2018 Contest Winners

Into the Sunset

Compiled by
Susan K. Marlow
Acknowledgments

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

Thank you to this year’s six independent judges, who are well acquainted with Andi’s adventures in the four Circle C series, and with the Goldtown books:

Karla Cook          Judy Nill
Emily McConnell     Donna Patton
Rebekah Morris      Colleen Reece

And thank you to all of the 2018 contest entrants. It was a challenge for the judges to choose the finalists from such a wide variety of delightful stories (eighty!). Without your enthusiastic entries, this collection would not have been compiled. Young authors’ names can be found with their story entries.

Note: All stories received professional editing for spelling, grammar, flow, and formatting prior to publication in Into the Sunset.

To learn how you can enter upcoming contests, visit CircleCAAdventures.com/writing-contest
2018 Contest Winners

Ages 6–9

1st Place: Eliana Kelley, age 7 “A Lesson in Listening”
2nd Place: Adina Elizabeth Newlin, age 9 “Lucky”
3rd Place: Kezzy Wheaton “Andi’s Christmas Miracle”
Honorable Mention: Joy Hopper, age 6 “The Gold”

Ages 10–13

1st Place: Grace C., age 12 “The Battle of the Bull”
2nd Place: Ellen Senechal, age 13 “A Blessing from Tragedy”
3rd Place: Victoria Crooks “Chasing the Rapids”
3rd Place (2): Grace Hopper, age 12 “A Memorable Fourth of July”
Honorable Mention: Mariah Mead, age 12 “Trapped”

Ages 14–17

1st Place: Olivia Marse, age 17 “Joy Cometh in the Morning”
2nd Place: Faith Potts, age 17 “My Happy Place”
3rd Place: Kaitlyn Krispense, age 16 “To the Moon and Back”
Honorable Mention: Calah Taylor, age 15 “Revenge Backfires”
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Ages 6-9
First Place

1 – A Lesson in Listening

Eliana Kelley, age 7
Iowa

Eliana is a home-schooled second grader. She loves to bake, play the piano, swing from her hammock, and play with her dog S’mores. She especially loves taking care of babies and playing with her siblings.

It was first thing in the morning. Andi ran down stairs, grabbed a muffin and some carrots for the horses, and then ran outside to the barn. Riley was in the barn.

“Hi, Riley,” she said. “Do you want a carrot?”
“Yes.”

Then Andi whistled for Taffy and gave her the rest of the carrots. When they were done eating, Andi went out to the pasture with Taffy to walk around and look at all the big horses.

Riley said, “Don’t forget to shut the gate.”
“I won’t,” Andi hollered back.
Riley headed to do his chores.
Andi stood petting Taffy in the pasture, watching the other horses running around. “Taffy, someday I’ll ride you, and we will run faster than them. You’ll be the best horse on our ranch.”

Just then Andi’s mother called her, “Andrea, come back in and do your chores before playing with the horses. Your aunt is coming, and I want the house clean. Then get into your dress, so Aunt Rebecca doesn’t think you’re a mud-diver.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there,” Andi said. “Just saying ’bye to Taffy.”

Andi hugged Taffy and said, “I don’t like it when Aunt Rebecca comes, cuz then I can’t see you as often and I have to wear scratchy dresses. But Mother called me, so I have to go. See you after lunch.”

Andi walked out of the pasture without thinking to turn and lock the gate.

Once Andi got inside, her mother said, “Good, you are here. I need you to do the dishes, dust off the counters, polish the furniture, and collect eggs. You know Aunt Rebecca likes our house clean when she comes, so I need you to do all the chores before three o’clock, when she arrives.”

Andi didn’t know that the horses were running off into the hills. A rattlesnake had spooked them. All she knew was that she was busy doing chores, and she hated it.
After lunch Andi went back outside to see Taffy, like she said she would. She ran to the pasture and saw the gate wide open.

All the horses except pokey Coco were gone!

She remembered Riley telling her to shut the gate. 

*Oh no! I need to find the horses before Aunt Rebecca comes or I’ll be in big trouble,* she thought.

Andi went running after the horses. She ran through tall grass and past trees, but the horses were going the exact opposite way.

As she walked she thought, *If I go home without the horses, Chad will be so mad, and Taffy will be gone forever. I must find them. I have to prove I’m responsible.*

She passed the road and kept walking. She saw a carriage coming down the road. Aunt Rebecca was inside.

Andi hid behind a tree and watched it pass. She was now more worried than ever. Not only did she lose the horses, but she would be late to see her aunt too.

She knew *everyone* would be mad now.

Andi kept walking until it was almost dark. She thought if she could find the horses, maybe everyone wouldn’t be as mad.

It was no use. She couldn’t find them at all.

Andi decided that she’d better head home. As she
walked home, she started to cry. When she got home, everyone was sitting at the table waiting for her for dinner.

She walked in crying, “The horses all ran off. We have to find them. I went looking, but it was no use. I’m sorry. I left the gate open. It’s all my fault.”

Aunt Rebecca let out a gasp. “Nothing has changed! You need to teach her to be more ladylike.”

Chad stood up and said, “Sorry, Aunt Rebecca, for interrupting dinner, but those horses are our work. Andi, you should have come got me sooner.”

“I’m sorry,” Andi said. “I was too afraid of getting in trouble. I thought I could find them myself—”

Chad interrupted her. “We better go look for them. We don’t want to lose them, or have anyone take them.”

Mitch got up and followed Chad to find the horses.

Mother looked at Andrea. Andi was wearing her dirty overalls, and her face was full of dirt and tear marks.

“Andrea,” she said. “Go get in your dress and wash off. We don’t want you looking dirty.”

Andi looked at her mother and said, “Shouldn’t I go with Chad and Mitch to find Taffy and the horses?”

“No,” Mother said. “You were already searching. It’s time to tidy up and sit down for dinner.”
Andi went upstairs to tidy up. When she came back to the dinner table she was in a blue dress with a lovely pink bow. She had her hair braided, with a pink bow at each end. And her face was clean.

She sat down, and Aunt Rebecca said, “Finally, she looks like a lady.”

Andi tried to smile politely at Aunt Rebecca. “Now eat your soup,” Aunt Rebecca said, “before it gets too cold.”

Andi tried to eat, but she was worried about Taffy. She silently prayed,

God, please keep Taffy safe, and don’t let anybody take her. She’s my favorite horse. And forgive me for going out searching without asking for help.

At that moment Chad and Mitch came walking back in, laughing.

Andi jumped up and said, “Did you find them?”

“No, we didn’t have to—”

“Wait!” Andi interrupted. “You didn’t go searching?”

“No, silly. They know their way home,” said Chad. “Really? Can I go see Taffy quickly?” Andi said.

Aunt Rebecca was about to say no, but Andi’s mother looked at Andi with a smile. “Yes, but be quick. And if you go through the pasture, don’t forget to shut the gate!”

Andi smiled and said, “Thank you, thank you, thank you. You’re the best.”
She ran past Aunt Rebecca to the barn and threw her arms around Taffy, “I’m so glad you’re home.”

She whispered a prayer to God, “Thank you for keeping Taffy safe.”

Andi and Coco
Adina Elizabeth Newlin, age 9  
Mission, Kansas

Adina is a homeschooled third-grader who has a great imagination and loves to read and write. She also likes to play basketball and climb trees. Adina has a real-life “Snowflake” of her very own.

What should I do? Andi thought restlessly.

Andi’s best friend, Riley, had moved away, leaving Andi with nothing to do. She watched her big brother Chad set up a garage sale from the fence.

Suddenly, she heard barking and ran to see what was going on.

Something was in Prince’s mouth!

As Andi rushed toward him, she saw a bunny dart across the lawn, and realized another bunny was in the dog’s mouth.

“Bad dog, Prince!” she scolded. “Drop it now!”
When Prince dropped the bunny, it lay so limp that it looked dead. But it was still breathing.

Andi carefully picked the wounded bunny up. It stirred a bit but then, finding a comfortable way to lie in Andi’s hand, was still.

As she walked toward the front of the house, Andi wondered where the bunny could live. Then she remembered an old bunny hutch she had seen in the garage sale. She hoped Chad would let her help the poor rabbit, maybe even keep it.

In the front yard, Chad was taking money from an old man buying a rickety rocking chair. When the man left, Andi walked up to him. She hoped to make conversation with him before he noticed the shaking rabbit.

“Howdy, Chad. Sold anything yet?”

“Just a chair and a cowboy hat.”

Whew! Andi thought. *He hasn’t sold the bunny hutch.* “Um . . . Chad?”

“Whatcha need?”

Andi opened her cupped hands. “The dogs almost killed it. I thought I could keep her ’til she’s well again, but I wanted to ask you—” She stopped short.

A big smile spread across Chad’s face.

“Did I say something wrong?” Andi asked.

“Oh, no,” Chad said with a laugh. “I don’t like rabbits eating the veggies, but I never wanted the dogs to hurt them, just to keep them away.”
“Oh,” Andi said, her voice hushed. “I thought you hated rabbits.”

“Nope,” he said. “You can keep the bunny if Mother says it’s okay.”

“Really? Thanks!”

“Sure,” Chad replied. “Now run along and play. I have a customer.”

Andi walked toward the house. *What will Mother say? Will she think I’m responsible enough? What will I name it? Sugar? No. Buttercup? I don’t think so. Lucky? Yes, that’s perfect! She’s lucky she’s safe from the dogs.*

“Dear God, help me to be able to keep Lucky,” Andi prayed.

As Andi entered the house, she cupped her hands, hiding the bunny once more.

Her mother was in the kitchen baking cookies.

“Hey, honey. Want a cookie?”

“I need to tell you something,” Andi said.

“What’s in your hands?” Mother said, spinning around.

Andi opened her hands. “Can I keep Lucky?”

“Lucky? You’ve already named it?”

“Yes,” Andi said. “Chad said I could keep her.”

“Is that so? I don’t see why you can’t. Plus, you wouldn’t be so lonely.”

“Really? Thanks!” Andi dashed out the front door.

*The bunny hutch! I should’ve grabbed it before I talked to Mother. What if someone bought it?*
Andi ran faster. She was determined to get there first. Suddenly, she stopped dead in her tracks. The hutch was in the yard, not next to one of the long tables holding things for the garage sale, like it was earlier.

Andi knew she hadn’t moved it. She walked toward the bunny hutch and inspected it for a tag with the printing “SOLD” on it but didn’t find one.

“Did you get what you wanted?” Andi shrieked. She spun around to see Chad laughing very hard.

“Sorry,” Chad said between breaths. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I was worried someone bought the bunny hutch,” Andi said.

“Oh, I stuck it in the yard, thinking you’d probably have luck with Mother,” Chad said. “Why don’t you put her in the cage and give her some food and water. We have bunny food in the basement.”

Andi put Lucky in her cage. “I’ll be back in a few,” she whispered and headed for the basement.

Her older sister, Melinda, liked to sew in the basement and was quick to ask Andi what she was doing.

“Getting bunny food,” Andi responded.

“Why?”

“I found a bunny.”

“Oh,” Melinda said, turning back to her work.
Andi grabbed the bunny food and dashed for the back door.

Mitch stuck his head out into the hallway. “What’s up, Andi?”

“I found a bunny,” she replied.

Mitch stepped into the hall. “How?”

“The dogs almost killed her,” Andi answered. “Chad and Mother said I could keep her.”

“Is that so?” Mitch stepped further into the hall to block Andi’s pathway.

“Will you move?” Andi asked, trying to get around him.

“No. Wild animals don’t belong in cages,” he said.

“Fine.” Andi fumed. “Be like that.” She turned and went out the front door.

That night, Andi thought about what Mitch had said. _Was he right?_

Lucky seemed extremely excited when Andi came to play with her the next day. By the second day, Lucky was jumping as high as the roof of the bunny hutch.

By the third day, Lucky had a three-inch scratch, straight up her left forepaw, from trying to dig her way out.

