2016 Contest Winners

Along the Western Trail

Compiled by
Susan K. Marlow

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Along the Western Trail—2016 Contest Winners
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Acknowledgments:

The Circle C Adventures, Beginnings, and Goldtown Adventures short-story writing contest is open to young writers ages 7 to 17. The contest runs annually from September 1 through January 15. Note: a one-year break from hosting the contest will occur following this 2016 contest.

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

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

And thank you, 2016 contest entrants! The competition was fierce, and without your delightful contributions, this collection would not have been compiled. Young authors’ names can be found with their story entries.

To learn how you can enter upcoming story-writing contests, email SusanKMarlow@gmail.com or visit Andi’s blog:

[www.CircleCAventures.blogspot.com](http://www.CircleCAventures.blogspot.com)
2016 Contest Winners:

**Ages 6-9**
1st Place: Kurt, age 9 - “Andi’s Blessed Day”
2nd Place: Katie Noël, age 9 - “The Capture”
3rd Place: Shelby Doyle, age 8 - “Andi and the Lost Pony”
Honorable Mention: Karalyn Krispense, age 9
“Long Walk Home”

**Ages 10-13**
1st Place: Christiana Thomas, age 11 - “Rosa’s Adventure”
2nd Place: Paige Turner, age 12 - “The Jewelry Box”
3rd Place: Abby Jones, age 11
“All Things Work Together”
Honorable Mention: Makenna Kendall, age 13
“The Last Job”

**Ages 14-17**
1st Place: Janelle Martin, age 16
“Secrets at the Madera Mine”
2nd Place: Kaitlyn Michael, age 17 - “Monkey Business”
3rd Place: Rebekah Eddy, age 17 - “A Visit from a Friend”
Honorable Mention: Hannah Mead, age 14
“A Desperate Prayer”
Honorable Mention: Krystal Sky, age 16
“Horses with Snowy Tales”
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LONG THE WESTERN RAIL
Andi’s Blessed Day

Kurt, age 9
Morgan Hill, California

*Kurt is in the third grade. He likes to play with Legos, draw, and write stories. He plays the piano and likes to ride his scooter. Kurt has two sisters, just like his dad has two sisters. His mom reads the Circle C books to him. Kurt hopes to be a writer one day.*


“Andi, give this to Chad. It’s apple-butter spread on cornbread, and the beef left over from last night’s supper. He has been working in the field all morning and is probably very hot, sweaty, and hungry. And remember, go straight there and back. When you come back, I will have your dinner ready.”

She handed Andi a tin plate wrapped in a quilt.

“Yes, Mother,” Andi said, and she marched off.

When Andi got outside, she squinted. The noonday sun was blazing hard. She walked to Chad
and was about to hand him the meal, when suddenly the ranch dog ran towards Andi. She tripped on him and let go of the meal.

Luckily, Chad was in front of her and stepped this way and that, and finally caught it. “Thanks for the meal, but I never knew I would have to get it using my square dancing skills!” He laughed. “Mmm-mm,” he said, taking a bite.

That night Andi snuggled underneath the covers. She was dreaming of a tall stack of pancakes and bacon. She was just going to take a bite when suddenly the pancakes and bacon disappeared. They jumped off the plate and ran out of the open door.

“Come back!” Andi said in her sleep.

“I never even left, Andi,” a voice said.

“Augh!” Andi awoke from her dream. Chad was standing over her, laughing.

Andi jumped out of bed, grabbed her shirt and overalls, and ran to the closet. When she was done changing, she ran downstairs and slid into her chair. She did not want to see Chad laughing.

“No running, Andi,” Andi’s mother said in an angry voice, but Andi saw that she meant no harm.

“Yes, Mother,” Andi whispered.

“Andi, eat quick, ’cause we have to go to church,” Mitch exclaimed.

***

The Carter family piled into the buggy. Justin cracked the whip. Saying, “Yah, yah! Yah, yah!” the family was off.
In church, Andi sat on the large wooden bench next to her mother. Melinda sat next to Andi on her other side. The congregation started to sing some songs.

After they had stopped singing, the minister started to say his part. “In the Bible, Matthew 6:19-21 tells us: ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’”

He then started talking in his own words about that verse.

Andi thought, *I would really like to find a dollar bill, or have someone else find one and then give it to me.* She was not really getting the idea of the minister’s message.

Suddenly, the church was singing, and that meant the service was almost done. As Andi sang the last few words of the song, she thought, *I would have a really blessed day if I found a dollar bill. Really!*

Then, it was time to go back home.

Andi looked longingly at the road. Suddenly, she saw something green. “Stop the buggy!” she shouted.

*Screech!* The buggy stopped. “What is it this time, ba—” Chad said.
But Mother stopped him from saying “baby sister.” Turning to Andi, she said “Andi, what’s the matter? Are you sick?”

Andi didn’t like thinking about getting sick, and she wasn’t. So she said, “I’m not sick, Mother. ‘Why I said ‘stop’ was because I saw something. Can I get out and see what it is? I will be back before you can say ‘little beetle buggy’ six times fast.” She added a “please?”

Seeing nothing foolish in his decision to allow it, Justin said, “All right.”

Andi jumped out and ran toward the green thing, hearing her family saying “little beetle buggy, little beetle buggy” in the distance. As she came closer, she asked herself, “Could it be?” Because before her eyes she saw a dollar bill.

1874 one-dollar bill

Andi picked up the crispy dollar bill. Yep, it was not counterfeit. She ran back to the buggy with the dollar bill gleaming in the sunshine when she heard her family saying the sixth “little beetle buggy.”
“Andi,” Melinda said. “You came after we said the last ‘little beetle buggy,’ not before.”

“Oh, well,” Andi said. “I found a dollar bill . . .”

“. . . which your big brother is going to keep,” Chad said.

“No!” Andi moaned.

“Don’t worry, I was only joking,” Chad said. “We have to give it back to the owner.”

***

Andi sat on the porch steps smiling. Chad had talked to almost everybody in the whole world, but nobody had lost a dollar bill. So Andi got to keep it.

But Mother had put it on a high shelf and said that Andi could only use it when she had to, or if it was important.

Suddenly, a buggy drove up. A man popped his head out of the buggy. Andi recognized the man. It was Riley’s Uncle Sid. He said, “Hey, Andi, how are you doing? Are you enjoying the summer break with no school?”

“Yes, I am enjoying the summer break, and I am really happy.”

“That’s great. Is Justin busy? Because I know a beggar in town. I’m gonna surprise him by giving him some money. I thought Justin might be the man to help me.”

Andi looked at the ground, shut her eyes tight, and thought. She had to make a wise decision. She
thought and thought. Then she looked up at Sid and said, “Well, I have a dollar bill. I’ll go get it.”

Andi ran inside and asked her mother, “Mother, Riley’s Uncle Sid is outside, and he is planning to give some money to a man in need. I told him I had a dollar bill, and I want to give it to him.”

“Slow down,” Mother said. “Andi, I am happy about your decision, but are you sure you really want to give Riley’s uncle the money?”

Andi nodded.

“Great.” Andi’s mother went away to get the dollar bill. When Mother came back she carried the crisp dollar bill.

Andi took it with gratitude. “Thank you!” She ran out the door, with Mother right behind her. Andi jumped off the steps and ran over to Sid.

“Thanks, missie. I guess I don’t need Justin’s help, thanks to you. Have a fi-i-i-ne day!”

Sid got ready to ride off, but Mother said, “How about staying for dinner? It is getting late.”

Then Andi added, “Can Riley come too?”

Uncle Sid laughed. “Of course. I’ll go pick him up right after I take this money to the needy man. When I return, we can tell Justin all about it.”

***

The next morning, Andi woke up in bed with Mitch staring right in her face. “Augh!” she shouted.

Mitch laughed. “Time to wake up. We have a busy day today. Oh, and by the way, Riley and Sid left an
hour after you went to bed after supper last night.” Mitch walked away.

Later, after the family had eaten dinner, Andi and Melinda got in the buggy with Chad. Then he drove away with them from the ranch. But suddenly, Andi saw that they passed Uncle Sid’s home.

*Where are we going?* Andi wondered. She turned to Melinda. “Do you know where Chad is taking us?” Melinda just giggled.

Andi fell asleep during the long buggy ride through town, so she couldn’t see the stand they were heading toward very well. When Chad woke her up, her eyesight was a little foggy.

When Andi finally realized what was happening, she saw that they were in front of a taffy stand. But who was getting taffy candy?

Chad pulled five cents out of his pocket and gave it to Andi. He said, “All your family and I think you made a good decision about giving the dollar bill to Riley’s Uncle Sid. So, here. Spend this on taffy.” He stepped aside.

Andi walked up to the stand, cleared her throat and said, “Could I please have some taffy candy?”

The lady said, “Yes and that will be five cents.”

Andi gave her the money and ran back to the buggy. As she was running, she tripped. *Oh-no! The taffy!*

Chad was nearby, stepping this way and that to catch it. He did. Then he gave it to Andi. “Here’s your
taffy! I never knew I would have to catch it using my square dancing skills, again.” He laughed.

“Mmm-mm,” Andi said, taking a bite. “Thank you, Chad.”

Andi had been blessed after all. She had learned that it is better to give than to receive. And now that she had learned that, she would try to listen more to the minister’s message.
Katie Noël, age 9

Katie is the fifth of six children and loves to play outside. She plays viola and piano. Katie doesn’t have a real horse, but she has an “iron horse,” a minibike. She also enjoys reading, so it is a good thing they have a lot of books at their house.

San Joaquin Valley, fall 1882

Andrea Carter shivered as she got out of bed. She pulled on a skirt and blouse. She grabbed a coat and hurried down the stairs.

“Good morning, Andrea,” her mother greeted her as she entered the dining room.

After Andi had taken a seat, her oldest brother, Justin, gave the blessing. Andi served herself eggs, bacon, and apple pie. When she finished breakfast, Justin was waiting to take her to school. As they arrived in front of the Fresno school, he said, “Have a good day.”
“Thanks, Justin,” Andi responded. She climbed down from the wagon and hurried up the schoolhouse steps and opened the door.

Andi bounded up the stairs to her classroom in the most unladylike manner. As soon as Andi entered into her classroom, she knew that she was late. Andi slid into her seat by Erica Woods, the teacher’s daughter. Mrs. Woods was a pleasant teacher who made learning fun.

On Sunday Andi and her family went to church. Mr. Woods gave an inspiring sermon. A few days later Mrs. Carter and Melinda left to visit Kate, Andi’s older sister.

Andi was glad she didn’t have to go because Thanksgiving break had just begun. Justin, Chad, and Mitch were around the house to say goodbye to the ladies.

A few hours later, five strangers stood at the door. The meanest-looking one pounded mightily on the door. Justin hurried to open the door and gasped as the man held up a .45 caliber revolver.

“What are you doing here?” Justin demanded.

“We’ve come to get some horses,” one man answered.

“Mind if we take a few?” added another with a snicker.

“We also need a likely young man to help us with directions,” the man with the revolver said.

“You got any good men here that we might want?” another asked.
While keeping Justin under gunpoint the whole time, the men searched the house. They soon had a sizeable group under gunpoint. Finally the man with the revolver lowered the weapon and announced that he was taking Mitch.

“Mitch? You can’t take him! Why, he is my brother!” Andi cried out in alarm.

“Well, then, little missy, you’ll just have to get along without him,” a man jeered.

Five minutes later Andi watched sadly as the men rode off leading Mitch, who was riding behind. “Why, Justin? Why? Why did you let them take him?” Andi demanded.

“Look, Andi. What can I do against five men when I am under gunpoint?” Justin asked.

She didn’t bother to answer.

“Hey, I will go get the sheriff,” offered one of the cowhands.

“No, that would take too long. I will get my own helpers,” Andi responded defiantly. She hurried out the door and ran as fast as she could to the barn. She hopped onto Taffy’s back and urged her horse to go faster.

Andi finally arrived at the Woods’ house. She dismounted rapidly and hurried up to the door and knocked.

Mrs. Woods opened the door. By the look on Andi’s face she knew something was the matter. “What is the matter, dear?” she asked worriedly.
“Mitch is gone . . . bad men took some horses . . . we have to get them back. Would Erica and Brandon like to help?” Andi explained brokenly.

“What is it, Andi?” asked Erica and Brandon.

“Andi’s brother, Mitch, has been kidnapped, as well as a few horses. Would you like to help recapture Mitch and the horses?” Mrs. Woods explained.

“Why, of course we would,” Brandon declared.

“Thank you. We’d better go back to the ranch quickly to get Chad and Justin,” Andi said. They went outside and mounted their horses. They rode swiftly back to the Circle C ranch.

When they arrived at the ranch, Chad had already gathered some of their best cowhands to go with them on the search. The three friends rode up and joined the rest of the group.

Under Chad’s command they formed three groups. Chad went with three cowhands. Sid, the foreman, went with several more men, and Justin went with Andi and her friends. The three groups each went in a different direction.

After four long days of futile search, Erica perceived a cabin in the distance. “Andi, look! There is a cabin. And there are horses in a corral out back of it,” she exclaimed excitedly.

“Let’s approach softly. Someone out here at this time of year would more than likely be up to no good,” Justin warned.

As they approached, they heard a loud thumping sound. Brandon interpreted the pattern to be S-O-S
in Morse code. Brandon suggested that he sneak up and peek inside the window and see if anything was the matter.

They agreed. Justin told him to be extra careful.

Brandon crept up softly, barely making a sound. He paused at the window then raised his head just high enough to see inside. Brandon saw Mitch, tied up and gagged on the floor.

Mitch looked relieved that someone had found him at last.

Brandon rapped on the window, signaling to Mitch that he would return with the others while the hoodlums were gone. Mitch nodded his head in agreement.

Brandon ran back to the others. “Andi! Mitch is in there. I told him that we would come back to rescue him. The bandits aren’t there at the moment, so we can get him now,” Brandon explained.

Everyone was very excited on finding Mitch, and they rode to the door of the shack.

Justin opened the door and walked inside. Justin and Brandon pulled out their knives and started sawing on Mitch’s ropes while the girls stood watch.

When they were done, they put ropes on the horses in the corral and opened the gate, leading out the horses behind them.
Chase was among the stolen steeds, and Mitch mounted him when the others mounted theirs. As the group rode home, Justin exclaimed, “O, bless the Lord for all his mercy.”
Category: Ages 6-9
Third Place

-3-

Andi and the Lost Pony

Shelby Doyle, age 8
Conroe, Texas

Shelby is a second-grader who loves music and spends her free time reading, memorizing Scripture, playing outside, and crafting. She looks forward to riding horses on her grandparents’ ranch and being their "ranch hand." She has treasured listening to family stories, which has inspired her to become a writer.

Andi was on the way home. It was a long way and she had time to think. All of the sudden, Andi saw a pony jump out of the thicket. Andi couldn’t believe her eyes! She asked Mother if she could bring it home.

But her brother Chad broke in, saying, “Of course you can bring it back if you can give it a name before we get home.”

Andi already had a name. She thought Starlight was a good name.
When we get home, Andi thought, I'll try to put the new pony into Taffy's stall. That was good enough, Andi hoped.

Of course, that didn't work because Taffy started acting up. So, she tied her new pony to a post. But somehow her pony got loose and was munching on Mother's new pie.

Andi got into big trouble because the pie was for company. So, Andi had to help Mother make a new pie.

Andi made sure she latched the lock all the way this time. But somehow, for some reason, the pony got out again. And this time Starlight let the chickens out.

Somehow a chicken got on the window sill, where there was a crack in the window, and the chicken got in the house. Father was sitting reading a book and the chicken flapped up on his lap.


Uh-oh, thought Andi. She got in big trouble again. Now Andi had to put away the chickens and clean up the mess.

Days went by with other mishaps. One day, Andi saw Starlight prancing in the corral. She thought that maybe she could train Starlight to ride so that would keep her pony out of trouble. So she started training day after day, night after night. After one month, Andi had gained Starlight's trust.
Then she had to get up on Starlight’s back. That didn’t go so well. So Chad helped. Andi said at dinner that she did all of the work herself, but then she said Chad helped a little. *Okay, a lot.*

Then one day, Andi saw a dog out playing with Starlight. Andi couldn’t believe it! She had never seen Starlight so happy in her life.

The dog was in the corral while Chad and Andi saddled up Starlight, and she was easier to saddle than ever. Every other time they tried to saddle up Starlight, she acted up. So, Andi tried to get up on Starlight’s back and she thought it went well.

Andi finally figured out that the dog had made friends with Starlight. Andi hoped the dog was still out in the corral so she could actually ride Starlight for the first time. Andi realized that all the other times she tried to ride Starlight, her pony looked mad.

But this time Starlight took off straight for the dog. Then the dog took a loop around Starlight and started running across the field, almost like they were playing together.

Andi had never had this much fun with Starlight in her life. If only Starlight knew how much fun Andi was having riding her. Starlight did not make any trouble after that because she was playing with the dog all the time.

Then one day, the dog was gone. But Starlight was not getting into anything and Andi was amazed. So,
Andi rode her again. Starlight didn’t act up even though the dog was not there.

The next day Starlight was gone. “Oh, oh,” said Andi, “What if Mother thinks that I am not responsible and takes away my other pony, Taffy?”

A few days later, Andi went to the market with Mother and Chad. Andi saw signs all over town that said: PONY. MISSING. The picture looked just like Starlight.

Andi tried to hold back tears, but they started coming out. Andi tried not to look at Mother. She was crying because she wanted Starlight to be her own pony, but she knew Starlight belonged to someone else.

Then, after a couple of days, Andi was in town getting groceries and she saw Starlight pulling a buggy. She went up to the man driving the buggy and said, “I think that is my pony.”

The man in the buggy said, “No, this is my pony.”

Andi saw the dog next to Starlight, and she claimed that was her dog too.

But the man still said these were his animals. Then he asked, “Did you want them?”

Andi replied with a teary, “Yes. I really wanted to keep her. Ya see, I found her on the roadside and took her home to care for her. She needed food and she looked very hot. So, I gave her a bath and a comfy place to sleep. And now I am so attached to her that I can’t leave her. Please may I have her?”
The man on the buggy said, “Hmmm . . . if you hadn’t taken her home, she might have died. You can have the pony because she may have died if you hadn’t cared for her in such a kind way. Since the pony and the dog are best friends, I’ll let you have them both. Just let me take my buggy home and in the morning you can come get them.”

Andi was overjoyed and she ran home to tell Mother. Chad was excited, and Mother agreed it was possible that she could keep them. Then her mother said, “Go talk to your father first.” She skipped along to her father.

He asked, “Why are you in such a happy mood, Andi?”

Andi said, “Because the man who owns Starlight and the dog said I could keep them, but the only way I can keep them is if you say ‘yes.’”

Her father said, “Of course you can keep the pony. I was just telling myself we needed a new member of the family.”
Karalyn is the youngest of six children, has many interests, and likes to keep busy. She enjoys music, acting, sewing, cooking, crocheting, writing, and spending time outdoors on the farm. Karalyn has always had a love for animals, especially horses.

This is an adventure when Andi’s brothers were young.

