slip down her cheek, and then another. The tears became more frequent as she watched her horse struggle and put herself in more pain.

A great sense of relief fell over her as she heard horse hooves coming around the bend. Rosa appeared, followed by Chad, Justin, and Mitch.

Chad jumped off his horse and sprinted over to Andi. When he saw that she was okay he proceeded to examine Taffy. Mitch and Justin dismounted and ran over to Andi.

“Are you okay?” Justin asked. Andi nodded.

“How far did you fall?” asked Mitch.

“After Taffy slipped I fell off her back. I didn’t get hurt that much, but I am going to have a giant bruise on my leg. I guess I passed out, and after I awoke I went to check on Taffy. That’s when I sent Rosa to get you.”

Andi bit her lip and asked, “How do you think Taffy is doing?”

Chad walked over and answered her question. “She fell pretty hard. It’s tough to say, but she looks fine. I don’t think she broke a bone, but it is possible. Most likely she hurt a muscle, but I need to take her back to the ranch to check. Can you make it to the ranch okay riding behind Rosa, Andi?”

She nodded and put a grim look of determination on her face.

Chad smiled and hugged her. “Okay! Let’s go!” he commanded. Everyone immediately started getting ready for the ride back to the ranch.
Once they arrived at the ranch, Andi was sent to bed immediately. She couldn’t sleep, though. Dreadful thoughts of Taffy and what might have happened to her clouded her mind. If Taffy couldn’t heal from her injury she would never forgive herself.

When sleep would not come, she got out of bed and crept down the stairs. She quickly exited the house and walked over to the stable building. Chad and Mitch were still in Taffy’s stall, checking her body for any other injuries.

“How is she doing? Is she going to be okay? Will you have to shoot her?” Andi finally asked.

Chad and Mitch jumped. Chad whirled around and looked at her with a look of bewilderment in his eyes. “Andi! I thought you were supposed to be resting. If Mother catches you out here, you’ll be in trouble.”

“I know, I know. I was just so worried about Taffy that I couldn’t sleep if I tried. You have had plenty of time to examine her,” Andi continued with a note of worry in her voice. “Has she broken any bones?”

Chad smiled. “I checked her the best I could, and I think that she hasn’t broken any bones. That’s the good news. The bad news is that she ripped a muscle in her leg. She must have tried to grip the slope as she was falling, and because she had so much momentum she wasn’t able to stop herself. We’ll have to keep her quiet and resting in this stall and see how she is in a couple of days.”

Andi’s eyes welled up with tears. She looked at Mitch to see if he agreed with what Chad was saying. Mitch nodded solemnly and hugged Andi.

Mitch finally broke the silence. “Andi, if you want, you can take care of Taffy until school starts. I’m going to
warn you, though: Taffy might not be able to heal. Don’t set yourself up for a big disappointment.”

Andi had heard enough. She fled from Taffy’s stall and ran to the house. She took the stairs two at a time and hurtled into her bedroom. She threw herself on the bed and lay there, sobbing.

A few minutes later Justin came in the room. “Andi? I know that you are upset about Taffy. I would be upset if it was my horse too, but I don’t know of anything that we can do to change the fact that Taffy is hurt. If she can’t be ridden again, we’ll use her for breeding, and she’ll have some of the nicest palominos in California.

“Taffy knows you better than she knows anyone else. If you take care of her, maybe she’ll want to recover. Sometimes, if an animal doesn’t feel loved they won’t even try to get well, and if they’re left alone they’ll die.

“Taffy needs you to recover. Just because she got hurt is no reason for you to only think of yourself. You need to keep optimistic in this situation, even if it looks as black as night.”

Justin was silent for a minute and then told her, “Mother wants you to know that supper is going to be served in a few minutes. You’d better wash up and join us downstairs.” With that, Justin left the room and closed the door behind him.

Once he was gone, Andi consoled herself and put on a dress for supper. Suddenly, a thought hit her. What would life be like without Taffy? How would she be able to survive?

She brushed these thoughts out of her mind as she went down to supper.
After supper, Andi rushed out to the barn to check on Taffy. There, her worst fears were confirmed. Taffy was not any better than before. She lay in a corner of her stall, cringing every few moments. When Andi called Taffy’s name, her horse whinnied to her but made no effort to rise. Tears started filling Andi’s eyes.

“I’m sorry about what happened to Taffy.”

Andi whirled around and found herself face to face with Cory Blake.

“Is she going to be okay?” Cory asked.

“Everyone thinks she’s going to be okay, but I probably won’t ever get to ride her again,” was Andi’s solemn reply. “When Rosa found Mitch, Chad and Justin were out riding. By the time Mitch tracked them down and got them to the spot where Taffy fell, Taffy had calmed down. If they had come sooner it would have riled her so much that she would have hurt herself worse. She probably would have had to be shot then. I’m glad that she’s still okay.”

Cory smiled and exclaimed, “I’m glad it worked out in Taffy’s favor. Maybe if you can’t ride her again you could ride Shasta. He’s been trained to carry a rider already, hasn’t he?”

Andi pondered that thought. “Shasta is ready to be ridden, but I couldn’t leave Taffy. I just will have to wait until she recovers.” Her voice wavered. “If she recovers. By the way, Cory, how did you know about Taffy’s accident?”

Cory laughed and replied, “Melinda was in town. She was passing the livery when Mitch went to go find her. I
eavesdropped and heard Mitch telling Melinda what had happened. I figured I’d check on Taffy when I had some free time, so I stopped by.”

Cory and Andi talked for an hour as they went around the ranch examining horses and playing with the foals. Night came fast in the fall, and Cory had to get back to the livery, so he left.

While Andi was dressing for bed, a thought came to her. The entire time that she and Cory were talking she hadn’t worried about what would happen to Taffy. Maybe, just maybe, she could live life without riding Taffy. If her beloved horse was still on the ranch she could still groom her and own her, just not ride her.

As Andi climbed into her bed, she made up her mind. Taffy couldn’t carry a rider without hurting herself worse. If she hurt herself worse, she might have to be shot. Andi would just have to give up riding her.

Making the right decision, even though it hurt deeply, was rewarding. Andi fell asleep with a clear conscience and a light heart.

Andi enjoyed the exhilarating feeling of riding a galloping horse, the wind whipping in her face, the feeling of flying. Shasta seemed to be soaring, making the world seem like a blur.

Although it had only been two weeks since Taffy’s accident, Andi knew she had made the right decision. It had been tough to let go, but it was the right thing to do. Taffy still walked with a limp that she probably would always have. Riding Taffy after she had hurt herself
would have been selfish, and it might have resulted in Taffy’s death.

As Andi slowed Shasta, she glanced over her shoulder and saw Cory and Flash, a long way behind them.

Giddy with excitement, Andi leaned over and whispered in Shasta’s ear, “Your mother and I made a great team, but you and I are just unbeatable!”

And with that she urged Shasta into a gallop, and the two of them went flying across the range.
Eight-year-old Andrea “Andi” Carter sat next to her big brother Mitch and watched him carefully measure out a spoonful of baking soda. He paused to look over the dirt-mound volcano and announced, “Well, Andi, I think this is the best one yet. But the question is, will it explode?”

“Oh, I sure hope so!” Andi exclaimed, bouncing up and down as her dark braids swung around.

Mitch smoothed his light-blonde hair back and grinned. “Okay, here we go.”

With a quick motion he poured the baking soda into the bottle of vinegar and snapped the lid shut, grabbing Andi and running toward the nearest stall.

They didn’t make it in time.

Boom! Baking soda and vinegar flew everywhere, spewing onto Chad’s new saddle and onto Andi and Mitch.

“It worked!” Andi laughed, wiping the yucky solution
off her face.

“Congratulations, sis, you are part of the team that’s discovered how to make a miniature volcano.” Mitch chuckled, taking out a handkerchief and wiping Andi’s cheek. “You’re a wreck, though.”

“You should see yourself.” Andi giggled, pointing at a huge blotch of “volcano substance” on Mitch’s forehead.

Footsteps sounded outside the barn door and Mitch froze. “Oh, boy, I bet that’s Chad,” he muttered. “I should have left half an hour ago to help him with the cattle.”

“Oooh, not good,” Andi murmured.

Mitch glanced around frantically, then whirled toward Andi. “Hey, Andi, would you be a pal and clean this mess up? I’m going to scoot out the back barn door and get going before Chad strangles me for being late.”

Andi sighed as she eyed the gooey mess. “Well, okay.” She sighed again.

“Thanks, sis, you’re the best!” Mitch patted her on the head and took off running, barely managing to slip out before Chad threw the front barn doors open.

“Mitch!” he yelled. “Mitch, I thought I told you half an hour ago to come and help me catch . . .”

Chad’s voice trailed off as he stared at his new saddle. It was only then that Andi realized that their volcano had messed it all up.

“What in blazes—” Chad began, his blue eyes snapping as he beheld the saddle. “Andi, what did you do to my saddle?”

“I didn’t do anything.” Andi gulped. “Mitch and I were—”

“Don’t you dare bring Mitch into this!” Chad roared,
causing Andi to step back. “What did you do to my new saddle?”

“I . . . well . . . Mitch and I made our very own volcano and—”

Chad didn’t let her finish. “You ruined my new saddle! Do you know how much I paid for that? You wasteful, selfish little girl. I spent a hundred dollars on that saddle, and you ruined it.”

“Chad, I’m sorry,” Andi stammered. “I didn’t mean to. We were just playing and—”

“We?” Chad snarled. “I don’t see any we, Andi. All I see is you.”

It was true. Mitch had gone out the back door, and it did look like Andi had made this mess herself. “Chad, Mitch was here and—”

“Don’t you dare lie to me, young lady.” Chad was furious, it was easy to tell. But Andi wasn’t about to let him call her a liar.

“I’m not lying!” she shouted back. “You won’t give me a chance to explain myself.”

“I don’t need an explanation. You ruined my saddle and that’s that.”

Angry tears spilled over her eyes and she rubbed them away. “Fine!” she snapped. “Be that way. I don’t care. I wish you weren’t my brother!”

With that she bolted out the door and ran across the ranch yard.

“Andi, come back!” Chad called after her, but she only ran faster.

Andi ran and ran, past the first pasture and the second, past the road that led into town and toward the creek she loved to fish in. Tears streamed down her face.
and blurred her vision, often causing her to stumble and trip over gopher holes and tree roots.

When she reached the shaded area of the cool creek, she collapsed on the ground underneath her favorite tree and sobbed.

Life wasn’t fair, and being the youngest sister in the Carter family didn’t make it any better. She always got into trouble and was yelled at. It just wasn’t fair.

Oh, I wish Justin was here, she moaned inwardly. Big brother Justin would tell Chad to be nice to her. But he was in San Francisco on lawyer business and wouldn’t be back for another week.

Mitch would stand up for her and tell Chad he was wrong, but he was hiding from Chad too. Big sister, Melinda, didn’t dare argue with Chad. She was several years younger than he was, and he bossed her as much as he did Andi.

That left Mother.

Dear Mrs. Carter would vouch for her case, Andi knew, but of course this was the day she went to town for her Ladies’ Aid meeting.

That left Andi without anyone to tell Chad she hadn’t done anything wrong. This isn’t fair. Why is Chad always mean to me?

Well, a lot of the times it was her fault. Though she hated to admit it, she often did cause a lot of trouble. It was plausible for Chad to think she was the one who messed up his saddle.

But he didn’t even give me a chance to tell him I didn’t do it, that I was helping Mitch make a volcano! Yet, Chad didn’t believe her, and wouldn’t until Mitch found out and explained what really happened.
Suddenly, an idea popped into Andi’s head. *Chad’s been so mean to me lately, I’m going to go visit Justin in San Francisco,* she decided. *Justin loves me, and he won’t be mean to me.*

It was settled. She would start out right away and get on the first train to San Francisco. She’d stay with Justin until he came home. Then Justin would tell Chad to be nice to her. It was perfect!

Without another thought Andi stood up, wiped the tears from her eyes, and brushed off her dress. She couldn’t waste any time if she wanted to be in San Francisco by tonight.

Chad bit his lower lip thoughtfully as he scanned the horizon. The sun was setting in the west, casting a warm, orange glow on everything in its path. In the far north pasture he could make out the cows and the new bull, while in the west pasture he could barely see a horse and rider heading his way.

*Mitch, no doubt,* he figured. A frown crossed his face and he scanned the land once more. *No Andi.*

It had been hours since he’d seen his little sister. He felt bad about getting so mad at her, then reminded himself that he had every right to be angry. She had ruined his saddle, and it wasn’t the first time she’d pulled a stunt like this, and yet . . .

Chad sighed and shook his head. He had been too hard on her. Even so, he wasn’t going to go look for her. Andi was a hardy little thing. She had made her way home more than once in the dark and would come home in her
own good time. She was no doubt as angry as he was, seeing how she had his same stubborn streak.

That’s probably why we don’t get along so well, he thought with a smile. But she needs to apologize first. Once she apologizes, then I’ll apologize to her. After all, she was the one who ruined his brand-new saddle.

The sound of the horse entering the ranch yard caused Chad to turn. Mitch came cantering in on his sorrel gelding, Chase, with a sheepish grin and smudged dirt plastered all over his face.

At the sight of his blond brother, Chad glowered, remembering he had a bone to pick with the chore dodger.

“So, you decided to show up at last,” Chad growled.

“I moved all the cattle to the north pasture and led the horses from the east pasture to the west pasture,” Mitch quickly defended, dismounting and tying his horse to the snubbing post. “So, whatever you’re angry about you have no right because it’s all done.”

“Oh, and would you like to explain why you were half an hour late?” Chad roared, though his eyes twinkled.

“Andi and I made a volcano in the barn.” Mitch shrugged. “Hopefully, she cleaned it up like she promised she would.”

Chad’s mouth dropped open and he stared at Mitch. “You . . . you helped Andi?” he managed.

“Actually, I made it. She stood and watched.”

Chad felt the blood from his face drain. Mitch ruined his saddle, not Andi!

“Chad, what’s wrong? Did Andi not clean up the mess?” Mitch demanded.

Chad swallowed and glanced at the sun as the last rays
disappeared behind the horizon. “Mitch, Andi left eight hours ago and I haven’t seen her since. We need to find her.”

Andi shivered as she walked down the dark road. She wished she had her jacket, but since she hadn’t planned on going to San Francisco before she’d left the ranch she’d have to make due.

I sure hope San Francisco isn’t far away. I don’t want to walk much more in the dark by myself. Andi shivered again, then glanced behind her to make sure no scary monsters were following her.

Several months ago Justin had pointed out a narrow road and had told her that if he were to drive the wagon to San Francisco that’s the way he’d go. “But San Francisco is a long ways away, and it would not be fun to drive the wagon.” He’d chuckled.

Now, Andi wondered just how far away it was. She had to have been walking for twenty hours or more. At least, that’s how she felt. She was hungry too. After all, she’d missed lunch and dinner. Maybe going to San Francisco wasn’t such a good idea.

Andi stopped dead in her tracks and turned around to look behind her once more. The idea of her own bed and a nice, warm meal sounded so good, but then she remembered how mean Chad had been to her. No! she decided. Chad doesn’t love me, and Justin does. I have to get to San Francisco!

So onward she pressed.

Twenty minutes later, though, she was sitting on a
rock and crying. “Dear God, why is San Francisco so far away?” she sobbed. “I’m so tired, and I just want to get to San Francisco. I want to be with Justin, but I don’t think I can walk much farther. God, if you could please help me? That would be great. Amen.”

No sooner had she finished her prayer when a sharp step behind her sent her straight up in the air. She whirled around and stared at the figure in front of her, her heart pounding a million miles a second.

“Dobryy den’, vy propala malen’kaya devochka?”

Andi sucked in a breath. She had no idea what he’d said, but it sounded threatening. *Dear God, please help me!* she cried inwardly.

Chad’s conscience was pricking him something fierce. He could kick himself for being so stupid and mean to his little sister. It was nearly midnight and no trace of her had been found. The only thing they were going on was the fact Andi’s friend Cory said he’d seen her heading down the West road.

“Did you talk to her?” Chad had demanded.

“No, I was busy with the horses and I didn’t have time. I waved though,” Cory told him.

Mitch rode next to Chad. The two kept silent as they trotted down the road, hoping for some sign of the littlest Carter.

Chad could imagine Mother when she arrived home. He’d instructed Melinda to tell her what had happened, and told her they would not be back until they found Andi. *I’m sure Mother’s worked herself up into something awful,*
he moaned inwardly.

“Chad, look!” Mitch exclaimed, pointing to something on the road a good fifty feet ahead.

The boys leapt off their horses and ran toward the object, grabbing for it at the same time.

Chad reached it first and jerked it from the ground, staring at the object with high hopes. With a sigh, he threw it down and walked back toward his horse, Sky.

“Andi wasn’t wearing bows this morning,” he grumbled. “I don’t know whose it is, but it’s not Andi’s.”

Mounting up on Sky, Chad kicked the black horse into a gallop, not even bothering to wait for Mitch.

As he tore down the path at breakneck speed, Chad humbled himself and prayed, Dear God, please keep Andi safe tonight. I’m so sorry that I was hard on her. I shouldn’t have been so mean. Help us find her, God, Amen.

“Papa, I lost my hair bows,” Tonya complained. “I think they fell off when Fyedka was pushing me.”

“You were asking for it, Tonya.” Fyedka snorted. “Chert voz’mi! You’d think I ought to be shipped to Siberia the way you carry on.”

Andi watched the two Russian children with keen interest as they bumped along in the old wagon. Mr. and Mrs. Dobzhansky sat in the front while Mr. Dobzhansky drove the two old horses, and Andi, Fyedka, and Tonya sat in the back.

Andi snuggled the blanket around her more securely and settled back against a bag of flour. Thank you, God, for sending the Dobzhanskys, she prayed.
The sun played across the path and the trees as Andi thought back to the night before. It had been Mr. Dobzhansky who’d found her on the road. He’d gone looking for Fyedka—who had a bad habit of sleep-walking—and had found Andi crying by the rock. He had been tired and had automatically asked her what was wrong in Russian. When he realized she only spoke English, he had switched to her native tongue.