Andi thought about her situation when she went to bed that night.

_Is Lucky going to hurt herself more? Will she die from her injuries? Was Mitch right after all?_
Mother had always said that when we pray, sometimes God says yes. Sometimes He says no. And sometimes He says maybe.

Andi felt like God was saying “no” this time. First thing tomorrow, she would set Lucky free. She fell asleep, trusting she’d made the right decision.

At breakfast the next morning, Justin reminded Andi of something she had completely forgotten. “Tomorrow’s your birthday, Andi. What’s on your wish list?”

“Oh, um . . . a lasso . . . socks . . . another golden coin.”

“That’s all?”

“Yup!” Andi said and jumped to clear her dishes. Dropping her dishes in the sink, she headed for the door.

Chad was in the way. “Where are you going?”

“I’m letting Lucky go,” Andi answered sadly. She turned to Mitch. “You were right.”

“We’ll go with you,” Justin offered.

“Thank you,” Andi said.

Lucky was sleeping in her cage with no new injuries. Andi carefully lifted the bunny out of her cage, while Justin, Chad, Mitch, Melinda, and Mother watched.

Andi walked to the middle of the yard. She set Lucky down and stepped back. Tears stung her eyes as she stood with the others.
Lucky took a hop, sensing her freedom.

Then, the most amazing thing happened! Lucky turned around, hopped toward Andi, and nuzzled her leg.

Andi blinked away tears. *Is Lucky saying thank you for letting her go?*

Just as quickly as she came to Andi, Lucky was off through the fence, jumping and kicking up her hind legs.

Strangely, Andi didn’t feel sad. She felt glad that her new friend was happy, living free and in the wild.

The next morning, Andi peeled back her covers and jumped into her overalls.

Chad peeked his head into her room. “Happy birthday, sunshine!”

Andi jumped up and hugged him, landing in his arms.

“I’m supposed to bring you to the barn for your present,” he said, heading for the back door.

Andi remembered her sixth birthday, when Chad had taken her to the barn to get her present, Taffy.

When they drew close to the barn, Chad told Andi to close her eyes.

Then he set her down on the dusty barn floor. “Open your eyes, Andi.”

She opened her eyes. In Lucky’s cage was the cutest bunny ever! She was white, with gray spots and big, brown eyes.

“Oh, wow!” Andi gasped.
“We saw how sad you were about Lucky,” Mother said.

“She’s your very own,” Melinda stated. “She’s a tame, pet bunny.”

“Oh, thank you!” Andi cried. “I’ll name her Snowflake, because she’s the color of a beautiful snowfall.”

Andi was so happy her grin reached to her ears.

Snowflake
It was three weeks before Christmas, and Andi was begging Chad to go Christmas shopping.

“No, Andi. I don’t like shopping.”

“Come on, Chad. One day of shopping won’t kill you.”

“No.”

“Please?” Andi begged. “I have no presents for anyone.”

With a sigh, Chad looked at her. “Go ask Mitch.”

“He’s not here right now.”

“Then go ask Justin.”

“He’s with Mitch.”
“Where?” Chad asked.
“I don’t know. Probably riding in the field.”
“Well . . .” Chad rubbed the back of his neck.
Please go get my hat.”
“Yes!” Andi jumped up and down in excitement.
“Well, do you want to go or not?” Chad asked with a smile.
“Don’t worry, I’m getting my hat.”
On their way into town, Chad asked, “How much money do you have in your allowance?”
“Five dollars.”
“Good. How about going to the mercantile for Mother and our two sisters.”
“Okay. I know what to get Justin and Mitch. They need new hats.”
“What are you getting me?”
“Why would I tell you?”
“Because I’m your brother.”
“Just because you’re my brother does not make me tell you what I’m getting you for Christmas. First, I’m getting Katherine’s and Melinda’s presents.”
“Okay, that’s fine with me,” said Chad.
“I’m getting Katherine a necklace with a horseshoe on it,” Andi announced. “And some lace for Melinda. And a bracelet for Mother. Chad, if I give you the money, do you mind getting the hats for Justin and Mitch?”
“Sure,” said Chad.
“And Chad, while you get the hat for Mitch and Justin, I’m getting your present.”
“Okay,” said Chad.
At the counter, Andi asked, “How much did it come to?”
“Four dollars and seventy-five cents,” Mr. Goodwin replied.
When Andi got home she remembered something she forgot to get at the store. Wrapping paper. She decided to go see if they still had some from last year.
She came back with a small roll of the paper.
When she finished wrapping the presents, she wondered what she should do next. She thought it might rain that night, and she wanted to ride Taffy before the rain came.
Andi walked over to the window to see if it was raining. It wasn't actually raining, but the windows had some small raindrops on it. She went to get her hat.
Mitch saw her and asked, “Where you are going, Andi?”
“I’m going riding.”
Mitch looked at her a moment. “I'll go with you. It’s raining out there.”
“Thanks, Mitch,” Andi said.
“Andi, I’m done.” Mitch looked around. Where did she go? he wondered.

He looked around, but couldn’t find her. He decided to go and get Justin.

When Justin heard, he was worried and ran to get his hat. He did not want Andi out all alone in the storm. He told Mitch to go look behind the house while he went to the barn to look for her.

As Justin walked in the door, he saw Andi lying on the ground. One of the new stallions stood beside her, rearing.

Justin ran to Andi. He picked her up and ran as fast as he could toward the house. “Mother, send for the doctor!” he yelled.

When the doctor came, he asked what had happened. When Justin told him, he asked, “Why was she out there alone?”

“I told her I would go riding with her, but I had to get my hat. When I came back she was gone,” Mitch explained, a worried look on his face.

“Something’s wrong,” the doctor said.

“What is it?” asked Mitch.

“She is blind,” the doctor said solemnly.

“What?” Justin exclaimed. “And with only two weeks before Christmas.”

“Yes, I’m very sorry.” The doctor looked at the family, who had gathered in the room. “It may be temporary, but we won’t know for a couple of days.”

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“When she wakes up she will probably be frightened,” he continued. “So try to calm her down. Right now just move her to her bed. We will know in the morning.”

Andi opened her eyes and saw nothing. She tried to get out of bed but felt someone pull her back. She screamed. “What’s happening?”

“Andi,” Justin’s voice came to her, “it’s okay.”

“Justin,” Andi cried. “I can’t see.”

“I know, Andi. But it’s breakfast time. You need to eat.”

“Justin—”

“Andi,” he said, interrupting her. “It’s okay. I will help you downstairs. Come on.”

At breakfast, Andi had a hard time eating. “Mother, can you help me cut my pancakes?”

“Yes, dear. And don’t worry about having to do anything today.”

After breakfast, Melinda asked Andi, “Do you want me to read you a story?”

“Sure, I have nothing else to do,” Andi said. “This is horrible! Two weeks before Christmas. Why did this have to happen to me?”

“Andi, it’s okay. Life is just that way sometimes,” Melinda said.

“But why would God do this to me?”
“Whatever God does, there is always a purpose.”
“Do you think so?” Andi asked.
“I know so.” Melinda said, giving her a hug.
“Thanks for telling me. It sort of makes sense now.”
“You’re welcome. Remember when you’re alone, God is always with you. Now, do you want to pick out a story?”
Andi smiled, trying to be brave and not cry.
“Sure.”

It was Christmas Eve. Andi was excited. Even though she was blind it could still be a good Christmas. She went to bed, but it took her awhile to fall asleep.

On Christmas morning, Melinda ran to Andi’s room. “Andi, it’s Christmas morning.”

Andi opened her eyes, ready to let Melinda help her. But all of the sudden, she could see light, and then shapes.

“Melinda, Melinda!” she squealed.
“What’s wrong, Andi?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I can see! And it’s beautiful!”

“Andi, that’s great! Come on, let’s go down stairs and tell everyone else. Mother, Chad, everyone!” Melinda shouted.

Chad bounded up the staircase. “Is something wrong?”
“No, but Andi can see!”

His eyes moved to Andi. “Andi, is that true?”

“Yep!” Andi smiled. “So I guess it will be a good Christmas, after all.”

“Well,” Chad said, “Let’s go to breakfast, then we will open presents. But I already know what the best present is.”

He tossed Andi up on his shoulders and smiled. “Our Andi can see! We have our own Christmas miracle.”

And he said, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.” Luke 18:27
It’s going to be a nice day,” Andrea Carter said.
She went out the door with a jump and a skip. She ran toward the barn and then ran into her sweet palomino’s stall. Her horse was named Taffy.
“Good morning, Taffy,” she said.
Grooming her horse, she put the saddle on her horse’s back and hopped on. They were almost to her favorite fishing spot when her horse suddenly started to graze.
Andi hopped off Taffy to let her graze and ran over to her fishing spot. There was a small trickle of water left in the stream.
She suddenly felt something itching her in her pocket. She pulled it out of her pocket and found that it was a piece of folded paper. She unfolded it.

“Maybe it will be something interesting,” she said.

It was the gold map that she had found several months ago in Mr. Benton’s beat-up trunk. Some months ago, Andi and Mother were kidnapped by an outlaw who wanted to learn to read and thought Andi’s mother was Miss Hall, Andi’s teacher.

Andi gasped, astonished at what she had found. Months ago when Andi had found the map and pulled it out of her pocket it had been wet and smudged.

Now it was dry and crisp, and the words were coming together.

She saw a drawing of the Circle C ranch, her family’s ranch, on the back. There was an X marking a spot where the river flowed through the ranch.

Andi gasped. “That must mark where the gold is buried!”

Quickly hopping on Taffy, and holding the gold map in one hand, Andi began to get her horse to gallop.

Little did Andi know that one of the new ranch hands, who she wasn’t sure about, was nearby and had heard her exclamation. She didn’t know that the ranch hand was quickly chasing her on his horse.
While Andi was galloping she saw a shovel. She stopped. “This is what I need to dig for the gold.” She grabbed it, got back on her horse, and continued riding.

Andi got to the spot that she had seen on the map. Jumping off her horse, she began to dig with the shovel. Suddenly, she saw a small dot moving toward her in the distance. She began to dig even faster.

She hit something hard with her shovel. Was it a rock or the gold?

She saw a small, dirty bag. She pulled it out of the dirt. She opened the bag. There inside was a gold nugget the size of an apple. Andi could hardly believe her eyes.

She glanced up and saw a rider on a horse approaching her. She threw the shovel aside.

Grabbing the gold bag, she ran to Taffy and hopped on. Taffy began to gallop. Andi passed the other rider without a word. It was the ranch hand.

When she got home she put Taffy in her stall and ran into the house with the bag of gold.

“Andrea, what are you holding?” exclaimed her mother.

Andi told her mother about the gold.

Mother stared, astonished. “My goodness! Where did you find that?”
“This gold map helped me find it. Where the X is, the gold was. This is the map that I found at Mr. Benton’s.”

Mother was surprised. “Andrea, we need to tell the sheriff right away.”

After telling the sheriff, he exclaimed to them, “You have solved the mystery of where the gold that had been stolen years ago from Mr. Weaver was buried. I will return it to him.”

Mother gave Andi a hug.

Andi smiled and knew she had done the right thing.
Ages 10-13
First Place

5 - The Battle of the Bull

Grace C., age 12

Grace loves reading, writing, sewing, and her seven wonderful siblings. Her cat, Charcoal, likes to sit on her keyboard while she tries to type.

Mr. Carter glanced up from his plate full of food to his son. “Chad, I want you to bring the cows from the southeast pasture into the north pasture once we’re done here.”

Chad set his cup down on the large wooden table. “Yes, Father. But, sir, aren’t you keeping Prince Reginald in the southeast pasture?”

“Yes, Chad. He generally stays on the outlying edge of the field, so you can leave him there and just worry about the other cows. I don’t believe he will act up, but if he does, just leave the pasture.”