Justin, when will we get to stop?” Chad asked. “Well, first we have to . . . avalanche! Run!”

Chad started running. He tripped and started rolling down the mountain.

Justin ran down after Chad. Just in the nick of time, Justin helped Chad up and they ran out of the path of the avalanche.
“Is everybody here? Are the horses okay?” Justin asked. “Wait! Where are the two dogs? Oh no, they’re buried! Oh, those were some really nice dogs. I’ll miss them. Well, I guess there’s nothing that we can do now, so we’ll have to go on without them. Home is just on the other side of the mountain. If we stay here for long, we’ll freeze. There’s no branches around here that will be dry to make a fire.”

A couple of hours later, Justin said, “We’re finally on the other side of the mountain.”

“Look! There’s a bear coming up the side of the mountain. I wonder why it’s out of its hibernation,” Chad said nervously. “And I guess we can’t shoot it since our guns got lost in the avalanche.”

“There’s a tree over there. It looks hollow,” Justin said. “Let’s go see if we can hide in it.”

The boys walked over to the tree.

“Boy, it looks awful tight in there, but I guess we’ll have to make the best of it,” Justin said.

Suddenly, the bear started charging up the mountain, almost toward the tree with the two cramped brothers.

“Do you think it smells us?” Chad asked quietly.

“No, I think the wind is blowing the wrong direction,” Justin whispered back.
The bear charged up the mountain past the tree. Once the bear was far enough away, Chad hopped out of the tree with Justin right behind him. They looked up the mountain.

“By golly, it’s a mountain goat!” Chad said with a sigh of relief.

“Come on, let’s start running down the mountain while the bear is otherwise occupied,” Justin said.

The brothers started heading down the mountain once more, and Chad decided he wanted to have a little fun. He made a nice-sized, well-packed snowball and threw it at Justin.

Justin laughed. ”Oh, little brother, you need to learn some manners.” He ran and tackled Chad into a snowdrift and started throwing snowballs at him.

“Snowball war!” Chad yelled as the two brothers started throwing snowballs at each other.

“I surrender!” Chad said a few minutes later. “Come on. Let’s keep going down the mountain.”

Justin caught up with Chad, and Chad jumped on Justin’s back. Stumbling, Justin tried to get Chad off his back.

Once Chad was on the ground, Justin started running. “Catch me if you can!” he yelled.

After a little while, he stopped and waited for Chad to catch up, then they started on home.

As they were walking, Justin said, “Who knows? Maybe Mother, Mitch, and the girls will be waiting for us at home with warm cookies and hot coffee.”
“They’re probably going crazy from doing extra chores,” Chad replied.

A couple of hours later, when the brothers arrived home, nine-year-old Andi came running up to them with Melinda, Mitch, and Mother following.

“Guess what we have waiting for you,” Andi announced. “Warm cookies and hot coffee.”

“What did I tell you, Chad?” Justin chuckled.

A few minutes later, the family sat wide-eyed around the table as Justin and Chad told their story.

“. . . and when I was in that tree, I was so cramped. I don’t want to do that again!” Chad declared.
Category: Ages 10-13
First Place

-5-
Rosa’s Adventure

Christiana Thomas, age 11
Rainier, Oregon

Christiana enjoys country life with her dad, mom, and seven siblings. Her favorite activities include playing the harp and piano, reading, horses, beading, and being outdoors. She loves Jesus and desires for Him to shine through her more each day.

Andi’s friend Rosa has an adventure of her own just before she meets Andi in Long Ride Home.

Rosa Garduño groaned as she rolled over. Sleeping in a wagon box was starting to get old after five weeks. That’s how long they had been traveling from Mexico.

She sat up and looked around. Her brother, Joselito, was still asleep but her parents’ beds were unoccupied. No use trying to go back to sleep. It must be time to get up anyway. She slipped into her colorful skirt and white blouse and folded her
blankets into a corner of the wagon. Then Rosa quietly jumped out into the open air.

Her parents were sitting around the fire pit they had used the night before, and Mamá was cooking breakfast. Tortillas and cheese were on the frying pan. Yum!

“Good morning, Rosa. Did you sleep well?” questioned Mamá.

“Not bad, for sleeping on a hard, wooden bed,” Rosa said with a grimace.

“Is Joselito awake?” asked Papá.

“Well if he is, he is lying in bed,” she answered.

“Please get him up, Rosa, It’s time for breakfast.”

“Sí, Mamá.” She climbed back into the wagon and started shaking her brother. “Wake up, Joselito! Wake up!” Rosa exclaimed still shaking him.

He mumbled something about needing more sleep and rolled over, flinging his arms in her face while doing so.

“Well, then,” Rosa chided, “I guess you’ll miss breakfast. In that case, I will eat your helping of food. Which happens to be tortillas and cheese,” she added with a little smile as she hopped out of the wagon.

“Wait. What?”

Everyone outside around the campfire heard the confused voice coming from inside the wagon. They chuckled.

About a minute later, Joselito came scrambling outside and to the fire while strapping on his overalls. He flopped down on the ground and grabbed a plate.
“Are you hungry?” Papá questioned.
“Of course!” Joselito exclaimed with his mouth full. “I haven’t eaten all night.”
They all laughed and Mamá passed him the sausage.

With breakfast cleaned up, the family repacked the wagon. Soon they were on the move again, and a small town came into view.

“There,” Papá announced, “is where we will hopefully find two or three days’ work. If not, we will ask at a house for food and water in exchange for work or something we have brought from Mexico.”

Rosa sighed. She knew this story. It seemed like they had been doing it forever. Since they did not speak English, the family often got cheated out of what they really earned.

Soon they arrived at the town called Mesa Flats. Papá, after talking with some local Mexicans, found the family two days’ work at a farm.

As the sun began to set that evening, Rosa pulled the last onion from a long row, plopped it in her basket, and stretched. Then she headed toward their wagon, parked at one end of the large farm. When she got there, she flopped down on the ground and helped Mamá prepare the meager evening meal.

“Mamá,” Rosa said quietly, “do you miss our home in Mexico? Do you ever think about what we would be doing right now?”
There was a long silence while Mamá slowly stirred the beans. She chose her words carefully as she answered the question. Finally she spoke.

“Sometimes I do, Rosa. But then I think of why we left on this journey. If we were still in Mexico, we would be struggling to raise a crop, like we were before we left. Your papá is very excited to find a piece of land that we could call our own, or a long-lasting job on a ranch where we could have a house and wouldn’t have to pay rent.”

Mamá handed Rosa a tortilla to put on the pan over the fire. “Now, try not to think about it and work on preparing this meal for Papá and Joselito. I am sure they will be hungry.”

The next day dawned, promising to be as hot as the one before. It passed very much like the first day at the farm.

On the third day, Papá searched for more work. He found none, but heard of a possibility close to the town of Fresno. That meant more traveling, so he decided they would rest at Mesa Flats for one more day. They could have time to wash clothes and do other basic chores.

That night, Rosa could not sleep because her back was hurting too much in the wagon bed. “Lying here on wood is so uncomfortable,” she complained to herself. “I wish we were back in Mexico.”

Then she remembered her conversation with Mamá. “Well, I guess I have to work, so I’d better change my attitude . . .”

“I guess it was my imagination,” she whispered to herself.

Creeaakkk!

There it was again! Rosa lay as still as she could and listened. She heard a small sniff on her left side. Barely moving her head, she noticed that Joselito was awake too. Then she realized that the creaking noise was made by someone climbing up the wagon wheel!

The moonlight in the wagon disappeared as the form of a man took its place. Rosa opened her mouth to scream, but a cloth was clamped over her face. In a few seconds, the world went black.

When Rosa opened her eyes, she felt dizzy and lightheaded. She had a headache, but that was fading quickly. Joselito was lying a few feet away, still unconscious. She started to crawl toward him but was held back.

Rosa twisted around to see what was holding her. To her dismay there was a heavy chain around her ankle. The chain was attached to the wall of the dismal building they were in. She sighed and leaned back against the wall as she took in her surroundings.

The room, which was not big, appeared to be a cellar of some sort, with cement walls and a thick door. A small opening in the door revealed bars running up and down like a cage. An even smaller opening in the wall near the ceiling allowed a few,
faint rays of sunshine into the glum room. Other than that, the room was pitch black.

Looking out the tiny window and judging the location of the sun, she determined that it must be close to noon.

She heard a groan and turned. Joselito was finally waking up. He slowly looked around the room, his gaze resting on his sister.

“Oh, Rosa, I’m glad you’re here,” he said. His relieved smile slowly changed to a frown. “You look terrible.”

Rosa looked at herself. She was still in her nightclothes, and her hair was hanging every which way. To add to that she was covered with dirt and dust. She also had a big bump on her head, *Probably from being tossed in here*, she thought.

She looked at Joselito and shrugged. “You don’t look so good yourself.”

He grimaced and changed the subject. “I’m starving.”

“You always are.”

“Not always, just mostly.”

Rosa laughed. “Yeah. *Mostly*.” Her voice turned serious. “Do you have any idea why they did this to us? I mean, why *our* family? We are definitely not the richest in town.” She paused. “I couldn’t tell if the man was a Mexican or a *gringo*, could you?”

“No.”

A sound came from outside the door.

“Someone’s coming, Joselito!”
The siblings could hear someone heavy coming down the stairs. The door creaked open and a large, sloppy man entered the room.

“Here’s your grub!” he grunted. He slid two bowls of soggy rice across the hard floor. He chuckled when he saw them looking with disgust at the food.

“That’s the best you’ll be gettin’, so don’t be ’spectin’ nuttin’ fancy-like.” He started to leave the room but then called over his shoulder, “The boss’ll be lookin’ you over in a couple o’ hours.”

The man shut the door, and the children could hear the key turn and the lock click. Then they heard a loud voice, clearly used to being obeyed.

“Jake, get up here and start doing your job!”

“But it ain’t my fault. I had to feed those . . .”

Rosa and Joselito cringed as the foul man used a long string of swear words to describe them.

All was very quiet before the children dared to speak to each other again.

“That man was certainly not Mexican, but he sounded like it. He speaks Spanish perfectly,” Joselito commented.

“That’s for sure. What do you think he meant when he said that the boss will be looking us over? Seeing if we’re good enough for work?”

“Something like that, I guess.”

Rosa looked at the food on the floor and glanced at Joselito. He was also staring at the bowls with suspicion.

“Still hungry?” she asked.
“Not as much as I was. I guess I’m going to hold my nose and dive in.”
“Go for it.” Rose eyed him like she thought he was crazy.
“Thanks.”

Around noon, the man Jake entered the room. He pulled a ring of keys from his back pocket and started to unlock Joselito’s chains.

The big man yanked the boy free and headed toward Rosa. Joselito stumbled to his feet, wincing with the man’s rough treatment. Rosa received the same harshness from Jake as her brother did.

The children were led up the stairs and into the brilliant sunshine. Rosa and Joselito blinked in the bright light. As their eyes adjusted, they slowly glanced around at their surroundings. Several buildings dotted the site, all with cement walls and wooden roofs. They were in a field, far from any town or road.

Jake led them past other Mexicans, who stopped their work to watch as they passed. They shook their heads and talked among themselves. Some of their conversation could be overheard.

“Imagine! Kidnapping innocent children to put them to work,” exclaimed one woman loudly.
“I never thought that he’d go that far!” came a reply.
“If I could, I’d walk in there, punch him in the nose, and tell him what I thought about his dirty ways.”
“Shut up and get back to work!” Jake shouted.
The onlookers suddenly became quiet and looked away from the children. They went back to work, picking up bundles of grain and tying them together.
The threesome walked toward the biggest of the buildings centered in the middle of the others.
Jake opened the door and shoved them in. “Here’s the new ones, boss,” he said.
A small man was sitting at a desk in the middle of the room. As he raised his head, Rosa could see an irritated expression on the man’s face. It softened for a second when he saw who was standing in front of him.
“Jake!” he said sharply, “you should be ashamed. Really. Such rough treatment to children. Don’t you have a heart?”
“But, boss! You told me to—”
The small man silenced him with a warning look. Then he turned back to the children. “I’m sorry that you have had such a”—he paused—“such an unpleasant experience. While you’re here, I hope you won’t mind pulling your share of the work. As Jake told you, or as he should have told you, you’re here because a tragic accident happened in town. It was arranged for you to stay here for a while.
“Now, Jake will take you outdoors and explain how we work around here. We are like one, big, happy family,” he said with a plastered smile.
Jake led them out of the room.
Rosa and Joselito were marched out the door and into the hot sun. They were just crossing a nearby field when an overseer began calling out, “Riders approaching! Riders approaching!”

The boss came running out of the house, took one glance at the situation, and started giving orders.

“Get the slaves . . . I mean, the workers inside immediately!” he ordered with a sideways glance at the Garduno children.

The children watched in amazement as the workers, who were being pushed and prodded out of the field, resisted with all their strength. Many started screaming for help and waving their arms wildly. The guards were strong and fast, but the band of horses and riders were faster.

Another man came running up and stopped in front of the boss. “Boss, it’s the sheriff and his deputies.” He panted.

“What?” the small man roared. “What happened to my watchman?”

“He fell asleep in the old oak, sir. Then he fell out, hit his head, and is still unconscious.”

He glanced behind them at the men struggling with the prisoners. Only a few were inside the building, and the sheriff was getting closer.

“We ain’t gonna make it,” the man stated bluntly. “We gotta get outta here.”

That got the men moving. Soon they were riding out of sight over the top of the hill.

The sheriff rode up and dismounted. He sent most of his men to chase the retreating slave owners, while he escorted the enslaved workers back to town—and to a wagon with two very worried parents.

*Papá* and *Mamá* were very glad to see Rosa and Joselito and made a huge fuss over their return. They had spent the entire day looking for their children.

*Papá* had even gotten the courage to go to the sheriff’s office and explain that his children had been kidnapped. Thankfully, the sheriff understood *Papá*’s Spanish perfectly and set out immediately to find them.

The family was grateful to be together as they bedded down for the night. As Rosa cuddled under her blankets, she felt shivers run up and down her back. But she reminded herself that *Papá* and *Mamá* were sleeping right beside her this time, and she had nothing to worry about.

The next morning, they were off for Fresno. It felt good to be back on the road again. Rosa smiled as she rode for a while in the back of the wagon. Everything
was back to normal. Everything was going to be all right.

Just then, the wagon came to a halt. Joselito stuck his head inside the wagon bed. “Rosa, Papá found a girl on the road. Come out here and see.”

Rosa hopped out of the wagon with excitement. Life was never quite normal after that.
Category: Ages 10-13
Second Place

-6-

The Jewelry Box

Paige Turner, age 12

Martina Preston is an avid writer, craft enthusiast, and harpist. She currently lives in Washington state with her parents and two siblings. As a young author, her favorite pen name is Paige Turner.

Ten-year-old Andrea Carter charged into the general store, her friend Cory right at her heels. “Ha!” Andi yelled, breathless. “I win!”

The store helper, Joshua, shot Andi a disapproving look. “Shh!” he scolded. “Mr. Sandras is in the back room with a customer.” He shook his head at the two then went back to his sweeping.

“Oh,” Andi said, lowering her voice. “Sorry.”

Cory wandered around the store, admiring the one-dollar pocketknives and colorful bandanas. He held up a bright-blue one to show Andi. “Look at this one, Andi. Isn’t it a beauty?”

Andi grinned and picked up another bandana. “Watch this!” She expertly folded the red fabric into a
bow and set it on top of the pile. An idea struck her. “Cory, will you help me find a yellow one?” she asked, already up to her elbows in bandanas.

“Why?”

“Because . . .” Andi looked up from her digging.

“Lindsey—you know, my friend from school—her birthday’s in a few days, and I completely forget to get her a gift. Her favorite color is yellow, and she could pull back her hair with one of these. Plus, they’re really handy for all sorts of things,” she added, grinning.

“Oh, wait, I just found one,” Andi said happily, holding up the golden-yellow bandana. “I’ll go pay for it. Wanna come with me?”

“Sure,” Cory replied, fingering one of the engraved pocketknives. “I think I’ll buy one of these. Pa gave me some extra allowance this week.” He stepped toward the register at the same time Mr. Sandras walked out from the back room.

Andi turned toward the shopkeeper and smiled at him. “Hi, Mr. Sandras.”

“Hello, Andrea, Cory.” His bushy brown mustache brushed the top of his nose as he spoke. “How may I help you two today?”

“I would like to buy this bandana, please.” Andi set the yellow cloth on the store counter.

“Ten cents. Any reason to be spending your hard-earned money on this?” Mr. Sandras asked, taking the shiny coin from Andi’s outstretched hand.
“It’s a gift for one of my friends. Her favorite color is yellow,” Andi explained, clutching the bandana tightly. “Thank you, Mr. Sandras.”

“Thank you, Andrea.” He smiled and turned to Cory to take his pocketknife money. “Your friend will be happy indeed.”

***

A little while later, Andi was riding around the ranch on her horse, Taffy, when she spotted Lindsey in the distance. “Hello, Lindsey!” she called. “Where are you going?”

Riding over to her, Andi noticed that her friend’s usually shiny blue eyes were anything but happy, and her brown hair was unkempt and messy. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Andi’s nine-year-old friend sighed. “Well, no, it’s not nothing. You know how my papa lost his job at Fairfield’s mercantile as a bookkeeper last month?”

Andi nodded. Everybody at school was raising money to help Lindsey and her family, but they never accepted it unless they absolutely had to.

“Well,” Lindsey continued, “lately we’ve been using the money the school raised for us, but we’ve had to sell some of our things too. Just this afternoon I had to sell Grandmama’s silver jewelry box.”

Lindsey started sobbing.

Andi gasped. The Rucker family jewelry box? The one Lindsey’s great-great-great-grandmother had
brought from Russia one hundred years ago? That jewelry box?

Andi patted her friend’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Lindsey. I’ll find some way to help you.” I hope.

***

Two days later, Andi had asked every member of her family, plus some of the ranch hands, how she could earn money.

Chad said she could pick apples for a week because one of his hands was sick and he couldn’t work. She had asked if she could pick for two weeks and have the money in advance. He was reluctant to agree, but Justin helped her out.

That’s three dollars! Only ten more to go, Andi thought. She had checked in the window of the general store to see if the jewelry box was there, and sure enough, it was.

Lindsey’s birthday came and went without enough money to buy the jewelry box back, though, so Andi gave her the pretty yellow bandana as planned. Lindsey smiled and thanked her for the gift, but Andi could tell she was still sad.

Other assorted jobs over the next week earned Andi four more dollars, but she only had two extra dollars in her piggy bank. “Still not enough to buy Lindsey back the jewelry box, even for a late birthday present.”

Andi sighed, brushing Taffy methodically.
Taffy couldn’t say anything, but her pawing of the ground did give Andi an idea . . .

***

“Step right up to our horse race!” Jody Barker, an eleven-year-old from school, shouted into his cupped hands. “Come one, come all, to watch as two of our famously celebrated racers hold the biggest showdown since . . . since the last time they raced!” He paused. “On your marks, get set . . .”