Now, it was at least nine in the morning and Andi was well on her way with the Dobzhanskys to San Francisco.

“We have to deliver this flour in two days or we lose our contract,” Mr. Dobzhansky had explained to Andi. “You’re lucky we came along when we did and could give you a lift. Otherwise you’d be walking those hundred and eighty-eight miles!”

The Dobzhanskys explained to Andi that Mr. Dobzhanksy’s father had come to California from Russia to work at Fort Ross, the fur-trading company that had closed down nearly forty years ago.
“Since then I married Sophie, and we travel from place to place, getting jobs wherever we can,” Mr. Dobzhansky had said in his thick, Russian accent.

Now, Andi sat in the back with the two Dobzhansky kids. Tonya was eight like Andi and had red hair, while Fyedka was ten and had blond hair.

“So, Andi, how many brothers and sisters do you have?” Tonya asked her.

“I have three brothers and one sister,” Andi told her. “My father died three years ago in a roundup accident, so my brother Chad runs the ranch.”

Chad. Andi’s stomach churned a little as she remembered yesterday’s incident with the saddle. It was during the night she’d recalled the awful thing she’d said to him. I wish you weren’t my brother.

But it was too late to go back. She was going to stay with Justin, and that was that. Chad had been mean to her, but now she knew she’d been pretty nasty too. Maybe when I reach San Francisco I can have Justin telegram Chad to tell him I’m sorry, she decided.

“I want to work on a ranch someday,” Fyedka announced, snapping Andi out of her thoughts. “I will be the best wrangler of all. I could probably bring all the korovy, cows, in by myself.”

“Don’t boast, Fyedka!” Tonya chided. “It’s not nice.”

“It’s really hard to bring in the cattle,” Andi pointed out. “Chad always has to bring several ranch hands with him to round them all up.”

“Da, Fyedka. Andi speaks the truth.” Mr. Dobzhansky chuckled. “You have high ambitions, Son, but don’t aim too high or you’ll be disappointed.”

“Andi, does your mother know you’re traveling to
San Francisco to see your brother?” Mrs. Dobzhansky asked, turning to face Andi.

Andi avoided her look and tried to think of something to say. “Well—” she began, when Tonya interrupted.

“Look! Riders are coming on fast!” she exclaimed.

The little party of travelers turned to look. They beheld two fast-moving horsemen heading toward them.

Andi caught her breath. She knew those horses. It was Chad and Mitch.

Chad’s heart soared as they drew closer to the small cart ahead of them. *It’s Andi!* He knew those straight braids anywhere. It was indeed his little sister.

Chad beat Mitch to the cart and reined in Sky, leaping out of the saddle and running toward the now-stalled cart. He pulled Andi out of the back and twirled her around.

“Andi, you’re all right!” he exclaimed.

Andi squealed and Chad laughed. He hugged her. To his surprise, she hugged him back.

“Oh, Chad, I didn’t think you’d come for me,” she whispered in his ear. “I am sorry for saying I wished you weren’t my brother. I feel really bad about what I said.”

“I’m sorry too, Andi.” He choked, doing his best to hold back his emotions. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you and that I got so angry. I had no right.”

“You . . . you really mean that?”

Chad looked into his little sister’s big blue eyes and
smiled. “I mean that, Andi. I am truly sorry.” A frown crossed his face, and he glanced at the four gawking strangers in the cart. “Though I need an explanation as to where you were going and who these fine folks are.”

“Oh.” Andi hesitated and Chad set her back down on the ground. “That’s a long story.”

Mitch laughed from behind them, causing Andi and Chad to turn around and face him. “Believe me, we’ll have time for that long story while we travel back to Fresno.” His face broke into a grin. “We have a sixty-mile ride ahead of us.”

Andi sat on her bed and stared out the window as her mind turned back to the last couple days after Chad and Mitch had brought her home.

She had gotten an earful from Mother and had to endure the wailing hysterics from Melinda when they’d arrived back at the ranch, much to her chagrin.

“I can’t believe you actually thought you could walk to San Francisco!” Mother had exclaimed. “Do you know how much danger you were putting yourself into? Thank goodness you met up with such nice folks as the Dobzhanskys, who took such good care of you.”

Andi was grateful to the Dobzhanskys, so grateful that when she said goodbye to them, she’d insisted they come to the ranch for a visit.

“When we come back through that area perhaps.” Mr. Dobzhansky had smiled. “If not, it was nice meeting you, Andi Carter.”

What Andi found most interesting about the whole
escapade was that Chad hadn’t yelled at her once for the last three days, even when she spilled milk into his lap at breakfast that morning. He kind of stared down at his lap, mumbled something, and then picked up the upset glass.

Andi smiled at the memory and twisted one of her braids as she watched for Justin’s carriage. He was to arrive home today and she was glad. What made her even more glad, though, was the realization that Justin wasn’t the only one who loved her. *Chad loves me a lot too.* She smiled. *Even if we fight a lot.*

After all, she was his little sister, and he was her big brother. Even if he did seem mean sometimes, she knew that she loved him too.

“*Andi!*” Chad bellowed from downstairs, causing Andi to jump. *So much for not yelling at me for three days.*

“Andrea Carter, you get down here right now and explain to me why that rooster is locked in the tack room. He tore up all the saddle blankets!”

Andi sighed. *Well, I guess Chad being nice was only going to last so long.* She decided it didn’t really matter anyways. The “nice” Chad kind of creeped her out. After all, it was easier to avoid a yelling man then a silent one.

Andi broke into a grin and slid off her bed. “Whatever happened, it’s not my fault!” she called out.

“Oh, really? We’ll see about that!”

For the next three minutes, the house was filled with shrieks and laughter as Chad chased Andi through the house with every intention of dumping her into the water trough when he caught her.
Chapter 1

One day when Andi was riding Coco in the pasture, she saw a big buggy driving on the road. It had lots of things in it, and it had a family that Andi had never seen before.

Inside the buggy was also a little girl. She looked about six years old. Just like Andi.

Andi got off Coco and took him to the barn, took off the saddle, and led him to his stall. Then she went inside to tell Mother.

That night at supper Andi picked at her plate of food. This supper was supposed to be fun because this night was fish night. Andi loved fish!

Chad, Mitch, and Justin went fishing that day. Chad caught two minnows. Mitch caught a salmon.
Justin caught a trout. But best of all, yesterday Mother and Melinda had picked blueberries. So for dessert they had blueberry pie.

Andi was wondering who was the girl she saw driving down the road. Where were they moving? Maybe she would be at school tomorrow. Then with that she finished her fish and blueberry pie.

Chapter 2

Andi slumped in the seat of the buggy on the way to school. Melinda had freshly washed hair with a big blue bow on it and a frilly pinafore on. Andi had braids and overalls.

Justin dropped them off and waved good-bye. Then the bell rang. Andi ran inside and to her seat. Miss Hall had a spelling book in her hand.

Beside Andi was Cory and the new girl that she had seen in the buggy. She had a frilly dress on that reminded Andi of that red, scratchy dress that old Aunt Rebecca had given her.

Miss Hall said, “Good morning children.” Then she said, “Take out your slates.” She wrote down a word list that said: HAD, PUT, ON, LET, STOP, RUN, and GO. She said “Now, copy those words onto your slates.”

After that followed math, reading, history, and science. Then it was recess. Andi was glad it was finally recess. She kept an eye on Melinda so she
would not lose sight of her. Then she ran over to the new girl.

Soon, Andi found out that the girl’s name was Elizabeth and she had moved from Canada to California. Now she was living a couple roads down from Andi.

Then before Andi knew it, it was time to go home. Elizabeth’s mom came.

Andi went up to Elizabeth’s mom. “Can Elizabeth come over for a playtime sometime?” she asked.

“Sure, how about tomorrow?” said Elizabeth’s mom.

“Okay,” said Andi.

Then Justin picked Andi and Melinda up as usual.

Chapter 3

The next day Elizabeth came. Andi was waiting for her. “Do you want to see my horse?” Andi asked.

Elizabeth didn’t want to, but before she could say “no” her mom said, “Elizabeth would love to see your horse. Bye, honey.”

“Bye, Mama,” said Elizabeth.

“Let’s go,” said Andi. First Andi showed Elizabeth Coco.

“I like Coco the best,” said Elizabeth. “I like the color brown.”
“Do you want to ride him?” asked Andi.
Uh . . . oh, thought Elizabeth. “No thanks.”
“Come on. Please?” said Andi. “I can ride Taffy, my horse, and you can ride Coco. We will go slow.”
“Okay,” said Elizabeth.
“Let’s ride in the pasture,” said Andi.
“Okay,” said Elizabeth.

Chapter 4

Unfortunately, Elizabeth had trouble steering. She turned Coco to the right, and her foot got in the dirty, musty water trough.
“Ahhh!” Elizabeth cried.
“What is it, Elizabeth?” asked Andi.
“I got my foot in the dirty, musty water trough! My foot is all wet and cold.”
“Let’s go inside and wash off your dirty foot,” said Andi.
“Okay,” said Elizabeth.

After Elizabeth’s foot was dried off it was chore time. This meant that Elizabeth was about to face the hardest task she would ever face . . . trying to get the eggs in peace with Henry the Eighth in the way!
“Let’s make a plan,” said Andi. “Henry is afraid of dogs. So let’s go and get one of the dogs and get it to chase Henry.”
“Okay,” said Elizabeth. “But how about you do that and I watch you?”

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“Fine,” said Andi.

Andi caught Duke the dog and led him into the chicken coop. As soon as Duke saw the rooster, he ran and chased Henry right on out.

“Good,” said Andi, “Now we can collect the eggs.”

“Sixteen eggs,” said Elizabeth.

“Right!” said Andi. “Let’s give them to Mother.”

The girls went back outside, and Elizabeth’s mother came to pick her up.

When her mom came, she thanked Andi’s mom and Elizabeth said, “Thank you.”

Andi’s mom asked if they wanted to take a dozen eggs home with them.

Andi waved and said, “Good-bye!”

As they went down the road, Mother said, “I think you girls are going to become best friends.”

“Yeah, best friends!” Andi said, smiling. Then she thanked God for her new friend.
Eleven-year-old Lexi Coulter propped her elbow up on the windowsill and gazed out the glass. The train’s motion made the outside scene appear like a sea of yellow blur instead of the golden hayfields that stretched out for miles. Lexi clutched at her stomach as the train made an unexpected lurch in its course.

Her father, who was sitting next to her browsing the newspaper, looked up at the sudden turn. “You all right, Lex?” he asked, nodding his head toward her arm tightly clutching her middle.

“I’m alright, Papa,” Lexis answered, looking into his gaze.

Lines of worry creased his forehead. “I know it’s been tough on you, Lex,” he said, pausing as he inhaled a deep breath. “First with Mama dying, and now this. It’ll be hard, Hon, but you’ll make it through.” He leaned over and squeezed her arm.
Tears pushed up in her eyes at the mention of her departed mother. She turned back toward the window so Papa couldn’t see her watering eyes.

Oh, Mama, why did you have to leave me? Lexi thought.

A picture of her mother flashed into Lexi’s mind: her laughing green eyes, her raven-black hair twisted into a braid, tightly wrapped around her head, and her loving smile that had always caught every passerby’s eye.

Lexi squeezed her eyes shut at the memory and fell back onto the padded cushion, and then drifted to sleep to the taste of her own tears.

A sudden voice roused Lexi from her slumber. She opened her eyes to see a prim-faced conductor standing in the neighboring aisle. He gave a sharp nod at Lexi and then aimed his message in her father’s direction.

“I am to inform you that we will be arriving in Fresno shortly. You are to gather your belongings and then wait until the train has made a complete stop before departing.”

With another quick nod the conductor moved briskly on.

“Well, I guess I’d better get our things together,” Papa said as he arose to lift their belongings down from the overhead compartment.

As the train slowed down in front of the depot, Lexi once again peeked out the window. To her surprise, the station was bustling with excitement. Through the midst of the crowd, a young man leaning against the ticket booth caught her eye.

“You ready, Lex?” Papa asked from behind.

“Yeah,” she answered.
Lexi turned from the window and grabbed her carpetbag from the corner where it rested. She hoisted it up onto her shoulder and then followed Papa down the aisle.

Once on the platform, Papa scanned the crowd. His eyes lit up when they rested upon the young man spotted from the train.

“There he is, Lex,” he said, pointing in his direction. “I haven’t seen Chad since he was twelve years old, but he has barely changed at all.”

Papa let out a little chortle at his last comment and then began moving at a rapid pace towards the man. “Chad!” he cried as he gave him a hearty embrace.

“Jem, it’s been so long!” Chad exclaimed, returning the action.

As the two men stood exchanging conversation, Lexi studied a girl standing directly behind Chad. Lexi had not seen the girl from the train, but she now guessed that she was with Chad.

Papa’s voice suddenly broke into her thoughts. “Chad, I would like you to meet my little girl, Lexi,” he said, gesturing toward her.

“Pleased to meet you,” Lexi said, dropping a curtsy in Chad’s direction.

Chad gave her a little smile and then, turning to Papa, said, “You’ve got a mighty fine young girl there, Jem. Looks just like her mother.”

Lexi could feel blood rushing through her neck at the last compliment. She ducked her head and stared at her feet.

“Yeah, she does, doesn’t she?” Papa replied, looking at her with eyes of admiration.
Chad’s voice seemed to break Papa from his daze, “Say, Jem, Lexi, I totally forgot. I’d like you to meet my sister Andrea. We call her Andi for short.”

As if on cue, the girl, Andi, stepped out from behind her brother. “How do you do?” she asked, smiling impishly at Lexi.

“Well,” Chad boomed. “Let’s not stand around here chitchatting all day. Supper’s waiting!”

Chad led the little group to the waiting buggy and they all piled in, Chad and Papa in the front, and Lexi and Andi in the back.

“So,” Andi inquired, “how old are you, Lexi? I’m fourteen.”

“I’m eleven,” Lexi responded. She felt Andi’s hand slip into her own and give it a tight squeeze.

“Oh, Lexi,” she breathed excitedly, “I’m so glad you are going to stay with us for an entire week. We’re going to have so much fun! I can’t wait to show you my horse and teach you how to ride her.”

Lexi paled. Her eyes widened and her stomach turned over. “Ride a horse?” she whispered. “Oh no, not me! A terrible sickness always comes over my stomach whenever I even set my foot on a moving object. I will never ride a horse!”

A hint of hurt washed over Andi’s face, but then it was gone the instant it came. “Oh, I’m sorry. Well, we’ll have fun anyway.”

The rest of the hour-long journey quickly flew by with Andi’s constant jabbering. It seemed like they had just left the station when the buggy came to a full stop in front of the Carter residence.
Lexi stared up at the large, white hacienda house. *How could anyone afford such a mansion?* she wondered, awestruck by its beauty. Tall, spiraled pillars rose from the black tiles that were covering the wrap-around walkway. On top of the pillar stood a beautifully crafted balcony. Colorful flowers sprinkled the grounds, each one well-watered and weeded.

“Coming, Lex?”

Lexi looked up from her trance. The rest of the group was already several paces ahead of her. She hurriedly scrambled out of the buggy and caught up with the others.

As Lexi stepped into the mansion, fear overtook her heart. The house seemed even larger on the inside than it did outside. Sunlight streamed in through a window above the door, striking a chandelier with its radiant beams.

Lexi promptly moved out from under the chandelier for fear of the chandelier coming tumbling down on her.

“Jem,” Chad said proudly, “I’d like you to meet the rest of my family. This is my mother, Elizabeth, my two brothers Justin and Mitch, and my sister Melinda.”

He turned to his mother, “Mother, I would like you to meet my friend Jem and his daughter, Lexi.”

A smile creased Elizabeth Carter’s face. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Jem, Lexi. We are quite pleased to have you stay with us.”

“For that I am very much obliged.”

“We are open any time. Andrea, perhaps you would like to show Lexi to her room? I’m sure she would like to freshen up a bit before supper.”

“Yes, Mother. Come along, Lexi.”
Lexi looked at her father. He nodded at her, so she followed Andi down the hallway and up the stairway until they came to a closed door.

“Here is your room,” she said, swinging the door open. “I see Joselito has already brought up your bag, so you should be good. My room is right next door, so if you need anything you can just ask me.”

She smiled at Lexi and then moved out the door, leaving Lexi alone.

Lexi peeked into the room. It was painted a deep blue. Lacy curtains hung from each of the four windows. A light green canopy bed sat in the corner. To the left of that stood a bureau with a washbowl set on top.

She went over to her bag, pulled out a fresh dress, and quickly changed into it. After brushing and plaiting her hair, she went over to the waiting washstand and washed her face and hands.

A sudden knock sounded at her door. “Lexi, are you ready for dinner?”

“I’m coming.” She pulled open the door to see Andi standing there. “Well, here I am.”

“Good,” Andi said. “I’m half-starved.”

The dinner that night was scrumptious: fat, juicy steaks, hot, flaky biscuits, sweet, buttery corn, and bread pudding sprinkled with cinnamon and raisins.

The long train ride had made Lexi dreary, so she excused herself early from the table, staggered up the stairs, and collapsed onto the bed, falling asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.
“Lexi, Lexi! Wake up! Wake up!”
Alarmed, Lexi popped her head out of the covers.
“What? Is something wrong?”
It was Andi. “No, of course not. Hurry up and get dressed. I have a surprise for you!” she exclaimed, excitement ringing in her voice.
“Okay . . . well . . . just a minute.”
Lexi slipped out of bed and stumbled, bleary-eyed, over to the washstand. The cool water revived her. After drying off with a towel, she once again looked up at Andi.
“Now, what did you want?”
“I said that I have a surprise for you.”
Lexi wrinkled her eyebrows. “I don’t really like surprises. They always seem to turn out bad.”
“This is a good surprise. Come on. Please?”
“Well, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to just look, but I want to tell my papa first.”
“I’ve already told him. In fact, my mother was the one who suggested it to me.”
“Allright. I’ll be ready in a jiffy.”
As Andi shut the door, Lexi pulled a dress out of her bag and slipped into it. In the hallway, she met the excited Andi, who had a basket full of hot breakfast. Andi slipped an arm around Lexi’s waist and led her outside to the barnyard.
“What are we doing here?” Lexi asked as Andi swung the barn door open.
“Well,” Andi answered. “I know you don’t like riding a horse alone, but what if I go along with you? You see, I haven’t been able to exercise my horse for a while.” She paused as she brought out a cream-colored mare. “This is my horse, Taffy.”
Lexi’s heart pounded. A sick feeling came over her stomach. She began backing away from the horse until she reached the barn door. “If you don’t mind, I think I’ll just watch.”