Aunt Rebecca tilted her head. “Who is Prince Reginald?”
“He’s the bull,” five-year-old Mitch explained, patting Aunt Rebecca’s arm. “Father let Chad and I name him.”

“Chad and me, Mitchell.” Aunt Rebecca pulled away from Mitch with a frown. “Please keep your dirty hands off my dress.”

“We’re planning on taking a walk to the pond this evening, so you should probably bring the cows in sooner than later.” Elizabeth Carter smiled at her son. “You may be excused if you’d like.”

“I want to help Chad bring in the cows. May I go with him?” Katherine looked at her parents hopefully.

Oh no, Chad thought. His younger sister’s help wasn’t usually very helpful.

“It is quite improper for young ladies to round up cows, Katherine. What makes you want to do such a thing?” Aunt Rebecca sniffed disdainfully.

For once, Chad agreed with his aunt.

“But Mother works on the ranch, and she’s a lady.” Katherine glared at Aunt Rebecca.

Mr. Carter cleared his throat. “Katherine, I think it would be best if you didn’t help Chad tonight.”

Katherine folded her small arms. “Why does Chad get to do it but not me?”

Aunt Rebecca pursed her lips. “Chad is ten, my dear, and a boy.”

“But I’m only two years younger!” Katherine looked from Aunt Rebecca to her father. “Please, Father?”
“No.” Mr. Carter shook his head.

Chad breathed a sigh of relief. He wouldn’t have to put up with Katherine’s antics tonight.

Katherine slumped in disappointment.

“Katherine, if you’d like, you may help me with clothes for the baby,” Mother offered.

Katherine shook her head.

Mr. Carter turned to his son. “You may go, Chad.”

Chad stepped off the veranda of the big, white ranch house onto the dusty ground and started for the barn. He would need his horse to help round up the cows. He grabbed his saddle and led the horse out of his stall.

“Hello, Sky,” Chad greeted the horse. He swung the saddle over Sky’s back and fitted the bridle over his ears. He mounted and began trotting toward the pasture.

As he rode, Chad thought about Mother’s baby. It would be arriving soon. If it was a boy, they would name him Levi. If it was a girl, she would be named Melinda.

The baby wouldn’t just be Mother’s baby, either. It would be Chad’s little brother or sister. He hoped it would be a boy. He had quite enough experience with younger sisters in Katherine.

Chad reached the pasture and opened the gate without getting off Sky’s back, a trick he had learned that summer. Where was Prince Reginald?
He looked around. If Chad knew where the bull was, then he could avoid it.

A snort came from behind Chad. “What was that?”

Chad wheeled his horse around. Standing about twenty yards away was Prince Reginald. The bull looked bigger, redder, meaner, and angrier than Chad had ever remembered him to be.

“Back, Sky, Back,” Chad whispered, pulling on the reins.

Prince Reginald took a step forward. Sky took a step backward.

Sky’s ears were laid flat back, and he was breathing hard. Chad looked behind him, hoping he’d left the gate open so he could make a quick escape.

The bull snorted.

As Chad whipped his head around to face the angry beast, time seemed to stop. The bull was charging.
The body of the huge animal was lunging forward, more quickly than a cow should be able to go, it seemed. His hoof beats shook the ground.

“I’m not wearing red, Prince Reginald. I’m really not,” Chad screamed, hoping somehow he could make the bull stop charging.

Sky reared, and Chad flew off backwards. He landed with a *thud* on the dusty ground. His hat flew off and landed on one of Prince Reginald’s horns.

Prince Reginald slid to a stop. He shook his head, trying to get rid of the new irritation. He stomped with one foot and stopped shaking his head, looking from Chad to Sky, and then from Sky to Chad.

He lowered his head, locked eyes with Chad, and once more began charging across the pasture.

Chad felt smaller than he ever had in his life. For the first time, he noticed how big the sky above him was, how much ground there was to cover between him and the safety of the other side of the fence, and just how easily that giant bull could crush him.

Was his life over?

Would he miss his family when he was in Heaven?

Would he never get to see Mother’s new baby, or see his mother and father again?

Would he never see his siblings again?

Funny as it felt, Chad even began to miss Aunt Rebecca.
“Will it hurt very much to die, I wonder?” He didn’t know who he was asking, but he asked anyway. He tried to stand up and run, but it felt like his legs were frozen to the ground. He couldn’t watch the bull advance anymore.

Chad squeezed his eyes shut. *God, help me,* he prayed silently.

The bull’s hooves shook the ground as they pounded nearer and nearer. One step closer, two steps closer, three steps closer—

*Woof! Woof, woof, woof?* Was that a dog?

Chad slowly opened his eyes. Splash, his dog, was racing toward Prince Reginald, snarling.

*Grrr!* The dog sprang at the bull and sank his teeth into its leg.

Chad found he could finally move his own legs. He leaped up and sprinted toward the fence, which Sky had jumped. He quickly clambered over it as his dog distracted the bull.

“Sky!” Chad looked around for his horse, but Sky had long since left for the safety of the barn.

He looked back at the pasture. Splash was chasing Prince Reginald, and Prince Reginald was chasing . . . Chad!

Chad ran and ran until he felt like he could not run anymore. He finally stopped, breathless. He didn’t think he could beat Prince Reginald to the house, but maybe he could hide from him.
Chad looked around for a suitable hiding spot. There weren’t any good trees, and the barn was a ways off. He would have to run for the house.

It seemed like an eternity before the welcome sight of the ranch house came into view. Breathless, he turned around, looking for Prince Reginald.

Just as he spotted the bull, a flash of pink caught his eye. His sister!

“Katherine!” Chad yelled.

Katherine cupped her hands to her mouth. “I’m gonna help you round up the cows!”

Prince Reginald snorted and turned his head toward the girl.

Katherine skipped toward Chad, clearly oblivious to the danger.

“Katherine, no! Watch out!” Chad spun around and dashed into the house, banging the door behind him. “Father! Mother!”

He heard no response. “Justin, Sid, anyone! Where are you?”

“Don’t yell in the house, Chad.” Aunt Rebecca’s gaze traveled up and down Chad’s filthy, torn clothing. She pursed her lips and frowned. “How could you get so dirty rounding up cows? You were off somewhere playing, weren’t you?”

Chad ignored his aunt’s question. “Where is everyone? It’s important, Aunt Rebecca.”

“Your family went down to the pond. They said
you could join them when you got back from the cow pasture. I personally do not think it proper to go gallivanting around outdoors in the evening air, so I stayed behind.”

“Prince Reginald’s chasing Katherine. I need help!” Chad blinked hard. He was ten years old, much too old to cry.

“Prince Reginald?”

“The bull. He’s loose, and he’s with Katherine.”

Rebecca Carter sat down heavily on the bottom step of the stairs, fanning herself with her hand. “Goodness gracious! Mercy on us! Why on earth did you let that beast out of his enclosure?”

“I need help getting Prince Reginald back in. Please, Aunt Rebecca! He’s still angry, and he’s going to go after Katherine. She can’t hear me.”

“Who do you propose you should find to help you?”

“There’s no time to get Father.” Chad looked from Aunt Rebecca to the door. He couldn’t waste any time, but he wouldn’t be able to help Katherine by himself.

“You’re going to have to help me, Aunt Rebecca. Get on Mother’s horse and go around the edge of the barn. If we can charge up to Prince Reginald from both sides, we should be able to scare him back into the pasture. Here.”

Chad pulled a bandana from his pocket and
handed it to his aunt. “This will confuse him.” *I hope,* he added in his head.

There wasn’t much a small bandana could do against a large bull.

“You want *me* to ride a smelly, dusty horse? I am a lady, and ladies do not chase angry bulls on horseback.”

Aunt Rebecca shook her head decidedly. “The very idea! It’s preposterous.”

“Aunt Rebecca, Katherine will die if you don’t.” Chad took a deep breath. He was getting angry. “Lady or not, you run and get on Mother’s horse. *Now!*”

Chad dropped the bandana on his aunt’s lap and took off toward the barn, praying his aunt would listen to him.

A ripping noise came from behind Chad. He looked over his shoulder as he ran. His aunt had torn her silk skirt from top to bottom.

And . . . probably for the first time since she was a girl, she was *running.*

Chad rushed to the barn and leaped onto Sky, who was standing in the middle of the barn. He pressed Sky faster and faster, breaking around the edge of the barn at the same time Aunt Rebecca did.

Katherine was pressed up against the back side of the barn.

Prince Reginald was about a dozen paces away from her, pawing the ground.
Yelling and flapping their bandanas, Chad forced Sky toward Prince Reginald.

The big, red bull turned and ran for the pasture.

Chad pulled his horse to a trot and followed after him. “Ride along the fence so he doesn’t try to break through it,” he yelled to his aunt.

She was a much better rider than Chad had expected her to be.

Prince Reginald’s charge slowed to a halt. He stood in the middle of the pasture, his sides heaving.

Chad swung himself off Sky and turned the latch on the gate.

Aunt Rebecca joined him. “The cows wandered out.”

Chad nodded. “I’ll find them, but we need to find Katherine. She must be terrified.” He turned the corner of the barn. Katherine was sitting on the ground, her shoulders heaving with sobs.

She looked up as Chad and Aunt Rebecca approached. “I was so scared, Chad. I thought he was going to kill me. I should have stayed with Mother and Father.”

“You’re safe now.” Chad sat down beside his sister.

“Katherine? Rebecca? Chad?” Shouts came from the house.

“Your parents must be looking for us.” Aunt Rebecca scooped Chad’s shaking sister off the ground.
Chad gaped. It was hard to believe Aunt Rebecca was strong enough to carry his sister.

“Rebecca! What on earth happened?” Mr. Carter leaped down the steps of the ranch house and took Katherine from his sister.

Aunt Rebecca smoothed her dusty skirt with a grimace. “Ask Chad. I must change out of this dress. This skirt is not at all decent.”

Later that evening, the family assembled inside the house. Chad, Aunt Rebecca, and Katherine took their turns describing the events.

After thoroughly praising Chad for his heroism, Mr. Carter turned to Aunt Rebecca. “Thank you, Rebecca, for helping to save our daughter’s life,” he said with emotion, holding his children close to him.

“No, James. It is I who must apologize to you. I have been so utterly selfish. I nearly stood back and let your daughter die.”

Was it just Chad, or were Aunt Rebecca’s eyes slightly wet?

“Besides, Chad was the one who stood up to Prince Reginald and led the battle with the bull.” The corners of her mouth turned up slightly.

“But you did help him, Rebecca, even though you didn’t want to, and that is what we’re grateful for,” Elizabeth said, hugging her sister-in-law.
Chad trembled to think how close he had come to losing his family. He felt sure he would never be unappreciative of his family again—not even of Aunt Rebecca.
Chapter 1

Riley, I just don’t understand it!”

Andrea Carter Prescott sat at the table with a pen and her journal sprawled listlessly before her. It was early April, 1906.

The Prescott couple had planned a trip to San Francisco for Easter, at Andi’s oldest sister’s house, and were leaving the next day.

Andi had decided to write all about it in her journal, but a question that had been buzzing around
in her head all day finally made her push her pen aside and stare, frustrated, at her husband.

At her exclamation, Riley lowered the newspaper he’d been reading and gave his wife his full attention. “What don’t you understand?”

They had been sitting at the table for no more than five minutes, and Riley was sure nothing serious had happened in that short time.

Andi crossed her arms. “I don’t understand why God won’t let us have children. “I don’t think it’s fair.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “Why won’t He let us have any? We’ve been married for nigh on twenty years now, and we still haven’t been blessed with a single child.”

She blinked back tears. “At this point, I don’t think He’ll give us a baby. But Justin and Lucy have five, Peter and Melinda have two, and Ellie and Chad also have five. Why can’t we have just one?”

“Maybe it isn’t His plan,” Riley suggested softly, though he was hurt at the thought of never being called “Daddy.”