Andi tensed, gripping Taffy’s mane. She looked ahead of her and went through the race in her head. *Just go fast until you get to the gate. Go through it and then swerve through the hay bales. Fast, fast, fast!*

Jody had promised the winner three fifty-cent pieces, and Andi was ready to win.

Beside her, Jack Goodwin straightened his cap and leaned forward on one of the other ranch horses. Andi had asked Chad if she could take Penny out for Jack, and Chad agreed. “She does need some exercise. Just make sure she doesn’t get hurt,” he’d said.

Jack grinned at Andi and cracked his knuckles. *Showtime.*

“*Go!*” Jody clapped his hands together loudly in place of a starting pistol.

Both horses were off like bullets. Penny was strong and lean, but Taffy was well-bred and agile. Jack was through the gate first, with Andi close behind.
Both teams started on the barrel obstacle with no hesitation. The horses were neck-and-neck, Taffy leaning to block Penny out. Dust flew in Andi’s face, and her braids whipped back and forth.

Andi surged ahead of Jack and Penny, darting from bale to bale. She whooped, one hand above her head, when Taffy had successfully made it through the hay bales. She craned her head around to see where Jack and Penny were, but suddenly pulled Taffy to a halt when she saw the team.

Andi dismounted and walked closer to where Jack and Penny were still standing. Penny had caught her hoof in some extra string from a hay bale, and she had to hold her leg up in an awkward position to keep from stepping on it. Jack had dismounted as well and was working to get the horse’s hoof unstuck.

“Penny!” Andi sighed. “What have you got into? Chad will be so mad if you’re hurt.” Andi bent down and tried to help Jack with the bale, but it was no use. They gently pulled and tried to untangle the string, but Penny just whickered.

Finally, Taffy nudged Andi’s shoulder and huffed. The horse stepped forward, grabbed a big mouthful of hay from the bale in her mouth, and started chomping.

“Taffy, what are you doing?” Andi led her horse away from Penny. “Eat some grass over there.” Then something struck her. “Wait a minute! Taffy, you just gave me a great idea.” She started running away from the group and back to where Jody Barker was
standing with the small crowd of onlookers. “Cory, where are you?”

“I'm right here.” Cory stepped towards Andi. “Is Penny fine? I saw her hoof get caught in the hay bale.”

“We don’t know if she’s fine. We can’t get the string off,” she said in a hurry. “Do you have your pocketknife on you?”

“Yeah.” He pulled his shiny, new pocketknife out from his pocket. “Why? How’s that gonna help Penny?”

“Come on! You'll cut the string away from her hoof. Taffy thought about eating the hay out of the string, but she’s got a race to finish.”

Andi and Cory ran back to where Jack was with the two horses. Cory set to work cutting. In no time, Penny was free.

“Her leg has little string marks on it, but she’ll be fine,” Cory proclaimed.

Andi whooped again.

Cory pushed the hay bale to the side, and Andi and Jack mounted their horses. Jack led Penny in a slow trot back and forth for a little bit while Taffy and her rider raced back to share the good news.

“I declare a rematch!” Jody proclaimed. “Winner gets two dollars!”

Andi’s eyes lit up as she and Jack cantered back to the starting line. Penny whinnied and nuzzled Taffy.

That was a close call, thought Andi. But I’m sure glad Penny’s okay.
“On your mark, get set, go!”

They were off. In less than five minutes, Andi and Jack were out of the hay bale obstacle and were racing down the homestretch.

Go, go, go! Andi blocked out everybody’s voices and silently encouraged Taffy to go faster. The last twenty feet were closing in, and Taffy leaped ahead and crossed the dirt line triumphantly. Jack and Penny were less than one horse behind them.

Jody awarded a very flushed and energetic Andi her two dollars, and he draped a garland of wildflowers around Taffy’s neck.

Andi found Jack and Penny. “Great race, Jack,” she said, putting fifty cents into his hand.

“Thanks, Andi.” He grinned a big, toothy grin.

***

“Mother, can I go into Mr. Sandras’s store real quick?”

The Carter family was going home from church the next Sunday, and Andi had all her well-earned money tucked in the pocket of her dress. Her mother gave her a questioning look but simply said, “Be in and out in five minutes.”

Andi thanked her and ran into the store, being careful not to trip on her fancy clothes. She raced up to the counter and was delighted to see Mr. Sandras there.

“Good morning, Mr. Sandras. Do you happen to have a silver jewelry box here for thirteen dollars? It
was here last week when I came in,” she said all in one breath.

“I think you’re in luck this time, Andrea.” He ducked back into the storeroom and came out with the familiar box. “It would’ve been gone in two days,” he said, “but Joshua noticed it had quite a few dents and bangs on it. We put it in the storeroom, but if you really want it, then here you go.” He wrapped up the box and handed it to Andi like a present.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Sandras. It came from Russia a hundred years ago, so it’s probably dented a little.” Andi dug the money out of her pocket and laid it on the counter. Then she picked up the box and waved goodbye with her empty hand.

It was hard walking with the big box in her arms. She had to hold it away from her so she wouldn’t make creases on her nice dress. Andi bumped into one person after another, trying to make her way back to her family. “Sorry! Excuse me. So sorry,” she apologized.

All of a sudden, Andi and another girl about her size ran right into each other. The jewelry box fell to the ground and nearly got trampled. Luckily, Mr. Sandras had wrapped it up well, and the pretty silver box didn’t get dirty.

Andi bent down to pick it up and heard the other girl gasp. “The jewelry box!”

_Oh no, Andi thought. It’s Lindsey!_ She stood up, trying to hide the box behind her back, but knowing it was no use.
“Andi, why do you have Grandmama’s jewelry box?” Lindsey walked around Andi, trying to see it.

Andi sighed. Holding the box in her hands, she presented it to her friend. “It was supposed to be a late birthday surprise. I bought it back for you.”

Lindsey’s small face broke into a huge grin as she hugged Andi, being careful not to squish the box.

“I thought you had bought it for yourself or for your mother. I’m so glad, Andi. Thank you so much,” Lindsey squealed. She took the silver box and ran off, waving to Andi over her shoulder.

Andi smiled at her friend’s excitement and walked slowly back to her family.

Case closed.
Category: Ages 10-13
Third Place

All Things Work Together

Abby Jones, age 11, East Bend, North Carolina

Abby is homeschooled and in 7th grade. She loves horses and enjoys reading all kinds of books about them—from fiction to books on caring for and training horses. She hopes to own a horse and become a horse trainer one day.

C’mon, Andi, I’ll race ya to that rock over there,” ten-year-old Levi Swanson said excitedly as he pointed out a rock to his twelve-year-old aunt, Andrea Carter.

“You’re on!” Andi shouted. She nudged her mare, Taffy, into a gallop.

Levi urged his pinto pony, Patches, into hot pursuit of Andi and Taffy. By the time they reached the designated rock, Levi had lost by only half a nose.

“I’ll get you next time!” Levi stated confidently as the two started to walk their mounts around to cool them off after the short race. “Anyway, you started before me. The race wasn’t fair,” the young boy said.

“I started about a half-second before you. It doesn’t matter,” Andi replied good-naturedly.
“That’s ’bout all you won by too,” Levi said, trying to keep his attitude in check. It was something he had been trying to do after his first visit to Circle C ranch, the large ranch Andi’s family owned.

Andi sensed Levi’s frustration and raised her free hand up in the air. “Hey, I’m sorry. It ain’t gonna happen again.” She used the hand still holding the reins to guide Taffy to a nearby spring and then dismounted to get a drink of the cool, clear water. She patted Taffy’s saddlebag to make sure the money was still there.

Although Chad had been a little reluctant at first, Andi was now carrying the $125 that Chad wanted to use to buy a horse from Mr. Hanson, who lived in the same town that Andi and Levi were going to.

Andi heard the palomino horse beside her gulping down the water. “Hey, girl, that’s enough. We still got a full day of riding ahead of us.” She pulled the now-wet muzzle out of the spring and looked up at the sky. “It’s starting to look a little dark up there,” she remarked.

Right before the two mounted up, a mass of swirling dust surrounded them.

“Dust storm!” Andi shouted.

It didn’t take long before they started trying to find shelter from the storm and its raging winds. Levi felt his foot hit something that made it hurt, but he kept on until he found a small opening in the rocks not much taller than himself.

When Levi dared open his eyes and look up, the only thing in sight was Taffy’s head stuck through the
entrance of the cave to protect it from the dust. “Andi!” he said.

When he got no response, he coughed out dust and tried again, but this time it was more of a yell. “Andi! Andi, where are you?”

The only sound was Taffy coughing.

Levi got up and looked around for his young aunt. “Andi!” His yelling was now mixed with sobs of fear. He leaned against Taffy’s shoulder as the tears fell. If she could, Andi would answer him. That meant that either she was hurt too bad to answer him or she was lost or . . .

Levi didn’t even want to think about the other things that could have happened to her. He stayed in his spot by Taffy’s shoulder until his tears were no more than a trickle. For the first time he could remember, he was not ashamed of his tears.

Levi forced himself to think of a reasonable explanation for why he couldn’t find Andi. She could have hit her head on something. She could have wandered a good ways away while trying to find refuge from the storm. Even though they hurt to think of, Levi knew there were all kinds of reasons he couldn’t find Andi.

***

Meanwhile, Andi lay still in the large cave Patches had found, staring at what was in front of her.

_Sssssssss!

Andi didn’t dare move a muscle.

_Hissssss!

54
Andi held her breath. *A real rattlesnake. I was hoping I would never see a live rattlesnake this close.*

Andi jumped back as the sand-colored snake lunged at her, missing her left arm by inches. She breathed a prayer of thanks while still keeping her attention focused on the slithering beast in front of her.

*Please, God, oh please!*

Andi kept the never-ending prayer up as the snake went for her again. This time Patches broke between her and the snake, taking the bite himself.

*Patches! God, please let him be okay.* Andi was still afraid to move or speak, but she knew she had to help the little pinto.

Bravely, slowly, and carefully, she inched over to a sharp rock a few feet away. Those few feet away seemed like miles to Andi, but she kept slowly moving on. Once she reached the rock, she picked it up and, in one fast movement, threw the rock at the deadly snake.

The rattlesnake turned back to Andi, Patches now forgotten. The monster had obviously been startled more than hurt at the thought of someone questioning his authority by throwing something at him.

Knowing that there was no time to waste, Andi grabbed up more rocks and started throwing them at the snake. Soon, the torrent of jagged rocks had
wounded the beast beyond movement. Andi walked carefully over to the body and checked to make sure that the rattlesnake was dead. Seeing that it was, she breathed a deep sigh of relief.

*Thank you, Jesus.* Andi breathed out the prayer of thankfulness as she walked over towards Patches. *Thank you, Lord.*

“Hey, Patches! What’s up with that leg, boy?” Andi kept up the steady stream of chatter as she ran her hand down his injured rear leg. “Oh, Patches!”

***

A little while later, Levi and Taffy stood under the shade of a large tree. “Oh, Taffy, what are we going to do?” he asked the palomino for what seemed like the millionth time.

Just then, the answer came to him in the form of a lost dog. Although the animal was foreign to Levi, Taffy seemed to know the mutt immediately.

Her whinny of joy was returned by the dog in the form of light bark and a lick on the muzzle the mare extended. A joyful *yap, yap, whinny!* echoed across the dry valley as the beautiful horse and the dirty dog were reunited.

“How do you know this dog?” Levi asked the horse, temporarily able to forget his worries about his young, lost aunt. “Well, I suppose you won’t be tellin’ me anything real soon, will you, little lady?” Levi patted first the familiar horse, then the strange dog.

Suddenly, the dog began sniffing the air, whining
as he did. Then everything happened at once.

The dog tore off down through the wilderness. Levi, who suddenly had an idea, sprang up onto Taffy’s back and followed the dog. “Andi would have mounted up better,” he said to himself. Right now, though, he was too happy with the thrill of his possible discovery to be upset at himself for his less-than-perfect mounting skills.

“C’mon, Taffy!”

***

Meanwhile, Andi and Patches had had no such luck.

“Patches, stand still.” Andi’s annoyed tone rang out loud and clear in the silence of the uninhabited cave. The pony’s leg wasn’t near as bad as she had thought it was, and now the pinto was just getting on her nerves. As Andi gently rinsed the minor wound, which wasn’t much more than a scratch, she kept up her talk.

*Yap! Yap!*

Andi drew in a sharp breath at the sight of the dog. “Sam?”

Patches sure didn’t recognize the dog, though. He reared up, almost jerking the reins out of Andi’s hand.

“Whoa!”

Andi’s gentle command made Patches calm down. The pony had scared the dog away, so Andi led Patches to a ledge on the side of the cave that stuck out far enough to tie the pinto’s reins to. As she wrapped the reins around the ledge, she listened to the dog whining as he tried to get away from the
spooked pony.

Andi walked outside the cave to find the dog. When she finally found him, she realized it really was Sam. He seemed glad to see her. As she reached down to pick him up, he jumped right into her arms. “Maybe you can help me find Taffy and Levi,” Andi told the dog snuggled in her arms.

Everything happened as if on cue. Sam barked. Taffy galloped up with Levi on her back.

Andi gave a shout of joy. “Levi! Taffy! You’re okay!”

“Andi! The dog found you. He led us right to you,” Levi said in a relieved and excited voice.

“Now, let’s see if we can find our way home,” Andi said. “When the storm hit, I followed Patches to this cave. I can see if I can find my way back to the creek. It is kinda hard to figure out where you are when you’re surrounded by a bunch of dust.”

Andi paused and started thinking hard. “Now, I remember walking straight, but my feet still got a little wet. So that means that I must have walked through that little puddle that never seems to go away.”

She frowned in thought. “If I walked through that puddle, I must have been heading east. I had my hand stuck out in front of me, and I hit something hard like a rock. I think it was that really tall rock. You know which one I’m talking about?”

At Levi’s nod, Andi continued. “That means I was still headed east. Then I felt like I was getting sprayed with water. So, I would have started heading northeast close to that little river that has low banks and likes to
spray you with water every time you walk by it. I walked through a clear stretch before I got here. The last thing I remember feeling before I got here was stepping through a really sandy spot. So let’s go this direction,” Andi said excitedly. “Follow me!”

They traveled for a little ways, riding double on Taffy and leading Patches. Andi knew that Patches could be ridden if it was necessary, but she didn’t want to risk making him hurt his leg any more than it already was.

They followed the trail markers that Andi had described until they finally reached the creek. All four stopped to get a drink of water, then Andi and Levi mounted up and rode back home. The excitement for today was over . . . or so they thought.

***

“Andi, did you let any of the horses loose?” Chad stood right in front of Andi, staring down at her.

“You know I would never do anything like that, Chad,” Andi replied.

“I know. I was just searching for some kind of explanation.” Chad had a defeated look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” Andi asked.

“One, the corral gates got opened during the storm. Half of the breeding stock is gone. They’re nowhere to be found. Mitch is getting ready to go looking for them now. Thieves is most reasonable explanation I came up with.” Chad seemed worn out.

“Can I go with him?” Andi was hopeful as she
looked up at her older brother.

“I was afraid you would ask that,” Chad said. “But I need all the help I can get finding those mares. You seem to know the ranch better than anybody. I suppose you can go. Mother is at Aunt Rebecca’s house for the week, so she won’t be here to worry about you. Go on and saddle up Blaze. Taffy has had a enough excitement for today. She’s probably worn out.”

Andi met up with her brother Mitch a few minutes later, just before he rode off. “Mitch! Wait up!”

She rode up beside Mitch, mounted on Blaze, a sturdy bay with a wide white blaze on his face and two white socks on his front feet. “Chad said I could come with y’all,” she explained.

“All right. We need all the help we can get. We should have some good foals this year, ones that took years of breeding to get. Those were probably some of the best mares we have ever had. They had such good conformation. Let me know if you see them. They should be easy to spot with our brand on them,” Mitch said without ever really looking at Andi.

“You mean one like that?” Andi pointed to a lone mare standing a little ways in front of where they were riding.

“Yeah, like that one.” Mitch pulled his rope off his saddle horn and swung it above his head, preparing to throw it. As it landed smoothly around the mare’s neck, Andi noticed the confused look on her older brother’s face.

Just then, a horse whinnied from a little ways into
the rocks. Then the two siblings heard a noise like a man grunting. Mitch and Andi dismounted and carefully approached the area where the whinny and grunt had come from.

They peeked around the stone wall and saw a man lying on the ground with a horse standing over him.

It wasn’t just any horse, either. It was a Circle C mare. The rest of the stolen horses were standing a little ways away, watching the scene before them.

“Mr. Hanson, did you steal our horses?”

Andi could tell Mitch was extremely furious by the tone in his voice. To be exact, Andi had never heard him this mad.

“It was only a secondary plan.” Mr. Hanson looked at Mitch. “If that dust storm hadn’t hit, you wouldn’t have your little sister riding beside you now. She would have still been busy walking home.”

“What do you mean by that?” Andi spoke up for the first time since she had found the mare.

Mr. Hanson, now obviously trapped, didn’t hesitate before going on. “I wanted to get me some good horses, and Circle C horses are some the best I know of. I figured the easiest way to get them would be to steal them. I was planning on stealing your little sister’s horse, not letting her buy one from me. But the dust storm ruined that idea.”

Andi looked at Mitch. “I guess God really meant it,” she said.

“Meant what?” Mitch looked confused at Andi’s words.
“In Romans 8:28. Just think, if that dust storm hadn’t come up, and if we hadn’t got lost and then come straight home, I would have been walking home right now . . . without Taffy. So, He really meant it. ‘And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God,’” Andi quoted, “‘to them who are the called according to his purpose.’”
Makenna is a homeschooler who lives in Idaho with her family. She enjoys reading, writing, playing musical instruments, making movies and, of course, horses! She especially loves to read to learn more about Jesus Christ, her Lord and Savior.

What?” Andrea Carter banged the test papers onto the desk of her brother Justin.

He sighed and picked up the papers. “It’s true, Andi. You got an F on this test.”

“But I studied hard! You saw me. I even gave up riding over the weekend to study. All this for an F. I’ll be the laughingstock of the school. I won’t be able to lift my head after this.” Her lip quivered slightly.

Justin pushed back some documents and rested his elbows on the top of his desk. “Sis, you need to accept the facts. You failed the test.”

Andi felt the tears welling up in her eyes. “Failed?” she whispered, swallowing hard.
Justin stood up. “Andi, you know we will have to tell Mother about this—”

“No!” Andi hit the desk so hard it jarred her teeth. She turned and ran out of his office.

“Andrea Carter! Come back here this insta—”

She slammed the door and crashed into Tim O’Neil, Justin’s clerical assistant. “Miss Carter, this is an important law office, not a children’s school yard.”

Andi scowled as she pushed past him. She flung the door open and clattered down the steps onto the hot, dusty streets of Fresno.

Rosa, her best friend, was waiting outside, braiding her long, thick, black hair. “¿Qué pasa? What’s wrong?” She tied the end of her braid as Andi flew down the street, ignoring the inquisitive glances of curious bystanders. “¡Espera! Wait!” Rosa called out after her. “Come back!”