Andi shrugged. “Okay, suit yourself.” She put her foot in the stirrup and pulled herself over the horse. “You sure you don’t want to go?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I think I just want to take a walk.”

Lexi opened the barn door. She strode out and was instantly hit with a glare of sunlight. The sun had now risen high in the sky, and the heat was intense.

Andi led her horse out of the barn. “I’ll be back soon. Oh, I almost forgot. Here is your breakfast.” She tossed Lexi a bundle tied up in a red-checkered cloth. “Have fun on your walk!” With that, she dug her heels into Taffy’s side and galloped away.

Lexi decided to go the opposite way of Andi, going around the barn and through the open fields. With every step she took, she felt more relieved to get away from the horse. Every time she closed her eyes, she could see Andi sitting on her horse, her joy clearly evident on her face.

Thoughts swirled through her head. Why is Andi so happy all the time? It’s not fair! How can she be so confident on that horse when I run the first time I see it? Why am I always afraid of everything? Why, why, why?

The answer came to her the minute she asked. Because Andi has the courage to try. Another question came to mind. How do I get the courage that she has?

Lexi contemplated for a moment. A line from a song that she used to sing in church came to mind: “In heavenly armor we’ll enter the land, the battle belongs to the Lord.”
“Jesus!!” she cried out loud. “He’ll give me courage!” She bowed her head and prayed aloud, “Dear Jesus, please give me courage like Andi has. Help me be like her, and not be afraid all the time. Thank you, Amen.”

Jesus will give me the--
A frightful whinny disturbed Lexi from her thoughts. She jerked her head up in time to see a horse galloping across the meadow, rearing up and shaking its rider to the ground.

Lexis’s heart skipped a beat. The rider flying through the air was Andi! She broke into a frantic run. “Andi!” she screamed. As Lexi looked at Andi’s limp body, her heart began beating with bravery; her veins flowed with courage.

I must get help, and fast! she thought.

Lexi looked around. Taffy stood grazing nearby. Gathering all of her courage, Lexi inched her way over to the horse. She put her foot in the stirrup, placed her hands over the horn and lifted her body over the saddle, just as she had seen Andi do. She then gently pressed her heels into the horse’s side, just as Andi had done.

“Go home, Taffy” Lexi commanded.

Taffy fell into a slow trot. Lexi took a deep breath and then pressed harder and harder and harder. Taffy was now galloping at full speed.

“Go home!” Lexi urged again.

Taffy galloped through the meadow, past the creek, and past the peach orchard. She stopped in the barnyard of the ranch.

Lexi leaped off of Taffy and tore into the house. “Papa! Chad! Mrs. Carter! Anyone!” she screamed.
Chad appeared from the study. “What’s wrong? What’s wrong, Lexi?” he asked, worry seeping through his voice.

“It’s Andi. She fell off her horse; she’s badly hurt,” Lexi rushed. “She’s in the meadow, past the creek.”

“Thank you, Lexi. Justin! Mitch! Hurry up! Andi’s hurt!” he bellowed up the stairs.

Justin and Mitch stampeded down the stairs and followed Chad out the door.

Lexi sat on the settee near the door. She dropped her head in her hands and closed her eyes. I did it! she thought. I overcame my fear! I rode a horse!

Lexi felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Papa. “I’m proud of you, Lex. You overcame your fear, and you saved Andi’s life. Mama would be proud too.”

Lexi smiled. She leaned her head on Papa’s shoulder and let out a breath. She had conquered the first battle. There would be many more, but with Jesus’ help she would succeed. Some of her worst fears were now behind her.
Andrea Carter lay on her bed drinking in the early morning sunshine. Far away on her family’s range, a horse whinnied, and Andi sighed happily. Ever since the school bully and town troublemaker, Johnny Wilson, had been sent to a military school, peace had returned to the town. Andi found she was not getting into as much trouble. She sighed again, and reluctantly left her warm bed to get dressed for the day.

Pulling on her overalls over her blouse, she suddenly got a whiff of breakfast coming through her door. Mmm . . . it sure smelled good. Quickly now, she finished her dressing and braided her hair. Whistling a cheerful tune softly, she left her room and headed down the stairs. Her hand bounced on the banister and she looked at it longingly.
Just then, Justin came around the corner and saw her. Guiltily, Andi took her hand off the banister and continued down the stairs. Justin raised an eyebrow.

Andi felt her face growing red. “I really wasn’t going to slide down it. Honest!” she said pleadingly.

Justin shook his head and pulled one of her braids. “Will you ever grow up?” he asked teasingly.

Andi grinned. Justin never teased when he was angry, so she knew he was not mad. “Maybe not,” she said, teasing him back. “But I still wasn’t going to.”

Justin laughed. “All right, I believe you,” he replied. “May I escort your ladyship to the breakfast table? You’re the last one.”

Andi laughed at his offer, accepted it, then groaned. “The last one?” she asked. “Not again.”

Justin chuckled and took her arm, giving it a reassuring pat. “It’s all right. I don’t think Mother will be too upset. Just relax and greet her with a smile.” He gave her a poke in the ribs, making her laugh. They both grinned at each other and entered the family’s dining area.

Andi took Justin’s advice and greeted her mother with a smile and kiss, saying a cheerful, “Good morning.” Her mother looked a little surprised, but said nothing other than returning her greeting.

Andi’s stomach growled as she looked at all the food. She helped herself to two muffins, a hearty serving of eggs, and a steaming cup of coffee. The meal started after a quick prayer from Chad. Andi, knowing better than to say anything, just listened to the conversations going around her.

Mitch, after a sip of coffee, asked Chad what he was planning on getting done that day. Chad thought awhile
and said maybe they should get a couple of the new horses trained, and the stabled horses exercised.

Andi gave a barely audible groan. She knew what that meant: mucking out extra stalls. However, if she got her stalls done in record time, Chad might let her ride Taffy out on the range.

She hastily shoved the remaining forkful of egg down her throat and asked her mother if she could start on her chores early. Her mother gave her permission, and Andi bolted out to the barn as soon as Chad told her what stalls she had to do.

Once inside the barn, Andi stopped running and took in the sights and smells of the barn as she caught her breath. Chad always reminded her to enter a barn calmly. She followed his advice and got right to work.

The first stall she had was Taffy’s, so she cooed love words softly into Taffy’s ears as she worked.

A couple hours went by. Andi, now finished with her stalls, excitedly ran to find Chad. He was out training one of the ranch’s new mares.

Andi waited until he stopped. “Hey, Chad, I finished my work. Could I ride for a little bit?” she yelled.

Chad turned around, gave her a look of disbelief, and shrugged.

Andi dashed back to the barn. The sunshine from the morning was gone, and dark clouds now covered the sky. Andi looked at them. “It would start raining before I can ride,” she mumbled with a frown. “But if I hurry, I might get in some riding before it really starts to pour.” With
lightning speed, she saddled up Taffy and jumped up onto her back.

Melinda was on the front porch peeling potatoes. She saw Andi lead Taffy out and looked up at the clouds. “Andi!” she shouted. “Are you sure you should go riding? It looks like we’re in for a real big storm.”

Andi came as near to the house as she could. “Chad said I could. I promise I’ll make it short.”

Melinda gave her and the sky another worried look. Andi, after giving her a reassuring wave, galloped onto their range.

The clouds grew darker, and before long it started to pour. Andi pulled her hat down over her head and turned Taffy away from the sheets of rain. Slowing Taffy to a walk, she squinted, trying to make out the trail.

Andi felt Taffy shift her weight uneasily. She loosened her hold on the reins, letting Taffy take the bit in her teeth. “All right, Taffy, go ahead. Find your way home. You don’t need any help from me.”

Taffy snorted with obvious relief and plunged ahead down the hill. Andi had just sat back on the saddle when there was a sudden flash of lightning and crash of thunder that sent Taffy bolting down the trail.

Andi clutched onto Taffy’s mane, clinging to all that was between her and a very bad fall. Another lightning bolt only made Taffy go faster, and Andi found that Taffy was taking her through a forest.

“Taffy,” she groaned into her horse’s ears, ducking so as not to get swept off by any low branches. “You’re
going to get the whole ranch upset if you get us both lost. Keep to the trail, please.”

But Taffy, for once, paid no attention to her young mistress and continued fleeing from the frightening noise and blinding light. As Andi felt herself getting farther and farther from home, Taffy started showing signs of exhaustion.

At last, Taffy slowed from a gallop to a walk. Sides heaving and lathered, Taffy finally came to a full stop, her head hung in utter exhaustion.

Andi slid off the saddle, only to collapse on the ground, her legs feeling like they were made of her mother’s best jelly. She gently prodded her body for any signs of broken bones or injury but found none. Relieved but still shaken, she did the same for Taffy.

“Well, at least neither of us is injured,” she told her horse. “Now all we have to do is find our way home.” She stood up, her legs now recovered, and started leading Taffy down the road again.

As she walked, her mind wandered back to when she had last been this far from home. She shuddered as she thought of the man who had taken Taffy and about all the following events until she had at last gotten her horse back again.

“You have no idea how much I’ve gone through for you,” she said, giving Taffy a quick hug. “But you know you’re worth it. I love you, Taffy.”

Taffy gave a snort, tossing her head into the air.

Andi grinned. “You’re so full of yourself, pretty girl, and I’m afraid I don’t help much.”

Suddenly, there was a shrill whinny, and Taffy’s head shot up. Andi became alert instantly. “Whoa girl, steady.”
She quickly jumped up into the saddle, wincing slightly at her still sore tail bone, and let Taffy have some slack.

Taffy took advantage of the slack and started trotting toward the sound. Andi felt Taffy grow tense in excitement, and she hoped that the strange horse had someone she knew on its back, wherever it was.

Without warning, a huge, black stallion rose up on top of the hill directly in front of Andi and Taffy. He pawed at the air, his muscles rippling. Andi froze, her hands tightening on the reins, but Taffy nickered. The stallion shook his mane and loped down the hill. Flaunting himself in front of Taffy, he encouraged her to join him.

Taffy seemed willing, but Andi was not. “If I was a horse like you, he’d tempt me as well, but you’re mine, and Chad would not be happy to have you leave, and neither would I. You are going to stay right here,” she said.

The stallion, as if just realizing Andi was there, gave a snort of surprise and backed away. He returned to the top of the hill, still trying to get Taffy to follow him, and finally disappeared from sight.

Andi breathed a deep sigh of relief, and pulled Taffy away. “Never mind him. Let’s find our way home, girl.”

“It’s no use, Taffy. I don’t remember any of this country. Where have you brought me?” Andi looked up at the speedily sinking sun and gave a deep sigh. “I’m sure going to catch it from Mother, and it’s not even my fault.”
She sighed again. Her stomach grumbled and reminded Andi that she had not eaten since breakfast. “I’m hungry. We need to find a town or ranch where I can buy something to eat.”

Sitting as tall as she could in the saddle, she searched the landscape for any signs of civilization, and was rewarded by spotting a road. Still wary, keeping her other adventure in mind, she followed the road, but stayed off of it.

She made fairly good time and arrived at a town in about an hour. Her stomach was hurting now, so Andi headed towards the inn, her hand searching her pocket for money.

“Just my luck,” she said, finding nothing. “Not a penny on me, so now what am I supposed to do?” She jumped down off of Taffy and tied her to the nearest hitching post. Walking down the street, she began looking around at her surroundings to get her mind off her stomach.

Her curiosity overcoming her better judgment, Andi found herself not paying attention to what was going on around her, until she realized that she was being followed. Partially turning around and looking through the corners of her eyes, Andi noticed two teenaged boys walking toward her. She pretended not to notice, but the two troublemakers didn’t leave.

She felt a firm hand on her shoulder, and when she tried to shrug it off, a rough laugh made her stomach flip-flop. *Why didn’t I stay home?* Andi thought as she slowly made herself turn around. *Why, why, why do I always get into trouble?*
She turned toward the two boys and—with all the firmness she could muster—asked them to leave her alone.

They broke out into a laugh and stepped closer.

Andi set her jaw and gave the boy closest to her a punch that he wasn’t likely to forget for a long time. Stunned, he reeled back away from her and Andi, encouraged by this, gave the next boy the same punch and braced herself for when they revived and came at her.

Before Andi had any more time to repeat her defense, a figure came between her and the troublemakers, yelling at her to let him finish the fight. Already faint from hunger, her extra adrenaline gone now, Andi barely had time to say thanks before sinking into an unconscious heap on the side of the road, out cold.

When Andi came to, the first thing she saw was a concerned face peering down at her. She groaned and tried to sit up, but nearly blacked out again with the effort. Her head swam, and she rubbed her forehead to make it stop. In a few minutes, her head stopped spinning, and she was able to make out the figure of someone kneeling down beside her, giving her some water out of a canteen, and asking in a worried voice whether or not she was okay.

“I’m okay, just hungry.” She took a sip of water and grinned at her new friend. He returned her grin and told her that her horse was safe in a stable getting fed.

Andi sighed with relief. “Thanks.” She suddenly took a closer look at his face. “Riley? Riley Weaver?” Andi
hadn’t seen Riley since she was seven and he was nine, and now she was fifteen. Both of their mouths flew open as they recognized each other after eight long years.

“What brought you here?” Riley asked Andi before she could ask the same of him.

Andi grew slightly red in the face and she hung her head. “Taffy and I got lost in the storm. I really should have stayed home,” she replied.

Riley gave her a lopsided grin. “You’re still the same Andi,” he said. “Trouble still follows you around.”

Andi rolled her eyes. “And I don’t even try.” She heaved a sigh. “What brought you here?” she asked to change the subject.

Riley raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know?” Andi gave him a look that clearly said she didn’t, so he continued, “I’m here to get a job with Uncle Sid again, only this time he’s going to pay me.”

Andi grinned. “Are you sure he will?” she asked. “He seems to think that if you’re related to him, you work for free.”

Riley shrugged. There was silence for a few minutes. “I know the way to your ranch from here. Do you want my help?” Riley asked.

Andi brightened. “If you know the way, then yes, I could use your help. You can double saddle with me on Taffy.”

“Great! That saves me the trouble of having to ride in a stagecoach.” He grimaced and rubbed the seat of his pants. “I’m still sore from the constant bumping on the way to this town!”
Andi laughed. There was another silence. “Do you still have Midnight, your horse I was always trying to ride instead of Coco?” Andi asked.

Riley smirked, remembering the many mishaps his horse had gotten Andi into, but not for long. A shadow passed over his face.

“I did for as long as Mother let me, but I had to let him go into the wild about four years ago.”

Andi gasped. “You let Midnight go?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t want to. I’m going to look for him as soon as I’ve got myself settled down on your family’s ranch. I’m pretty sure he won’t be far from the ranch, because that was his home for so long.”

Riley gave a long sigh, stood up, dusted off his pants, and offered Andi a hand to help her get up. She accepted it, dusted herself off, and the two of them went to the stable where Taffy was. As Andi saddled up Taffy, Riley bought the two of them some food for the way home.

When he returned, Andi jumped onto Taffy, helping Riley climb up behind her. She twisted herself around so she could see his face better. “All right, where’s the ranch?” she asked.

Riley chuckled, pointing out the way over Andi’s shoulder.

At last, Andi was on her way home.

When the trio came closer to the hill on which Andi and Taffy had seen the stallion, Taffy started to show signs of excitement. The shrill whinny drifted into their ears again, and Andi immediately got a firmer grasp on
Taffy’s reins, bracing herself for any sudden burst of speed.

Riley grew as alert as Andi, sensing that something wasn’t right. The stallion again appeared and repeated what Andi and Taffy had already seen. Riley’s eyes were fixed on the stallion as Andi struggled to control her horse.

Suddenly, Riley jumped off Taffy and ran over to the stallion.

Andi gasped. “What are you doing?” she yelled. “You’re going to get yourself killed!”

Riley paid her no mind, continuing toward the stallion. He stopped five feet short of the stallion’s pawing hoofs. Andi shut her eyes, unable to watch him get crushed. There was a moment of silence, and Andi cracked her eyes open, fearing the worst.

There in front of the stallion stood Riley. He was still alive, and Andi could barely hear the string of calming words flowing from his mouth as he took a step closer to the massive horse.

The stallion stood still, quivering with excitement as Riley got closer. Another step and Riley was right in front of the horse. Slowly, he stretched out his hand and touched the stallion’s muzzle.

The horse dropped his head in submission as Andi looked on in disbelief. Words continued to come out of Riley’s mouth while his hands busily went over the body of the horse. His hand stopped just behind the horse’s ear, and he started scratching. The stallion gave a great sigh of pleasure, and a smile broke out on Riley’s face. Grabbing some mane, he led the horse over to Andi and Taffy.
Andi was still stunned over what had happened. “How did you do that?” she asked, her mouth open in astonishment.

Riley grinned. “You don’t recognize Midnight?” he asked.

Andi gasped. “Y-you mean . . . ?”

Riley nodded. “This is Midnight. I was right. He did get as close to your ranch as possible. And here he has been for the last four or five years.”

Andi shook her head. “All these surprises,” she said. “First, I met you in the last place I would expect, and now you find your long-lost horse. I still can’t believe my eyes.”

“I can’t either,” Riley said and jumped up onto Midnight’s back. He gave Andi a huge grin. “Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s go to your ranch!”

When the ranch at last came into view, Andi let out a long sigh of relief. Two horses were galloping toward them, and Andi immediately recognized the figures on them.

“Chad! Mitch! Go tell Mother I’m okay. I got lost in the storm, but a friend helped me get home,” she yelled.

They gave her one look, turned their horses around, and went back to the house. Andi urged Taffy into a gallop. Riley did the same with Midnight, and they arrived at the house at almost the same time, Taffy beating Midnight by only a few seconds.