A lump that had suddenly lodged itself in her throat prevented Andi from responding. She gave a small nod, picked up her pen, and wrote in her journal:

Riley is right—as usual. I think God doesn’t intend for us to have any children. The reason why is beyond me, but I’ll just trust that His plan is the perfect one.
Yet, Andi knew it would be a hard thing to do as she watched a tear drip onto her page and blur the neatly written paragraph.

Chapter 2

The Easter celebration at Katherine’s was lovely. The two days after that were spent touring the city and oohing and ahhing over Katherine’s grandchildren. On the evening of April 17, Andi went to bed exhausted.

She opened her Bible for her daily reading of Scripture and her eye snagged on the verse, “Man makes plans, but the Lord establishes his steps.”

Andi’s eyes pooled with tears. Lord, she prayed silently, is having children the plans of Riley and me, but not You?

Andi was fast asleep when a deep rumbling and the shaking of her whole bed awoke her. Around her, the walls trembled violently. The bed began to slide across the room.

“Riley!” Andi ripped back the bedcovers and rolled out of bed. “Earthquake!”

Riley was already awake. He followed his wife and grabbed their housecoats on their way out.
Katherine joined them in the hallway. “What’s happening?” she asked groggily.

“Earthquake,” Andi answered. “We must go outside, and hurry.”

Katherine nodded and let her sister and brother-in-law lead the way. Out in the cold morning air, they snuggled into their housecoats and huddled together.

Around them, other people were pouring from their homes and onto the streets. Some hollered, some cried, and others held tightly to each other.

The earth continued to shake violently.

Andi had never been a witness to such a terrible thing as this. She, along with several others, fell on the ground as another wave commenced.

When Riley collapsed beside her, she grasped his arm and held on tightly.

The buildings started turning into rubble piles. The ground began to crumble. People cried out with fear.

Andi felt like screaming. She squeezed her eyes shut and ordered her stomach to keep last night’s supper in place. Oh, Lord, whatever’s going on? she mentally wailed.

Riley stood and yanked Andi to her feet. He then dragged her out of the way just before Katherine’s house fell into a pile of bricks, timbers, and glass.

Andi gave a small shriek and covered her face to prevent flyaway glass shards from hitting her eyes.
Dust clouds erupted from nowhere, filling Andi’s mouth with the choking dust. She coughed and fell back down to the ground.

And then . . . it suddenly stopped.

Andi looked about her, shocked at what she saw.

A few of the taller buildings still stood, but most were only heaps on the ground. The air was beginning to fill with the whinnies of frightened horses, people’s sobs, and the sound of remaining bricks tumbling down.

Aftershocks began to ripple through the city. Worse yet . . .

“Fire!” someone shouted.

Andi’s head snapped up in the direction of the voice. Sure enough, it appeared a gas main had erupted. Bright-orange flames were licking away.

While hollering voices swirled around her, Andi rose and grabbed Riley again. “What can we do?” she asked softly.

“Nothing,” Riley answered. “I think they’re calling the fire department, but I don’t think that’ll work. The lines are down. And the roads are too crumbled and covered up with the remains of houses for the fire engines to come through.”

Andi shivered.

“Cold?” Riley asked.

Andi shook her head. No, she wasn’t cold. Her shivers and the chattering of her teeth came from
pure fear. Her insides felt all shook up. *Oh, Lord,* she prayed, *help us now.*

“Are you all right, Kate?” she inquired of her sister.

“I’m fine.”

Andi returned her attention to her surroundings and watched as more and more people began to gather in groups. They wailed and sobbed. Some cried out that their family members or friends were gone—crushed in the remains of buildings.

Chapter 3

Out of all the weeping, suffering people, Andi’s attention was drawn to a boy who looked not yet six years old. He was barefoot and trembling with cold and fright. Shaggy curls dangled loosely over his brow.

A dirty nightdress hung limply from his shoulders, which were shaking in hard, choking sobs.

He shoved his grimy fists into his eyes and said between hiccups, “Mama! Mama! Where are you, Mama?”

Andi’s heart clenched in compassion for the small child.
He looked so heartbroken, so helpless. His mother must have been killed in the quake, she concluded sadly.

She shook her head. So many people had lost their friends or family in the earthquake. Why was she feeling so much pity for just one of them?

Riley was soon crunching his way through the rubble. He led Kate and Andi to a semi-cleared spot a little ways away.

Horses and wagons had found their way past the rubble, to carry people to the ferry dock, and across the bay to Oakland, safely away from the earthquake.

But no matter how far Andi walked away from the boy, she could not shake off a little feeling that nagged at her. A feeling she could not yet define.

What’s up with me? Andi wondered.

She settled into a wagon quickly filling with panicking people and squeezed against Riley. Why do I keep feeling like . . . like . . . like what?

She closed her eyes and tried to banish the feeling, but it was useless. It only pressed harder at her.

All she saw behind her closed eyelids was the boy’s despair. Lord, what’s going on?

Then she knew what she felt. “Riley, I’ll be right back.”

The next instant, she jumped from the wagon and hit the street running.
She bounded over the rubble and down the street, and soon arrived at the little boy’s side. She knelt down next to him and draped a comforting arm around his shoulder.

“Hello,” she said in what she hoped was a soothing voice. “My name is Andi Prescott. It looks like aftershocks keep happening, and I don’t want you hurt. Would you like to come along with my husband and me?” She gestured to Riley, who’d just come up behind them.

“Sure, little man. Come along with us,” Riley said. “We’ll go to Oakland and board at a hotel for a little while.”

The boy sniffed and swiped at his tears. “That’s kind of you, Mr. Prescott, Mrs. Prescott.” He sniffed again and swallowed hard, clearly trying to control his sobs long enough to talk.

“But it don’t make no difference to me where I go. My ma’s gone. Pa died a few years back, so ma was all I had left. Now she’s...she’s...” His voice trailed off in misery.

“I know, dear, and I’m sorry,” Andi said tenderly. “But, please, come with us. We’ll keep you safe for the time being.”

The little boy shrugged. Then he nodded and slipped his hand into Andi’s outstretched one. He trotted along behind Andi and Riley as they walked back to the wagons.
Fortunately, there was enough room for the threesome to squeeze in. Andi held the little boy—who was sobbing inconsolably—on her lap and snuggled him close.

“That was a smart thing to do, Andi,” Riley whispered to her ears only. “I didn’t even notice the little boy.”

“I don’t know why,” Andi said thoughtfully, “but I felt kind of . . . well, led to do it.”

Chapter 4

After a short drive, the Prescotts, the little orphan boy, and Kate boarded a ferry, which took them safely to Oakland.

There the Prescotts signed themselves into the Claremont Hotel. Katherine said she’d stay with a grandchild currently living in Oakland.

To the orphan child’s obvious surprise and delight, Andi told him he would share a room with her and Riley. She had the maid bring up extra comforters, which she used to make a small bed on the floor for the boy to sleep on.

Several days later, when they were mostly settled in Oakland, Riley, Andi, and the child (who’d informed Andi earlier that his name was Amos Sterling), were sitting together in their room,
drinking hot chocolate and eating sugar cookies.

Little Amos sat across the room from the Prescotts, nibbling at his snack. Though Andi had figured out that he had been a poor urchin, forever hungry and dirty even before the earthquake, he only picked at the meals the Prescotts brought him.

Amos’s heart was clearly still heavy with the grief of his passing mother.

Even the sweet taste of sugar cookies could not tempt his appetite or make his mouth explode in delight.

Andi was concerned for him. So was Riley.

“What else can we do for him?” Andi whispered to her husband.

“I don’t know, Andi. We are doing all we can for him now.”

Suddenly, a loud, hopeless sound came from across the room, where Amos sat. He was crying—hard. “Oh, Mrs. Prescott,” he blubbered, “I want my mama! Why did she have to die? Why?”

Andi ran over to him. Pulling him close, she tenderly began to rock back and forth in a consoling manner. “It’s alright, Amos.”

“No, no, it ain’t,” sobbed poor Amos. “I don’t have nobody. Nobody! I don’t even have a place to go.”

There was a pause. Then, “Mrs. Prescott, can’t I stay with you? Can’t I stay with you forever and ever? I promise to always be a good boy.”
He held his breath and froze in Andi’s arms as he waited for her answer.

Andi turned around so she could look at Riley. “Riley?”


Andi beamed. What was pumping in her heart came out in words. “I think that God has just established our steps.”

“Do you? I do too.” Riley’s smile split his face. “Tomorrow I’ll talk about it to the judge that lives here.”

Chapter 5

Andi and Riley soon returned to their Memory Creek Ranch. When they did, small Amos Prescott trailed along behind them, staring at everything in astonishment and wonder.

In no time at all, Amos was riding, learning to lasso, and doing little chores. He appeared to love the sunshine and the birds, and he delighted in going to school.

Not a day went by when he didn’t say how much he loved Mama and Papa Prescott.

Andi watched it all with growing excitement. Indeed, she thought, I made a plan, but God
established my steps.

A few weeks later, Andi and Riley were standing at the corral fence, watching Amos prance around inside on the back of his pony. “You know,” Andi commented, “I do believe Amos has been a blessing from tragedy.”

“Yes,” Riley agreed. “The earthquake was certainly a tragedy. And we thinking we’d never have any kids was heartbreaking. But God had it all planned.”

Truly, a blessing from tragedy.
Victoria loves Jesus, enjoys playing the piano and guitar, reading, drawing, and hanging out with her family and their cat, Gracie. She adores animals and dreams of becoming a veterinarian.

Chapter 1

Should I move left or right? Left. Right. Which way?

Lily Prescott pondered. She frowned, scanning the checkerboard in front of her. She glanced up at her opponent, her mother, Andi Prescott, who sat at the opposite side of the board.

Andi shot a sly smile at Lily.

Lily inhaled deeply and placed her hand on her last checker.

I'll go left! she decided, sliding the checker to the square. Lily looked at Andi, watching what her next move would be.
But before Andi could lay a finger on her playing piece a loud, boisterous voice sliced the air. “Mama, Mama, Mama!”

Lily’s little brother, Ethan, ran into the room, yelling at the top of his lungs. “Maggie’s annoying me!”

Lily’s eyes widened when he barreled toward them. “Ethan! Watch out!”

Sadly, the warning came too late. A second later Lily, Andi, and Ethan were sprawled out on the floor with checkers and a now-bent checker board surrounding them.

“Oh, Ethan said.

Lily held back a laugh while her mother sighed.

It was typical for Ethan to do such sudden things. Last week he’d dropped three teacups, broke a new bridle, lost a couple of brushes while grooming his pony, and ripped their father, Riley’s, cowboy hat.

Everybody assumed Ethan was going through a clumsy stage. These days they just assured him it was okay.

“Ethan,” Andi said, “Why don’t you go outside and check on Papa. He should be coming in soon for the noon meal.”

“Oh, I’m truly sorry. I just couldn’t stop. And Maggie kept bothering me,” he told them.

“Was not!” a small voice cried. A little girl stood in the doorway and puckered her lips.
“Margaret, don’t argue,” Andi said. “Ethan, it’s over now, so you go find Papa.”

“Maggie, why don’t you come over and help me pick up these checker pieces,” Lily said to her five-year-old sister.

“Oh goodie!” she squealed.

Lily smiled. One thing Lily liked about Maggie was that she thought doing a chore like that was a great honor.

Supper went very well, in Lily’s opinion. Ethan came back with Papa right as Mama was putting food on the table. They sat down, said grace, and dug in.

“Andi, I’m going to need some help out on the range this afternoon,” Riley said.

“And?”

“I was thinking that Lily is old enough to stay at home and watch Ethan and Maggie,” Riley finished.

“Are you serious, Papa?” Lily butted in.

“If Mama agrees, then yes,” he replied.

Lily shifted her eyes to Andi, who appeared deep in thought.

“Well, it would be a good experience. Do you want to, Lily?” Andi asked.