Andi paid no attention to Rosa’s frantic calls. Tears poured down her face as she turned down a dark alleyway. Flinging herself down on a stoop of steps, she let out a sob. How did she get an F after studying so hard?

Andi’s shoulders heaved up and down. She buried her face in her hands and let the sobs flow. All that work for nothing?

Just then, Andi heard footsteps coming down the alley. Rosa’s concerned face peered over the side of the building. “¿Estás bien? Are you okay?” She knelt beside Andi and dug into her pocket for a handkerchief.
Andi rubbed her swollen eyes and accepted the wrinkled fabric.

Rosa tilted her head and squinted at Andi. “Was it about last week’s test, amiga?” she asked sympathetically.

Andi nodded. “I got an F. An F! No one’s grades are that low. I also made myself look like a fool by tearing through Justin’s office. Tim’s probably fit to be tied.” She groaned inwardly.

Rosa smiled. “I could hear you running loco in there. Don’t worry, Mr. O’Neil will probably be too busy to rant at you.”

Andi shook her head. “Tim’s never too busy to give me a piece of his mind.” She got up, brushed her clothes off, and wiped her face with the sleeve of her light, cotton blouse.

Squaring her shoulders, she set her jaw and prepared to go back to Justin’s office and apologize. She felt the blood rush from her neck to her face. Andi shook her head, visualizing how stupid she must have looked, crashing into Tim like that.

Suddenly, the stairs vibrated and the sound of galloping horses pulling a stagecoach caught her attention.

Rosa’s eyes opened wide. “¿Qué es eso? What is that?”

Andi shrugged. “Probably just a coach. It sounded like it had a strong team of horses. Come on, let’s go see.”
They ran to the entrance of the alley and peered out to see people tying up their horses. Andi caught her breath as she gazed at the most beautiful horses she had ever seen. Black, with white manes and tails, the glossy steeds tossed their sleek heads and whinnied gaily.

Andi had to tear her gaze away from the beauties to glance at the family. It looked like the parents had gone into Justin’s office, and only the children were left in the coach.

A boy with shaggy brown hair was clapping hands with his younger sister, a little brunette beauty with a laugh like silver bells. Andi walked closer to the carriage.

Rosa pulled at her arm. “Por favor, amiga. Please, Andi. Don’t get into any more trouble today.”

Andi turned and grinned at Rosa. “Don’t worry, Rosa. They’re just kids.” Rosa still looked suspicious. Andi smiled. “Why don’t you tell Justin where I am, so he’s not worried when he can’t find us.”

Rosa nodded. After one more doubtful glance at the strange children, she took off in the direction of Justin’s law office.

Andi stepped toward the stagecoach.
The strange boy turned around and grinned at Andi. “Howdy,” he said, glancing at her slightly disheveled appearance.

“Hi,” answered Andi. “You must be new here. I’m Andrea Carter. What’re your names?”

“I’m Mike Parker,” answered the boy. “This is my sister, Danny.”

The little girl nodded at Andi and then glared at her brother. “My name is Danielle,” she snapped, “not Danny.” Turning to Andi, she pleaded, “Please call me Danielle.”

Andi raised an eyebrow at Mike, who shrugged. “It’s what she likes. Say,” he said, “is that your brother calling you?”

Andi turned and saw a blonde-haired boy running toward them, waving his arms and shouting. “Goodness, no.” She laughed. “That’s my friend Cory Blake. Cory!” she said, turning to wave him over.

“Andi, so glad I found you!” Cory bent over to catch his breath. “There’s a new headline in the paper. Something’s up in Silverton—”

“Silverton?” Mike interrupted him. “We’re from there.”

“Really?” Cory asked, his eyes growing big. “Then maybe you know about the theft at the County Bank?”

Danny gasped.

“The County Bank? How much was taken?” Mike asked.
Cory scanned the paper he carried. “Thousands,” he answered. “Mostly money from Judge Thompson’s account.”

“Not Judge Thompson! He’s such a nice man,” Danny cried out.

“Who do you think did it?” Andi asked her new friends.

Mike shrugged. “Who else?”

Cory cocked his head in curiosity. “Who?”

Mike balled his fists. “The town bully, Jason Lyles. He’s always getting into trouble. Once, he even brought a gun to school and threatened to shoot all the first graders.”

Danny shivered.

“Was he still in Silverton when you left?” Cory asked.

“No,” Danny answered. “His cousin Jake—who’s a friend of mine—told me that Jason left town in a hurry.”

Andi snapped her fingers, making all the others jump. “Jason Lyles! I thought I recognized that name. Cory, he goes to school, remember? He’s only been here a few weeks, but he took the test with everyone else.” In her excitement, she almost forgot her grade on the test.

Cory scratched his head. “Yeah, now I remember. He just arrived in Fresno. Tall, shaggy black hair, blue eyes?”

Mike groaned. “That’s him. Great. I thought we had escaped him when we left Silverton.”
Andi heard Justin call her name. She smacked her forehead. “Justin, Rosa. I forgot about them.” She turned to look at the Parkers. “Where are you going to live? Can I talk to you tomorrow?”

“Sure.” Mike shrugged. “We’re going to live over there, in a small . . .”

Justin’s voice grew more insistent.


***

Andi walked down the hall of the boardinghouse where Mr. Blake, Cory’s father and the owner of the livery, had informed her that the Parkers lived. She carried the latest edition of the *Fresno Weekly Expositor* under her arm. She couldn’t wait to show her new friends the headline on the front of the paper.

Andi had bought the paper after Justin dropped her off in town. Andi’s mother, Elizabeth, had included not going into town alone as part of her punishment for running off in a rage from the office.

Andi grimaced. The other part of her punishment was mucking out the dirty horse stalls for a week. During vacation time! Plus, she had to restudy her lessons and take the test again.

At that moment Andi despised everything she studied, and everything related to her studies. She probably would have added more to her dark
thoughts, but a strong hand suddenly rested on her shoulder.

An unpleasant voice interrupted her reverie. “Look where you’re goin’, Carter girl. Almost ran me over.”

Andi found herself looking at a tall, black-haired boy with piercing blue eyes. “Jason!” She gasped. “Yeah. Not too happy to see me, are ya?” “It’s not that, I just . . .” Andi gulped. “Just what?” Jason asked, raising an eyebrow. “Excuse me.” Andi tried to walk sedately past the boy, but he held his hand in front of her. “Nothin’ doin’, girl. What’s that under your arm?”

Andi held it out, face down. “Just a paper.” Her hands were shaking. If Jason saw what was on the front . . .

He stared at it. “A paper? What’s a pretty girl like you doin’ with a newspaper in this place, of all places? Are you here to visit somebody?”

Andi stamped her foot. Who did Jason think he was to call her pretty, and to say such insulting things about her reading, and to dig his nose into her business? Andi drew herself up to her full height. “Jason Lyles, whether I go to visit someone or not is none of your concern. Now, let me pass.”

Jason smirked. “Think you’re real high and mighty, now, don’t ya, Andrea Carter?”

Andi tightened her lips. She was just about to say something she would probably regret, but Jason’s
gaze went over her head. He suddenly stiffened, grabbed her arm, and pulled her close to the wall, covering her mouth with his strong, calloused hand.

She dropped the paper and struggled, but his grip was firm.

He whispered in her ear, “Stop fightin’ now.”

Andi stopped, but still she remained tense. She heard footsteps coming down the hall, but they stopped. The two remained still.

A nasty voice resounded in the passageway. “Jason, where are you? Blast, he’s late again.”

Andi looked up at Jason. He gave a quick nod of reassurance. “Stay right here. Don’t move and you’ll be safe.” Releasing his grip on her mouth and arm, he stepped out into the open. “Here, Dad.”

Andi’s mouth fell open. Dad?

“About time, kid. Got the money?”

“Here.”

There was a shuffling noise that Andi recognized as money passed from hand to hand.

“Great work, boy.”

“Dad, you said when I’m done with this job you’d let me be.”

Andi furrowed her brow. Done with what?


Andi heard shouts outside. Too late she realized Jason had walked into a trap. Andi peered out of her little nook. She saw the man as he sprang past Jason,
hitting him in the stomach and winding him. He turned to run down the hall. Andi shrank back into her hiding place, but it was too late.

Jason’s father grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him. She kicked and bit. He slapped her face. “Be quiet, girl.”

Andi glared at him. “Let me go!”

Jason got up. “Dad, let her go. Please. Don’t hurt her.”

“I told ya to come alone, kid.” The man was furious. He held Andi tightly.

“Dad, it was an accident. I found her in the hall. I was trying to make her run off. Honest!” The sound of trampling feet was getting nearer.

Andi gasped. “Jason, get out of here! The sheriff’s here.” She kicked the man. “Let me go!”

Jason frowned. “I can’t.” He ran at his father and grabbed Andi, pulling her toward him.

The man struck Jason on his cheek.

Andi bit his hand and screamed at Jason. “If you stay, they’ll arrest you!”

Jason ducked a blow from his father. “I won’t leave you with him.”

The pounding of feet grew louder. The man frantically shook Jason off and yanked Andi toward the door.

The door burst open. Mike and Cory stood there.

The man hesitated then turned toward the other door. It was flung open, revealing the sheriff, and—
“Chad!” Andi yelled to her bossy older brother. “Help!”

Chad’s eyes opened wide. He started toward her then stopped.

Andi wondered why. Then she saw a gun in her captor’s hand. She felt a blow to her head. She was vaguely aware of a shout. Then all went black.

***

Andi woke up. She heard low voices speaking. Shaking her head side to side, she tried to clear the confusion out of her mind. “Ouch.” It hurt to open her eyes. She was in the sheriff’s office, lying on a small cot. Several men were gathered in one corner.

She sat up and called, “Justin? Chad?”

Justin turned toward her and came to her side. “Hi, honey, I heard you had a rough time.”

Andi smiled, relaxed in Justin’s embrace, and nodded. Then she gave a start. “Jason? Cory? Where—”

Mitch, Andi’s third-oldest brother, came to her side. “They’re fine. Jason gave a full account of what happened, and Cory and Mike verified it. All’s fine, little sis. But next time you think you might have a lead on a criminal . . .”


Sheriff Tate came over and sat beside Andi’s bedside.
Justin cleared his throat. “Jason Lyles, the boy you met in the hallway, is a wanted criminal in Silverton. However, with what we’ve discovered today, it was actually his father who committed the crimes and framed his son for them.

“As for the money, Kirk Lyles, Jason’s father, gave it to Jason to bring here to Fresno, where Kirk would set Jason up, get him arrested for a crime he didn’t commit, then skedaddle out of California with the money and no one looking for him.”

Justin chuckled and finished. “Thankfully, you stopped Lyles, and we got him. He tried to hurt you, but Chad can be like a wild beast when he’s angry.”

Andi smiled then asked, “What will happen to Jason now? After all, his dad’s in jail. Will he have to be put somewhere, like a school?”

Sheriff Tate laughed. “No, Andi. Jason’s staying here. He’ll be working, of course, to help clear his name, but I think you’ll see him at school.”

Just then, Jason walked through the door. Seeing Andi, he walked over and held out his hand. “How’re ya feeling, Miss Carter?”

Andi took his hand. “Much better, Jason.” She smiled. “Heard you’re coming to school.”

Jason rubbed his neck. “Yeah, I tried to get out of that one. Never was much one for learnin’.” He and Andi shared a grin. Then he turned to answer a question posed to him by Chad.

Justin leaned over to Andi. “Speaking of school . . . you’ve got studying to do.”
Chapter One

They were on their way! Fifteen-year-old Andi Carter could hardly believe that Mother had let her go. Goldtown, California, here we come!

Once every year Chad made the two-day trip up to the small mining town for a routine check on the mine the Carters co-owned, and this year Mother had allowed Andi to go along.

Chad winked and grinned at her. “Enjoying the ride, little sister?” he said, bringing Sky to a stop.
“It’s beautiful, Chad,” she breathed as they both turned their gaze to the beauty before them. The sun was just peeking over the Sierra foothills, sending splashes of violet, gold and pink hues across the sky.

They stayed there until the sun had fully risen in all its glory, then Chad broke the silence. “Well, we had best be on our way.”

Andi nudged Taffy into a canter. Happiness spilled over. This was going to be the best week ever! Nothing was going to spoil their adventure. Not if Andi could help it.

***

Justin Carter turned the page in his book and looked over at Mitch and Mother as they concentrated on their game of checkers. Supper was long over, and the Carters were enjoying a rare evening of peace and quiet. Melinda was out for the evening, and with Chad and Andi gone the house seemed still and silent.

A knock on the front door made him look up again.

“My, I wonder who could be here at this hour,” Mitch said, glancing up from his game. “It’s nearly ten o’clock.”

“I’ll go see who it is.” Justin rose and left the parlor. He returned several minutes later with a disturbed look on his face.

“What wrong, Justin?” Elizabeth said, catching sight of Justin’s worried face.
“It’s Chad.” He sank down on the settee and handed the telegram to Mitch, who read:

**CHAD DO NOT COME TO GOLDTOWN STOP STERLING IS BLAMING YOU FOR PROBLEMS AT THE MINE STOP TO COME NOW WOULD BE EXTREMELY DANGEROUS STOP JEM COULTER**

“Oh, no,” Elizabeth whispered, sinking back in her chair.

“Justin, what are we going to do?” Mitch’s voice was low.

“The only thing we can do,” Justin said grimly. “Mitch, you’re going to Goldtown.”

***

Andi shivered as she and Chad entered the Goldtown hotel. Every bone in her body was screaming for a rest, and her eyes could barely stay open. Chad had hoped to arrive in Goldtown around ten o’clock Tuesday night. But an unexpected rainstorm had delayed them. Now, two hours later, Andi was soaked through and exhausted.

“I would like two rooms please,” Chad said to the clerk.

“All right, sir. What name shall I put down?”

“Carter. Chad Carter.”

***

“He’s here, Carl. Chad Carter is here in Goldtown.”
A single candle lit the room. Two shadowy figures sat at a table facing each other, their faces shrouded in the darkness.

The smaller man continued. “I seen him with my own eyes. He checked in over at the hotel not ten minutes ago. When I asked him what name I should put down he said ‘Carter, Chad Carter’ just like that.”

The other man was silent for a moment. “So, he’s come at last, has he? Well, I guess it’s time to put the plan into action.” His voice was low and raspy. “Tell the others. They’ll know what to do.”

He stood up and pushed his hat onto his head. Then he opened the door and without a word melted into the moonless night.

Chapter Two

Chad briskly nudged his horse along Goldtown’s Main Street. He had left Andi back at the hotel. There was no need for her to come along with him to Will Sterling’s.

William Sterling was the son of Earnest Sterling. When Earnest had suddenly died eight months ago, William had taken over his half of the mine.

As Chad headed up the steep hill toward the Sterling’s large house at the top, he noticed a cluster of rundown houses at the edge of the hill.
The last time he had been here the miners’ houses hadn’t looked like that. Jem Coulter, his good friend, lived in Goldtown running a livery business. Why hadn’t he informed Chad of the housing conditions? Where had all that money Chad had sent to keep up repairs gone?

“What in blazes is going on around here?” he muttered to himself as he cantered up to the house and pulled Sky to a top. He was shown into a large, elegant parlor.

Moments later William Sterling walked in. “Hello, Chad,” he said stiffly. “Won’t you take a seat?”

“No, thank you, Will. I’d rather stand.” Chad’s voice was cold. Without pleasantries, he got down to business. “Why are the houses so dilapidated?”

“Why are you asking me? You’re the one who’s been sending only half the money we need,” William shot back. “I’ve been doing my best to make ends meet as it is. It’s time you start pulling your fair share of the weight around here.”

William glared at Chad. “All I’m saying is that for the last four months you’ve only been sending half of the agreed amount. I sent you telegram after telegram, but you never replied. Now, thanks to you, it’s all I can do to keep the miners from going on strike. And I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that the mine hasn’t been producing much gold lately.”

By the time Chad left, he was convinced William was stealing part of the money he sent every month.
and using it for his own purposes. William had all but admitted that he was in financial trouble.

As Chad galloped toward the mine, he seethed with anger. How dare William treat these miners with so little care? And it wasn’t just the housing. Wages had been cut back also. If he’d had any idea of what was going on before, this would never have happened.

But something just didn’t add up. If William was indeed stealing money, why would he be pouring every last cent he had into this mine?

Chad stopped. Maybe William was telling the truth. Maybe somebody else was stealing the money Chad sent.

Just then a sharp, searing pain ripped through Chad’s back. The next instant he found himself sprawled face down in the dirt. Pain tore at his shoulder. He couldn’t breathe. The world was going black, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

***

Jem Coulter hurriedly knocked on Chad’s hotel room. Why had Chad come to Goldtown? Didn’t he get my telegram in time?

This was not good, not good at all. The miners were looking for someone to blame for the low wages and unsafe conditions of the mine. William Sterling, the sniveling weasel, had put all the heat on Chad, telling the miners it was all his fault. Jem had done his best to convince them otherwise, but Sterling had
his clutches on the miners so strongly that only a handful believed him.

The door swung open, and a pretty, dark-haired girl looked up at him. “Hello, sir. How may I help you?”

“I’m looking for Chad Carter. I was told he was in room ten, but I must be mistaken.” He turned to go but halted at her next words.

“This is Chad Carter’s room. I’m his youngest sister, Andi. May I ask what business you have with my brother?”

Her voice was friendly, yet Jem detected a hint of reserve and uneasiness in it. “I’m your brother’s friend, Jem Coulter.” He smiled at her. “Is Chad here?”

“No, he left about half an hour ago. I think he said he was going to see William Sterling . . .” Her voice trailed off as she caught sight of his face. “What’s wrong? Is Chad in danger?” Worry creased her brow.

“I’m afraid so,” Jem grimly stated. He related the events that had been unfolding.

“Oh, dear! What are we going to do?” Andi’s eyes filled with fear.

“I’m going to start searching for him as soon as I take you back to my place. Ellie, that’s my sister, lives there with me. You can stay with her till we get this all sorted out.” His voice was low, as if he was afraid of someone hearing.
“I want to go with you,” Andi stated determinedly. “He’s my brother. I ought to help you look for him.”

Despite the worry in his gut, Jem cracked a smile. “You sound just like him, you know—determined and strong-willed. A Carter to the bone. But I can’t let you go with me. If something happened to you, Chad would never forgive me.”

He paused and looked at Andi. “No, you’re coming to the homestead. Now grab your things and follow me. I don’t know if the miners would stoop so low as to hurt you, but we can’t take the chance of finding out.”

Chapter Three

“You’ve killed him, Greg,” the man said in a scared voice, looking down at Chad’s still body. Blood dripped from a wound in his chest.

“So what if I did, Harry? It’s what the boss paid us to do,” Greg said, though his hands shook as he hoisted Chad onto his horse. “Now, help me get him out of here before anybody see’s us.” He jumped onto his horse, Chad’s limp body slung over the front.

Harry grabbed Chad’s horse. After about two miles, they stopped at the edge of a steep, rocky incline that dropped off sharply half-way down.
Between the two of them they dragged Chad over to the edge.

“Are you sure we have to do this, Greg?” Harry stammered. “You already shot him. It seems kinda cruel to push him down a cliff too.”