Andi’s mother, her sister, Melinda, and her brothers were already on the porch. Andi jumped off Taffy.
Almost as soon as her feet touched the ground, she was engulfed in hugs from her family. Andi felt her eyes watering and quickly turned away before anyone could see her crying for joy.

“Mother, this is Riley Weaver. Do you remember him? He’s the one who helped me find my way back.” Andi quickly turned the attention of her family to Riley.

Chad’s mouth dropped open in amazement. “Does Sid know you’re here?” he asked.

Riley nodded. “He should. Mother sent him a letter.”

Chad raised an eyebrow. Turning towards the barn, he cupped his hands around his mouth. “SID!” he bellowed.

The foreman came out of the barn. “Yeah, boss?” he asked. Then he saw Riley. He stepped back a few feet in surprise. “Riley?” he asked uncertainly.

Riley gave him a nod and a grin.

Sid’s jaw dropped. He gave his nephew a hearty clap on his back, which nearly sent Riley sprawling into the dust. “Welcome back, Riley. I’ll be glad to have your help again!”

The two of them left, talking and laughing. After watching them go, Andi slowly turned back to her mother, expecting a scolding. Instead, her mother gently took Andi’s hands in her own and looked into Andi’s downcast eyes.

“I know you think I’m going to scold you, dear, but you don’t need it.”

Andi’s eyes left her boot tops, and she returned her mother’s gaze in surprise.

Her mother gave her a gentle smile and continued, “Andrea, I’ve been meaning to tell you that I’ve noticed a
difference in your behavior over the last few months. You really have been trying to be more responsible and trying to make fewer mistakes. I know trouble tends to follow you around. I know that getting lost in the storm is not your fault; I know you meant to come back right away.

“God had a plan for all of this, and look!” She pointed over at Riley and their foreman. “You brought a long-lost friend back to us. So, let’s just forget about your past mistakes and focus on your future life.”

Andi felt tears running down her cheeks as her mother brought her inside, but she ignored them. She was home, and home was exactly where she wanted to stay.
Chapter 1
Andrea Carter Scores a Homerun

Twelve-year-old Andrea Carter was sleeping in bed when she awoke with the feeling that something was not right. *It’s still dark outside.*

Andi looked at her clock; it said 2:00 AM. *Oh that was the problem!* Andi quickly fell back asleep.

What seemed like the next moment, Andi heard a knock on the door. “Come in,” she said.

Of all people, it was Chad. “Chad, what are you doing here?”

“Well, I was supposed to wake you up. But I guess I don’t have to anymore.”

Andi got up and got dressed. Then she hastily ate breakfast, got in the rig, and drove to school.
When she got to school, she was relieved that she was not late.

At recess, Andi decided to play baseball, though Rosa thought it was a “loco” idea. When it was Andi’s turn to bat, she hit a homerun. “Yea!” she screamed and started running.

“Girls,” Johnny mumbled to himself.

When Andi got to home plate, she looked at Cory. Cory had his mouth hanging open.

“Wow,” Cory said, “I couldn’t have done that!”

“Thanks,” said Andi, trying not to blush. But she felt her face getting red.

“Andi, are you sick?” asked Jack.

“No,” Andi said quickly. Then she ran back to where Rosa was. But Rosa had gone inside. Oh well, thought, I will go inside too.

When she got inside, she slid in her seat next to Rosa. “Why did you go inside, Rosa?” Andi asked.

“I didn’t feel like waiting for you. Sorry, Andi. I thought that it was a loco idea. But I guess it wasn’t, after all.”

After school, Justin came to picked them up. “How was school?” he asked.

“School was awesome,” cried Andi happily. “I hit a homerun in baseball. I can’t wait to tell Mother and Melinda. Can I go riding with Jack and Cory?”

“Okay, okay, Andi, slow down. I’m proud you hit a homerun in baseball. And yes, you may go riding with Jack and Cory if you do your chores quickly enough.”
When they got home, Andi raced to the kitchen to get ready to tell mother and Melinda about hitting a homerun in baseball.

But then she remembered Mother was in San Francisco, and she was bringing back snobbish old Aunt Rebecca. Andi decided to put on her overalls and do her chores. It took a little bit but soon it was done.

Chapter 2
In Trouble

The race had started. Andi was first, or Cory or Jack. “Watch out, Andi!” she heard.

She turned her horse and saw the rig. She missed the rig by inches. Oh, no! That must be Mother and Aunt Rebecca! I am going to get a scolding, she thought.

She rode home on Taffy and ran to her room. The next thing she heard was, “Andrea, you must have fallen asleep. Aunt Rebecca would like to talk to you.”

Oh great. It’s a scolding, she thought. She went downstairs to talk to Aunt Rebecca.

“Andrea Carter, I am disappointed in you.” Aunt Rebecca said.

“Sorry, Auntie. I was celebrating because I hit a homerun in baseball.” As soon as those wards came out of her mouth she regretted them.
“Your mother should punish you for being so unladylike. Get into a dress, now. Go help your mother.”

“Yes, Aunt Rebecca,” Andi said. She ran upstairs and snuck out of her room and went riding with Cory.

When she got to the spot where they met, someone grabbed Andi and Cory out of the blue. “Help,” they screamed.

The man put a huge hand over her mouth. “Don’t talk,” he muttered.

Andi didn’t dare talk. She kicked and squirmed, but the man wouldn’t lose his grip on her. He shoved her on a horse and got on himself. Andi felt like a squished banana.

He shoved a blindfold over her eyes and tied the blindfold. They set camp and tied Andi and Cory to a tree. And finally fell asleep. Cory got his pocket knife out of his pocket and cut the ropes.

Chapter 3
Running Away, Lost, and Found

Andi and Cory ran until they couldn’t run anymore. Then they realized they were lost. They fell asleep and when they woke up they heard footsteps. They didn’t have time to hide.

Then appeared Justin’s clerk, Tim. “Why, howdy, Andi, Cory.”
“Hi, Tim,” said Andi.
“Why are you and Cory out here alone?” asked Tim.
“Oh, we got kidnapped.”
“What? I’m going to bring you to your folks.”
“All right, Tim.”
On the way back Andi fell down, and Tim carried her home.

Chapter 4
Mother and Worries

Tim took Andi and Cory home. Mother asked where they had been.
“Oh, Mother! We got kidnapped.”
“KIDNAPPED!” cried Mother.
“Yes,” said Andi.
“Tim, thank you for bringing Andi home,” Mother said. “You should stay for tea.”
“Oh, no, Mrs. Carter. Justin wants me back at the office immediately.”
“All right, Tim. You go to Justin’s office. Thank you again.”
“You’re welcome, Mrs. Carter.”
When Justin came home, he told Andi, “I know all about it. Tim told me. Let’s go down to dinner.”
“All right, Justin. Let’s.”
The next morning, Justin, Andi, and Melinda went to town. On the whole way there Melinda complained. “Oh, my dress is getting so dirty.”

When they got home, Andi went to help Mother with dinner. At dinner they ate fried turkey, mashed potatoes, and lima beans. Afterwards they went to bed. For tomorrow was Christmas!

Chapter 5
Christmas

It was finally here, Christmas. Andi raced into her room and slipped on a dress. She ran downstairs to watch the Christmas tree being put up.

After they put up the Christmas tree, they decorated everything else. Then after everything was done, they opened presents.

Mother, Justin, Chad, Mitch, Melinda, and Andi got some nice things. Andi got a new saddle for Taffy and something from Aunt Rebecca: knitting needles and yarn.

“Oh, no! What am I going to do?”
Andi’s Not-So-Bad Christmas
by
Kaylie Brase, age 12
Oronoco, Minnesota

Andi groaned as Mother read the letter aloud. It wasn’t just any letter. It was from Aunt Rebecca, and it smelled exactly like her. The letter was an invitation to join Katherine’s family and Aunt Rebecca on an all-expense-paid trip to New York City for Christmas.

If Andi didn’t dislike Aunt Rebecca so much, it would have seemed like an ideal way to spend the holidays. The worst part was that the train ride would take two weeks!

Who would take care of Taffy and the ranch?

And there was just something about the way Aunt Rebecca always made Andi wear dresses and act like a young lady that made Andi dread her visits.

I am not ready to become a young lady! Andi groaned again inwardly. I live on a RANCH. Melinda likes to act like a young lady, but I do not. I like to ride horses, wear overalls, and catch spiders.
Aunt Rebecca wants me to talk like a young lady, dress like a young lady, and act like a young lady. How am I supposed to do all that while trying to ride, groom, and muck out Taffy’s stall? At least I only have to pretend when Aunt Rebecca is here.

That’s why Andi couldn’t help but make a whining sound when Mother stopped reading.

“Why, Andrea, that is not the way we act in this family. Especially regarding such an extravagantly nice offer. I think it’s a wonderful idea. What do you think, Justin?” Mother asked.

“Well, considering that she is offering to pay all the expenses, it sounds like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Justin replied.

Whatever Justin says goes. Andi knew she was stuck. There was no use arguing now. She’d have to focus on the bright side. Christmas in New York City. With Aunt Rebecca.

Three weeks later, Andi was sitting on Melinda’s bed as she braided her hair. It was obvious that Melinda was very excited about the adventure ahead. It was only three hours until they were to depart from the Fresno station.

“Why do we have to pack all of our nice clothes?” Andi asked Melinda. She cringed at the thought of wearing her fancy, purple dress that Mother had given her for her birthday.

“We need to look nice, Andi,” replied Melinda. “Aunt Rebecca doesn’t want us to show up in New York and look like we just emerged from the horses’ stalls.
New York City is a very big city, and around Christmas time I imagine it is especially fancy.”

Andi rolled her eyes at the look of excitement in Melinda’s eyes as she swooned about New York City. Oh, boy. At least seeing Levi, Betsy, and Hannah will be really fun. And riding the train across the country will be very exciting too.

Two weeks later, Andi stepped off the train with a big smile on her face. The ride had been even more fun than she had expected. It was awesome to see the beautiful sights out the window, eat meals while chugging down the tracks, and sleep in the bunks on the way.

Katherine’s family and Aunt Rebecca were eagerly awaiting their arrival at the train station. Betsy ran over and hugged Andi so hard that she almost knocked her over. “Andi! Andi!” she cried.


Then Hannah ran over. “Andi!” she shouted.

Andi picked her up. “Hi, Hannah. Look at how much you’ve grown!” Andi exclaimed.

Then Aunt Rebecca approached in her typical, flamboyant fashion.

“Uh-oh,” Andi whispered to Levi.

“Get ready for what we have to deal with,” Levi whispered back.

“My, how beautiful you look tonight, Andrea! Absolutely stunning. Now, come over here and give your Aunt Rebecca a hug,” Aunt Rebecca said.
Andi saw Mother giving her a stern look from afar, where she was talking to Katherine. Andi set Hannah down and walked over to Aunt Rebecca, only to be engulfed in a big hug. She smelled like really strong perfume, and Andi squirmed out of the hug.

“How are you, Andrea?” Aunt Rebecca asked. “I see you have started to become a young lady.”

Andi had no polite response to answer that comment. Luckily, before she had to answer, Katherine called her name.

“Oh, I think Katherine is calling me. Will you please excuse me?” Andi attempted to say in her most polite voice. She knew Mother would be disappointed if she wasn’t polite. Then, without waiting for an answer, Andi scurried over to the circle of adults who were talking.

“Hi, Katherine,” Andi said as she gave her a big hug.

“Oh, Andi, I missed you!” Katherine said. “We have so much to catch up on.”

Aunt Rebecca was already leading the way out of the train station with the kids following her. She paused to gather the rest of the family. “Shall we go?” Aunt Rebecca asked.

“Sure,” said Chad.

As they left the train station, Mitch waited for Andi.

“Has Aunt Rebecca started torturing you yet?” he asked.

The answer was yes, but Andi didn’t want to admit it, so she didn’t answer.

“I assume that’s a yes?” he asked.

Andi guessed she didn’t really have a choice to not answer, so she nodded.

“Any ideas on how I can avoid her for the next week and a half?” Andi asked him.
He chuckled. “Sorry, sis. You’ll just have to live with it.”

Later that night, the family approached an enormous hotel called the Hoffman House.

“Wow, is this where we are staying? It’s gigantic!” Andi gasped.

“It looks like the White House!” exclaimed Levi.

As everyone filed through the large, beautiful doors, Andi didn’t realize that Mother had stopped walking until she ran right into her and fell backwards.

Mother turned back to help her up. “I’m so sorry, Andrea. I was distracted by all of this,” Mother explained as she waved her arm from the left to the right.

As Andi glanced around, she suddenly realized why Mother had stopped so suddenly. The Hoffman House was huge. The lobby had giant pillars. Glass chandeliers hung down from a ceiling taller than Andi had ever seen. Very important-looking people were bustling about everywhere.

Now Andi knew exactly why Mother had made them dress so nicely.

The adults checked in and then everyone hauled their luggage up to the fourth floor. Aunt Rebecca had reserved two suites that were right next to each other.

Andi would be staying in a room with all the girls. As she entered the suite, she couldn’t help but stand and gape. The suite had three rooms within it, not including a kitchen and parlor.

Mother walked in behind her. “Andrea, close your mouth. It’s impolite,” she whispered with a wink.
Andi closed her mouth but she knew that Mother was just as awestruck as she was.

“Andrea, you will be staying in this room with Betsy and Hannah,” Aunt Rebecca said as she led Andi to a big bedroom with one big bed and bunk beds. “Hannah and Betsy will sleep in the bunk beds and you can have the bed.”

She left Andi to show the others to their rooms. Mother and Melinda were in one room, while Aunt Rebecca and Katherine were in the other. The boys had similar rooms.

Betsy bounced in to where Andi was standing. “Mama says we have to go to bed,” she said with disappointment.

“We are all going to bed,” Mother called to Andi. “We have a very big day tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Andi said reluctantly as she changed her nightgown and crawled into the comfy bed. It had the softest covers ever, and soon Andi was sound asleep.

The days that followed were not actually that bad for Andi. They were filled with fun with Levi, Betsy, and Hannah. It was fun to play hide and seek in the suites and play cards until late at night.

The days flew by, and before Andi knew it, she was crawling into bed on the night before Christmas Eve.

On Christmas Eve, when Andi woke up, everyone was hurrying around except for Hannah and Betsy, who were still fast asleep.
Mother had laid out Andi’s fancy Christmas dress. She surprised herself as she put it on with a smile and did a little twirl to make the skirt fan out. Andi walked with confidence out into the parlor and kitchen.

“Why is everyone so rushed?” Andi asked Melinda.

“We need to make it on time to the big Christmas dinner.” Melinda exclaimed.

Right. The big event that everyone has been talking about all week. Which one is the right fork to use again? I really hope I don’t mess this up.

The Hoffman House was hosting a Christmas dinner for all the guests. Andi had heard the dinner was huge, but when they went downstairs, she certainly didn’t expect there to be so much food.

The dinner was set on a very long table in the lobby. It consisted of clam soup, baked fish, hollandaise sauce, roast turkey with oyster dressing, and celery and oyster sauce, roast duck with onion sauce, broiled quail, and chicken pie.

But that wasn’t where it ended. There was plum and crabapple jelly, baked potatoes in jackets, baked squash, southern cabbage, canned corn, tomatoes, rolls, mangoes, sweet pickled grapes, peppernuts, chocolate drops, coffee, and tea.

Once they had all sat down, Justin said a prayer. Andi suddenly realized that this really was a once-in-a-life-time experience and how thankful she was to be on this trip.

Andi thought about that as she shoveled food into her mouth. After Andi had eaten all that she could eat, she leaned back in her chair.

“Ohhhh,” Levi moaned next to her. “It was all so good.”
“I know what you mean.” Andi replied.

After dinner, they took a fun ride through New York City in a stagecoach. As they rode through the city, they passed the hand and torch of Lady Liberty. It was very big and so neat.

They did a lot of shopping for Christmas. All of the stores were decorated for Christmas. Andi bought Mother a brand new scarf. It was white until she accidentally dropped it on the ground. Now, it had spots of brown. Oh, well.

After they finished shopping, Aunt Rebecca announced that a very good friend of hers had invited all of them over to his home on the east side of Manhattan to see a very special Christmas tree.

Supposedly, it was the first of its kind. Aunt Rebecca’s friend had worked on the project with Thomas Edison, a really cool inventor. Andi knew that this tree was going to be spectacular!

When they arrived at Mr. Edward H. Johnson’s house, he greeted them excitedly and quickly led them upstairs. There sat a tree about six feet tall, with tinsel and ornaments.

“Prepare yourselves for a spectacular display, a wonderful sight, and an amazing phenomenon,” said Mr. Johnson. “Let us now count together down from ten!”

“Does this man seem a little strange?” Levi whispered to Andi.
Before she could answer, everyone all began to count down from ten. When they got to one, the tree lit up in a way that Andi could never have imagined.

“Wow!” Andi gasped.

Mr. Johnson explained that he and Mr. Edison had invented the first electric strand of lights and that there were eighty delicately painted glass bulbs on this tree. The tree rotated with a powered simple, electric motor that was hidden under the floor.

With every turn, the tree alternated colors from red, white, and then to blue. The dark room shone with different colored lights as they danced and reflected along the walls and ceiling.

Aunt Rebecca burst out in song. “Oh, Tannenbaum! Oh, Tannenbaum!”

Levi and Andi couldn’t help giggling. But when Mother and Katherine started to sing, they stopped their hysterical fit to sing along.

Okay, so maybe this isn’t such a bad Christmas after all.
Snow flew around a lone figure trudging through white mounds of snow. Her hair whipped across her face, leaving it stinging relentlessly. Wind rushed through thin garments not intended for the harsh weather.

She couldn’t feel her hands any longer; every time her foot sank into the deep snow she wasn’t sure she could make it another step. Even though she was so physically exhausted, she kept pushing on.

*Why did Taffy leave me?* she thought. Taffy was her best friend, her horse. But Taffy had been scared. She bucked and threw Andi out of her saddle, then Taffy had bolted.

The snow had come quickly. Andi hadn’t expected it. But now she was trapped. She couldn’t see behind or in front of herself. She felt as if she had been walking for hours.
“Dear Lord,” she exclaimed. “I know I will die soon. Please let it be quick. Please comfort my family and save me so I will see you soon. Amen.”