“Oh yes. I’d love to. You can count on me!”

“All right then, the job is yours,” Riley said.
Chapter 2

Crash! A clattering sound echoed by splintering glass filled the air.

Lily jumped, letting out a frustrated sigh. *It’s only been two hours since they left and there’s been more problems so far than I’ve seen in my whole life. Arguments, teasing. What’s wrong this time?*

She sprinted to where the sound was heard. “Oh no!” She skidded to a halt in front of the dining room doorway. The floor was littered with pearly white glass, water, and scattered roses.

Standing above the mess was Ethan.

“You and your sister have caused me so much trouble. Can’t you do anything right?” she yelled.

Immediately Lily regretted what she said.

*Anger.* One of the downfalls that made her life so hard.

She didn’t usually get angry about Ethan’s clumsiness, but after all that had happened this afternoon, she couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“Ethan,” Lily started softly, “I’m sorry. Just . . . go get Maggie. You two can play outside.”
Ethan nodded and ran out of the room.
Lily sighed and started cleaning up the mess.

After half an hour spent cleaning up the monster mess, Lily decided to check on her siblings. She knew she should have been watching them, but she doubted harm would come.

Then, as Lily wiped her hands on a towel, a sharp scream pierced the air. She froze for a moment then ran to the window. *Where are they?* she thought.

As she flew to the door to investigate, it suddenly swung open. Ethan, shaking like a leaf, stood in the entrance.

“Tell me what happened,” she demanded.

“M-Maggie fell in the c-creek!” Ethan sobbed, hiccupping all the while.

As the last two words were said, Lily’s whole world seemed to stop. She wavered for a second. Her heart froze, and her blood turned to ice.

“Lily!” Ethan screeched.

As quickly as time had stopped, everything came to life. Lily pushed past her brother, trampled down the back steps, and raced to the barn on the other side of the vast yard.

When she got there, Lily caught her breath and hauled open the barn doors. The strong smell of hay and animals knocked into Lily’s senses.
Without hesitation, she sprinted down the aisle and unlocked a stall door. Dozing inside was Lily’s horse, Freckles, a white appaloosa with brown dots sprinkling her coat.

“Freckles!” Lily exclaimed, grabbing a halter and lead rope, “We’re going for a quick ride!”

Lily led Freckles out of the barn and mounted. Freckles snorted, liking the chance for a run.

“Come on girl, we have to save Maggie!” Lily cried, nudging her horse into a gallop. They raced down the creek like two in one.

Lily usually liked to fly across the never-ending acres Mama and Papa owned, but this race wasn’t for fun. Maggie was so little!

And with the creek being so massive and cold her little sister could—

Lily forced herself not to think about the outcome of staying in the creek for so long. Then she gasped. A new thought suddenly wormed into her head.

*There are a few small rapids in the rougher areas of the creek. We aren’t allowed to play in those sections because we’re so far away from the house and we could get injured. But what if the creek pushed Maggie down into those parts and—*

“Negative thoughts again, Lily,” she told herself.
Five long minutes later Lily was distraught. She didn’t stop the austere thoughts in her mind now. “This is it, Freckles. My first opportunity to babysit is my last. All because I’ve lost M-Maggie to a creek.”

Lily didn’t try to blink back the salty tears. She let them trickle down her cheeks.

After slowing Freckles to a stop, she laid her head on the horse’s stringy mane. Lily closed her eyes and sighed. “What am I going to do?” she whispered softly.

Freckles started to trot. Lily gave a shaky gasp as she started to slide off. “Freckles, stop!”

But the horse kept her pace.

Lily snagged the flying reins and clutched them harshly. After a minute of bouncing up and down Freckles jolted to a stop. “Gracious, Freckles! Don’t scare me like—”

Lily stopped scolding. “Freckles?” she timidly said. The appaloosa was ferociously asking to take the lead.

Lily slowly gave it to her.

Freckles bounded for the creek and halted on the bank.

“What are you trying to tell me . . .”

Lily’s sentence hung in the air as she noticed a flash of dark colors and a bob of brown curls that hung limply across a mossy, green rock.

It was Maggie.
Chapter 3

The harsh rapids tumbled around her and beat her back. “Maggie!” Lily squeaked.

Freckles pawed the ground.

“Yeah, I know,” Lily mumbled to the eager horse. “I have to get Maggie, but I could get hurt or even killed.” She eyed the sharp rocks.

“No,” she argued aloud. “I was supposed to watch out for Maggie and Ethan, and it’s still my duty.”

Lily urged Freckles into the water before she changed her mind.

She clenched her fists, pursed her lips, and tried not to think about turning around. The icy cold water fought against them the deeper they traveled to the middle of the creek.

Finally, they stood a couple of yards from where Maggie lay.

*Now the tricky part,* Lily thought. *Pulling Maggie up on Freckles without getting her squashed by Freckles.*

“This is a very dangerous idea, Freckles,” she said. “But I have to save Maggie, and this is the only chance I have. You need to stay really still while I get
in the water, wade to Maggie, and grab her. Got it?”

Freckles shook her head.

“Okay, here it goes.” Lily slipped into the water, holding the reins as if she never wanted to let go.

“Please do not step on Maggie or me,” Lily muttered to her horse. “Of course, Mama and Papa wouldn’t have gotten you if they didn’t trust you in the first place.”

A freezing wave of water splashed against her back, soaking her to the skin.

Lily gave a yelp in surprise as it dragged her under the current, trying to push her to the bottom of the creek bed. She squeezed her eyes shut and wrapped her fingers around the reins as tightly as she could.

Fire burned in Lily’s chest as she fought to get to the surface.

Feeling like forever, she broke through the top, gasping for air. She peeked open her eyes and gaped when she saw that she was right next to Maggie.

Lily blanched when she saw Maggie so lifeless. She hauled her sister off the slimy rock and made her way back to Freckles. Soon enough, she climbed atop Freckles hiking Maggie up there as well.

Lily squeezed her legs against Freckles and they started the dangerous journey back out of the water.
As a bird suddenly freed from its cage, Lily and Freckles cantered into the yard. Dust flew in every direction. She reined in Freckles, who halted in a bone-jarring stop.

“Ethan!” Lily called as she dismounted. After giving the ranch a hurried glance, she pulled Maggie off Freckles and dashed into the house as fast as she could.

“Ethan!” Lily cried a second time.

“Here!” The curtain to the kitchen pantry pulled back, revealing her little brother.

“Ethan, go to the bathroom and grab a couple of towels. Then run into Maggie’s room and lay them on her bed.”

Ethan bolted out of the room.

Lily hobbled into her sister’s room and slid Maggie on the bed, laying her head on her lap. Ten minutes later, Lily had dried Maggie off. She laid her in bed, hoping her parents would come home soon.

Finally, Lily sank into a chair to think what to do next. “Oh, I wish Mama was here! She’d know what to do.”

She studied Maggie while she thought of what to do next. The little girl was surrounded by blankets, in a dead sleep, and was breathing slowly.

“Lily!” Ethan called.

Lily jumped up and hurried into the living room, where Ethan was looking out the window. Two black
dots in the distance were getting bigger and bigger, until Lily could see that they were horses with riders.

“It’s Mama and Papa!” Lily gasped. “They’re back early.” A wave of relief washed over but also the fact that she’d have to explain all the events that had happened since they left.

“Oh boy,” she said, gulping as they entered the yard.

Chapter 4

Hello, Mama,” Lily said as she scooted out to meet them. “Hello, Papa.”

She was in absolutely no rush to tell them what happened. “Goodness, you’re back early. Did you enjoy working?” she questioned as they dismounted.

Riley snorted. “If you call rounding up a bunch of stubborn heifers fun, then go ahead.”

“Ri-i-i-ght.” Lily nervously laughed, stretching the word out. But in her mind, she groaned.

Ugh. What a dumb question. What’s worse is they’re most likely expecting a hot bath and a meal now.

“Lily, are you okay? Did something happen?” Andi asked.

“No. I mean . . . let’s all go inside. I need to . . . uh, tell you something,” Lily mumbled.
“I’m so sorry,” Lily whimpered after telling the story.

“All is forgiven, Lily,” Andi replied. “But you should have been with Ethan and Maggie when they were outside. And you need to remember to not get angry about things when they don’t go your way.”

“Yes, ma’am. I know. I shouldn’t have gotten so mad at Ethan when the vase broke, but about rescuing Maggie . . .” Lily paused, not sure how to phrase the upcoming words.

“Lily,” Andi broke in, “even though you made some mistakes beforehand, you were quick in your actions and saved Maggie in the nick of time. You also have learned your lesson of how certain choices lead to certain consequences. From now on, you must decide on following the right path or the wrong path.”

She took a deep breath and went on. “Today you made the right choice after a wrong choice. Because of it you saved your sister. Your father and I are proud of you for that.”

Lily didn’t respond for the fear of another round of tears and misunderstood words. Instead, she hugged Mama in response.

Then they turned to Dr. Burns, whom Riley had called once he and Andi heard that Maggie had fallen in the creek.
“Well, you’re lucky you found her when you did, or things could have been a lot worse. She caught a chill, has some bruises, and a few small lacerations. I’ll give you a medication for her.”

Dr. Burns kept talking. “You should feed her warm liquids for the first few days. But other than that, she’s going to be just fine,” he assured them and left.

Lily gave a relieved sigh. She sure was glad Maggie would be okay, and she was glad she and Ethan were on the right terms. Even though she would have to gain some trust back—and her next time babysitting her brother and sister would be a while from now—Lily was okay with that. She learned her lesson.

Two weeks later, Maggie was back to her normal self, giggling, feeling honored to do little chores, and bothering Ethan, who seemed to have finally exited his clumsy stage.

Riley was especially happy about that. Now he now could buy a new cowboy hat.
Grace Hopper, age 12,  
Charleston, South Carolina

Grace enjoys reading, drawing, writing, sewing, singing, crocheting, piano, and archery. She also enjoys leading events and serving in her American Heritage Girls troop.

Chapter 1

Nice day, isn’t it, Taffy?” I asked my horse as I sat on the bank of the creek, legs dangling.

There was not much water. The hot days of early July had dried most of it up, but a trickle of water still slowly made its way down the creek bed. Enough to dangle my feet in, anyway.


Taffy snorted, as if to say that wasn’t exactly her problem.
“There’s a collection being taken to rebuild it, and I’d really like to help,” I went on. “Maggie Tucker is a school friend of mine, and I want to help her family.”

I sighed. “Unfortunately, I know from experience that I cannot withdraw my money from the bank, not without an adult signature. And I don’t want to ask Mother for the money. It wouldn’t be from me if I did that.”

I stared pensively at a nearby tree. After a few minutes, I looked up. The sun was already sinking low in the western sky.

“We’d better get moving, girl.” I stood up and mounted Taffy. “I don’t want to be late for supper.”

Supper came and went. Around nine o’ clock I got in bed and thought.

The Fourth of July was in two days. I was definitely looking forward to it, especially the Fourth of July horse race. It’s too bad, I thought, that none of my brothers are competing this year.

Suddenly, I had an idea. I could compete in the race!

The prize for first place was fifteen dollars. What if I won? (Glorious thought!) I could give the prize money toward the collection for the Tuckers’ barn and—if Mother did find out that I had raced—she could find nothing wrong with my motive.

Could she?
Elated, I planned it all out in my mind. I would ride Taffy to town early and hide her, maybe in the livery stable. My friend Cory’s father owned the livery stable, and perhaps Cory would help me. The race would begin at one o’clock, and we would be ready.

Glad I had a plan, I snuggled down under the covers and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 2

Two days later, Fourth of July dawned bright and clear. Warm and sunny, but not too hot. Perfect, I thought.

Hurriedly, I dressed into a white dress with navy trim and braided my hair. I ran to the stairs and—as usual—sliding down the banister seemed a superior option to running down the stairs. After an exciting slide, I landed in a crumpled heap on the landing.