“We’ve got to do what the boss wants, and he told us to dump him down Cripple Canyon.” His face hardened. “And that’s what I plan to do.”

***

The sun was high in the sky when Mitch galloped up to Jem Coulter’s homestead a little ways out of town and slid to a stop. He had been riding as hard as he dared push his horse for the last two days.

The front door swung open at his knock, and a pretty young lady with auburn hair answered.
"I was told that Jeremiah Coulter lives here," Mitch said.

"Yes, this is his place. I’m Ellie Coulter, Jem’s sister. Who are you?"

"I’m—"

"Mitch!" Andi exclaimed, dashing passed Ellie.

"Andi, what are you doing here?"

"Jem came by the hotel this morning around eight to tell Chad that the miners were after him, but it was already too late. So he brought me out here to the homestead. Oh, Mitch, I’m so worried about Chad. Jem hasn’t been able to find him since he left the hotel this morning." Tears choked her voice.

"It’s okay, Andi." Mitch comforted her, but his eyes betrayed his anxiety. "Everything is going to be fine. We’ll find Chad. Don’t worry."

***

The air was hot and muggy. Beads of sweat dripped down Mitch’s face. After finding Andi at the Coulters and saddling a new mount, he had left to find Jem, which wasn’t an easy task since he didn’t know the area very well. But at last he had found him and a few other of Jem’s trusted friends.

There was no sign of Chad, however. It was if he had disappeared without a trace. Sterling claimed he hadn’t seen Chad since he left his house that morning for the mine. The miners swore Chad never arrived at the mine.
So, where could he be? The miners were so stirred up against the Carters that anything was possible.

“Oh, Lord,” Mitch whispered, bowing his head. “Protect Chad right now and give him strength. Please show us how to find him.”

He wished he had a bird’s-eye view of the vultures circling nearby. Surely then he could see Chad . . .

*Wait a minute,* he thought. *Vultures don’t usually group together like this unless . . .*

“Jem, look at those vultures. You don’t think that maybe—”

“Let’s hope not.” Jem stopped his horse and studied the vultures for a second then said, “It looks like they’re circling around Cripple Canyon.”

Jem’s face was calm and placid, but Mitch could see he was scared. Scared that something awful had happened to Chad, that he was lying in some ditch—bleeding, wounded, or worse.

But even in the midst of their turmoil, Mitch could feel a reassuring presence, a calm in the dark of the storm. God’s hand was with them, and whatever happened he knew it would be in God’s will.

Silently, they made their way down the rocky slope until they were at the bottom of Cripple Canyon. Tall, steep hills sloped down, creating a narrow, winding gully.

“Chad!” Mitch called, his voice echoing eerily through the canyon.

Mitch spotted him first, lying face down on the dusty ground. With a cry, he swung off his horse and
rushed over to the still form. “Chad” he said, slowly rolling him over.

He froze.

A long gash ran along the top of Chad’s head, the blood already clotted and dark. His arm lay twisted at his side. But it was the bullet wound in his shoulder that made Mitch stop. What had happened?

“Oh, no.” Jem’s shocked voice brought Mitch out of his daze. “Is he still alive?” His last words were barely audible.

“Yes, but just barely,” came Mitch’s answer. “He’s been shot, so we can’t move him. The bleeding has stopped, but I’m afraid if we move him it’ll start again.”

“Then we have to bring the doctor here,” Jem stated, his face full of concern. “I’ll go.” He mounted his horse in a flash and was off.

Chapter Four

The pain was unbearable, as if someone was stepping on his chest. Chad moaned, and his eyes fluttered open. “Water,” he managed through his parched lips.

Someone who looked vaguely like Mitch brought the canteen to his mouth.
“Chad, what happened?” The voice seemed far away. He fought the wave of darkness that threatened to cover him again. Mitch had to know.

“Sterling,” he whispered, trying to sit up. “It’s not—” His face contorted in agony as another wave of pain swept through him. Chad licked his lips and started over. “It’s not his fault.”

He fell back, exhausted. There was more to say, but the darkness once again enveloped him. This time he did not fight it.

***

It was almost dusk before they got Chad back to the doctor’s office. They had waited until no one was around before they dared bring him inside.

Doctor Brown had done his best to stabilize the wound. Several of Chad’s ribs were cracked, and his arm badly broken.

Andi slumped in a chair, exhausted but too worried to sleep. Mitch sat beside her, an unreadable expression on his face.

Finally, Ellie broke the silence. “You know, when Jem and I were little we knew an old miner named Sid. He would tell us these old stories and swear it was the dead truth.”

A faraway look came over her pretty face. “I remember one story he told us. Long ago before I was born, a man named Mr. Henderson owned the land where the Madera mine is now. The family was poor,
very poor, and not knowing that the land under them was rich with gold.

“Anyway, one night at the saloon in town, Mr. Henderson gambled his land away to Mr. Earnest Sterling, then a young man of eighteen. He gambled it all away except for a small part along the edge, a nasty bit of land.”

The lamp light illuminated Ellie’s face as she continued. “Right after that they discovered gold in the mine. Mr. Sterling became wealthy overnight.”

“What happened to the Henderson family?” Mitch asked.

“They lived on that little bit of land for a few years after that, but jobs were scarce and Henderson couldn’t stand to work in a mine that he thought was rightfully his. Finally, he moved his family down to another part of California.

“Their land never sold, and it now belongs to his grandson, Carl Henderson. Rumor has it that Carl believes that the Madera mine really belongs to him. He’s been told stories all his life about how the mine was stolen from them until it’s made him a bitter and angry man. Sid used to tell us that Carl was plotting to overthrow the mine and take back what he believes is rightly Henderson land.

“I’ve only seen Carl a few times, but personally I wouldn’t put it past him to overthrow the mine,” Ellie stated. “But Sid never stopped worrying that something was going to happen to the mine. I think he really believed the story he told. In fact, a few
months ago, Sid came by the house looking for Jem. He wouldn’t tell me what he wanted to talk to him about except that it was very important and had something to do with Carl. But Jem was out of town for the weekend. I could tell that Sid was worked up about something.

“Hard as I tried,” Ellie went on, “he wouldn’t tell me what it was about. He told me that he would wait for Jem and not to go snooping in his business. That was the last I saw of him. The next morning they found Sid dead in a gully. Folks assumed he fell over the edge on his way home. It was a cold and rainy night, and I suppose that might be what happened.

“But Sid knew this town like the back of his hand. It just seemed odd to me that he would fall over a cliff. I still wonder if he stumbled across something he shouldn’t have and got killed for it.”

Once again silence fell over the room. The sound of a door opening made Andi look up. Doctor Brown stood in the doorway.

“How is he, doctor?” Andi asked, worry in her voice.

“I removed the bullet, and he’s lost a lot of blood. But as long as an infection doesn’t set in I don’t see why he wouldn’t make a full recovery.”

“Thank you, Lord,” Mitch exclaimed.

“He wants to talk to you,” Doctor Brown said to Mitch.
They disappeared into the next room. A few minutes later Mitch returned. “Where’s Jem?” His voice was clipped.

“Outside keeping guard.” Ellie had barely finished before he was gone.

*That was strange,* Andi remarked to herself. *I wonder what he’s up to?*

In a few moments, the door swung open and Jem and Mitch came in.

“Listen up.” Jem’s voice was hardly above a whisper. “Chad told Mitch that one of the men who tried to kill him had a scar down the left side of his face.”

He looked at Ellie and continued. “The only man I know around here that fits Chad’s description is Greg Simmons, Carl Henderson’s caretaker. He keeps the Henderson land from squatters.”

“So Jem and I are going up there to see if he knows anything,” Mitch supplied.

“Maybe Sid’s story was true,” Ellie said. “Maybe this is all about getting the mine back.”

***

*Dear Mother,*

*Chad is recovering quite well, and Doctor Browns says that hopefully he will be able to come home in two weeks. I know Mitch told you that Chad is fine, but I wanted to tell you how they caught the people that were really behind it all.*
Nothing made sense until Chad told Mitch that one of the people who attacked him had a long scar down the side of his face. It reminded Jem of a miner who was less than honorable. So he and Mitch decided to go check out this old cabin. And guess what, Mother! The man with the scar was there, along with Sky.

Anyway, as soon as he saw there was no way out, the man confessed that he and another man beat up Chad. They were working for Carl Henderson, the man who was really stealing the money for the mine. Needless to say, they are all behind bars now.

I miss you terribly, Mother. and can’t wait to be home again—

A nudge to her side made Andi look up. Mitch’s teasing eyes met hers. He shifted his gaze across the room. Chad and Ellie sat at the table, deep in conversation.

Andi looked back at Mitch, surprise written across her face. “Well, I never,” she muttered to herself.

Picking up her pencil, Andi concluded her letter.

Jem and Ellie have been so kind to us. I really like Ellie and I don’t think I’m the only one that feels that way!

Tell Justin and Melinda howdy from me.

All my love,

Andi
Kaitlyn is a homeschooled student from Arizona. With two awesome parents and five younger siblings, life is never dull. Her favorite activities include reading, writing, signing, anything music, and hanging out with friends. Lord willing, she hopes to someday have a horse of her own.

Chapter One

Come on, Mitch, let’s hurry!” eleven-year-old Andrea Carter begged, attempting to pull her big brother towards the wagon. “We still have to meet up with Cory, and I wanted to be there early so we can see everything and—”

“Whoa! Slow down, little sis.” Mitch chuckled. “We have plenty of time. The circus will be here all day.”

“I wouldn’t be in such a hurry if we could’ve gone earlier this week too. My other friends—”
“Ahem!” Chad coughed from the wagon seat, giving her a warning look. “You know very well why we couldn’t go before now. Be grateful we are taking you today, young lady.”

Yes, Andi knew. When you lived on a successful ranch like the Circle C, there was always work to be done. Especially with the new horses, the boys had to stay up late last night doing extra chores so they could be gone all day today.

“I’m sorry,” Andi apologized, dropping her head. “Thank you for taking me today.”

“Sure thing, lil’ sis.” Mitch smiled. “But if Justin doesn’t hurry up, I’m afraid I’m going to be the impatient one.”

“Well, your wait is over.” Gleefully spinning on her heels, Andi rushed over to hug her eldest brother.

“Hi, honey.” Justin returned the embrace. “Mother has decided it’s best for herself and Melinda to stay behind, on account of Melinda’s running a fever.”

“In that case, since we’re not all going anyway,” Chad began, “I reckon I’ll stay behind to tend to those new horses. Some of them show some real potential. See ya’ll later!”

***

Having wandered around the grounds for several hours, the Carters were hot and hungry. Andi’s friend Cory suggested it was high
time for a late lunch. “Look, there’s a good spot,” he hollered, pointing to a shaded spot beneath an elm.

“Sure is,” Mitch heartily agreed. “I’ll go get the picnic basket.”

“Yippee!” Andi squealed, jumping up and down a bit before racing after Cory. “I’m starved!”

***

Discreetly wiping her sticky hands on her denim skirt, Andi grimaced. “I can’t believe I forgot to fetch the napkins when Mother told be to,” she grumbled under her breath. “And I forgot my bandana too.”

“What’s that, honey?” Inquired Justin, raising his eyebrows.

“Oh, nothing, big brother. Do you think we could...”

“... go into the tent with the special animals next?” Cory finished. He smiled mischievously.

Turning to Justin, Mitch scrunched his face in confusion. “But that’s the tent where they keep all the trained animals for the shows. Is it actually open to the public?”

Justin nodded. “It’s open for the first time. Kids really enjoy seeing such unique animals up close, so the circus decided to see how that goes.”

“Alrighty then, I don’t see why not,” Mitch said.

After waiting in line, they all went inside a dim, busy tent. Large cages lined the walls. Ducks, dogs, and a bear cub were just a few of the interesting animals the cages held.
“Oh, look at that monkey, Cory!” Andi squealed excitedly and pointed across the tent.

“You two can go get a closer look if you want,” Mitch approved. “Just stay together. Justin and I will be over here looking at the . . .”

Before Andi heard what they were going to look at, Cory was dragging her by the hand. “Come on, Andi. Hurry. I’ve never seen a real monkey before.”

Surprisingly, the small mammal seemed just as curious about the children as they were of him.

“Aww, look how cute and playful he is, Cory. Hi there, Mr. Monkey. How are yo . . . Hey!”

“I think he likes you too, Andi.” Cory chuckled.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t need to . . . this monkey’s sure got a grip! Hmm, Cory?”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t get him to let go of my shirt sleeve,” she whispered, blushing.

“I’ve got an idea.” He whipped a carrot stick out of his pocket and offered it to the monkey.

“You were supposed to eat that with your lunch, Cory Blake,” Andi hissed.

He shrugged. “I was saving it for later.”

Immediately, the little, brown, fur ball released Andi and lunged for the carrot, snatching it through the bars. Giggling, Andi took a step toward Cory, paying attention to how close her sleeve came to the cage. While they watched the animal, Justin came up behind them.
“Ready to go?” he asked in tone which Andi knew well. It meant ‘time to go.’

“Sure Justin.” When she spun around, Mr. Monkey grabbed her braid. His cage began to tip as she walked away. Her hands flew to her head and she stumbled forward. The cage toppled.

Thankfully, Cory dashed to the rescue, catching the cage by its latch and preventing disaster.

He laughed at Andi’s horrified face. “Yep, it’s definitely time to go!”

Chapter Two

*Crunch, clap, clip-clop. “Whoa there, boy.”* Mitch reined in the horse. The wagon rolled to a stop.

Sliding immediately from the wagon, Justin snatched a brown paper bag that had been sitting on the bench between Mitch and himself. “I’m gonna run this in to Mother real quick. She had me pick up some medicine for Melinda while I was in town.”

“You do that,” Mitch said. “I’m going to put up the horses for the night . . . as soon as I use the outhouse, that is,” he added.

With both brothers gone, and nothing breaking the silence but the crickets, Andi slid down in the wagon and gazed up at the stars. They were just
beginning to appear. Sighing contentedly, she rested her head on a pile of blankets.

It squeaked. Then it began to wiggle.

With a screech, Andi leaped back, heart pounding. Squinting, she watched as something emerged from the wad of cloth.

“Mr. Monkey?” She gasped, jaw dropping. “How in the world did you get here? You’re supposed to . . . not supposed to . . . what am I . . . when did . . .?”

Hearing the resounding bang of the outhouse door, Andi realized she had to act fast. “My brothers can’t find you!” she whispered.

With a shudder she remembered the last time she had introduced them to her critter-pet: a raccoon. Needless to say, they hadn’t reacted very well.

“Shh!” With that, she wrapped the squirming monkey up, charged through the front door, dashed up the stairs, and stopped only when she was safely behind the closed door of her bedroom.

***

Andi stretched and rolled over.

*Crash!*

Forcing her droopy eyes open, she shot up. What in the world made that—

“Oh, no!” she groaned, flopping back onto her pillow before rolling out of bed. She surveyed the damage.
Her bureau drawers were pulled out askew, clothes spilling onto the floor. The remains of her water-glass was shattered on the ground. “It looks like something exploded in here!” she grumbled, eyes darting frantically in search of the culprit.

Quickly, she pried him from her tapestry. “I have to hurry to breakfast before Mother sends someone to fetch me. Here, you little rascal, you can hang out in my closet until I bring you some food. And this time, stay put.”

After making sure the monkey was properly situated and pulling anything out of the closet that would be easily destroyed, Andi rushed through her morning routine. Still tying the end of her braid, she clomped down stairs.

“Well, good morning little miss sunshine!” her mother greeted her. “You’re the first one to the table this morning. What do you think should go with the flapjacks and bacon? Eggs or fruit?”

“Fruit!” she replied without hesitation. “More of us could eat it that way.”

“Huh? More of us could . . . hmm, okay, sweetie.”

In a few minutes the family was seated around the table and Justin said grace.

“In Thy Name we pray, Amen,” he finished.

“So,” Andi started as casually as possible, passing the bacon. “Can we take Melinda to the circus today or tomorrow, since she’s feeling better?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, honey, but they’re already gone.”

“What?” Andi fairly shrieked.
“Andrea, please!”
“Sorry Mother.”
“It’s okay, Andi. I don’t mind,” Melinda chipped in, unsure of why her sister had reacted so violently.
“Oh, well that’s good. But, Justin, why did they leave so soon?”
“They were a few days behind schedule when they arrived, so they’re making up for it by leaving a little early. Why?” He eyed her quizzically.
“No reason.” She would make sure to slip some extra fruit upstairs. “Hey, I told Cory I’d ride with him today. Is that still okay?”
“That’s fine, dear.” Mother looked up from her plate. “Just be back in time to do your evening chores.”
“I will. Can I be excused? I have to go water the horses.”
“Of course.”
After gulping down her juice, Andi sped up stairs for her hat. And to feed her house guest.

Chapter Three

Out on the range, Andi felt so free. The breeze was wonderful, and probably would have blown off her hat if she hadn’t secured the chin strap properly.
“Come on, Taffy! We have to meet Cory at our special spot. Just let me make sure Mr. Monkey is nice and secure.”

Andi peeked at him. He was safe—yet slightly frightened—in her carpet bag. Tugging gently on the ropes with which she had fastened it to her saddle horn, she made sure they were still nice and tight. Satisfied, she clicked at Taffy and softly kicked her sides with her boots. “Okay, girl, go ahead and run!”

Cory was already there by the time they arrived. “Howdy, Andi. Where shall we go today?”

“That doesn’t really matter right now,” she answered hastily, trotting up beside him.

“Huh?”

“Dismount and I’ll show you why,” she explained, an edge of mystery in her voice. Swinging down herself, she met him on the ground. “Come look in here,” she encouraged, pulling him toward the carpet bag.

Although he raised his eyebrows at her suspiciously, Cory readily obeyed. A sudden yelp showed her he had indeed seen its contents.

With a start, he slammed it shut and leaped back. “Jiminy crickets in July! Why in the world do you have a monkey, Andi? Is it the same one we saw yesterday?”

Andi nodded then proceeded to tell him the whole story, including all the mischief he had caused thus far. “And just this morning, when I came in from my morning chores, Melinda was hollering from 100
upstairs about someone throwing everything off her vanity. I knew he must have got out again.”

She made a face. “I really hoped no one had found him. Then I heard a crash from the kitchen and found him in the pantry!”

Cory’s eyes widened. “Did your mother find out?”

“No, but it was close. She came in a few moments later and scolded me for getting into the food without asking. And for making such a mess out of it.”

“So, what are you going to do? The circus has already left,” he inquired dismally.

“I know. That’s why I really need your help.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“You live way closer to town than me. So, I was hoping you could find out where they went and how to send a message to the circus people.”

“Is that all?”

Andi sighed. *He knows me too well,* she thought. “Actually, I would like you to take a turn watching him.”

She took a deep breath. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but I still have to clean up the messes he made at my house. Scattered items and . . . uh”—she crinkled her nose—”before someone happens upon them, you know.”

“I don’t know about this.”

“Oh, please, Cory,” Andi pleaded, giving him her very best puppy-dog eyes.