Andi started crying. The tears warmed her face for a second, before they froze on her cheeks. Her foot caught on a frozen clump of ice, causing her to tumble to the ground.

As she hit the snow, she felt as if billions of tiny needles had come in contact with her face. She whimpered. With all the strength she could muster she tried to get up, but her arms failed, plunging her face back into the biting snow.

Then she blacked out from severe exhaustion.

Close by, a young fur trapper treaded through the deep snow. Gun slung over his shoulder, fur cap placed on his head, and snowshoes strapped onto his boots, he made a picture. With dusk quickly approaching, he hurried to check all the traps he had set.

*Only a couple left,* he thought. As he took an animal out of his last trap, his eye caught something dark sprawled out on the ground. Venturing around to the spot, he was surprised to see a girl almost dead with the cold.

Now, as this young man had not yet reached his twentieth birthday and was almost his full strength and stature, he reached down and—without any trouble—lifted Andi into his strong arms.

Andi slumped lifeless over the horse’s neck as they road to a little shanty where the young trapper had been staying.
A drip of water hit Andi’s hand. She woke with a start. She was slumped against a wooden table leg wrapped in warm furs. Her shoes had been removed and were beside her, drying by the fire like she was.

Andi was still in her soaked clothes. She apparently hadn’t been there too long because she was still deathly cold. She tried to get her thoughts in order, but everything was a blur.

The door creaked open behind her, and she naturally turned around. As soon as Andi noticed the stranger she let out a little shriek and instinctively moved away.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay! I’m sorry I frightened you,” the young trapper said comfortingly. He came in and bent down to grab his saddlebag from under a rickety wooden bed in the corner. Opening it, he pulled out some of his clothes.

“Here, put these on,” he said.

Andi reached a frozen hand out and gently took them from the trapper. The clothes were made of a coarse material, but they were dry.

“Thanks.” She smiled appreciatively.

The young trapper helped Andi get up from the floor. They stood for an awkward second before Andi gave him a half-smile, questioning look, which he correctly interpreted to mean: “Um . . . are you going to leave so I can get dressed?”

“Oh, yeah . . . well, I probably should go out and check my horse again.” The door shut, leaving Andi alone in the cabin.
Later, the trapper made a meat stew, nothing like Andi had tasted before. But it was wonderful, and the best part about it was that it was hot.

After a couple of hours at the cabin, Andi was finally warm. She regained the natural glow in her cheeks, and her skin changed from an icy blue to a rosy pink. She was a beautiful young lady for sixteen, even though she wore clothes that were meant for a man.

The shanty was not a permanent dwelling, but it did have all of the necessities that one would need. A small, round table stood in the middle of the room. In front of the table was a large fireplace. To the right was a bed that took up the entire length of the wall. And to the left, a couple of cupboards which held a pot, pan, and a bucket for water.

As they sat eating, Andi told the trapper who she was and where she was from. She had been talking for a while when the trapper interrupted her.

“Excuse me, and correct me if I’m wrong: you’re from California, and you came up here to Oregon to visit your aunt and uncle?”

Andi nodded, and he continued.

“Your family in California is pretty wealthy, you got lost in a snowstorm going back to your aunt and uncle’s. They would probably go to the local sheriff and file you as missing?” He paused.

“Undoubtedly. I get into these situations all the time,” Andi replied.

“Okay, so your aunt and uncle file you as missing. Now, everyone in the surrounding area knows there is a young girl missing. They know what you look like and your name. If they dig a little farther into your history
they would find out your family is wealthy. In conclusion . . . all the crooks and desperados know that if they could find this girl that you’d catch a pretty large ransom fee.”

“Yeah.” Andi nodded at his good reasoning.

“Oh, this is swell! Is there anything else I need to know?” he asked. “What have you got with you? Do you have anything valuable or important?”

“Why do you need to know?”

“You never know what things would be helpful in a given situation. And it would be best if I knew what you had. Take me, for example; I always have a pocketknife on a cord around my neck. Now that you know that, think of some situations where it would be helpful information.”

Andi nodded. “Before I left California, my brother gave me a revolver,” she said. “I’m not great at shooting by any stretch, but he thought it would come in handy if I ever had to use it. I always have it on me. Right now I have it in my pocket.” She indicated the one on her right side.

“Good to know.” The trapper smiled kindly.

They sat up late into the night. The trapper told a little about himself. At least what there was to tell. His name was Fletcher Pierson. His mother and father had both died when he was seventeen, two years ago.

“I’ve been living on my own ever since,” he said as he finished his tale.

“Don’t you have any relatives who you could stay with?” Andi asked.

“The only family I have is my grandfather who lives in the east. I doubt if he even knows I exist. Sometimes I wish I did have a family, someone I could share my
dreams and troubles with, you know?” He gave a brokenhearted laugh. “You probably think I’m ridiculous.”

“Oh, no, I don’t,” Andi said. “I’ve been in predicaments when I’m not with my family and it hurt, but I’ve never had to deal with the pain you have, of losing both your parents. I’m so sorry.”

“Please don’t feel sorry for me,” Fletcher said. “I actually have had it better than I could have. And I’ve been making my way just fine over here.”

The sun had set hours before, and Andi was miles away from her aunt and uncle. Fletcher let Andi have the bed, and he slept on the floor. The wind whipped against the shanty relentlessly, shaking the bed like a rowboat in a river’s wild current.

Andi woke with a start. She had heard something. She sat rigid, waiting for another sound. Then she heard it. Fletcher’s horse gave a terrified whinny. She heard growls and snaps as a response.

A wolf!

Andi was heartbroken for the poor, terrorized horse. She quickly slipped out of bed and shook Fletcher’s shoulder. “Fletcher!”

He groaned and rolled over.

“Wake up!”

“What?” he answered in a sleepy voice.

“A wolf is trying to attack your horse!”

“What are you talking about?”

The horse gave another petrified whinny.
Andi had never seen anyone move so fast. Fletcher jumped up, grabbed his coat, shoved his feet into his boots, and snatched his gun on the way out the door.

Fletcher hurriedly plodded through the snow to his horse’s stable. Three wolves were around the barn, digging at the door, leaping on the tumbledown walls that concealed the animal. Fletcher’s ill-fated horse kicked against his surroundings, trying to free himself from danger. His whinny sounded like a doomed scream.

Fletcher aimed and fired. A yip resounded from one of the wolves. But it was only wounded and kept at its destructive job. Because of their desperate need for food, the other two wolves turned on Fletcher, a supposedly easier target. He shot again and killed one of them. The other wolf made a flying leap toward Fletcher. He shot just as the wolf was about to strike him.

The shot was fatal, but as the wolf fell, one of its claws caught Fletcher’s cheek. He instinctively reached up and touched his face. Blood dripped from his fingers.

The slice started at his cheekbone and ended at his jaw. He held his hand against his cheek as he went to check his horse. The wolf he had wounded first limped away as he perceived Fletcher coming.

His horse was still terrified, and Fletcher didn’t trust himself to go into the stable while his horse was in such a state. Fortunately, it hadn’t been injured and was just in a panic.
Meanwhile, Andi had been sitting at the table, worked to a frenzy worrying about Fletcher. She had almost made up her mind to go out and find him when the door opened and he walked in.

Andi gasped. Blood covered Fletcher’s hand and cheek while it dripped down onto his already-soaked coat. He made a pathetic smile before he winced from the pain. She had him sit down as she prepared a wet cloth.

In a short while Andi had his wound cleaned. He had the hardest time talking. Every time his cheek moved, it opened up the wound afresh. After a while, Andi got enough syllables from him to understand what had happened.

Morning came quicker than Andi had expected. After the exciting night, Andi thought she would have slept for years. But she woke up early to the aroma of stew.

Fletcher had to sell his furs in town before taking Andi to her aunt and uncle’s home. After a quick breakfast they packed up all of their stuff into Fletcher’s saddlebag. He handed Andi a hat.

“What’s this for?” she asked.

“Tuck your hair into it. That way if we run into any trouble you’ll hopefully pass for my younger brother.”

“What if I don’t?”

“Leave it to me and don’t worry.” He smiled reassuringly.
They set off for town. The world was a frozen landscape stretching for miles—when you could see through the dense pines. Every time Andi breathed out, she could see her breath. It wasn’t snowing at all, unlike the night before.

But it was bitterly cold. Andi’s hands were as frozen as ice as she held the reins. Fletcher sat behind her carrying his gun. He had asked if Andi had wanted to sit behind and be in control of the gun. But she said she would rather lead the horse; she was better at that.

They were still in sight of the shanty when Fletcher’s horse started to panic.

“There they are!” yelled a stranger. He and three other men burst from thickets on both sides of the horse.

Andi was terrified. One of the men came up beside the horse and pulled her down, just as two men reached up and yanked Fletcher off the saddle. They wrenched his gun out of his hands and threw it into the trees.

“What’s the meaning of this?” shouted Fletcher.

“We’re looking for a lost girl,” one of them replied.

“Well, we don’t have her!” Fletcher yelled. “It’s just me and my younger brother.”

The man who had been dialoging with Fletcher, and who obviously was the leader of the group, walked over to Andi. He reached up and her tore off her hat, letting her hair fall around her shoulders and down her back.

“Does this look like a brother to you, men?” He sneered.

“No.” They laughed in unison.

“It don’t look like no brother to me either,” the leader cackled. “It would have been easier for you, boy, just to tell the truth. Now, shoot him, men!”
Andi’s heart stopped. All she could hear was the wind blowing its cold gusts through the trees. It shook the limbs, causing snow to fall like a waterfall off the branches.

The men around her were reaching for their guns when Fletcher yelled, “Fine! You can have the girl. I don’t want her no more. She slows me down and gets herself into trouble.”

The two men who had been holding Fletcher released their grip, astonished.

Fletcher slowly started walking toward Andi. “You didn’t really think I would stand up for you? Risk my life for some stuck-up rich girl?”

Andi caught her breath.

“These men could use the ransom money you would provide.” Fletcher turned to the men with a grin that made Andi sick. “Am I right?”

They all yelled and shouted affirmations.


A single tear rolled down Andi’s cheek. *Who is this man?* she thought, horrified. She wanted to reach up and smack him across his sneering face. She wanted to say, “Fletcher, you’re scaring me. Are you joking? I thought you were my friend. Please tell me what’s going on!”

But she couldn’t say anything. She could feel the pain build up inside of her, waiting to be freed by a torrent of tears. She wanted to collapse into the snow and faint.

But she didn’t. She stood there like the prosecuted, in front of a judge whom she thought had been her friend, hearing her sentence. And she was innocent.
You’re going to let these men, whom minutes before were about to kill you . . . you’re going to let them take me? Why did you save me from the snow, when you would just turn around and feed me to the wolves?

Fletcher started up on his malicious judgment again. ‘Poor girl, I guess you do get into these unfortunate situations all the time, don’t you?’

Andi and Fletcher were face to face now, but she had to look up because he towered above her so much. “Well, here you go, Andi. The betrayal kiss of Judas.” He bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

The men were laughing, even though they clearly didn’t understand the analogy. But as Fletcher gave Andi the quick kiss, unbeknownst to the men behind them, he took from her pocket the revolver that she always kept with her.

As soon as Fletcher had the gun in his hand, he twisted around. Four shots later, the men were writhing on the ground, gripping their shoulders where they had been shot—completely stupefied at what had happened.

Andi stood like a statue, dazed and befuddled at the outcome.

Fletcher removed the firearms the men had with them. He threw the guns far out into the snow, where they could not be reached or used, until Andi and Fletcher had made their getaway.

Andi started to laugh, then burst out crying.

“I’m so sorry, Andi,” Fletcher exclaimed as he went over to see her. “It was the only idea I had to get those creeps off our backs. I didn’t mean any of those nasty things I said, really. Please forgive me, won’t you?”
Andi looked up into his big, blue, anxious eyes. They almost made her heart break. She gave another pathetic laugh, between a giggle and a sniffle. “Of course I forgive you. I’m just so glad everything’s okay.”

Fletcher retrieved his gun from among the woods. Then he helped Andi onto the horse, which had dashed to a safer place not very far away. They rode through forests and fields, across rocky terrain and iced-over streams. The snow sparkled and glistened as the sun’s rays glanced off the surface. The air was piercingly cold.

Andi felt exhausted. The afflictions of the past two days had really taken a toll on her. Fletcher didn’t look any better. His cheek was starting to heal, but it looked painful.

Suddenly, Andi caught sight of smoke drifting up over the tall pines. “Fletcher, do you see that?” she asked excitedly.

“We’re almost there,” he replied, finally relaxed.

Andi sighed happily. *Hopefully when we get to town, someone will give me something nice and warm to drink,* she thought dreamily.

They came out from the trees and onto a path that was well used. Five minutes later they arrived in town. No one walked about on the streets. Freezing didn’t even describe how cold it was.

Fletcher left his horse at the livery, then they hurried across the street to the general store. There were about eight people in the building, and they all turned to look at Andi and Fletcher. Newcomers seldom came. And when they did, everyone in the town knew about it within the hour.
Andi and Fletcher were definitely news for the village gossips. They looked like they had been abandoned and left for wild animals. Andi still had Fletcher’s clothes on. They hung on her oddly, like a big grain sack; and her hair was tousled and windswept.

Fletcher looked like a wild mountain man. He had lost his hat somewhere along the way, so his hair was messy and disheveled. His clothes were ripped in some places and still had little blood stains here and there from his cheek.

One of the customers spoke up. It was a young man, “Andi, is that you?”

Andi looked over to where the voice was coming from. “Daniel? Oh, Daniel!” She ran over to him. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

“You can’t believe I’m here? What about you?” he asked, astonished.

“Oh, well, that’s a long story.” She laughed. “But here, I’ve been rude. Daniel, this is Fletcher. Fletcher, this is my cousin, Daniel. I’ve been staying with him and my aunt and uncle, as you know.”

They shook hands.

“Where is Uncle David?” Andi asked.

“He’s over at the sheriff’s office, asking about you.”

Andi burst into the sheriff’s office. “Uncle David!”

David Carter, who had been talking with the sheriff, turned around. “Andi! You don’t know how glad I am to see you!” he exclaimed. “We knew something was wrong when Taffy showed up at our door without you.”

Andi ran up and hugged her uncle. She introduced him to Fletcher. David Carter expressed his gratitude to Fletcher for taking care of Andi.
“It looks like you and Fletcher would probably like some clean clothes and warm food. We should all go over to the hotel, where your Aunt Ellen is staying.”

The sheriff spoke up. “Mr. Carter, does this mean you would like me to take down the ‘MISSING’ notifications?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” he replied.

“Officer,” Fletcher said, “some miles outside of town there are four men who are wounded. You may want to send some people out to get them. To forewarn you though, they did try to shoot me and take Andi hostage.”

“It seems like you two have been through it,” the sheriff exclaimed.

They looked at each other and laughed. “You have no idea!”
Andi danced all around the garden. “I am going to have a party for my horse!” Andi said.

Chad came and said, “Who are you inviting?”
Andi said, “You, Justin, Mitch, Melinda, and Mother, and Riley.”

Then Justin came and said, “I forgot. How many more days are there until Taffy’s birthday?”

“Four,” said Andi.

Chad said, “Pretty short.”

“Of course it is,” said Andi.

Then Melinda came and said, “What are you talking about?”

“My horse party,” said Andi.

“It’s so exciting!” said Melinda.

Finally, the party day came.
Andi danced all the way to the kitchen. Then she remembered, “I promised Mother I would make a horse cake for Taffy.”

So Andi got a mixing bowl, blueberries, strawberries, and a spoon, cake batter, a spatula, and eggs.

She cracked the two eggs into the big bowl. Then she put in the cake batter and stuck it in the oven. “I hope I can finish all this stuff,” she said.

The cake was done. Ring! Ring! The oven rang.

Andi quickly opened the oven and set the cake on the counter to cool. Then she lifted the cake off the pan and put it on a plate and covered it up with a towel.

Then she asked Justin, “Will you help me put the balloons, tables, and chairs outside, please?”

“Yes,” Justin answered.

Then they put out seven chairs: 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 . . . 6 . . . 7.

After all the chairs were at their spots, Andi heard the doorbell. Ding dong!

“It’s Riley,” Andi said and she quickly opened the door.

“Hi, Andi,” Riley said. “I just remembered this morning about the party, so that’s why I’m late,” he said.

“Oh, that’s okay,” said Andi.

“Thank goodness for that,” Riley said. “I really thought you would be mad.”

“Why would I ever be mad at you?” asked Andi.
“Because I was late,” answered Riley. “Sometimes you are mad. Well . . . sometimes.”
“Just forget it,” said Andi, laughing. “Let me show you what is happening so far.”
“Fine with me,” said Riley.
“Great!” said Andi. “Because there are only two things done already,” she said, laughing again.
“Oh,” said Riley, laughing also.
“C’mon Riley,” said Andi.
So, they ran to where the chairs were.
“See!” said Andi. “There are seven chairs: 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 . . . 6 . . . 7.”
“Cool!” said Riley. “It looks great.”
“Thanks. My brother and I did it all together.”
Then Andi said, “Can you help me finish the cake, please?”
“Sure,” said Riley, and they both headed to the kitchen.
Andi got out the frosting and frosted the cake. It was a beautiful white cake now, and Riley sprinkled the berries on.
Then he asked, “When does the party start?”
“In six minutes,” said Andi.
“That leaves us time to set out things for Taffy,” Riley said.
“Yes,” said Andi.
They put out apples and carrots.
After everyone sat down, Andi brought out the cake. But she did not notice that the cake was
leaning. She set it on the table with a bang. The cake fell on her.

She cried, “Mommy! It’s running down my back!”

After Andi was all cleaned up, they did not have cake because of the accident. But otherwise, it was a perfect birthday party. Taffy turned ten years old, and Taffy ate her carrots and apples.

Andi just got applesauce, but that was as good as cake.

Then Taffy whinnied to Andi. Taffy said in horsey voice, “We didn’t really need a cake because it is my birthday.”