Melinda would say it was “most unladylike,” but at the moment I didn’t care. Laughing, I picked myself up and made my way into the dining room.

When I got there, the rest of the family were eating pancakes and sausages. Mother offered me a plate. I poured sticky maple syrup all over the pancakes.

The conversation was all about cattle and horses. When I could get a word in edgewise, I asked Mother,
“Could I ride Taffy into town this morning?”

“May I, not could I, Andrea,” Mother corrected me “And certainly not. We will all go together in the buggy.”

“Please? Just this once?” I asked desperately.

“I already said no, Andrea.”

“Mother, I—”

“Andrea,” Mother said in a warning tone.

I was quiet. In fact, I stayed quiet for the remainder of breakfast.

It was of no use to argue. My plans were quickly falling to pieces, rather like my pancakes, which were untouched and soggy with syrup.

Savagely, I stabbed at a pancake. Though discouraged with the failure of my idea, I began to think of a new plan to get Taffy to town in time for the race.

I thought about my dilemma the whole buggy drive long. Wild, desperate ideas—none of which would actually be of any use—suggested themselves to me.

We arrived in town at about ten o’clock, and I made a feeble effort to hide my disappointed feelings. The race would be held in three hours, and Taffy was back at the ranch.

It suddenly came to me that I had even less time to act, as I could not race in a skirt. If I could ever get back to the ranch before the race, I would have to
change into something suitable for riding.

Even if I did hit upon a plan, did I have enough time to carry it out?

“Hello, little Sis.” Justin’s cheery greeting broke into my gloomy thoughts and scattered them. “Why were you so quiet on the drive this morning?”


“For what?” asked Justin, amused, and a bit perplexed at my strange answer, I imagined.

“I’ll tell you later!”

“Andi, please be reasonable—”

“It’s a surprise,” I improvised.

There were some things I was not willing to tell even my oldest and favorite brother. I knew he would stop me in my tracks if he knew I intended to be in the race.

It was true that if my family found out, it would be a surprise, but not a very pleasant one.

My idea was this: I would drive the buggy to the ranch, get Taffy, and ride her back to town. Of course, I had to first ask Mother if I could go off by myself for a while.

She granted her permission, saying, “Certainly you may walk around for a while. Don’t wander too far, and be sure to be back in time for the race. I know you don’t want to miss that.”

Well, I wasn’t sure if going back to the ranch was
“too far,” but I had no intention of missing the race. Fortunately, I remembered to sign up for the race before going back for Taffy.

The man taking the names of the entries surveyed me a bit quizzically as I wrote down my name.

Probably in his experience, no girls—crisply dressed in a white and blue dress with neatly braided hair tied with two red bows—had ever signed up for a Fourth of July horse race.

Chapter 3

After signing up for the race, I made my way to the buggy and drove it back to the ranch. I unhitched the horses and took care of them before putting them in their stalls. Then I ran into the house, up to my room, and changed.

I wasn’t allowed to wear overalls in public, but my family—and especially Mother—would probably be less angry with me if I wore a split skirt. I dashed out to the barn, saddled Taffy, and rode her back to town.

Not too fast, though. There was no point in tiring her out before the race.

On the ride back, I began to think more seriously about how my family would feel about my being in
the race. Mother would certainly not be happy to find out that her daughter had, without her knowledge, entered and participated in the Fourth of July horse race.

I tried to tell myself that it wasn’t wrong. Nobody had told me I couldn’t be in the race. And anyway, I was competing in the race to get money to give for the collection.

But all the while I knew I was wrong.

We reached town before I knew it. According to the big clock on the courthouse, it was eleven forty-five. A little over one hour till the race.

Careful not to be seen by my family, I made my way to the livery stable and, with the help of my friend Cory, got Taffy into a stall, where she would remain until it was time for the race.

The next hour went by very quickly. I walked around town—cautiously, so as not to be seen by my family. I did not want to have to slip away again.

At twelve forty-five I led Taffy to where the race was to take place.

A crowd was gathering on either side of the street, and I thought I saw my family. I turned the other way, hoping they would not recognize me in my faded split skirt.

*There’s no turning back now,* I reminded myself.

Someone announced the race, but I didn’t pay much attention as I surveyed the other contestants.
Jack Goodwin and Cory were also in the race, as well as a number of other boys and men.

“On your marks!” shouted the man announcing the race. “Get set—”

The starting gun went off, and the race began.

I had no more time to think about how my family would feel. They probably were all watching me now, angry or horrified. Probably both.

There were three riders ahead of Taffy and me. *We must pass them, we must!*

I had to have some good reason for entering this race. If I didn’t win—

*Oh good! Only two riders remained ahead of us.*

*We had to pass the last one. Hooray! We passed him.*

Only a few more yards to the finish line . . .

We crossed the finish line, seconds ahead of the other riders.

The next minute was a blur. The winner of the race was announced, “Miss Andrea Carter,” and I was presented with the fifteen dollars.

I could now distinctly see my family. They were heading toward me.

I took the money, mumbled a hurried thanks, and led Taffy away. Perhaps I could get back to the ranch before my family found me, and—

Oh dear. The buggy. I had a distinct picture in my head of the buggy sitting in the ranch yard, exactly where I left it.
Oh no! There was no time to get away. The pleasure of winning the race melted when I saw my family quickly walking towards me.

“Andrea!” exclaimed Mother. “Why did you—“ I started to cry. I couldn’t help it.

Justin held out his arms to me.

“I’m sorry,” I sobbed. “I did it because . . . well, you know the Tuckers’ barn burned down. There’s a collection being taken to rebuild it and I wanted to help—”

“Where’s the buggy?” interrupted Chad.

“At the ranch. In the yard.”

“Of all the unladylike—” started Melinda, but Mother told her that was enough.

“Why didn’t you ask me about giving?” asked Mother.

I hung my head. “I’m sorry.”

When I had calmed down some, Mother told me she forgave me. “I am disappointed you didn’t ask me for help on this matter, but I am glad you have a giving heart.”

I nodded.

“You will have to ride back to the ranch to get the buggy,” Mother said.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied.

“And then you will let Taffy out on the range for two weeks,” she added. “That is your punishment for what you did. No riding.”
A Memorable Fourth of July

Fair enough. I deserved it. I drove the buggy back, and we enjoyed the rest of the day in town.

Eventually, the Tuckers’ barn was rebuilt. Every time I saw it, I was reminded of the race. In fact, it was certainly the most memorable Fourth I had ever had.
Ages 10-13

Honorable Mention

9 - Trapped!

Mariah Mead, age 12
Chippenham, England

Mariah is in the seventh grade and is one of six children. She enjoys reading, writing, journaling, gymnastics, and playing with her siblings. Her love of Jesus grows every day.

Chapter 1

Andi and Riley sat on the corral fence, bored stiff.
Riley opened his mouth and spoke. “We could sure use some excitement around here.” He frowned. “What can we do?”
Andi cocked her head to the side and thought. “I know,” she said, her face brightening. “Let’s find a secret hideout.”
“Good idea,” Riley said, liking the idea more and more the more he thought about it.
“We could try an unused stall,” Andi said.
Riley shrugged and nodded his assent.
“Let’s go see!”
They walked into the barn and peered into each of the stalls. The one at the end had no horse inside. The stall door opened with a *creak* and they peered inside.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Chad said from behind them. “I’ve got to put this mare in there.”

Andi and Riley stepped back, and Chad led a chestnut mare into the stall.

They took off and hid on the back porch. Andi sat down on the edge of the porch step. She slumped and looked glumly at the dusty ground.

Riley came and sat beside her.

Then Andi had an idea. “How about under the porch? For the den, I mean.”

Riley didn’t look so sure.

Andi bent down and looked into the darkness.

“Let’s go explore.” Without a moment’s hesitation, she squeezed under the porch.

Riley followed.

They stopped crawling when they couldn’t see anything anymore. Andi squealed. “I felt something cold!”

Riley came around beside her, fearless as usual, and asked where she had felt it. He put his hand there and jumped back a little.

“Oh, that *is* cold. Hey, there’s a handle. Maybe this is your mother’s old potato cellar.”

He pulled the handle up toward the porch floor.
above them, and the door opened stiffly. “If it is, it would be the best hideout ever.”

They went back out and got two lanterns from the house. Just as they were about to go through the trap door, the dinner bell rang.

“We’d better go.” Riley put the lanterns underneath the porch where they could find them later.

Chapter 2

After dinner, Andi and Riley went back under the porch and propped the trap door open.

Riley reached into the dark with one of the lanterns, shining the light around. Without any hesitation he said, “There’s a ladder. I’m going down.”

He slid around and let his feet drop down into the cellar.

Andi passed him her lantern and followed eagerly.

The ladder was made of splintery wood. When her feet hit the dirt floor, a small cloud of dust came up around the lantern. Riley had set it down while he looked around with his own lantern.

“Oh, boy!” Riley breathed.

Andi picked up her lantern and went over. Barrels lined half of the room’s wall.
Riley pried one open. It was empty. "We could use these for storing spiders and bugs in." Riley was always catching and storing spiders and insects of all types.

"Yeah, we could even make them homes by putting dirt and leaves in the barrels," Andi said.

Riley thought for a minute and then shrugged. *He sure doesn’t like many of my ideas,* Andi thought.

The pair went around the remainder of the room, exploring every nook and cranny. There were lots of barrels and shelves everywhere.

There was even a wooden door. It was locked, though, and they couldn’t get it to open.

Andi’s eyes opened wide when she saw another ladder leading up to somewhere. "Come on, Riley!"

They slowly set off up the ladder, carrying their lanterns in one hand and gripping the ladder with the other.

When her head almost touched the ceiling, Andi pushed. Nothing moved. "It isn’t a trap door," she said. "It won’t budge."

"Let me try it. I’m stronger, you know." They both climbed down.

Then Riley went up. "Hmm, I wonder why there’s a ladder here leading to nowhere?" he asked as he came back down.

Andi shrugged. "It didn’t move at all."

TRAPPED!
When they emerged from their secret room, it was suppertime.

“I can’t come back tonight,” Riley said. “But maybe tomorrow.”

“Sure. Maybe we can bring down the bugs tomorrow,” Andi said as she went inside.

As Andi lay in bed that night, she heard the crickets singing outside. But all she could think of was the secret room. She and Riley had sworn to keep it a secret.

Andi finally fell asleep.

Chapter 3

The next morning Andi went to the cookhouse to find Riley, but he was busy. Cook said he wouldn’t let Riley leave his work at all that morning.

Glumly, Andi went to the barn and groomed Taffy. Taffy was growing up fast!

But all Andi could think about was the secret room. After she’d finished brushing Taffy, she went up to the hayloft and came back down with the spider jars. She put them under the porch, ready to be taken down to the secret room, so she could surprise Riley.

Finally, that afternoon Riley came. They brought the jars down to the secret room. Riley emptied them into one barrel.
“Let’s make a fort with that firewood and these barrels,” Andi proposed.

Riley seemed to like the idea. So they got on with it, shoving barrels into place and lugging wood over from the other side of the room.

They worked hard on it for the next two days. By Saturday, they knew that just one more building session would finish it. Straight after dinner, the twosome crawled under the porch.

Andi went first this time.

Riley passed her the lanterns. “How do you prop the door open normally?” he asked.

“Just put a smooth stone under the trap door when you come down.”

Riley was down in a jiffy. They went straight to work, propping the wood against the barrels and making sure it was secure.

“We need more wood. Let’s grab some from that pile over there.”

Andi went over to the pile. Something shiny caught her eye. She reached down and picked it up. A key! Without a thought she put it in her pocket.

A piece of splintery wood scratched Andi’s hand, and she gave a little yell. At the same moment she heard a bang.

Riley gulped. “That was the trap door.” He climbed up the ladder and tried pushing the trap door. “It won’t budge.”
“Get down. Let me try,” Andi said, already moving to ascend the ladder.