He laughed. “Fine. That’s what friends are for.”
“Thank you. You’re the best!” she cried, giving him a quick hug.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said, helping her switch the monkey carrycase to his saddle. “Meet me back here at two, and I’ll tell you what I found out. That will give me four hours.”

“Okay, see you then!”

***

“Phew!” Andi shut her bedroom door behind her. “Done.” As she strolled to the stairs, she glanced around curiously. No one was around. With a mischievous grin she hopped onto the banister and rode it all the way downstairs. “Oof!”

“Why, Andrea! Aren’t you a little old for that?” Mother’s hands were on her hips, but there was a twinkle in her eye.

“I’m sorry, Mother. I guess I just felt like it.”

“Oh, well. It’s alright, dear.” Mother surprised her, helping her up. “And thank you for straightening the pantry. So thoroughly too.”

“You’re welcome, Mother.”

*I did inadvertently cause that mess, anyhow, Andi thought. Maybe I should have just told them. They would’ve known what to do. But what if I get in trouble?*

Andi followed her mother into the dining room for lunch. *I don’t think it’s my fault, but what if they don’t understand that?*
As they sat down, another thought struck her. *What if I get in trouble for not telling them before, if I do tell them now?* No, she decided. *I’ll just take care of this myself. Just me and—*

“Hey Andi!” Chad broke in to her thoughts. “Will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Say grace. Justin just asked you to.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” she agreed, blushing. After saying a quick prayer, they began to eat.

“Honey, are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Why?”

“I don’t know. You just seem . . . distant this afternoon. Anyway, how has your summer vacation been going so far? And your ride with Cory?”

“It was . . . very interesting.”

“Your vacation or your ride?”

“Both, I guess.” She hurried to change the subject.

“Does anybody want to go fishing with me sometime before school starts up again?”

“Definitely”

“Andi.”

“Yes, Mother?”

“While you were out with Cory today, I took a peek in your room. It was an absolute mess. I haven’t seen it so bad in a long time. You are to clean it up right away if you plan on going riding anymore today.”

“I already have.”
“Really?” said Mother, her surprise evident. “How grown-up of you, Andrea. I’m so proud of you doing that before I even asked.”

Andi managed a smile but knew she didn’t really deserve the compliment. After all, I did it to hide something, not simply because I knew I should.

She didn’t like hiding things from her family. Something in her gut told her it wasn’t a good idea.

Chapter Four

“So, Cory, what did you find out?”

They were back at Andi’s favorite spot, a light breeze rustling the trees that shaded them from the sun’s intense heat.

“First off, here is the address you can send a letter to, or whatever. They should be there until the end of early next week.”

“Thanks a million, Cory. How did you mange? I owe you one. What would I do without you?”

“I honestly have no idea” he replied, shaking his head. “Oh, and here’s Rascal back. Do you know how much trouble he almost got me into? I’m willing to bet you owe me two.”
Andi giggled and rolled her eyes, taking the bag. “Wait . . . Rascal?” she queried, turning to fasten the carpetbag to her saddle.

“Yeah, that’s what I named him. Unless you already named him.”

“Actually, I’ve just been calling him Mr. Monkey. But I like Rascal better. It certainly suits him.”

“Well, good.” Cory beamed at her, mounting up. “Well, I’ve got to get back to help Pa.”

“Hey, Cory, you fed Rascal, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, of course I did. I’m no dummy. Fresh fruit and vegetables, as much as I could spare.”

“Oh, good. Thanks again. See ya.”

“Adiós, amiga.”

***

As she sat in her room, Andi thought about what to do next. Suddenly, she realized what she should’ve been doing all along: talking to the One Who she knew could help her.

“Dear Lord, please help me. I’m so sorry for not talking to You sooner. I guess I just got so caught up in finding my own way out of this, I just didn’t remember You are always here for me. But what should I do now? Should I write that letter or . . .”

You know what you should do, a quiet voice reminded her.

“Do I have to tell them? What If they’re mad? I knew better than to have something like . . . well, a real, live monkey in the house without telling them.”
Even so, you know in your heart you must face the consequences of your actions, whatever they may be. And that I’ll be with you when you do. You are My child, and you are never alone.

Feeling reassured, though not completely confident, Andi headed downstairs to find her whole family conveniently sitting in the living room.

Well, Lord, you sure worked that out. Taking a deep breath, she addressed all of them. “Umm, could I talk to you real quick?” she asked, watching their faces.

“Of course. Andi. What’s the matter?” Justin said, exchanging a worried look with Mother.

“There’s something I’ve been hiding from you—literally. All day today. But I’ve realized now that I shouldn’t have.”

“What is it?”

Unable to hold it back any longer, Andi poured out the whole story, starting from when she first discovered the monkey, to how he was now taking a nap on her bed. “Here’s the note with the address for the circus on it,” she finished.

“Wow. Can we see it?” Mitch asked.

“See what?”

He laughed. “The monkey, of course.”


“No. Should we be?”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe. I mean, you were pretty mad about that raccoon—”
“You mean,” Chad broke in, “that raccoon we found in the woods and I told you to leave alone. The one you later surprised us by ‘adopting’?”

“Well, yes. Oh.”

“See the difference, honey?” asked Justin, taking her into his arms. “The raccoon incident was willful disobedience on your part. This was just a crazy mix-up. And as to hiding it from us? Although I wish you had told us sooner than you did, I’m proud of you for telling us the truth, even though it was hard. And you did it on your own.”

“I didn’t do it on my own, Justin. God helped me. But”—she glanced at their faces—”am I still in trouble?”

“No, sweetie. Just tell us sooner next time.”

“I will, Mother. But I hope there won’t be a next time.”

“Maybe not of this kind, but you will have more trouble in your life. When you do, remember this: God gave you the family you have for a reason. We will stand by you and be there for you. Often you may not like what we do, and sometimes we may even be wrong. We’re all human. But trust God, respect the authorities he put over you, and always remember we love you. And He loves you even more.”

“I’ll remember, Mother!” she cried, hugging her.

“You know what?” Melinda said softly. “We should probably check on that monkey upstairs. By itself.”

***
Everything was cleared up in the next few days. Justin contacted the circus, and they were overjoyed to have their little star back.

Andi paid Cory for his favor back in bait, but she didn’t mind at all, because it meant she had a fishing buddy for that weekend.

And God was working on her day by day, molding her into the women He would someday have her to be.

On the day Chad came back from returning the monkey, Andi proudly told him that she had learned her lesson. She wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

“That’s good.” Then he grinned. “Although I know you will make mistakes again, at least I can count on no more monkey business from you. For a while, anyway.”
Category: 14-17

Third Place

A Visit from a Friend

Rebekah Eddy, age 17
Port Orchard, Washington

Rebekah is a Christian, a homeschooled young lady, and the daughter of the senior pastor of Manchester Community Church. She comes from a family of twelve people. Yes, that means she has nine siblings, and yes, she loves them all! Rebekah loves music, writing, reading, and all things that have to do with horses. She is a sinner, saved by grace. Her passion is to follow her Savior, Jesus Christ, with all her heart, soul, and mind. All her writing is to His glory.

A story from between the Circle C Adventures and the Circle C Milestones

Chapter One

In breathless anticipation, Andi Carter watched the stagecoach slowly rattle to a stop in front of the post office. Two young men stepped out, closely followed by a girl her age.
The girl ignored the hand offered her by the taller man and jumped out by herself. Her wild, red hair had calmed down into a slightly more mature auburn, but the twinkling eyes that met Andi’s across the street left no doubt as to who the girl was.

“Jenny!” Andi squealed, oblivious to the shocked stares from various people on the street. She picked up the skirt her mother had insisted she wear and ran across to greet her friend.

Jenny met her halfway and the friends embraced.

“I’m mighty glad to see you,” Jenny whispered happily. “Mother finally gave me permission to visit again, but she refused to let me go alone. Thankfully, Eli and Micah were willing to come along.”

“Eli and Micah?” Andi asked in confusion. “Who are they?”

“Two of my brothers,” Jenny hurriedly explained, then gasped and put her hand over her mouth, eyes dancing. “I forgot to introduce them. Mother would be fit to be tied.”

Andi joined her friend’s laughter as Jenny brought her over to the two young men standing by the luggage.

“Andi, these are my brothers, Eli and Micah. Eli’s older, but Micah has him beat in height. Brothers, this is Andi Carter, my friend from the fancy ladies’ school we attended together a few years back.”

The two young men gave Andi awkward bows.

Andi smiled at their attempted manners and quickly tried to make them feel more comfortable. “I
reckon you don’t have to worry about fancy manners with me,” she announced. “I hate them myself.”

Both brothers glanced at Jenny with grins on their faces.

“I told ’em you were like me,” Jenny explained, “but they didn’t believe me until now.”

“She’s right,” the younger brother, Micah, admitted with a twinkle of mischief in eyes. He reminded Andi of her friend Cory Blake.

Andi smiled. “If you wait for a bit, I’ll corral Justin—he’s my oldest brother—and let him know we’re ready to get along home. It won’t take me long.”

“I’ll come too,” Jenny offered.

Andi nodded, glad for the company. They walked towards Justin’s office while telling each other what had happened to them during the few years since Jenny’s last visit.

Justin met them at the door with a welcoming smile. “It’s good to see you again, Miss Grant,” he said. “You’ve grown up quite a bit since the last time you were here.”

“I’m afraid so.” Jenny laughed.

“Thankfully, you haven’t changed much on the inside,” Andi whispered, giving her friend’s hand a squeeze. Jenny returned the gesture with a grin.

“Well, Andi, I’d better get you and our guests home soon to save Mother from having to keep supper warm.” Justin unhitched the wagon and helped the girls into it after locking up his office.
On their way to pick up Jenny’s brothers, sounds of a fight grew loud. Andi looked at her brother and saw his lips were drawn into a tight line. He hated brawls of any kind, at all times.

A man ran toward Justin with a relived look on his face. “I was just coming to get you, Mr. Carter. Sheriff needs your help separating some troublemakers.”

Justin gave the man a curt nod. Jumping from the wagon, he handed the reins to Andi. “Stay in the wagon until I return,” he commanded. “A fight is no place for ladies.”

The minute her brother’s form disappeared around the corner, Jenny took the reins from Andi’s hands. A twinkle appeared in her eyes.

“What are you doing?” Andi asked in surprise.

“He told us to stay in the wagon,” Jenny explained. “He said nothin’ about us not driving it.”

Suddenly, Andi understood what her friend was going to do. “He did tell us that a fight was no place for ladies,” she protested weakly.

“We both know we’re not ladies,” Jenny answered with a laugh. “However, to please your brother, we’ll stay a safe distance from the fight. Satisfied?”

Andi nodded. “I guess as long as we’re careful.”

Jenny grinned and drove the wagon around the corner. There she stopped abruptly. In front of the post office, the dust had settled enough for both girls to see the two struggling men held back by Justin and the sheriff.
“One of ’em is Eli!” Jenny exclaimed, though not in surprise.

“It looks like the other man got the worst of it,” Andi said after studying both men critically.

Just then, Justin stormed over to the wagon. Behind him were Jenny’s two brothers, Eli with a black eye and a bloody lump on the side of his head.

“I thought I told you to stay where you were,” he said.

“We did,” Jenny replied innocently. “You asked us to stay in the wagon, and here we are.”

Justin was stumped for only a moment. “You knew what I meant by that, Miss Jenny Grant, as did you, Andi Carter. You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”

“Andi tried to stop me.” Jenny hurriedly came to her friend’s defense. “But I insisted. I’m very sorry for disobeying you, Mr. Carter. It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“Very well. I accept your apology, Miss Grant.” Justin softened a little. He got into the wagon, followed by Jenny’s two brothers. “Let’s get you all home before anything else happens.”

Chapter Two

Eli winced as Mrs. Carter gingerly felt the lump on the side of his head. “Well,” she announced, “it
certainly could have been worse. I’m surprised you came away from that fight with no more than a black eye and a lump.”

Jenny’s brother grinned wryly. “Compared to some of them boys I work with, including my own brothers, the man I fought punched like a sissy.”

“What was the fight about?” Andi asked, finally able to satisfy her curiosity.

“He didn’t take a likin’ to my crude manners. That’s all.” Eli’s answer was bitter.

Jenny grinned. “Eli has the shortest temper in our family,” she said. “Pretty much anything can get him riled.”

Eli punched Jenny playfully in the shoulder. “You quit spreadin’ falsehoods about your brothers,” he ordered, but his wide grin belied his stern words.

Jenny laughed and turned her sparkling eyes to Andi. “And now, tell me what’s been goin’ on with you since the last time I came. How’s your horse? Has Cory found a gold strike yet? Any more crazy trips into the mountains on a wild-goose chase?”

“Come with me and I’ll show you how my horse is doing while answering your other questions,” Andi replied.

After getting permission from her mother and leaving Jenny’s two brothers to talk to Justin, Chad, and Mitch, Andi dragged her friend to the barn. She stopped a moment at the door and breathed in the familiar, wonderful smells around her beloved horse.
TAFFY’S ears were pricked forward, and she nickered a welcome to the two girls. Andi had managed to slip a few carrots from the kitchen and handed one of them to Jenny now, who fed it to Taffy. Over Taffy’s crunching, Andi answered Jenny’s other questions.

“Cory hasn’t found a gold strike yet, though he’s tried plenty. He keeps coming up with loco ideas and tries roping me into them, but so far I’ve kept out of trouble.”

She grinned. “There haven’t been any more trips into the mountains yet, either. Mother was scared so stiff last time that it’ll take a while before she’s ready to let us go again.”

“I only wish I could convince my mother to let me come here more often,” Jenny said mournfully. “I sure miss having you to talk to when I go back home.”

“I miss you too,” Andi agreed. “I am glad you’re here now.”

Jenny brightened. “For two whole weeks.”

“We’ll have to stuff as many things into those two weeks as we can,” Andi said, suddenly overwhelmed. “What should we do first?”

“I was just about to ask you that,” Jenny answered.

Both girls thought in silence for a moment.

Then Andi’s eyes drifted to her horse, an idea suddenly coming. “Let’s go see Cory,” she exclaimed. “He’s always in town helping his father with the livery stable at this time of day.”
Jenny nodded eagerly. “And see if he has any more crazy ideas,” she added.

Just then Jenny’s brother, Micah, walked into the barn. He noticed them over by Taffy and wandered over, his hands in his pockets. “That your horse?” he asked Andi curiously. She nodded. “Shore is a perty thing,” he added.

“Andi and I are goin’ into town, Micah,” Jenny announced. “Want to come?”

Micah shifted his weight from one leg to the other, contemplating the offer. “Shore will.” He grinned. “Sounds fun.”

Andi convinced Mitch and Chad that they needed to go to town with her and her friends for some ranch supplies. Soon the five of them were well on their way. Eli decided to stay behind. He had a headache.

Andi and Jenny, both astride Taffy, were soon far ahead of the much slower wagon that carried the brothers. They arrived in town first and dismounted in front of the livery stable.

Jenny saw Cory first and wordlessly pointed toward him, her eyes dancing with fun. The friends shared a silent conversation, both agreeing to scare the living daylights out of him. On tiptoes, Andi’s hand over Taffy’s muzzle to keep her from alerting Cory to their presence, the girls snuck closer to the blond-haired boy.

Jenny mouthed, one, two, three! Then both girls shouted, “Cory!”
The boy spun around, his fist swinging toward them blindly. It stopped inches from Andi’s stomach, and he dropped it with a sheepish grin of recognition.

“Sorry, Andi, I didn’t realize it was you.” His gaze wandered over to Jenny, and his eyes widened in surprise. “Jenny Grant?”

She held out a hand for him to shake. “Mighty good to see you again, Cory,” she said with a grin. “It’s been a while.”

“Sure has,” he agreed, taking the offered hand and shaking it enthusiastically. “How long have you been in these parts?”

“I just came today. We would’ve stopped by earlier, but my brother got himself into a fight with someone so we had to hightail it out to Andi’s family so he could get taken care of.”

“You have brothers here too?”

“Yes, two of my brothers came with me this time. Otherwise, I don’t think Mother would have let me come. She hates letting me travel by myself.”

“Is he one of your brothers?” Cory asked, pointing behind the girls.

They both looked the direction he pointed and saw Andi’s brothers come into the stable, followed by Micah.

“Mitch and I are going to be in Goodwin’s store if you have any problems,” Chad informed Andi and Jenny. “Let us know when you’re ready to go home. Micah wanted to be with you two.”
Andi smiled. “Sure.” Her brothers left and there was a short, awkward silence. Andi quickly filled the pause with introductions. “Micah, this is my friend Cory Blake. He works here in this livery stable.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Blake,” Micah said stiffly.

Cory waved away the formality with a grin. “Just call me Cory. My father is Mr. Blake.”

Micah’s stiffness melted away and he returned the friendly grin. “It shore is nice knowin’ other folks that don’t take to all them manners.”

During the following hours, Jenny pestered Cory and Andi with questions about their town and all that had gone on. It wasn’t long before Cory and Micah were fast friends and vowed to see each other as often as possible for the duration of their short stay.

Sadly, Mitch and Chad finished their business in town fairly quickly and came to find them. Cory helped them load the wagon and soon the friends parted and drove back to the ranch for a hot dinner and warm bed.

Chapter Three

“Wake up!” A pillow landed on Andi’s face and then her blankets were unceremoniously yanked off of her.
Andi sat up suddenly, ready to glower at whoever dared awaken her. Her fierce frown only caused the tormentor to burst into a merry peal of laughter.

“Oh, Andi, you look a sight!” Her friend squealed gleefully.

Andi tried to keep from joining the contagious laughter. “Jenny Grant . . .” she began to scold.

It was to no avail. Her mouth twitched, a grin spread across her face, and soon she joined her friend. “You’re the one who looks a sight!” Andi exclaimed, her outbursts of mirth dying down into the occasional hiccup. “Look at yourself.”

The door opened, and Melinda came in looking very stern and disapproving. The girls got to their feet guiltily, trying earnestly to suppress their hiccups.

“You are both late for breakfast, and it’s getting cold now,” the older sister said. “Stop your ridiculous behavior and get dressed quickly.”

“Yes, ma’am,” both girls responded in unison.

Melinda stalked from the room, and they heard her firm footsteps going downstairs. Andi looked at her friend and rolled her eyes, a giggle slipping out.

Jenny grinned. “Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.”

Andi shrugged and began dressing. “Oh, Melinda just doesn’t like getting up early, that’s all. She’s really a nice sister usually.”

Soon the friends were dressed and ready for the day. Jenny had managed to get her wild hair into some semblance of order and they made their way
downstairs. Today would be another day of excitement, despite Chad reminding Andi that she had chores to do. The two friends could hardly hold back their excitement.

Justin interrupted their conversation by saying, “Andi, I thought you and Jenny might want to know this. Cory came here early this morning and he and Micah said they were going to spend the morning together. Eli is helping Chad and Mitch with some horses.”

“We don’t mind,” Andi exclaimed.

Her oldest brother smiled. “I thought you might not, but I wanted to let you know so you could better plan your day.”

Andi gave Justin an appreciative look. “Thank you.”