Andi whispered back, “That’s right, Taffy. I did not think of that before. Thanks for saying that.”

“You’re welcome, Andi,” said Taffy kindly.

Then Andi got more and more applesauce for the apples to get dipped in, and the party was great!
Honorable Mention  
Ages 10-13

The Creek-Bed Discovery  
(tied for honorable mention)  
by  
Rebekah Huber, age 13

Summer, 1862

Katherine!”

Seven-year-old Kate Carter yanked herself out of bed. Oh no! I slept in again!

Her dream had been delightful. She pushed her thoughts aside and made her way to the wardrobe. Yawning, she pulled a wrinkled calico dress over her head.

Kate’s eyes passed over her room once again. Clothes were strewn on the floor, her bed was unmade, and her doll Jane sat in a corner. I don’t have time to clean it now.

She ran downstairs to the dining room, where her family sat waiting.

“Sorry I was late,” Kate apologized hastily. “I was having the most wonderful dream.”
“What was it about?” her brother Justin asked, scooping eggs onto his plate.
“I dreamed that I lived in the city. I was a singer!”
“Kate, that’s never gonna happen,” Chad replied.
“Yeah, but it’s worth dreamin’ about it,” she said stubbornly, shoving her arm into Chad.
He jerked, and a pitcher of milk crashed to the floor.
“Kate, that was your fault!” Chad yelled.
“Was not!” she yelled back. “I didn’t knock the pitcher over.”
“You made me do it!”
It was not getting any better. Kate felt her face grow hot. She turned to Chad, a scowl on her face. She clenched her fists and screeched at him. “You’re so mean!”
Kate stormed outside to do chores, forgetting her breakfast and leaving her parents speechless.
She was carrying water to her foal, Snowflake, and wishing she hadn’t yelled at Chad, when Justin snuck up behind her. He surprised her so suddenly that she dropped the water bucket and it splashed all over her clothes.
Kate couldn’t take it anymore. “Why would you do that?” she cried as tears streamed down her cheeks. “This is the worst day ever!”
She stormed out of the barn and all the way up to her bedroom, where she threw herself onto her bed, wet clothing and all.
Her mother, who had heard Kate storm past, called out, “Justin! This is probably a good time to tell Kate about the big plans for today.”
“Okay, Mother,” Justin answered. He went into Kate’s room, where she was still crying.

“Kate, I’m sorry for scaring you. It was an accident, really.”

She sniffed and kept her back to him.

“Chad and I have a little surprise for you. Change into overalls and meet me by the old oak tree.”

“Why? What are we doing?” Kate asked suspiciously. She sat up quickly.

“It’s a surprise.” Justin grinned.

Once Kate was in overalls and a clean, dry shirt, she skipped all the way to the oak tree, where her brothers sat waiting.

“What are we doing today?” Kate repeated, curious.

“We were thinking of doing a little prospectin’,” was the reply.

Kate gasped. Where were the mean boys who had teased her this morning? “Prospecting? You mean . . . gold prospecting?”

“That’s right, little sister,” Chad answered, grinning.

Kate’s mind raced. She remembered Father’s stories about his luck in gold panning and how he had been able to purchase not only the ranch, but a house in San Francisco. If we find gold, the doll in Millerton could be mine, and then I would be able to play dolls with Lydia!

“So,” the little girl asked happily, forgetting her gloom. “What next?”

Kate dragged her feet across the ground. After taking forever to collect the necessary supplies, they had finally
started out across the hills. Kate felt as if she’d been walking for hours. *We should have ridden horses, not hunted for gold. Climbing these hills is more like climbing mountains.*

“Justin! Chad! Can we stop now? I’m tired of walking.”

Her brothers paid no attention, trudging along as if she hadn’t spoken.

“Please, can we stop now?” she yelled louder. “My feet hurt.”

This time, her brothers heard her. They turned around.

“Of course we can stop,” Chad and Justin replied in unison. “But we need to find water if we’re going to pan for gold.”

Kate looked around in exhaustion. *Please let there be a stream somewhere.* To her joy, they soon spotted a small creek. “There’s water over there!” she yelled, pointing.

After a brief rest, the siblings set to work. Using the metal bowls they had borrowed from their mother’s kitchen, they scraped the creek for rocks.

Once the mud cleared, Justin examined every rock left in the bottom carefully, but he found nothing but stones. Ordinary, common stones.

“No gold,” he declared sadly.

It went on like that for a while. Scraping, sifting, and searching. Their efforts seemed fruitless.

After panning for gold until her fingers ached, Kate decided to take a break. *I am exhausted.*

Before Justin or Chad could put her back to work, Kate climbed out of the water. She flopped down in the shade of a cottonwood tree, smack in the middle of the riverbank mud.
But watching the water ripple past her only made her thirsty. Although her Aunt Rebecca would have scolded her for being unladylike, Kate kneeled on the ground and scooped the cold, clean, water into her hands. As she drank, a flash of color caught her eye.

Forgetting her thirst, Kate dipped her hand underwater and reached for the object that glittered so beautifully in the sunshine. Her heart beat faster as she saw the rock’s brassy yellow. Could it be? It had to be gold!

“Justin, Chad!” Kate croaked. “Get over here!”

“Whoa, little sister!” Justin called in concern. “What’s wrong?”

Kate didn’t speak. She just held out the stone. “Do you think it is gold?”

Justin fingered the precious rock carefully. It was the size of a pebble, no bigger.

Kate held her breath as Justin bit into the rock. There was a long silence . . . and then he grinned.

“Where did you find that?” Chad asked slowly.

Katherine showed him the spot. “It was right by the cottonwood. Over here.”

Justin and Chad each grabbed their bowls and started working feverishly. “Hopefully there’s more where this came from.”

They were amazed to discover the creek bed was practically full of the chunky stones. Once their bag was full, they realized how worn out they were. But they couldn’t resist starting immediately for the ranch, trudging downhill.

“We’d better hurry. I know I don’t want to be late for supper,” Justin said, glancing up at the setting sun.
The walk that seemed so tiring that morning passed in a second. When they made it to the familiar ranch house, Luisa informed them that it was only six o’clock and dinner was ready.

“You better clean up first, though.” The housekeeper motioned at their muddy clothes.

“Claro. Of course.”

Kate ran upstairs to her bedroom. After looking in the mirror, she was glad Luisa had made her change. Her overalls were plastered in mud, her shirt was sticky from sweat, and her hair was tangled.

She tried to clean up. A clean dress and a few strokes from the brush helped tremendously. After washing her face, Kate decided she was ready for dinner.

Kate took her place at the dinner table, barely able to contain herself. She was itching with excitement, and so were Chad and Justin.

*When can we tell Mother and Father about the gold?*

They got a chance during dessert. “What have you children been up today?” James Carter asked, turning to his children.

It took a while, but they relayed the story to their parents.

“. . . and then Kate found the gold!” Justin finished proudly, looking over at Kate.

She blushed, her mouth full of warm peach cobbler. “They helped too,” Kate pointed out.

“But you found it first,” Chad finished.

“Where *is* this gold of yours?” their father boomed.

Chad reached into his overall pocket and pulled out a square, golden rock. “There’s more upstairs, Father.”
James Carter took the precious stone carefully. After biting into it, he chuckled. Tears were rolling down his cheeks as he handed the stone to Mother. She looked at it carefully, and then she too began to laugh. Not a deep laugh like Father’s, but a gentle, amused, laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Chad demanded.

Katherine felt hurt. Why are they laughing at us? “Kids,” Father explained as best as possible without chuckling. “This here is . . .”

He never finished his sentence. He was too busy laughing.

Elizabeth Carter came to the rescue. “Children,” she said softly, “I’m afraid what you found . . .” She finished the sentence sadly, “. . . isn’t gold.”

The room went into an uproar.

“What do you mean it’s not gold?” Chad hollered angrily, standing up.

“Yeah!” Justin joined in, a little quieter, though not by much.

Kate started to sob, overwhelmed by the answer to her question. Not gold! She stammered. Of course it’s gold! Tears rolled down her cheeks as her older brothers continued to howl.

Suddenly, her father, who was no longer laughing, attempted to calm the racket. “STOP THAT AT ONCE.” His loud, thunderous voice could be heard a mile away. “Justin, Chad, Katherine, sit down right now and let me explain.”

The siblings sat down reluctantly and listened to what their father had to say.

“This here rock is called pyrite.” He was careful not to call it by the better-known name of fool’s gold. “It is
often mistaken for real gold. Although it’s found in the same places as gold, it’s something different.” Father tried to make the speech short for the sake of his kids.

They had many questions. “I checked it though, Father. It was soft like real gold,” Justin objected.

“Does that mean what we found is useless?” Chad asked, devastated.

“I can’t get the doll in Millerton, then?” Kate whispered quietly.

“Do you want us to get rid of it?” her brothers questioned.

“Kids, one question at a time. To answer your question, Justin, pyrite is softer in the water once it’s been soaked.”

Justin’s face was downcast.

“Chad, I don’t know of any uses for pyrite except to look pretty on your dresser.”

Chad looked miserably at Kate.

She gave him the best I’m-so-sorry face she could muster. Then she waited for her father to answer her question. But he seemed not to have heard her.

“I would like you all to keep a stone of your choice to remember this day. Hopefully, next time you will realize the difference.”

He paused, looking into the eyes of his children. “Tomorrow, I want you all to get up early and put on your best clothes.”

Her brothers moaned.

Katherine’s curiosity was bubbling. “Why?” she asked.
“Just do as I say. If you’re done with your cobbler, please get ready for bed. We have a huge day ahead of us.”

Kate went to bed that night wondering what morning would bring.

When morning dawned, Kate awoke, anxious for the day to begin. After putting on her best—although itchy—dress, and struggling with the buttons, Kate ran downstairs, only to get caught by Mother.

“Go comb your hair,” Elizabeth Carter ordered.

Kate hurried back up the stairs. Where are we going? she thought as the brush struggled through her rat’s nest.

Kate found out soon enough. After a hasty breakfast, the Carter gang crowded into a carriage. Even though Kate was full of excitement and curiosity, the horses’ hooves and the slow, bumping noise of the carriage lulled her to sleep.

Before she knew it, Justin was shaking her awake. “Kate, we’re in Millerton,” he announced breathlessly.

Kate was all ears as her father halted the carriage in front of the general store. Her heartbeat quickened. Why here?

Then her heart fell. Of course, her father was only getting supplies. Nothing more. She stepped out of the carriage and looked at the store window. There’s no use looking at something you’re never going to get.

But Kate couldn’t help herself. The doll she longed for so much seemed to draw her like a magnet. Her beautiful dress was made of pure silk—or at least that’s
what her best friend, Lydia Jackson, claimed. Who knew if that was the truth or not?

She was pulled away from the doll momentarily by Chad. “Kate! Look!” He revealed four shiny dollar coins from his pocket.

Kate’s pupils grew larger. “Where did you get that much money?”

“Father decided that we deserved a treat for all our hard work yesterday. This could by us a fortune! Two dollars is enough to buy me a new dog whistle and tons of licorice!”

Maybe there was hope for the doll after all. She marched proudly into the store.

“Excuse me, sir,” she said sweetly to the man behind a new, polished counter. “How much is the doll in the window?”

He leaned over the counter. “My dear, that doll is more than you might have, I’m afraid.”

Kate stood on her tiptoes and held the coins. “I have two whole dollars.” she said proudly.

“Sweetheart, that doll costs twelve dollars. It’s an imported doll.”

Kate looked so miserable that the storekeeper tried to cheer her up.

“Don’t worry,” he said reassuringly. “This doll only costs two dollars.” He stepped out from behind the counter and held out a rag doll with a sweet painted face, yarn hair, and a calico dress.

She’s not as beautiful as the other one, but better than Jane.

Jane was Kate’s ragdoll. Mother had pieced her together out of scraps of leftover fabric, but Jane was
horribly tattered now. After Kate had dragged her around for a few years, she was nothing but shreds.

Kate made a decision. “I’ll take her and call her Charlotte,” she announced, holding out her two coins.

The clerk took her money and carried Charlotte to the counter. He tied the doll up with brown paper and string and handed the parcel to Kate, along with a peppermint stick.

“Here you go, sweetheart.”

Kate carried her parcel delicately, squeezing it gently every so often.

“You’re gonna be my bestest friend in the whole wide world.” she said to the package.

Charlotte became Kate’s favorite doll and accompanied her on many, many adventures. Kate never did try her hand at gold mining again, but if you walk into her bedroom you can still see proof of her creek-bed discovery.

Amongst her other knickknacks sits a shiny, golden rock that still glistens in the sunshine.
Honorable Mention
Ages 10-13

-12-

Saving Taffy
(tied for honorable mention)
by
Kayla Bjorn, age 9
Utah

Andi Carter raced down the porch steps toward the barn. She stopped in the huge doorway of the big barn and breathed in the honey and alfalfa smell.

A horse whinnied. Another answered.

I couldn’t live without horses, thought Andi, and smiling, she walked toward Taffy’s stall.

Andi’s long, dark braids fell forward as she reached up to hug Taffy’s neck. Taffy, her filly, was golden brown with a white star on her forehead.

She and Taffy had been together since Taffy was born three years ago, when Andi was six. Even though Andi was tall for her age, her head only came up to Taffy’s chest.

Andi smiled as she slipped the bridle over Taffy’s head. She struggled to lift the big saddle. She tightened
the girth, then swinging up onto Taffy’s back, she slid her fingers through her sweet mane.

She unlatched the half door and rode through the stable. Being careful to relatch the door behind her, she rode out along the corral, where her older brother Chad’s stallion was grazing.

Andi loosened her hold on the reins and nudged Taffy with her heels, urging her to go faster. They galloped down the well-beaten path leading from the barn around the corral.

At this point the path branched off. On one side, a well-worn trail led back to the house. On the other, a much-less-used path led to Andi and Taffy’s favorite hideout—a small pond nestled in a little copse of trees. It was clear that no one else used this path. Grass was growing in the middle of the trail and scraggly sagebrush lined the edges.

Taffy bent down and started to nibble on the grass, but Andi nudged her again. Taffy immediately swung her head up and started to trot along the path.

Andi nudged her again, and Taffy started to gallop, the occasional tree whizzing past, over little hills and through bushes. They galloped on toward the pond along the roughly broken trail.

“C’mon girl. Go, Taffy,” said Andi, excitedly nudging Taffy again. Taffy burst through the bushes, galloping forward.

Suddenly, Taffy skidded to a stop.

“C’mon, girl! Let’s keep going. We don’t have all day. C’mon!” said Andi, rubbing Taffy’s neck.

Taffy started limping forward.
“What’s wrong, Taffy?” Andi said as she slid down from the saddle and knelt in the dust. She lifted up Taffy’s front hoof.

“Oh, Taffy, poor girl,” Andi said.

The hoof was dirty. Right in the middle, in the soft part of Taffy’s foot, was a tiny, sharp piece of rusted metal. It had poked through the skin and a little blood was oozing out.

Carefully pulling, Andi lifted the piece completely out. “We need to clean that, Taffy,” Andi said, reaching for the reins. She started to lead Taffy slowly along the trail back home.

It took them half an hour to get home, Andi encouraging Taffy all the way. “C’mon, girl. Let’s go, Taffy. Keep coming,” When they got home, Taffy’s head was hung low. Andi led Taffy into her stall and went to get Chad.

“What happened?” Chad asked after he had looked at the wound in Taffy’s foot. Chad ran the family ranch now that Father had passed away.

“I don’t know. We were just running up the trail and then she stopped and the metal piece was in her foot . . . I didn’t do anything,” Andi explained.

“Go get the iodine in the pantry,” said Chad.

“Okay,” said Andi nervously. She ran toward the house on the same path that she had run down so excitedly just this morning. By the time the screen door banged behind her, she was already in the kitchen, opening the pantry door.

“What are you doing in there? What are you doing with the iodine? Did someone get hurt?” Mother said, looking up from her cleaning.
“Taffy did, and oh, I can’t tell you about it now. I’ve got to bring this to Chad,” said Andi hurriedly. She ran out the door and into the barn.

She handed the bottle to Chad. Soon, his fingers were stained with strong-smelling orange iodine as he rubbed it onto Taffy’s foot.

“Alright, so you rub the iodine on her wound after you clean the stall. This is your job. Remember that. Taffy is your horse, and you are in charge of her. Tell me right away if the wound starts to smell bad or look oozy,” said Chad. “And absolutely NO riding.”

“Okay,” said Andi meekly.

That night in bed Andi thought about the events of the day: *Taffy is hurt. There is to be no riding at all. This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me or Taffy.* Her last thought before falling asleep was, *This is going to be hard.*

The next morning right after breakfast, Chad told Andi to go and check Taffy.

“I know, I know,” she said. She went out the door and toward the barn. She was in Taffy’s stall in seconds.

Andi remembered the day before when Chad had showed her how to rub the iodine onto Taffy’s hoof. She rebandaged Taffy’s foot. Then she currycombed Taffy and mucked out her stall. When everything was done with Taffy, Andi went on to her other chores.

After she was done with everything, Andi tried to amuse herself, but nothing was fun without Taffy. She tried to play with Taffy, but how are you supposed to play with a horse that you can’t ride?

She tried walking to the pond, but it was too far away. She asked to take a different horse out, but Chad would not let her.
She could always ride Coco, but Coco wasn’t the same as Taffy. Coco was Andi’s first horse. When Andi was four, she had learned to ride on Coco. Old, slow Coco was even slower now.

After exhausting all the ideas she could come up with, Andi slumped on the porch steps, trying to think of something else to do.

Everyone had tried to give her ideas, but they were all so boring compared with riding Taffy. Mother had said “help with the mending.” Chad had said “do some chores.”

_all boring, boring, boring._ Andi stood up and walked along the pathway. _Oh, poor Taffy_, she thought. _She must feel horrid!_

Andi started to cry. She ran to Taffy’s stall in the barn and cried, snuggling against her horse.

That night, after a never-ending day of sitting on the porch being bored, bored, bored, she went back to Taffy’s stall and did the nursing all over again. Then she went to bed.

After three days, Andi couldn’t stand it anymore. She trudged into the barn, her head hanging. Feet dragging, she passed Coco’s stall without so much as a “good morning.” She trudged toward Taffy’s stall, muttering to herself.