It still wouldn’t budge. “I guess it’s only able to be opened from the outside. Which means . . . ” Andi’s voice trailed off.

“We’re trapped,” down-to-earth Riley said.

They stepped down.

Andi sat down on a piece of wood. “No one knows we’re down here,” she wailed.

Riley put his head in his hands. “It’s all my fault.”

“Well, we need to start figuring out how to get outta here,” Andi said. “Or we never will.”

Riley went up the ladder again and pushed at the trap door. Then he tried the other ladder, the one that led nowhere.

Andi went around the edge of the room and checked for loose boards. Nothing. Both pushed again at the mystery door.

“We need a key,” Riley said. “If not, it won’t open.”

It was right then that Andi remembered. She dug her hand into her pocket and pulled out the key.

Riley grabbed the key and pushed it into the keyhole. It made a rusty, grinding sound. He turned the key with great difficulty, but the door wouldn’t budge.

They both pushed themselves against it. Slowly, creakily, the door swung open.
A gust of cold air seeped into the room, and a lantern went out.

“We don’t have too long before the other lantern goes out,” Riley said. He held up the lit lantern and peered into the darkness.

Andi shuddered.

“Don’t panic,” Riley said.

Andi took a deep breath, and they went up a step into the room. Shelves lined the walls. To Andi’s surprise, she saw Mother’s jellies and preserves on the shelves. An open sack held potatoes. Another held sweet potatoes.

“This is Mother’s cellar,” Andi blurted. “That ladder”—she pointed to a ladder propped up against the wall—“should lead to the kitchen.”

Riley was on it right away. But the new trap door would not open.

Andi went up and gave it a try. But it still wouldn’t open. They pounded, but no one came to rescue them.

Suddenly, darkness filled the room. The other lantern had gone out.
Chapter 4

Andi carefully climbed down and sat at the foot of the ladder.

Riley spoke up matter-of-factly after a minute. “They probably can’t hear us banging on the ceiling. The floor’s probably too thick, and there’s probably no one up there right now. They’ll have finished washing the dinner dishes and won’t have started getting supper yet. I guess we’ll have to wait it out.”

Andi sighed. After a long pause, her hopeful voice broke the silence. “Well, they’ve got to come down to get some of this food at some point. Also, we can eat it if we get hungry.”

They waited for a long time in the darkness. Andi strained her eyes, but it was too dark for her to see anything.

Riley moved about restlessly.

After what seemed like forever, the door opened. A light shone in, and Mother climbed down.

“Oh, Mother!” Andi cried.

Mother screamed. She later said that they had made her almost jump out of her skin.

Up the ladder she led them and into the kitchen. She sat them down and told them to tell her all that had happened.

Andi told the story. Riley chipped in every couple of seconds.
When they finished telling the story, Mother threw up her hands and said, “If you go getting yourself into trouble again, I . . . I don’t even know what will happen.”

“What was that secret room?” Riley asked.

Mother sat back in her chair. “Well, when this house was built, there was already a cellar,” she explained. “But the floor plan turned out that the kitchen did not sit above this cellar. Instead, the cellar was underneath the porch.

“That, of course, was unsatisfactory, so we had them dig a cellar off of the other one, and so that is the way it turned out. I guess I haven’t told you that before.”

Andi nodded. Now she understood.

Mother wasn’t finished. “This adventure could have ended badly had I not needed to go down to the cellar. I don’t want you to keep a secret like that again. Please tell me next time.”

Riley and Andi promised they would.

As the twosome went outside to sit on the corral fence once again, they walked with a jump in their steps.

“We got that excitement you wanted, Riley,” Andi said with a smile. She climbed up to sit on the corral fence.

“Yep, it was quite an adventure,” Riley exclaimed. And so it had been.
Ages 14-17
First Place

10 - Joy Cometh in the Morning

Olivia Marse, age 17
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Oliva is a homeschooled teen who lives with her parents, three of her five siblings, and her pet turtles and dogs. She loves reading, writing, sports, and her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Chapter 1

Lucy!” Andrea Prescott grinned and embraced her sister-in-law. “I am so glad you were able to come for supper.”

Lucy Carter shifted her daughter Gracie in her arms and hugged Andi back. “Thank you for the invitation. Justin will be happy to know I didn’t spend the whole time he was away cooped up at home alone.”

“Hi, Auntie!” little Samuel James piped up from his mother’s side.
Andi immediately knelt down to greet her nephew.

“Well, not all alone,” Lucy added with a smile. “These two have been keeping me on my toes. Speaking of little ones,” she continued, “how’s that wonderful son of yours doing?”

Andi’s face glowed. “Jimmy is such a good baby, Lucy,” she exclaimed, glancing toward the room where her three-month-old slept. “He’s down for his nap right now, but I’m sure he’ll be awake soon.”

Lucy nodded, and she and Andi were soon chattering on about the children while they finished up making dinner.

When the door creaked open thirty minutes later and a hot and sweaty Riley entered, the two women greeted him, along with the aroma of a delicious meal.

In no time at all, Riley was washed up and they were sitting down to eat.

“I’ll go check on Jimmy,” Andi offered as soon as the blessing was finished. “He usually doesn’t nap so late.” She excused herself while Lucy handed Sammy a freshly baked biscuit.

He grinned his delight and took a big bite.

“Riley!” The panic-infused cry echoed through the dining area.

Sammy covered his ears. Riley jumped to his feet and raced to the bedroom.
Lucy stood, Gracie in her arms, and peeked through the doorway. Andi and Riley knelt beside the crib. Riley had an arm around Andi, whose shoulders were shaking.

“Mama.” Sammy tugged at his mother’s skirts. “What’s wrong?”

“Shh, dear, it’s all right,” Lucy assured the toddler. Tears welled up in her eyes even as she spoke. But at the sight of her sister-in-law sobbing over the baby’s crib, she knew nothing was all right.

Dear Lord, please be with us all.

Chapter 2

Andi stood next to Riley, dressed in black. She stared straight ahead, lips tight. She barely heard the closing words being said by the reverend. All she could seem to focus on was the tiny coffin, bearing the body of her three-month-old.

Next to her, Riley stood, one hand covering her own in a comforting hold, the other clenched in a tight fist. He worked his jaw slowly, his eyes on the preacher.

Around the grave, the rest of their family and friends were huddled. The day was dreary, and the skies gray, reflecting the mood of the mourners.

When the reverend said “amen” after the final
prayer, the people slipped away one at a time, each throwing comforting glances in the Prescotts’ direction.

Justin and his little family stopped next to them.

“I’m so sorry, Andi,” Lucy offered softly. Tears glistened in her eyes.

Andi took a quick glance toward them. Her eyes caught on Gracie, snuggled up and asleep in her sister-in-law’s arms. Just like Jimmy would be if—

Andi clenched her jaw and turned away.

Justin whispered something in his wife’s ear, and she turned and took hold of Sammy’s hand, leading him toward their buggy.

Justin laid a gentle hand on Andi’s arm. “It’ll be okay, honey,” he said, his voice gentle. “God is with us, even through the trials.”

Andi looked up at her brother and slid her hand out of Riley’s. “I’ll be fine, Justin. Really.” She turned and walked away. “Let’s go home, Riley.”

“Andi?”

Andi glanced up from her position at the dresser. She stared into the mirror, a faraway look on her face.

Riley stepped farther into the room. His eyes, bloodshot and droopy, scanned his young wife. “Are you—”

“I don’t know how many times I’ve been asked that in the past few days, Riley.” Andi sounded tired
and frustrated. Her blue eyes drifted over to the small crib in the corner of the room. “Would you please move that to the barn?”

Riley nodded slowly. “Your mother sent a hand to invite us to the ranch for supper. Do you want to go?”

Andi sighed. All she really wanted to do was curl up in bed and give up, just plain forget about everything.

But she couldn’t. She was fine. She had to be fine. “Yes, we might as well.”

Riley leaned in and kissed her on the head. “It’ll be all right, Andi. We’ll get through this together.”

Chapter 3

I’m really worried about Andi.”

Riley laid his palms flat out on the sitting room table. He met the gazes of his brothers-in-law. “It’s been a month. She says she’s fine, but all she does is mope around the house all day, wearing the same stoic expression.”

He ran a hand through his mussed hair. “Kind of scares me.”

Justin sighed. “I know what you mean. She was the same way at dinner earlier. Silent, quiet, trying to pretend she’s all right.”

“And she’s not,” Chad chimed in from his seat.
He crossed his arms. “Maybe I ought to have a talk with her.”

Justin eyed his brother and shook his head. “Considering how most of your talks with our little sister go, it’s probably not the best option.”

Riley continued as if neither one of them had spoken. “She needs to grieve, but she doesn’t want to believe he’s gone.” He bit his lip. “It’s making it harder on everyone, I think.”

He didn’t add the words, “especially me,” but he was sure everyone heard them anyway.

Justin nodded his dark head. “It’s like what happened with Taffy a few years ago.”

“Only worse,” Chad said, clenching his jaw. “Taffy was just a horse. As hard and painful as it was, at the end of the day a horse can be replaced. But to lose her own child . . .”

Riley knew his brother-in-law was thinking about his wife Ellie and their own baby, just about a month away from entering the world. Probably wondering how hard it would be to lose his child.

Chad caught Riley’s gaze and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry,” he apologized, apparently realizing his insensitivity. “Jimmy was your baby too.”

Justin turned to him. “Are you doing okay, Riley?”

Riley shrugged. “I guess.” The crack in his voice and the moisture he felt welling up in his eyes proved otherwise.
Justin leaned over and laid a comforting hand on Riley’s knee. “I think we need to pray. God knows what we are going through. He knows exactly what it’s like to lose a son.”

Riley jolted. He had never thought of it that way before, but it was true. “You’re right,” he admitted, nodding slowly in agreement. “And if there’s anyone who can give us the peace and comfort we need right now, it’s our Heavenly Father.”

Chapter 4

Andi loved her sister-in-law and her little family, but right now she couldn’t wait for them to leave. Lucy had insisted on visiting and bringing supper for Andi and Riley, against Andi’s own insistence that they were just fine.

“Thank you,” she managed to say, setting the basket of food in the kitchen. “You really didn’t need to do this.”

Lucy smiled. “I know. I wanted to.” She shifted her hold on Gracie before looking up. “How are you doing?” she asked, voice soft, clearly searching for a deeper, truthful answer.

Andi swallowed hard. Why did everyone have to keep asking her that? Obviously she wasn’t fine.

It had been over a month now. She rarely saw
Riley anymore. He was always out working. When he was home, Andi tried avoiding him. She didn’t want to talk about it.

A moment of silence passed.

Lucy stepped closer and laid a hand on Andi’s arm. “Andi, none of us can pretend to understand what you and Riley have gone through—”

“Then don’t!” Andi was growing agitated. “You’re right, Lucy. You don’t know what it’s like.” Her gaze shifted to Gracie, then Sammy, playing on the floor with Tucker. “Your kids are healthy and alive.” The last word rolled off her tongue bitterly.

Lucy’s eyes widened, but Andi didn’t give her a chance to respond. She picked up her skirts and bolted, nearly plowing Riley down on her way out the door.

His surprised yell of “Andi, come back!” was ignored.

In no time at all Andi was mounted on Shasta’s bare back. She squeezed her knees into his sides. She rode hard and fast, not even sure where she was going until she wound up walking Shasta along the banks of the creek.

Part of her regretted her outburst back at the house. *It isn’t Lucy’s fault that Jimmy died. I shouldn’t have taken it out on her. I can’t do anything right.*

Andi swallowed. She dismounted Shasta and tossed his reins around a nearby bush. She wandered
to the edge of the creek, staring out at the beautiful scenery before her.

“Why?” she cried out, breaking the silence of the still air. She clenched her hands into fists so hard that she could feel her fingernails digging into her palms. But she didn’t care.