Andi and Jenny decided to get the detested chores finished first and then spend the rest of the day riding Taffy around the ranch. Both girls had to change into old clothes for chores, and so once the cold breakfast had been gulped down, they uttered a hasty “excuse us” before dashing up the stairs.

The minute Andi opened her bedroom door, she knew something was wrong. Frowning, she glanced around the room. Everything seemed to be in its place.

Then she saw it. The window was broken, and a rock lay on the floor surrounded by pieces of glass. Andi gasped and picked up the rock, careful to avoid stepping on glass.
“Why would someone break your window?” Jenny wondered aloud, peering outside in search of the culprit.

Andi shook her head. “I don’t know. It seems like a mean trick.” Suddenly she noticed a piece of paper tied around the rock. “This might help explain some things,” she declared triumphantly.

Careful to not rip the paper, she smoothed it out on her bed and began reading it. The note was badly written, with many misspelled words and terrible grammar, but after a few minutes of deciphering, this was what she made out:

If you and yer red-heded frend want to no where yer frends Cory Blake and Micah Grant ar, go to the big rok by the creek and wait for ferther instrukshuns. You must com alone.

Jenny got up immediately and quickly switched from her dress into a pair of borrowed overalls.

Andi looked up at her friend. “What are you doing?”

“Following the instructions in the note,” Jenny stated matter-of-factly.

Andi gave her a look of dismay. “We can’t just obey this writer without knowing all the details. What if they’re lying?”

“That’s a risk I’m goin’ to take,” Jenny replied. “I ain’t—I’m not—gonna stand by and let someone kidnap my brother. Or Cory, for that matter.”

“Shouldn’t we tell someone?”
“They said to come alone.” Jenny paused. “But they didn’t say we couldn’t be followed.” She frowned thoughtfully then seemed to come to a decision.

She nodded. “We’ll leave your folks a note explaining why we’re gone and where we’re goin’. That way, if we don’t come back, they’ll know where to look.”

Andi, relieved, agreed with her friend. “Good plan. My brothers will be able to find us. They’ve had a lot of practice,” she added ruefully. “It seems like I get myself kidnapped all the time.”

Jenny grinned and stood impatiently while Andi changed into her overalls. The two girls slipped from the house after leaving a note on Andi’s pillow for her family to find if they didn’t come back with the two boys.

Chapter Four

Andi saddled Taffy with all possible speed and they rode towards the creek.

The big rock was about ten minutes farther along the road than her special spot, and they soon arrived. The girls cautiously dismounted and stood nervously next to Taffy. Their eyes wandered around the scenery, searching for the promised “instrukshuns.”
A Visit From a Friend

An arrow whistled past Andi’s head, missing her ear by an inch, and lodged itself in a tree behind her. A piece of white paper was attached.

With trembling fingers, Andi undid the folded note and read it:

_Yer frends ar ferther down. Follow creek south until you see a pile of roks. They will point you in the rite direkshun._

The girls remounted Taffy and walked her alongside the creek until they saw a pile of rocks in the shape of an arrow. It pointed toward another large rock, a rock someone could easily hide behind.

Andi exchanged a nervous look with Jenny. Her friend motioned her to continue. “Are you sure?” Andi whispered.

Jenny nodded, a touch of desperation entering her voice. “I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to my brother.”

Gulping down her worry, Andi forced herself to nudge Taffy and felt the horse going forward. She had to force herself not to shut her eyes or hightail it back to the ranch where she would be safe.

_God, please let everything be all right in the end. Keep Cory and Micah safe from whoever has them in their power. Please keep Jenny and me safe._

After her prayer, Andi felt better. She gathered her shreds of courage and went around the rock.

A boy with wild blond hair jumped from his hiding spot and shouted “surprise!” He was joined by another boy who was tall and rugged-looking.
After her first shriek, Andi recognized both boys. Her surprise changed to anger. “Cory and Micah! You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves! Jenny and I were worried sick over you two. And you were safe the whole time.”

The boys, instead of shamefacedly apologizing, merely laughed harder.

“Oh Andi,” Cory gasped out, “you should have seen your face!”

Micah had tears streaming down his face. “It worked. We thought you would figure it out. But you walked right into our surprise. I thought that you might recognize my handwriting so I wrote the note in my left hand and purposely misspelled words.”

Cory added, “I shot the arrow before we both ran here.” He grinned at Andi and winked. “I’m a pretty good shot, huh? I’ve been practicing.”

Jenny, forgetting how hard she worked to become a lady, walked up to her brother and slapped him. “How could you, Micah?” she scolded.

Finally the boys seemed to realize the terror they had put the girls through and apologized.

They all rode back to the ranch together, but the friendship between them had cooled a bit. For a while Andi didn’t talk to either Micah or Cory, much less acknowledge their existence with more than a stiff how-do-you-do.

***

The two weeks passed uneventfully after that, though Cory and Micah both got dumped in the
watering trough by Jenny a few days after the unfortunate trick. That soothed the ruffled pride of both her and Andi enough to make everyone good friends again.

The time came when Jenny packed her bags, slowly rode to town on Taffy one last time, and said her tearful goodbye to Andi. As she climbed up the steps of the stagecoach behind her two brothers she remarked, “Life will seem awful dull after living with you and your family for two weeks.”

Andi had to agree. “I do always find ways to make things happen around here. Though,” she added with a glance in Cory’s direction,”sometimes I get help from friends.”
Category: Ages 14-17
Honorable Mention #1

-12-
A Desperate Prayer

Hannah Mead, age 14
Chippenham, England

_Hannah is one of six children and has been homeschooled all her life. She is a lover of reading, writing, history, fashion, and most importantly, of Jesus!_

For Jessah

En route to Bakersfield in Kern County, California, August 15, 1885

_Ow!_ Seventeen-year-old Andrea Carter’s head thunked on the back wall of the stagecoach as it made its way across a particularly deep pothole towards the city of Bakersfield.

She looked over at her older sister, Melinda, who was sitting across from Andrea on the not-very-comfortable benches in the stagecoach. She looked calm and collected—as usual, her hands resting on her swollen belly. Her blue eyes looked out the window at the grey sky outside.
Andrea—or Andi as she was more commonly known—marvelled at how Melinda could look so put-together and beautiful even at eight months pregnant, sitting in an uncomfortable stagecoach and bumping around on a hot, dusty road in the middle of August.

Andi was sure that when she stepped off the stagecoach at the end of the two-hour ride, she would be rumpled, dusty, and hot, while Melinda would look just as fresh and pretty as when she stepped onto the coach two hours previous.

This whole trip had all started when Melinda received a letter from her widowed aunt-in-law, Mrs. Ackerman. She asked Melinda and her husband, Peter, if they would come and visit.

“I haven’t seen you since your wedding almost a year ago, and I do wish to have a nice long visit with you, my dears,” Mrs. Ackerman wrote. “I would come to you, but ever since I broke my ankle, I haven’t been able to get around as well. It would be a nice, relaxing little vacation for you, just before your new arrival.”

After many letters back and forth, plans had been formed, train tickets had been bought, and the date was set.

Then about a week before they were due to go, Peter received an urgent business call from San Francisco. There was no way out of it. He had to go. Melinda couldn’t go alone all the way to Bakersfield
and beyond, and she refused, so Peter and Melinda cast about for a suitable companion to go with her.

They ended up convincing Andi to accompany her sister for the two-week trip, and so the two sisters took the trip to Mrs. Ackerman’s on August 1st. Melinda and Andi had a lovely visit, and at noon two weeks later, they started back to Fresno.

Mrs. Ackerman lived just over twenty miles south of Bakersfield, so that meant a two-hour stagecoach ride to Bakersfield, and then about a four-hour train ride from there to Fresno.

They had only been riding for about an hour, but Andi was already tired of it. It was slow, bumpy riding, and Andi wished that she was galloping Taffy toward home instead of sitting in a hot, dusty stagecoach.

Yawning, she shifted in her seat to get into a slightly more comfortable position. She sneaked a glance sideways at the only other passenger on the stagecoach besides herself and Melinda: a middle-aged, morose man who had briefly introduced himself as “Andrew Fairfax, journalist” before burying himself in his newspaper.

All Andi could see of him now was the top of his greying head poking out from the newspaper, and the lower half of his body, legs in grey suit trousers and shiny black shoes.

He sat so still that Andi wondered if he was asleep. Her suspicions were proved correct when a tremendous snore issued from behind the newspaper.
Andi smirked and caught Melinda’s eye. She smiled back.

Andi opened her mouth to say something, when abruptly a sharp, cracking noise resounded through the air. Andi was thrown against the side of the stagecoach, with Mr. Fairfax leaning on top of her.

Melinda screamed, Andi screeched, and Mr. Fairfax emitted a *hrumpfl-aaahed*. Above all of that, there was the noise of the driver shouting at the two whinnying horses.

There were several bumps, and then a sort of scraping noise as the stagecoach slowly ground to a halt. Andi looked over at Melinda, who was holding onto her seat for dear life, her face a mask of fright.

Andi struggled to sit up. Mr. Fairfax did the same, but the tilted angle of the stagecoach made it hard and awkward. As they tried to right themselves, the sound of pounding footsteps came around the coach. The door was pulled open, and the worried face of the driver, Mr. Jenkins, peered in.

“Is everyone all right in there?” he queried.

“Well, apart from the angle that we are all sitting at, we are fine,” replied Mr. Fairfax shortly, still trying to keep from crushing Andi and regain his original position.

“Well, then, ladies first,” said the driver, reaching in to help first Melinda, then Andi, out of the stagecoach. Finally, Mr. Fairfax clambered out.
The three passengers and Mr. Jenkins stood back and surveyed the damage. “Looks like the back axle snapped and the back-left wheel came off.”

Mr. Jenkins frowned. “What are you going to do about it? Here we are out in the middle of nowhere with two ladies, and we’re stranded.”

Andi surveyed the surrounding countryside. She saw nothing of interest but a ramshackle, obviously abandoned house and barn. She looked over to where Melinda was standing, pale and trembling slightly. Her breath came in short, little gasps.

“Excuse me, sir. Could my sister sit down please? She’s had a bit of a shock . . .” She trailed off, looking around for something for Melinda to sit on. Her eyes lighted on the trunks strapped to the back of the stagecoach, and she made a beeline for them.

Struggling with the straps that held the trunks, Andi was grateful when Mr. Jenkins came to her rescue. He lifted a trunk down and carried it over to where Melinda was standing.

“Here you are, Linda. Just sit right here,” said Andi, helping Melinda lower her distended body down onto the trunk.

“Thank you.” Melinda sighed gratefully.

“Now, what do you suggest we do?” questioned Mr. Fairfax of Mr. Jenkins.

“I guess the only thing to do is for me to ride as fast as I can to Bakersfield on one of the horses, get help, and hopefully be back in two or three hours.” Mr. Jenkins, frowned even more deeply than before.
Suddenly, a rumble of thunder echoed, breaking the sultry air. Andi looked up and saw dark storm clouds gathering in a grey sky. *Oh, great, it’s going to storm. Just what we need*, she inwardly grumbled.

“Oh, great. Just what we need, a storm,” said Mr. Fairfax sarcastically, unknowingly echoing Andi’s thoughts.

“I suggest you take shelter from the storm in that barn or house over there while I’m gone,” said Mr. Jenkins over his shoulder as he walked toward the two horses.

“All right. Here, ma’am, let me assist you,” offered Mr. Fairfax. He helped Melinda up and guided her toward the abandoned house.

Andi hurried ahead of them, got to the house, ran up the steps, and tried the front door. It was locked tight. She went around the back, briars tangling around her feet. When she tried the back door, it too was locked fast. She came back to the front and reported the bad news to Mr. Fairfax and her sister.

“Both doors are locked fast. I’ll try the barn.” Andi started toward the barn at a fast trot. Her skirt bunched around her legs, slowing her down. “Oh, bother this pesky skirt!” she said impatiently and hiked it up to her knees, not caring how unladylike she looked.

When she arrived at the big barn door, she hefted up the bolt and pushed. *Creak!* The door slowly opened, revealing a dim, musty interior.
“It’s open!” Andi hollered back at the approaching Mr. Fairfax and Melinda before hurrying to the stagecoach.

It was a race between Andi and the storm. The wind was whipping up; dark clouds scudded across the sky. Andi was no judge of storms, but this looked like it was a big and bad one. When she reached the stagecoach, Mr. Jenkins was unhitching the horses, having already emptied the stagecoach of its contents onto the ground.

“Here, let me help you,” Andi said, taking one of the horse’s bridles. She proceeded to unhitch the horse without any problems.

* I guess there are advantages to living on a ranch with horses your whole life, * she mused, unaware of Mr. Jenkins’s slightly stunned look directed toward her. Horse unhitched, she made her way back to the barn and led the horse inside.

It was quiet, dim, and musty in the barn. Melinda sat down on a bale of hay, while Mr. Fairfax busied himself in the back corner of the barn, doing who knew what.

“It’s gonna storm, and soon,” said Andi to Melinda as she walked past with the horse to a stall.

“It’s *going* to storm, don’t you mean?” half-scolded Melinda.

“Yes, ma’am, it’s *going* to storm,” replied Andi as she tied the horse up. *Melinda’s always a stickler for good grammar, even in a barn I guess,* she thought as she came out of the stall.
“Look what I found,” called Mr. Fairfax, coming out from the dark corner he was in. “Blankets. A bit musty, I admit, but nothing a good shaking won’t fix.”

He shook the blankets and then proceeded to cough for a good minute as a result of the cloud of dust that enveloped him.

“Thank you. They will be good to sit on,” replied Melinda gently.

A little too gently, Andi thought. “Are you okay, Melinda?” she whispered.

“Yes, just a bit shaken up, that’s all . . . I hope.”

Those last two words were spoken so quietly that Andi wasn’t even sure she’d heard right. Before she had time to think about it, in came Mr. Jenkins carrying a trunk.

“Fairfax, you want to come help get another one?” he said, placing the trunk on the dusty floor.
“I’ll come too,” Andi volunteered. “I’m just getting our carpet bags,” she said over her shoulder to Melinda.

Once back at the stagecoach, she gathered up the bags and followed the two men with the two trunks back toward the barn. Just as Andi reached the barn door, rain started to fall, making wet splats on the dusty ground.

“There we go. You’ll be dry in here,” Mr. Jenkins said to the three passengers inside the barn.

“Oh, but what about you? You’ll be soaked by the time you reach Bakersfield,” worried Melinda.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m used to getting wet.” With a wave and a parting smile, Mr. Jenkins went out into the gathering storm. Thunder crashed, and rain pattered on the roof, but the three people—and one horse—inside the barn were safe and dry.

Andi and Mr. Fairfax busied themselves getting things comfortable in the barn while Melinda watched. Andi lit the two lanterns that had come in from the stagecoach and hung them up. Mr. Fairfax pitched some hay down from the rickety loft up above. The two trampled it down into a pile and then laid the blankets that Mr. Fairfax had found on top.

“Perfect. May I assist you to your couch, madame?” Andi asked Melinda jokingly. She helped her up from her perch on the hay bale.

“You call that a couch?” Melinda replied, gingerly setting herself down on top of the pile.
“Yep. It’s a special variety called ‘barn style.’ Now, you just rest,” said Andi. “Mr. Jenkins will be back in no time.”

“Thanks, little sis.” murmured Melinda, lying back with a sigh. “I believe I might just take a nap.”

Andi watched until her sister fell asleep, then she tiptoed over to her bag and pulled out her book.

“Uh . . . your sister is asleep?” asked Mr. Fairfax, walking over to where Andi stood.

“Yes, though I don’t know how, what with all the racket,” Andi replied.

And racket it was, for rain pounded on the barn, the wind blew and howled, and thunder and lightning crashed and slashed at regular intervals.

“I’m just going to read over there,” said Andi, pointing to the hay bale where Melinda had sat.

“Ah, yes, I believe I shall read too,” said Mr. Fairfax. He found his newspaper and walked over to an unsteady-looking chair leaning against a wall.

Andi watched as he seated himself in it. Three seconds later he fell to the ground with an oof as the chair collapsed beneath him. She suppressed her giggles and politely turned away toward her chosen hay bale. She sat down and began to read, dark head bent toward the pages, struggling not to laugh out loud.

She succeeded. On the outside she looked like a demure young lady quietly reading her book. But on the inside she was rolling on the ground, dying of laughter.
After a few minutes of silent hilarity, she peeked over to where Mr. Fairfax was. He was sitting on the floor, newspaper held in the exact same position over his face as in the stagecoach almost two hours previous. Andi wondered what he was thinking, and with one last, silent chuckle she turned back to her reading.

Andi must have fallen asleep, for suddenly she was jerked awake by a noise that she couldn’t identify. She listened intently, wondering what had woken her, but all she could hear was the rain and wind still pounding and whooshing outside and the reverberating snores of Mr. Fairfax. Then, there it was again. A low moaning noise that came from . . .

“Melinda?” Andi rushed over to where her sister was reclining on the pile of hay. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Andi was frightened by the expression on Melinda’s pale face. Her lips were pursed, sweat beaded her forehead, and her blue eyes were wide with . . . was that fright?

“What’s wrong?” Andi repeated her question, filled with foreboding.

“I-I think the baby’s coming.” Melinda quavered, her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

“It can’t be. I thought you said it wasn’t due for almost another month.”

“Babies do come early, and I think this one is. Ohhh . . .” Melinda groaned as another pain gripped her body.
Andi struggled to clear her mind of the panic that filled it. *What do we do? There is no doctor, no midwife, no one even slightly medically capable of handling this situation. Oh, what do we do? Oh, God, please help!*

She ran over to where Mr. Fairfax was snoring, leaning up against the wall. “Mr. Fairfax, Mr. Fairfax!” Andi called as she shook him frantically “Please wake up.”

“Whaaa? Um . . . um . . . ruffummm . . . What?”

Mr Fairfax roused finally.

“It’s my sister. She . . . the . . . her baby is coming!”

All sense of propriety was stripped away by Andi’s panic. She didn’t stop to think that under normal circumstances she would never speak to a man about pregnancy or having babies.

“What?”

“Please help me. I don’t know what to do.”

Mr. Fairfax looked just as bewildered as Andi felt. “Uh . . . I guess the only thing to do is for me to ride for a doctor. What do you think?”

“Well, unless you want to deliver the baby, I suggest you get going,” Andi snapped and then immediately felt guilty. After all, the poor man had just woken up and was offering to go out in the midst of a torrential downpour to find a doctor for a lady he’d only met a couple hours previous. “I’m sorry. I’m . . . I’m a bit flustered. Yes, please go. And hurry!”

“Right.” Now that Mr. Fairfax had woken up completely, he was all business. Quickly getting the
horse from its stall and tacking it up, he opened the barn door and peered out into the storm.

“Ohhh!” Melinda’s groan seemed to spur Mr. Fairfax into action. He mounted the horse in one, swift movement and disappeared into the rain.

The barn door slammed shut behind him with a hollow bang, and Andi felt the enormity of what was happening settle over her. An hour and a bit ago, she was happily reading, with no cares in the world, having an adventure in a barn.

Now, she was alone with a labouring woman in a dirty barn in the middle of a storm, possibly having to deliver the baby by herself.