“When is this horse ever gonna get better? She’s been hurt forever,” she groaned. When she came into Taffy’s stall, everything was the same. _Maybe I can just ride around the corral once . . . just once_, she thought.

“What do you think Taffy? Wanna go riding?”

Taffy shook her mane.
“Okay, let’s go!” Andi said excitedly. She grabbed the halter and the saddle and swung up onto Taffy’s back.

It felt so good! She hugged Taffy’s neck and breathed in her sweet smell. She started riding around the corral.

Suddenly, there was a shout. Chad was running toward her. “What are you doing? How can you be riding Taffy? That’s dangerous for her. Now she might get an infection. How could you do this?” he asked. “Bring Taffy back to the barn right now!”

Andi miserably trudged back to the barn. Leading Taffy, who was limping behind her, Andi opened the barn door and shoved Taffy into the stall. She suddenly realized that in their ride around the corral, Taffy’s bandage had fallen off.

Andi gasped at the site of the dirty hoof. “Uh-oh!” she said as she fell to her knees and started wiping off Taffy’s foot.

Then she had an idea. She ran out of the barn and back into the corral. She found the bandage. Quickly, quietly, Andi ran back to the barn and put the bandage back on Taffy’s foot so Chad wouldn’t know.

The next day Andi was late to get to her chores. It was almost lunchtime by the time she came into the big barn. She cleaned the stall and groomed Taffy.

This is boring, Andi thought as she undid the bandage, just like it always is.

A strong, rotten smell reached Andi’s nose. She looked down at Taffy’s hoof. It was red and full of pus.
“Aahhh!” cried Andi, plugging her nose. *Uh-oh, is Taffy’s foot infected? Is it because I rode her and the bandage fell off?*

Very scared, Andi ran out of the barn toward the corral, where Chad was working on a new colt. “Chad! Chad! Something’s wrong! Taffy’s foot smells awful. It’s all red and full of pus and yucky. Help!”

Even as she said it, Chad was running toward her. Closing the gate behind him, he ran into Taffy’s stall.

Chad knelt down in the straw, his face grim. “She’s got an infection,” he said. “I told you if you rode her, she’d get one. This is really serious, Andi. She might die from this. Go ask Mother to help you make a boiled garlic poultice. That will draw the infection out.”

Andi ran down the path and into the house, the screen door banging behind her. “Mother! Mother! Quick! We’ve got to make boiled garlic for Taffy. I’ve got to bring it to Chad!”

“Honey, calm down. Why does Taffy need a garlic poultice?” Mother asked.

“She got infected and her foot smells horrible and—but come on! We’ve got to make it now!” Andi said impatiently.

“Oh, no! Not Taffy. Andi, go get the garlic from the cold store. I’ll get the kettle on.”

Andi went down to the cold store. Forgetting to be cold, she grabbed as many bulbs of garlic as she could carry and raced back up the stairs with them. Mother had the kettle started.

“Good. Now, you peel,” she said, her voice breaking at the edge. She gestured toward the table covered in garlic.
“Yes, Mother,” said Andi, sitting down in a chair and starting to pull the crunchy, papery peels off the garlic until the cloves fell apart. She grabbed them one by one, ripping the skin from them and throwing the cloves in a pile.

Mother put them in the kettle. She added some water, then she sat down at the table and started to peel too. They peeled and tossed the cloves in the kettle and stirred anxiously.

Andi’s arms ached but she did not complain. She kept on peeling until she thought she could not work anymore.

When the garlic on the table was gone and the garlic in the kettle was almost done boiling, Mother said, “Andi, go sit down on the sofa and rest a minute. I know you’re tired out.”

But Andi could not rest even though she was tired. She got up and watched the kettle until it was done.

Mother scooped up the paste and wrapped it in a cloth. Then Andi took the poultice and ran from the house towards the barn and into Taffy’s stall, where Chad was still kneeling.

Chad wrapped the poultice around Taffy’s hoof. He traced the red lines moving up Taffy’s leg. “We’ll have to put on another poultice a soon as this one is cooled. Do you think you can peel more garlic?” he asked.

“Okay,” said Andi. Determinedly, she ran back to the house. “Mother,” she said, “we’ve got to make another poultice. Chad said he’ll need another in a few minutes.”

“Go get some more garlic then,” said her mother.

Hour after hour Andi and Mother peeled and cooked the garlic. In the minutes between peeling, Andi stroked Taffy’s mane, trying to soothe her.
“Oh, Taffy, please get better. C’mon, girl,” she whispered into her mane.

Finally it was night, and all the garlic was gone.

Chad sighed. “That’s all we can do, Andi. We’ve done everything we can. Now, we just need to leave it up to God,” he said. Then he left the stall.

Andi stamped her foot. “There’s got to be more we can do!” she cried. “I’m not giving up on her!” With a pitchfork, she made Taffy a fresh bed of sweet-smelling hay. Then she brushed Taffy.

As she pulled the curry comb gently through Taffy’s hair, she sang softly, “You’re my precious one, my own dear, precious one.” She smiled a little, remembering how her mother used to sing that song to her when she was sick. She hugged Taffy’s neck.

“Oh, Taffy,” she cried, “you can’t die. You have to get better!” She sat against the wall. She was cold.

Mother came in, holding a blanket. “Why don’t you come to bed?” she asked.

“No. I’m staying here with Taffy. She needs me, Mother.”

“All right,” Mother said, handing Andi the blanket.

“Thank you, Mother,” said Andi.

It was well past midnight. Andi tried to stay awake. She looked up into Taffy’s wide, heart-breaking eyes. Andi was determined not to fall asleep. She pulled the blanket closer around her.

Taffy had calmed down just enough to sleep. Andi stood up and hugged Taffy. This horse was her life. Taffy was part of her family.

Don’t give up on me Taffy, not yet. She cried softly, hugging Taffy. She thought back to all the fun times they
had gone through together, all the times she had come to Taffy for comfort.

“Dear God,” she prayed, “please make Taffy well.” Exhausted, she fell asleep, full of pain for her horse.

Andi woke to the sound of nickering and the feel of sunlight streaming down on her face. Taffy was nuzzling her with her nose.

Andi tried to stand up. Her body was cramped from sleeping against the hard, wooden wall. She stretched and pulled herself to her feet. She hugged Taffy and looked up into her sweet eyes.

“Taffy, you look so much better,” she exclaimed. She bent down to look at Taffy’s foot. “Oh, look! All the red lines are gone and it smells good! Oh, Taffy!”

Andi jumped up and hugged Taffy again. Just then the big barn doors started to creak. Chad came in. As he entered Taffy’s stall, Taffy tried push out.

“Whoa, girl!” said Chad. He knelt down and inspected Taffy’s foot. “Wow, Taff—Andi, Taffy’s foot is getting better.”

“Taffy, Taffy, you’re going to be okay! Oh, Taffy!”

Andi hugged her horse and danced around the barn. Her heart was exploding with joy and happiness. She sank down to her knees. “Oh, thank you, dear Lord.”
Andi Carter paced up and down in front of the Blake livery stable, fighting the unladylike urge to stomp her feet. “Cory said he would meet me here at two-thirty, and it’s already almost three.”

She frowned. Cory had mentioned a surprise, but if he didn’t hurry up, Justin would be ready to leave for home. *Life is just wonderful,* she thought sarcastically. *Nothing this year has gone right. I’ve been trying so hard to behave, but I just want some fun. Being a lady is so boring.*

While mentally bawling him out, Andi spotted Cory hurrying down the street. She wasn’t prepared for what came next. Right next to him was a slim, blond girl.

“Andi, this is Emily Blake from Carson City, Nevada. She’s my cousin.” Cory flicked a strand of hair out of his face and shot Andi a strange look before continuing. “She and her family are visiting Fresno ’til fall.”
Andi looked the girl over skeptically. She had huge brown eyes and fragile features. Her countenance wore the same twinkle of mischief Cory possessed, making them appear identical despite very different characteristics.

In her blue satin dress Emily looked like a proper lady, but Andi knew if she was any relation to Cory the dress would soon be traded for much more usable clothing. *Like boys’ trousers,* Andi thought hopefully. *She might be the fun I’ve been looking for.*

Andi greeted her warmly. “I’m Andi, and I go to school with Cory. Nice to meet you.” Tossing her manners to the wind, she grinned broadly and shook hands with Emily in a most impulsive style. *Much better.*

Emily glanced back at Cory, as if unsure what to say next. “Do you ride?” she asked.

Andi dissolved into laughter despite her best efforts to contain herself. Cory cleared his throat while suppressing a smile.

“Are you kidding? Everybody ’round here was born on a horse.” At the sight of Emily’s face reddening, Andi felt a twinge of guilt. “Sorry,” she added as an uncomfortable silence settled.

Cory jumped in to change the subject. “Umm . . . Emily, I think I hear your mother calling for you.”

Emily waved goodbye and disappeared into the livery.

Andi turned her attention back to Cory. “So, what’s going on?” she asked, hands on her hips.

Cory grimaced pleadingly. “Look, I really don’t know much about girls, you know . . .”

Andi nodded. A corner of her mouth twitched mercilessly.
Cory continued, “I was kinda hoping you would keep an eye on Emily and, you know, entertain her ’til she goes back.” He scuffed the toe of his boot in the dust repeatedly.

Andi’s eyes widened. “For six months?” she asked in shock. Cory had asked for big favors in the past, but this was enormous.

“Come on,” Cory begged. “She’s not much trouble. You could introduce her to the other girls at school and let her visit your ranch once or twice.”

Andi considered the request. Emily seemed sharp. Once warmed up to Fresno, she might be lots of fun. Frowning, Andi weighed the options in her mind.

“All right, I’ll look out for her,” Andi decided.

Cory exhaled with a smile. “Thanks! I owe you.” he acknowledged over his shoulder as he entered the livery to join his cousin. “See you Monday.”

With a wave goodbye, Andi set off for Justin’s office.

Andi vigorously chewed a large bite of roast beef and listened as Chad elaborated the day’s ranch incidents for the dinner guests, Emily’s family. Andi glanced over at Emily, whose eyes were glued on Chad. She was clearly enjoying the story, Andi decided. Next to Emily sat her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Blake, and at the end her adult sister, Clara.

Andi thought Clara was the most beautiful person she had ever seen. Clara’s golden locks gracefully floated down her back, and her laugh was like merry sleigh bells
ringing. For some time Andi had mused over the irony of this beauty being a relative of plain Cory.

An elbow in her ribs interrupted Andi’s thoughts. Emily leaned over to whisper something in her ear. “Andi! I’ve got a great idea. Meet me at Taffy’s stall after dinner and I’ll tell you.”

Emily’s eyes reflected that familiar sparkle of mischief. Andi felt as though she was looking at Cory himself.

She nodded yes to Emily and then chuckled softly. In the past week alone Emily had come up with more ideas and schemes than Andi had in her lifetime. Although Emily’s crazy schemes didn’t outweigh her good points, they nonetheless caught Andi off guard every time.

Now that Emily was feeling at home in Fresno, she was proving to be plenty of fun and an expert rider. Today, Andi had finally convinced her mother to invite the visiting Blakes for dinner, and so far it was worth the trouble.

After dessert, Andi and Emily dismissed themselves from the table and scampered out to the stable.

“We’d better not ride. It’s getting late,” Andi informed her friend regretfully. Taffy whinnied in protest from her stall. Andi fed her horse a smuggled carrot and leaned against a stall door. “Now, what’s your newest plan, Emily?”

Emily plowed ahead. “I like Fresno. So does the rest of my family. My cousin lives here, and so do you. Most of the kids at school are nice. I wish we lived here instead of dumb ol’ Nevada.”
Andi shook her head in agreement. How could anyone not like the picturesque California valleys and mountains just waiting to be explored?

Emily’s voice began to escalate in excitement. “Don’t you see? We could easily convince my parents to move here with one thing.”

Andi squinted, trying to follow the stream of words coming at her. She picked up a piece of hay and chewed on it contemplatively. “What one thing?”

Emily raised her hands above her head as if electrified. “All we have to do is get Chad and Clara hitched!” Emily sang triumphantly.

Andi choked and sat down hard on a straw bale.

Andi sat on the front steps of the schoolhouse, waiting for the first bell to ring. She was still steaming about the previous night’s conversation with Emily. How dare someone try to pawn off her brother just because they liked Fresno!

Then again, it would be fun to have Emily living nearby. Once the Blake family returned to Nevada, she might never see them again. Frustrated, she chucked a pebble at a stick across the schoolyard. It fell short by several feet.

The longer Andi wondered about Emily’s plot, the less she resisted it. Although still unconvinced, she began to see Emily’s point. Chad did seem extra tired this year, she reasoned. Perhaps this was just what he needed.

Deep down inside, Andi knew she was wrong. After all, in the past Chad had never found anything or anyone
he liked better than his job running the ranch. She assumed it was still true, but her adventurous side prodded her: **Andrea Carter, Matchmaker.**

The name had a wild, exciting ring to it. She could think of nothing less ladylike. Imagining the look on Chad’s face if he found out her plans, she felt the exhilarating rush of the challenge luring her to follow. With that last thought in mind, she pushed the remaining logic out of her head and grinned. *This will be fun.*

Andi crouched behind a buggy next to Goodwin’s Mercantile. She peered around the back wheel at the small stores across the street. Between the barber shop and Lind’s Dresses and Hats stood Clara Blake, her back towards the road.

Andi crossed her fingers. Any minute now, Chad would walk down the same street on his way to the blacksmith’s shop.

Sighing, Andi envisioned what would happen next. Chad would see Clara and reintroduce himself. She would blush, and he would ask her out to dinner. Then he would propose and—

“What happened?”

Andi awoke from her daydream with a start. To her dismay, the storefronts lay deserted. Jumping up, she scanned the street and saw Clara at the corner, walking away with some other young ladies. Chad was nowhere in sight.
“I asked, what happened? You said your brother was coming,” Emily frowned, hands on her hips. She climbed out from between two wooden barrels.

“I don’t know.” Andi shrugged. “He said he was picking up nails and a mended bit today at noon.”

“And after all my smooth talking about the ostrich feather hat in the window to get Clara here,” Emily lamented. She brushed the dust off her knees and pointed down the street after her sister.

“We just wasted our whole lunch break,” Andi grumbled. “And if we aren’t back at school when lunch is over, Mr. Foster will know we left. Let’s get going.”

As they turned to leave, a hand smashed down on Andi’s shoulder and jerked her backwards. She collided with the tall figure and suddenly broke into a sweat when she guessed who she was facing. As her eyes traveled up to meet the man’s gaze, a sinking feeling shuddered through her.

It was Chad.

“H-hi,” Andi faltered.

Chad, jaw clenched, bent down and looked her in the eye. His face wore an expression of rage and disgust. It scared her. She cringed as he fumed the familiar words. “What are you doing? I want an explanation . . . now.”

“W-we’re on lunch break. We’re not playing hooky,” Emily cut in from behind.

“No, I want to know about today’s setup, Miss Matchmaker.” He thrust an accusing finger at Andi.

She swallowed. “We’re late for school?” she hinted hopefully.

“Fine. Go ahead. But Mother invited the Blakes over for dinner again tonight, and you will explain and
apologize in front of our guests for this foolish caper. Understood?”

Andi nodded yes, and then spun around. Her eyes met Emily’s, and they both took off running for the school. On top of everything else, they didn’t need a lecture from Mr. Foster about tardiness. *This is a rotten year,* Andi though with dismay. *It’s only March and I’m already in big trouble. Again.*

Once again, Andi glanced around the dinner table at the Blake family. A lump rose into her throat when she looked over at Clara. It had been foolish of her to try her hand at matchmaking, she knew, but the embarrassment of apologizing had been even worse.

Emily didn’t seem to find it hard to apologize to her own sister, but to Andi it had been humiliating. Clara had looked surprised and slightly red.

To make matters worse, Chad had referred to her behavior as unladylike in front of the whole table. Andi grimaced. Another plan had fallen flat and left her the victim.

As soon as the dinner plates were cleared, Andi excused herself. She ran up to her room, leaving Emily downstairs, and took a deep breath to clear her head. In her own quarters she felt sheltered from her problems. Briskly, she crossed the room and flung open the doors to her balcony.

She stopped short. Out across the courtyard walked two people in the rapidly fading light.
Andi squinted. The girl was certainly Clara Blake. The other she could not tell. Carefully, Andi leaned as far out as she could from the railing. The man accompanying her was one of her own brothers. When he turned, Andi gasped and almost fell off the balcony. It was not Chad, but Justin.

Andi blinked in disbelief. As she turned to lie down and recover inside, she heard a quiet mumble of sound rise up from far below. It was then Justin pulled a tiny box from his pocket, and Clara uttered a barely-audible gasp. Andi felt her knees buckle as she sank to the ground in shock.

Andi flew out of the church, cheering at the top of her lungs. Her best dress fluttered around her like a cloud of delicate, pink-and-white butterflies. Bells pealed deafeningly, and flowers were strewn everywhere. Between pelting the bride and groom with handfuls of rice, she grinned at Emily and Cory.

“I guess we’re kinda related now,” she said to them, the idea still foreign to her.

“Not by blood,” Cory jumped in defensively, but Andi saw he was smiling.

As Justin and Clara climbed into their carriage, Chad placed his hand on Andi’s shoulder. “Big day, isn’t it?”

Andi looked at him apprehensively.

“It’s all right. I’m not mad still.” He grinned. “But now you see why I didn’t take kindly to your”—Chad cleared his throat—“little game.”
“But how did you already know? Emily had no idea this was coming, and neither did I,” Andi wondered aloud.

“You don’t know the backstory. Cory’s father and Emily’s father used to work together around here. Justin, Clara, and I all went to school together before Fresno was even here. When you and Emily were about two years old, the elder Blake brother moved to Nevada. You were too young to remember them.”

“So I’ve known Emily all the time?” Andi gaped.

“Yep. Now, Justin and Clara were pretty good friends by then, and they wrote each other off and on for a long time. Frankly, this is not a big surprise to most of us old folks. It’s about time.” Chad winked and gave her hair a tweak, then disappeared among a group of well-wishers.