Melinda’s moaning brought her out of her thoughts, and Andi rushed to her side. “Don’t worry, I’m here.” Though what I can do, I don’t know, she added silently.

Melinda’s face creased with pain as she panted and writhed under the grip of painful contractions.

“Here, hold my hand.” Andi placed her hand in Melinda’s and gasped at the strength of Melinda’s grasp. As Melinda’s groans intensified, Andi prayed one of the most simple yet desperate prayers she’d ever prayed in her life. I can’t do this. Oh, God, please help!

An hour later, Andi delivered a tiny baby boy in the midst of one of the worst storms Kern County had ever experienced. As she handed the red, screaming baby to the half-laughing, half-crying Melinda, Andi
felt her eyes well up with joy and relief at the sound of new life.

Well, it’s actually mostly relief. That last hour had been one of the hardest, scariest hours of her life. Now that it was finally over, all Andi wanted to do was curl up in a ball and cry herself to sleep. But she couldn’t. There was work to be done.

She found one of Melinda’s shawls in her carpetbag and gingerly wrapped her little nephew in it—hoping that she wouldn’t somehow break him—and laid him on Melinda’s chest.

Damp, curling tendrils of blonde hair framed Melinda’s face. A sheen of sweat glistened on her forehead, yet Andi thought Melinda looked more beautiful than she ever had in her life. An expression of peace and contentment shone on her face.

Inexpressible love and joy for her little baby boy radiated from her entire body. The glow from the lanterns shone on her face and made her look almost like an angel. Even the still-raging storm outside couldn’t break the peace that filled the barn.

A grin spread across Andi’s face, and joy filled her heart. She’d done it. With God’s help, she’d done it. “Oh, thank you, God,” she whispered. “Thank you, God.”
Category: Ages 14-17
Honorable Mention #2

Horses with Snowy Tales

Krystal Sky, age 16
Milford, Ohio

Krystal Sky is a homeschooled teen who loves reading, writing stories, playing acoustic guitar, listening to music, and being a part of her church. She is thankful that Jesus is her Savior, and for the good Christian family and friends He’s given her.

Hurry up, Andi, or I’ll leave without you!” Chad’s voice, filled with exasperation, pierced the peaceful mid-morning as he called to his little sister.

“I’m coming, I’m coming. Don’t you leave me here!” eight-year-old Andi Carter yelled. She grabbed her saddlebag that contained a change of clothes, her heavy coat, and her riding gloves and rushed down the stairs where twenty-two-year-old Chad waited, hands on his hips.

“She finally decides to make an appearance,” Chad muttered under his breath. To her he said, “I was
beginning to think you didn’t want to go with me to see that herd of mustangs.”

“Well, you can get that idea straight out of your head,” Andi retorted. “I’m definitely coming with you.”

“Then let’s go. Got your coat and gloves?” asked Chad.

“Yes, but I don’t see why we need them. It’s plenty warm outside.”

“It will get colder throughout the day. You’ll be mighty glad for warm clothes later.” He grabbed his coat, and they headed to the barn to saddle Sky and Taffy.

In the barn, they found the youngest Carter brother, Mitch. He stood in a stall saddling his horse, Chase, for another long day on the range. “Y’all are headed off now?” he asked.

“Yes,” Chad replied. “You know what to do today?”

“I would think so. You’ve gone over it at least three times already. “Mitch rolled his eyes and smirked.

Andi smothered a giggle at Chad’s brief look of half-hearted annoyance.

“Fine, then, I’ll leave you alone,” Chad said as he walked over to Sky’s stall. “If you mess up, little brother, you can’t go blamin’ me.”

Andi hopped up and down excitedly as she turned toward Mitch. “I can’t wait to see those mustangs,” she told him.
“I can see that. I’d say ‘have fun,’ but I already know you will. Just don’t have too much fun without me.” Mitch tweaked Andi’s braid then grabbed Chase’s reins. “See you later,” he called over his shoulder.

“Bye, Mitch!” Andi hollered back. She entered Taffy’s stall. “Hi, Taffy. Are you ready to go on an adventure? I know I am.” She saddled Taffy as fast as she could, then turned around to see if Chad was finished. He wasn’t. “Come on, Chad, hurry up,” she prodded.

“Hold your horses, girl. I’m almost done,” he drawled.

“I am holding my horse, big brother. Can’t you see that?”

“You know good and well what I meant,” he returned with a playful scowl that was quickly replaced by a grin. “All right, let’s go.”

They mounted and began their adventure under a warm sun. Chad and Andi rode up into the hills for several hours before Andi shifted uncomfortably.

“How much longer until we see the horses, Chad? We’ve been riding for ages,” she said, wiggling in the saddle.

“We’re almost to where I saw them last,” Chad answered. He pointed to a slope not far from them. “They were just over that ridge in the valley.”

“Oh, good.” Andi sighed. “I was thinking it would be a lot farther than that. I’m glad it isn’t.”
With a sudden burst of energy, she called to Chad, “Race you there!” She kicked Taffy’s sides and sped off. Chad laughed at his sister’s exuberance as he nudged Sky into a gallop.

When he reached the top, Andi beamed at him.

“Before you say anything, you had a head start, and you’re smaller than I am,” Chad said.

“You just keep telling yourself that,” Andi replied. “I still think Taffy’s faster than Sky.”

“Yeah, yeah, rub it in.” Chad caught her gaze and winked to show he wasn’t mad.

He dismounted and tied Sky to a nearby tree. Then he came over to help Andi down, but she was too quick for him. She had already slipped off Taffy’s back and hurried to the edge to look for the horses.

“Oh, there’s one!” Andi cried. “And more under that tree. Look! Three foals. They’re so pretty. Thanks for bringing me up here, Chad.” She flung her arms around his neck in a great big hug.
“You’re very welcome.” Chad returned her hug and then spun her around toward the valley.

Brother and sister watched the herd for a while longer before Chad, noticing the sun throwing its last rays into the air before night fell, suggested they make camp.

Tired from the long day of riding, Andi concurred, and Chad sent her to gather wood for a campfire.

As Chad built up the fire into a roaring blaze, Andi shivered and said, “You were right about wanting my coat. It’s cold out here.”

“It is pretty chilly,” Chad agreed, leaning back against a huge, fallen tree. “But this isn’t the coldest weather I’ve seen up in these hills. I remember one year when we boys and Father came up here to pick out a Christmas tree. There were several feet of snow in some places. Justin and I ganged up on Mitch and used the snow to our advantage. Mitch wasn’t happy, and he sure got us back later.”

“Snow! There isn’t much of that at the ranch,” Andi said. “Tell me that story.”

Chad’s expression grew reminiscent as he settled himself against the log. “Come here and get warm, and I will,” he said as he held out a hand to Andi.

Andi crawled over to him and snuggled close. She grinned impishly at him and said, “Now, tell me your snowy story.” She laid her head on his chest and listened to the deep rumble of Chad’s voice as he spun his tale.
“It was a typical morning, on a typical December day, and I didn’t want to get out of bed . . .”

Nine Years Earlier

Thirteen-year old Chad Carter slowly opened his eyes, and then squeezed them shut as the bright sunlight streamed in his window. He pulled the blankets over his head.

Thud!

“There’s Mitch,” he muttered. He braced himself for his little brother’s entrance.

“Chad! You’re still in bed? Get up and look outside.”

When Chad didn’t move, eight-year old Mitch jumped up on Chad’s bed and started bouncing and shaking him. “Wake up! You have to look outside.”

Chad groaned and snapped the covers back. “Why are you in such a hurry? I’ll see outside when I’m good and ready.” With that, he flopped facedown onto his pillow to block out the light.

“Fine, be that way! I’ll go tell Justin. He’ll be much less grumpy than you.” Mitch clambered off the bed. He just missed being walloped by a pillow Chad had flung in his direction.

Even through walls and pillow, Mitch’s cheerful voice invaded Chad’s quiet. He huffed a sigh, rolled over onto his back, and rubbed the last remnants of
sleep from his eyes. “There goes my chance of a few more minutes of sleep.”

Footsteps approached Chad’s room. Justin’s head appeared at his door, his gaze landing on the pillow Chad had thrown. Justin quirked an eyebrow at Chad in amusement.

“Don’t even say it,” Chad said and narrowed his eyes at Justin.

“Touchy this morning, are we?” Justin teased him, then sobered. “You really should look outside. There’s a surprise out there.”

“You too? All right, I’ll look.” Chad slid out from under the covers and shivered. The cold air bit through his clothes. All he wanted to do was crawl back into his warm bed. “This had better be really good,” he warned his brothers.

Chad stepped toward the window, and his eyes widened. “Oh! I guess that was worth it. Seeing snow is rare in this valley.”

“Get dressed so we can go outside,” Mitch urged.

“We have chores first, remember?” sensible Justin reminded him.

“But we can hurry through those. Then we can go up into the mountains with Father and pick out a Christmas tree.”

Mitch’s enthusiasm was contagious, and Chad quickly warmed to this idea. “Okay! Everybody out. Go get dressed, and we’ll do chores. Then maybe we can go.”

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A couple of hours later, the Carter family sat around the breakfast table planning their day. The boys couldn’t sit still as they waited for their father to bring up the subject.

After what felt like several hours, he said, “We only have a week until Christmas, and we don’t have a tree yet. Someone told me the boys aren’t interested in going with me up to the hills to get one,” he teased.

Mitch exploded. “Who on earth told you that? Of course we want to go!”

“Yeah, who would say a thing like that?” demanded Chad.

“No one. I was only teasing to see what you’d say.” Father chuckled. “What about you, Justin? Staying here?”

“I do want to go, Father. I’m just not as loud as these two are in expressing myself.” Justin gestured to his brothers.

“Oh, hush yourself,” Chad said. His frown barely masked the grin twitching the corners of his mouth.

“So, it’s settled then,” Father quickly intervened. “You three will come with me. Mother, Kate, and Melinda can bring down the decorations from the attic and bake Christmas cookies. Have you boys finished your chores?”

“We did those before breakfast. We were hoping we could go with you,” Justin said.

“Well, finish your breakfast and then go find your cold-weather clothing. The temperatures will drop the higher up we go.”
Half an hour later, Father and the boys stood at the porch saying good-bye to Mother and the girls.

Chad, eager to get going, bounced up and down. “We’ll bring back the best tree you’ve ever seen. Come on, Justin. Race you to the wagon!”

However, when they got to the wagon, Mitch had already climbed up and was perched on the seat looking down at them. “Does this mean I win?” he asked with a grin.

“You weren’t part of the race. So, no. Come down off there, or I’ll pull you down and load your shirt with snow,” Chad threatened.

“Not now you won’t, Chad,” Father said, coming up behind them. “We don’t have time for that. Get up in the wagon, and we’ll go. Once we get there, you can throw snowballs.” He smiled, knowing his boys would do just that.

The horses pulled away and soon left the ranch behind on the long trek into the hills. As they slowly made their way higher into the mountains, the boys compared red, cold-nipped faces.

“You’d better put on coats and gloves before too long,” Father said. “It’ll only get colder.”

Soon, they saw a smudge of green that morphed into trees as the clearing came into clearer view.

“We’re almost there. Then we can find a huge tree,” Mitch exclaimed.

As they drew closer to the woods, a mischievous plan started forming in Chad’s mind. As it took
shape, the grin on his face spread. He would wait for the perfect moment and then spring his pranks.

“All right, go find a good tree,” Father said when he stopped the horses.

The boys scrambled down and scattered in three different directions. After a few yards, Chad snuck through the trees toward Justin and crept up behind him. “Yahoo!” He pounced on Justin and pinned him to the snowy ground.

“What was that for?” Justin hollered.

“Cause I can,” Chad answered as he stood up.

Justin eyed Chad warily as he pushed to his feet.

“I have an idea for a prank on Mitch.” Chad said.

“You want to help me?”

Justin brushed the snow off his clothes as he considered this. “Maybe. What’s your plan?”

Chad leaned closer and told him in a quiet voice, which was unusual for him. As he spoke, Justin’s face acquired the same sneaky grin that Chad’s had. “Let’s do that!” he said.

The two agreed on their final strategies and then scouted the area for their youngest brother. When they saw him, Justin approached Mitch from the front, while Chad scooped up a handful of snow and packed it together. He spotted Father watching them with an amused look. Chad sent a “Don’t tell!” signal towards him, and Father nodded imperceptibly.

Chad turned his attention back to the prank at hand and heard Justin and Mitch talking a few yards
away. “That’s good, keep him distracted,” he murmured.

He thought he heard Father chuckling, but he didn’t turn to look. As quietly as he could, Chad walked up behind Mitch. When he got close enough, he stretched out his hand and grabbed his brother’s collar. He yanked it back and dropped the snowball down Mitch’s shirt.

“Yow!” Mitch yelled. “That’s cold!”

He danced around strangely as he tried to extract the Arctic ball from his shirt. When he succeeded, he turned to face his brothers, who were doubled over laughing. Father’s chuckle became a full-blown guffaw.

Mitch exclaimed, “This means war!” He charged Chad with a comically fierce battle cry.

“Uh-oh, you better run, little brother. He looks mad,” said Justin, still trying to control his laughter.

“Hey, you helped me,” Chad protested. He grabbed a handful of snow just as a ball Mitch had thrown barely missed his head. He tossed the cold, hastily formed projectile at his brother and hooted as it nailed its target.

“Ack!” Mitch swiped snow from his face and then threw all his weight at Chad, knocking them both down. He grabbed handfuls of snow and shoved them inside Chad’s coat. “Just returning the favor,” he said gleefully. Mitch relented, and Chad jumped up, shivering and shaking the snow from inside his coat.
“Boys, that’s enough for now,” Father called. “We need to pick out a tree and head back home. It’ll be dark before long.”

“Yes, Father,” the three said in unison.

“Which one is best?” Justin asked as he turned in a circle, looking at all the trees around them.

“Umm . . .” Mitch hesitated. “That one.” He pointed out a tree then ran around it. “On second thought, not this one. The whole back side is scraggly.” He scuffed his feet as he walked back to his brothers. “Definitely not that one.”

“Spread out and holler if you see a good tree,” Chad said and scampered off.

After many shouts followed by disappointed groans, Justin finally called out that he’d found one. Chad and Mitch trudged through the snow toward him.

“Oof!” Mitch got the wind knocked out of him when he tripped and fell face first onto the ground. Chad snorted, and Mitch glared at him as he shoved himself to his feet.

They continued toward Justin, and when they reached him, Justin pointed out a perfectly shaped evergreen. The three walked around the tree examining all sides, then deemed it just right.

“Yup, that’s it. We found it, Father,” Chad yelled.

“I’ll be there in a minute to cut it down,” Father called back. He tromped through the snow carrying an ax and a handful of rope.

Mitch ran toward him. “What’s the rope for?”
“Tying up the tree so we can haul it back to the ranch,” Father replied, giving it to Mitch.

“Oh, I should have guessed that,” Mitch said with a sheepish grin. He handed the rope to Chad. “Here, hold this for a minute. I just thought of something I have to do real quick.” He ran toward the wagon.

“What are you doing?” Chad called to Mitch’s retreating back. Either Mitch didn’t hear Chad, or he ignored him, because there was no answer. “Oh well,” Chad muttered. “I guess he’ll tell us later.”

He watched Mitch crawl into the wagon, grab a blanket, then disappear into the woods. Chad shrugged and turned back to watch Father.

Several minutes later, Mitch emerged from the trees dragging a bulging blanket. He tugged his bundle closer to the wagon. Struggling a bit with his load, he managed to heave it over the side and into the wagon bed. His secret mission complete, he shuffled back to his family, a mysterious smile on his face. “Why are you grinning like a hooligan?” Chad asked.

“You’ll find out,” was Mitch’s only reply.

“All right, our tree’s ready to come down. Stay back so it doesn’t fall on you,” Father told them sternly.

The boys backed far away and watched as the tree came crashing down. Then they ran to help tie it up in preparation for the long ride back to the ranch.

The trip back was uneventful, but there was a great amount of teasing at Mitch’s expense. He didn’t
respond much. He seemed to be too lost in his thoughts to pay them any mind. After a little while, they stopped and inhaled their dinner from the basket Mother had packed for them. She had known they would be coming back late and had sent them with a feast. Once they had finished, they packed up and drove on.

Mother and the girls came out to the porch to greet them and gush over the tree.

Mitch waited until they had untied the tree and taken it inside, then he grabbed his knotted blanket and rushed up the stairs. He slipped unnoticed into Chad’s room, then Justin’s. Once he had completed his task, Mitch whistled a happy tune as he slid down the banister. He landed with a muffled thump and jogged to the parlor where the rest of the family watched Father, Justin, and Chad set up the tree in the stand.

“We might have to call it a night and decorate the tree tomorrow,” Father said, trying holding back a yawn. “We were out longer than I had expected.”

“You’re right,” Mother said. “It is late, and you look exhausted.”

This decided, they prepared the house for the night and separated to their bedrooms.

“Hey, that’s cold!” Chad erupted. “Why is there snow in my bed? All my blankets are soaked through.” He swung the door open and shouted down the hall. “Mitch! This is what you were planning?”
And from Justin’s room: “Why did you put snow in here, Mitch? I didn’t do anything to you! Ugh, now I have to change the sheets.”

Mitch just grinned and burrowed under his warm, dry covers. “I’m so glad I’m not you two right now!” he hollered back.

***

Chad finished his story and looked down at his sister. Her eyes were heavy and she blinked, trying hard to stay awake. “There, happy now?” he asked.

“Yup. That was a good story,” she said drowsily. “Night, Chad.” She curled closer to him and within seconds fell sound asleep.

Chad pulled Andi’s coat closer around her. “Night, Andi,” he whispered. He leaned his head back and was soon snoring softly.

***

“Ah-choo!”

Andi jolted awake when Chad sneezed. She looked up at him and narrowed her eyes in mild annoyance. “It’s not even light out yet,” she complained.

“Sorry about that,” he said apologetically. “I didn’t mean to wake you, but the snow was tickling my nose something fierce.”

“What snow?” Andi asked him. She uncurled from his side and looked around. Her eyes brightened. “Oh, that snow!”

“I guess it started during the night,” Chad said as he gazed at the thin, white sheet draping the
landscape and the soft flakes floating silently in the air. He shivered and pulled his coat tighter around his body. “We need to get back home, or Mother will worry.”

“I wonder if the horses ran away,” Andi said.
“Don’t know,” Chad replied. “Let’s go look.”

He stood stiffly and brushed himself off. He held out his hands to pull Andi up. Together, they crunched through the snow toward the ridge and scanned the valley for the herd.

The horses were not hard to find. Their coats stood out in stark contrast to the white world around them. Determined to disrupt the continuous blanket, the horses frisked around in the fresh snow. A few of the younger horses chased one another around the valley, their hooves tossing more snowflakes up into the air. The flakes whirled around wildly before clinging to the horses’ manes and tails.

Chad and Andi laughed at the horses’ antics then tore themselves away from the picturesque scene. Packing up their campsite and saddling their horses didn’t take long. Soon they turned toward home and began their long ride just as the morning sun cleared the hilltops to greet the new day.
Saddle up for more adventure!

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