Tossing her last grains of rice into the air, Andi let out a whoop of joy. Not even her lace and frills could restrain her. *A proper lady can still have fun,* she decided. Suddenly, life really was wonderful.
Andi was sitting at the dinner table, picking through the meal of chicken and potatoes. Justin was discussing his latest case with the family, but Andi wasn’t listening. She was too busy planning her ride for tomorrow. She and Taffy hadn’t ridden together in three days! They needed to go somewhere for a nice, energizing ride.

“Andrea?”

Andi looked up quickly at her mother, Elizabeth. “Yes ma’am?” she said.

“Are you feeling all right? You don’t seem to be paying attention tonight.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just planning my ride with Taffy,” Andi answered. “It’s been a while since we’ve had time to ride.”

“I take it you aren’t interested in my newest case then?” Justin said with a small grin.

“Well—”
The door suddenly burst open, and the ranch foreman, Sid McCoy, marched in. He was dragging someone with him.

“Sid, what is the meaning of this?” Justin asked.

“I found this young’un sneaking around the barn,” Sid said, shoving his prisoner forward.

Andi glanced at the girl. She looked about fifteen years old. She had light, cinnamon-colored hair that was in a messy bun hanging at her neck. She had big, brown eyes and was dressed in a worn blue shirt and a pair of boy’s jeans.

“You say she was sneaking around the barn?” Chad asked Sid.

“You bet. She was peering into the stalls and getting her hands on everything.”

“I’ll see to her. That will be all, Sid,” Justin said, dismissing the foreman.

Sid walked out of the room, leaving the Carter family alone with the disheveled girl. Justin motioned the girl toward him. She slowly shuffled over to him.

“And what might your name be?” Justin asked.

“Leanne,” the girl murmured.

“What’s your last name?”

“Leanne O’Neal.”

“Well, Leanne O’Neal, welcome to the Circle C ranch. You hungry at all?”

Leanne gratefully nodded, and Justin led her to a seat between Andi and Melinda. Melinda grabbed an empty plate and began dishing it up for Leanne.

Leanne sat down quietly and accepted the plate with a soft word of thanks. She wasted no time in taking a couple big bites of the chicken.
“You from around here, Leanne?” Chad asked.
“Nope, I’m new here,” Leanne told him.
“Did you move here with your family?” Elizabeth asked.
“No.”
“Do you have any parents?” Justin asked carefully.
“No. They died last year.”
“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth, Chad, and Justin said together.
Andi listened to the conversation while continuing to finish her supper. She was interested in this girl.
Leanne warmed up to the family quickly, and she answered their questions with ease. After dessert was served, Justin started asking Leanne more serious questions.
“Leanne, why were you in our barn?” he asked after he took a bite of his pie.
“I was looking for a place to stay for the night.” Leanne suddenly seemed very nervous and worried.
“All right then. So you’re an orphan come to Fresno in search of a new life?” Justin continued questioning.
“Yes. I thought I’d try to get a job somewhere.”
“A job?” Andi spoke up suddenly. “But you’re only fifteen.”
“Some people don’t have an easy life,” Leanne softly reminded. “I don’t have much of a choice.”
Elizabeth and Justin exchanged looks. “Why don’t you stay with us for a while, and we’ll see if we can help you out,” Elizabeth proposed.
“I don’t know.” Leanne shook her head. “You’ve done plenty already.”
“Andi could always use some help with her chores,” Mitch hinted.
“You bet I could,” Andi agreed. She was eager at the thought of having a new friend around.

A smile crossed over Leanne’s face. “I guess I’ll stay then—for a little while.”

“Good!” Elizabeth said. “Melinda and I will prepare the guest room for you. If you’d like to wash up, Andrea can help you out.”

Elizabeth and Melinda headed up the stairs. Justin retired to the library, and Chad and Mitch went into the parlor, which left Leanne and Andi alone.

“Would you like to wash up?” Andi asked politely.

“It’d be nice,” Leanne said.

Andi led the way to the washroom. “What kind of things do you enjoy doing?”

“I like being in the outdoors. I love riding and hiking and basically anything with the outdoors.”

“Me too! I have an amazing horse named Taffy, and we ride together all the time.”

The girls reached the washroom, and Andi left Leanne to clean up. In the meanwhile, Andi went to work on some homework. She tried her best to focus, but she was too excited about this new girl. Leanne sounded like so much fun! Andi couldn’t wait to find out more about her.

Over the next three days, Andi learned a lot about Leanne. First of all, she was incredible with horses. She knew so much about them and worked wonders with them.

Chad let Leanne ride Wildfire, a blood bay gelding with a white blaze. Leanne proved an excellent match for the high-spirited horse.
Andi also learned that Leanne could be a lot of fun. They had already scared Melinda with a fake snake (of course, Melinda hired Mitch to pay them back with a dunk in the water trough).

Leanne was super smart too. She offered to help Andi with her homework each night. Andi took her up on that offer.

Friday night, they were in the kitchen finishing Andi’s homework. She only had one more arithmetic problem. “Is it . . . thirty-four?” she asked Leanne.

Leanne bent over Andi’s paper. “No. Try again.”

Andi reworked the problem. “Forty-three?”

“Yes, that’s right. Good job!”

Andi slammed her book shut and stood up. “Let’s go see if there are any cookies left.” She and Leanne dashed over to the cookie jar and snagged a few cookies.

“Oh, hey, let me go put these books back in your room,” Leanne said, picking up Andi’s books.

“Oh, okay, I’ll meet you in the parlor.”

Andi went ahead into the parlor, where Chad and Mitch were playing checkers. She sat down and watched her brothers.

“I think I have you this time, Chad,” Mitch said as he collected another one of Chad’s pieces.

Chad grinned and collected two of Mitch’s pieces. Mitch sighed and Andi laughed, but she didn’t laugh for long. One of the ranch hands raced into the parlor with a troubled face.

“Señor Chad!” he gasped. “Someone just ran away with three of your horses! McCoy and some others just went after them.”
Chad and Mitch shot up so fast they knocked over the checkerboard. They followed the ranch hand outside to the barn.

Andi hurried off to find Leanne and tell her the news. “Leanne! Leanne!” She leaped up the steps two at a time while calling for Leanne.

“I’m right here,” Leanne’s voice called behind Andi.

Andi turned to see Leanne walking out of the kitchen. Andi looked in Leanne in surprise. “I thought you were upstairs.”

“I was. I came down to grab a glass of water. Hey, what’s going on around here? I hear an awful lot of racket outside.”

“Someone just stole three of our horses!”

“What? Really?”

“Yes. Chad and Mitch went outside with some others to search for them.” Andi peeked out the window. “I hope Taffy is okay. I’m going to go check.” She reached for the door handle.

“Oh, no, you won’t,” a voice called.

Andi saw Elizabeth gliding down the stairs. “But Mother—”

“Andrea, it’s dangerous out there. The thieves could still be around. You will stay inside.”

Leanne and Andi dejectedly backed away from the door.

“In fact, it’s late. You two should go to bed.”

Andi and Leanne took another desperate look out the window. How could the girls sleep with all the excitement going on?

Leanne bid Elizabeth goodnight and headed up the stairs. “Good-night, Mrs. Carter.”
“Good-night, Leanne,” Elizabeth said.
Andi hugged her mother goodnight and followed Leanne upstairs. It took her a long time to fall asleep. She was too worried about Taffy.

The next morning, Andi woke up early and slipped outside to check on Taffy. To her great joy and delight, Taffy was safely in her stall. The palomino horse greeted Andi with a soft nuzzle and Andi gratefully hugged her. She gave Taffy a treat and headed back inside.

As Andi hurried in the back way, she heard loud voices from the library. Andi couldn’t resist the temptation. She crouched outside the doors and listened carefully.

“I’m telling you, Justin, Leanne is the culprit!” Chad’s voice rose.

“You don’t know that, Chad,” Justin responded in his calm, collected way.

“Justin! She was caught sneaking around the barn a few days ago, she has a fantastic knowledge of horses, and Wildfire was stolen, along with Chase and Amigo. The evidence points to her.”

“You can’t be certain,” Justin said. “We need facts, not assumptions.”

“But we can’t ignore her as a suspect,” Chad pointed out.

“I know.” Justin sighed.

The door popped open, and Chad flew out in a flurry. He stepped right on Andi’s foot and she squeaked in
pain. Chad looked sharply at her. “You weren’t listening in, were you?”

Andi smiled sheepishly.

Chad shook his head. “I wish you hadn’t,” he said as he walked away.

Justin came to the doors and looked at his sister. “Andi, I know you think a lot of Leanne. I like her too, but there is a chance she could have stolen those horses. Do you know where Leanne was last night?”

Andi nodded slowly and thought back on last night. The only thought that came to mind didn’t help Leanne at all. “Justin . . .” Andi stopped.

“You have to tell me what you know, Andi,” Justin prompted.

“Leanne wasn’t with me when the horses were being stolen. She was gone for about fifteen minutes.”

Justin rubbed his chin. “That’s not a good sign. But don’t worry, honey, I’ll check into everything.”

After Leanne and Andi finished chores that afternoon, they saddled up some horses for a ride. Andi took Taffy, and Leanne boarded Patches. The girls decided on a fun, three-hour ride. They were going to go up by the creek, one of Andi’s favorite places to ride.

After about ten minutes into the ride, Leanne popped the question. “Your family thinks I stole the horses, don’t they?”

Andi didn’t answer, but Leanne clearly knew why. She looked over at Andi with pleading eyes. “I didn’t do it,
Andi. I promise I didn’t. I was putting away your books when that happened. Honest!”

“I believe you,” Andi said. “It’s just that my family doesn’t know you very well.”

“I understand,” Leanne whispered. “But I didn’t do it. My parents taught me not to do stuff like that. I know better.”

Andi sighed. She had to show her family Leanne was telling the truth. “Leanne, we are going to do what we can to find out who stole those horses and prove it wasn’t you.”

“We are?”

“You bet we are!”

“Thanks, Andi,” Leanne said with a happy smile.

The rest of their ride was spent planning on how to capture the real thief. It was decided that Andi would camp out in the barn that evening to see if the culprit would come back.

After supper, Andi told her family she was going to bed early, which was half true. She said her good-nights and hurried up to her bedroom. Andi grabbed the bag she had previously packed some food and blankets in and crawled out the window and down to the barn.

Through the dim lighting, Andi made her way into Taffy’s stall. Taffy nickered to Andi as the girl crept in beside her horse.

“Shhh,” Andi whispered. “I can’t be caught.” She rubbed Taffy’s muzzle affectionately before flopping down in the straw.

It was very quiet in the barn. There was the occasional snort from one of the horses or the shuffle of hooves, but otherwise it was dark and scary. Andi bundled up in a
blanket and watched for someone to come by. She did really well waiting up until it got to midnight. Andi just couldn’t stay up any longer.

“Miss Carter! What on earth are you doing in here?”

Andi jerked awake at the sound of someone yelling. Next thing she knew, someone had pulled her to her feet. She looked into the face of her captor.

“Jim McPherson!” Andi gasped. It was one of the ranch hands. At least it isn’t Chad, Andi thought in relief.

“Yes, it’s me. Now, what are you doing out here?” Jim had stringy, brown hair and angry, black eyes.

“I was k-keeping an eye on Taffy in case the horse thieves came back,” Andi stammered.

Jim looked surprised at Andi’s answer. “Oh. Well . . . that’s what I’m here for. Sid has me keeping an eye on things.”

“I’ll just go back inside then.” Andi grabbed her bag and blanket. Before Jim could object, she hurried out of the stall and into the house. She raced into her room and gratefully relaxed on her bed and slept for the few hours before daylight.

It wasn’t until after church that Andi had time to speak with Leanne. They figured a short afternoon ride would be the best time to tell Leanne. Andi saddled up Taffy, and Leanne saddled Sahara, a chestnut mare, and they rode out to the range.

After they were three miles away from the ranch, Andi told Leanne of her adventure. “But it doesn’t prove anything,” she finished.
“Yeah,” Leanne agreed. “We need a different approach.”
“Like what?”
“Let me think a second.” Leanne leaned on the saddle horn and furrowed her eyebrows.
Andi and Leanne rode on in silence while they both thought.
“What if we ask the ranch hands if they noticed anything unusual Friday night?” Leanne suggested.
Andi readily agreed. “Sounds good to me. When we get back, we can go question the hands.”
The two got back to the barn an hour later. The girls put away their horses in a hurry before heading to the bunk house.
“Andi! Leanne!”
They slowed down and turned around. Melinda was jogging towards them . . . well, trying to jog in her big, fluffy skirts.
“Leanne, Mother wants to speak with you inside for a moment,” she said once she caught up.
Leanne nodded at Melinda and walked back to the house.
Andi watched in fear. Had Chad persuaded Mother to think Leanne was the thief? “What does Mother want with her?” Andi asked Melinda.
“Mother has found some job opportunities for Leanne,” she said. “She wants to discuss them with her.” Melinda walked away, and Andi continued on to the bunk house.
Most of the ranch hands were friendly to Andi, and they were really nice when she asked them some
questions. But no one really noticed anything strange that night.

Andi was getting nowhere! She had one last ranch hand to speak with before she had to go get cleaned up for supper.

“Hey, Marco,” Andi said nearing the ranch hand.

Marco was sketching on a sheet of scrap paper.

“Howdy.”

“Can I ask you a question or two?”

Marco nodded and continued drawing.

“Did you notice anything strange on Friday night, right before the horses were stolen?”

Marco’s eyes darted around the room with a sudden worried expression. “Yes, I saw something.”

Andi crouched down beside Marco and lowered her voice. “What? What was it?”

Marco shook his head and motioned for Andi to be quiet. He flipped over his paper and began doodling on the other side.

Andi watched him as his hand flew over the paper. After a few minutes, Marco showed her the picture. It was of three men speaking outside the barn. One man was holding the lead ropes to three horses.

“Do who know who they were?” Andi asked hopefully.

Marco glanced around the bunkhouse before answering in a low voice. “No, I don’t, but I do know that the man holding the horses had long, brown hair.”

“Thanks, Marco,” Andi said as she left. She hurried up to the house and into the parlor. Elizabeth was sitting in the parlor with Leanne. They were chatting together.

“Leanne!” Andi called.
“Hey, Andi. What’s up?” Leanne asked.
“I found out some information about Friday night.”
Elizabeth beckoned her daughter to the couch. “You better tell us what you know.”
Andi sat down between Elizabeth and Leanne and relayed what Marco had said.
“We still don’t know who it is. It still doesn’t free me from any suspicions,” Leanne said sadly.
“Don’t worry, dear,” Elizabeth said. “We are doing everything we can to find out who really did it.”
“That’s right. No matter how long it takes, we will prove your innocence,” Andi promised Leanne.
“Thanks,” Leanne said attempting a small smile.

Monday after school, Leanne and Andi headed out to the barn to help muck out some stalls while they talked.
“Okay,” Andi said as soon as she started on her stall. “During recess I made a list of all our ranch hands who have long brown hair. We only have three: Pete, Jim, and Rich.”

Leanne dumped a shovelful of manure into the wheelbarrow. “Are any of those guys strange or sneaky?”
“We can definitely cross Rich off the list. He’s been working with us for three years now, and he is way too nice. I don’t know Pete or Jim real well.”

It suddenly hit Andi full force. “Leanne! Jim was the one who found me in the barn Saturday night. He said he was keeping an eye on the barn for the night. How would he have found me all the way in the back of Taffy’s stall if he wasn’t trying to steal her?”
Leanne walked out of the stall and looked at Andi with huge eyes. “Andi, you have a point!”

“Now, all we have to do is—”

“Boss wants his horses, Jim,” a voice hissed.

A pair of footsteps was heard coming into the barn. Leanne and Andi peeked at who it was. It was two ranch hands walking slowly side by side. One was Jim McPherson; the other was Mike Wallace.

The girls ducked back into their stalls as quietly as possible.

“I know. I tried Saturday night, but the Carter girl was hiding in the barn and almost busted me,” Jim replied. “She was this close to realizing I was trying to steal her horse.”

“Hush up!” Mike whispered. “Someone is in here.”

Andi sucked in a deep breath. She was in big trouble this time! There was no escape route. She gripped her pitchfork with both hands and prepared for the worst.

Mike’s head appeared over the stall door. A sneer grew on his face. “What do we have here?”

“Get away! I’m going to go tell Chad and Justin what you said.” Andi tried to sound confident, but she was really scared. Lord, please help me out. Please get me out of this mess, she prayed quickly.

Jim joined Mike. “Always sneaking around, aren’t you?”

“Someone ought to teach you a lesson,” Mike added. He opened the stall door and began walking towards Andi.

“Don’t come any closer!” Andi warned, brandishing the pitchfork.
Jim and Mike both came at Andi. They backed her into a corner.

Lord, please send someone now!

“Step away from her!”

Jim, Mike, and Andi looked up to see Chad and Justin entering the stall.

Thank you, Lord! Andi prayed.

Chad charged at the two men and pushed them out of the stall. Justin ran over to Andi and enveloped her in a hug.

“Are you all right, honey?”

“Now I am. You arrived just in time.”

“Thanks to Leanne,” Justin said, pulling away.

Andi looked up and saw Leanne smiling outside the stall. “How did you get to Justin?” Andi asked incredulously.

“Those two didn’t see me. They were focused on you, so I slipped out of the barn and found your brothers outside.”

“So, now you know Leanne didn’t take the horses. It was Jim and his gang.”

Justin nodded at his sister. “I know now. I’m really sorry we thought it was you, Leanne.”

“No harm done.” Leanne shrugged with a small grin.

“I do have some good news for you, Leanne,” Justin continued. “Mother and I found a place for you to work at.”

“You did? What is it?”

“A simple job helping run a boarding house. It might not be a whole lot of fun, but it pays well and you’d be able to finish your education.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Justin.”
“Don’t mention it. You helped keep Andi out of trouble this past week. That’s payment enough.” Justin sent a teasing glance Andi’s way.

“Leanne can still come for visits, right?” Andi asked Justin.

“Of course! Whenever she likes.”

“Good, because we still have to get Mitch back for dunking us in the water trough!”