“Why, God? Why did you take away my baby?”

Anger welled up inside Andi’s chest, bursting out in the form of pounding her fists at the air in pure frustration.

The outburst faded as quickly as it had come. Andi dropped to the ground, head buried in her hands, worn out.

“Why?” The word was a mere whisper this time. *First Taffy, and now my own baby.*

She closed her eyes and leaned back against a tree, the very tree under which she had sat when she broke the wonderful news to Riley that the two of them would be adding a little bundle of joy to their family.

The cold, harsh reality of what had happened hit her like a glass of ice water in the face. She felt tears begin to well up.

The sound of approaching hoof beats caused her to jump to her feet. She blinked back the teardrops that had begun to form. Brushing loose tangles of hair away from her face, she readied herself to meet whichever family member had chased after her to make sure she was all right.
Chapter 5

Andi?

Riley slowly dismounted Dakota, letting the horse follow him toward the petite figure standing near one of the big trees.

His heart hurt, even more for his wife than for himself.

“Hey,” he said softly, coming to a stop at her side. Andi bit her lip. “I’m sorry, Riley,” she apologized. “I shouldn’t have spoken so rudely to Lucy and run out like that.”

“No, probably not.” He pulled his black Stetson from his head and clutched it to his chest. “The apology belongs to her, not me.” He sighed. “But I know that you—we—have been dealing with a lot lately.”

He reached out and clasped her hand. She didn’t pull away.

“I feel like I haven’t seen you, haven’t talked to you in ages,” he said, voice quiet. “A good chunk of the reason for that is my own fault. I’ve been throwing myself into work to deal with my grief.”

He sighed again. “Do you remember what I told you when Taffy died?”

Andi’s mouth twitched, the closest thing to a smile Riley had seen in weeks. “You told me a lot of
things back then.”

“True enough. I said you had to stop running and face what happened.” Riley blew out a big breath. “I think I need to take that advice as much as you do right now.”

Andi hung her head. A single tear dribbled down her cheek. “I just . . . don’t . . . understand.”

Riley knew right away what she meant.

“Listen, Andi.” He cupped her chin in his gloved hand and caught her gaze. “God is good, even during the hard times. If we worship Him when everything is going right, we need to do it—even more so—in the bad times. Even when we don’t understand.”

Andi swallowed, dropping her gaze. “I know.” The words were whispered so quietly Riley almost didn’t catch them.

“We don’t always understand why bad things happen, Andi, but we have to trust God anyway.”

Her gaze drifted to the creek that gurgled as the water rushed on its way. “It’s just so hard. I never thought when I put him down for that nap that . . . that it would be the last time I said goodnight to him.”

“I know.” Riley felt tears beginning to well up behind his eyes. He swallowed them. “I sometimes dream that he’s still there in our room during the night, crying for us.”

That did it for Andi. Tears filled her eyes and
spilled out over her dark lashes, dripping down her cheeks. Finally, it looked like she was feeling, letting out the emotions she’d kept pent up inside for weeks.

“Oh, Riley.” She let him pull her into his strong arms, and she sobbed.

Riley tried to stay strong. He prayed for peace and comfort amidst the pain and tragedy, but even he couldn’t keep his tears back.

And there, sitting in the grass surrounding the little creek at the place they called home, the two began healing together.

Chapter 6
Eight Years Later

Mama!”

The giggling six-year-old came skidding to a stop in front of Andi. Escaped tangles flew from her dark braids.

Another child followed on the heels of the first, so similar in looks that if Andi didn’t know better, she might have thought she was seeing double.

The joy on the children’s faces faded. Identical smiles twisted into identical concerned frowns.

“Mama? Why are you crying?” the first girl asked, claiming a seat on the porch steps next to her mother.
Andi brushed away the tear she hadn’t realized was trailing down her cheek. She smiled down at her daughters. “I was just thinking about your brother, Rosie.”

“Jimmy?” Rosie asked, eyes wide.

Andi tilted her head in a nod. “Yes. Today would have been his eighth birthday.”

“Don’t be sad, Mama,” little Rebecca added. “He’s in heaven with our Lord.”

That drew a smile from Andi’s face. “So he is, Becca. But it’s okay to be sad sometimes and miss him.”

She paused. “The Bible says in the Psalms that although weeping may endure for a night, joy cometh in the morning.”

Andi looked between her two girls. “And it did. God knew just what we needed when he gave me and your father the two of you.”

Andi still remembered Chad laughing for days after the twins were born.

Her brother was dumbfounded at the fact that after Andi’s beloved mare, Taffy, had given birth to twins years ago—a rare occurrence—Andi had somehow managed to do the same.

But everybody knew it wasn’t by chance that these two beautiful, freckle-faced little girls had been placed in Andi’s life.

She never took a moment with her children for granted.
“Papa!” The squeal from Rosie startled Andi back to the present.

Both girls ran to greet Riley, giggling when he caught them up in his arms and slung one over each shoulder.

From her position on the porch, Andi laughed. “Careful, Riley!”

He shot her a grin to let her know he had heard her good and well before spinning the twins around once and gently letting them drop to the ground.

“I’ve got a surprise waiting for you girls in the barn,” Andi heard Riley tell them, his voice low and mysterious.

Without waiting for further invitation, Rosie and Rebecca took off toward the small building, chattering excitedly as they went.

Riley watched them go before heading in the opposite direction, toward Andi. “Hey.” He planted a kiss on her cheek. “You doin’ okay?”

The look in his eyes, along with the soft undertone in his voice told Andi he hadn’t forgotten what day it was.

She wrapped her arms around his strong frame, letting silence fill the air for a few minutes before she finally spoke.

“God is good, Riley.”

He nodded in response. “Indeed. He’s blessed us with a wonderful home and two beautiful little girls.”
His lips quirked. “Not to mention He somehow managed to let me have the most incredible wife and best friend in the whole world—even if she does still burn dinner sometimes.”

“Oh, you!” Andi swatted at his arm.

He caught the assaulting hand and pulled Andi to him. His grin widened and he kissed her hair.

“I love you, Andi.”

Andi relaxed against him, watching the twins run around the yard with the new puppy Riley had hidden in the barn for them. She was so, so blessed.

“I love you too.”
The sun beats down on my back, hot enough to draw a sweat. And it’s not hardly noon yet.

I lean my forearms against the top railing of the fence, reaching up one gloved hand to push my wide-brimmed hat back off my forehead.

“What on earth is she doing?” I mumble to no one in particular. There is nobody nearby to listen to me anyway.

A chicken clucks noisily, strutting past my feet. I reach down and swat at it, succeeding in nudging it out of the corral. “Aww, get out of here.”

Returning my attention to the sight across the yard, I can’t help chuckling.
My sweet bride of three short weeks stands under a shade tree, hands on her hips. A wash bucket, a basket of dirty laundry, and a washboard are scattered around her feet. The slight breeze ruffles her split-skirt.

Even from this distance, I can tell she’s chewing her lip, deep in concentration.

I walk along the inside of the fence to the gate and let myself out of the corral. “Hey, Andi,” I call as I cross the grassy lawn toward her. “What are you doing?”

She looks up, squinting in the sunlight that streams through the overhead tree branches. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

I reach her and stop on the opposite side of the pile of dirty clothes, rocking back on my heels. “Well, right now it looks like you aren’t doing anything other than looking disgusted.”

Her head jerks up to meet my gaze, azure eyes flashing. “I am disgusted. Why do you have to dirty so many pairs of clothes in only a week?”

I bite my lip to keep from snickering at the scowl on her face. “I reckon I could wear the same sweaty clothes day after day, but you might get tired of smelling me.”

She rolls her eyes, dark curls blowing into her face. “Haul me some water and I might get done in time to fix your supper.”
I hesitate, none too appreciative of those terms. “Um . . . are you trying to discourage my assistance?”

“Riley Prescott, you take that back!”

I laugh, amused at the fury etched in her striking features. “I apologize. Seeing as how we had dinner at Chad and Ellie’s last night, I guess I can suffer through a couple more days before expecting someone else to rescue me.”

A plaid shirt from the laundry stack sails through the air and comes to rest on my hat brim.

“Andrea Rose Carter Prescott, I’m gonna—”

“Oh no, you’re not!”

From under my shirt-draped hat, I hear her coming toward me and reach out to catch her.

She squeals and shoves my grasping hands away, noises fading as she makes her escape while the getting is good.

I whip off the shirt and glance from side to side, but find no sign of her.

Sunlight glints off something to my left. Settled against the corner of the garden shed is a water barrel, only a few yards from where I stand.

The water that’s visible in the top of the barrel is sloshing to and fro, just beginning to calm after being disturbed.

Ah-ha.

Keeping one eye on my surroundings, I creep toward the shed. With my back pressed to the
whitewashed exterior, I peek around the side and canvass the yard.

_Hmm_. No Andi.

_She must have slipped off behind the house_, I muse, knowing she came in this direction and didn’t go straight toward the barn or corral.

I hurry across the shaded, grassy expanse of lawn, quickly eating up the distance with long strides. _She’s got to be around here somewhere._

I’m walking past the trunk of a large valley oak when a sudden deluge of icy water pours over me from above. I let out a chilled yelp and jump back.

Yanking off my saturated hat, I whirl around in search of the blue-eyed culprit.

She grins at me from behind the trunk of the tree as she shimmies down, eyes sparkling with mischief.

“I ought to dunk you.”

She steps forward to meet me eye-to-eye—best she can anyway, being well below my height. “You ought to stop making fun of my cooking.”

“But it’s fun to see you riled,” I argue. I step forward, leaning my head over hers so water drips into her eyes.

“Hey!” She backs away, wiping water from her face. “You deserved it.”

“Deserved what? I thought you were supposed to obey me, anyway. Your brothers should’ve warned me that marriage wouldn’t change you in the least.”
“I vowed to love, honor, and cherish. I said nothing about obeying you.” She grins impishly. “And my brothers have submissive wives. What help would they be?”

We both laugh, knowing it’s true.

“How about a compromise?” I step back and meet her eyes.

“Such as?”

“Such as no more dousing me like that. And . . . you have to do my laundry like the good little housekeeper your sister is trying to make you.”

“Not happening.” Andi shakes her head and starts to walk away. She pauses a few steps away, glancing back. “If I promise to behave and even wash your smelly socks, will you take off early this evening to go riding with me?”

I grin, capturing her hand in mine. “It’s a deal.”

“Isn’t it kinda early to be quittin’ already, boss?”

A young cowpoke on a splotchy red paint trots along beside me as we head back toward the scattering of buildings that Andi and I call home.

I reach up a finger to nudge my hat back and glance over at Sam. Older than me by a few years, the ranch hand looks like he should still be in grade school. He’s also the only hired hand we currently have, and he’s a hard worker.
“Yeah, but I’ve got a good reason,” I tell him.

“Oh?” His eyes widen as he looks back at me. “Care to explain?”

I clear my throat to buy myself some time. How much do I want to divulge to a fellow I hardly know? It’s not like it’s any of his business, anyway. “Mrs. Prescott has plans for the two of us this evening.”

“Ahh.” Sam settles back in his saddle, unable to keep the smirk from his face. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with why you wore a wet shirt for half the afternoon, would it?”

“You noticed that?” I fail badly at keeping my voice low and uninterested.

Sam doubles over. He guffaws so loudly that I’m concerned he’ll tumble from the horse’s back.

“Oh, drop it,” I grumble. But I can’t help snickering along with him. To a bystander observing Andi and me, it must have been humorous to watch our water fight play out.

Sam is still grinning and glancing my way every few minutes when we near the ranch. We trot into the yard in a whirling cloud of dust.

Andi waits near the barn, with Shasta and Dakota saddled and at her side.

I grin at the sight, swinging down from the back of my substitute horse. This afternoon, I rode one of the horses I’ve been training recently so Dakota would be fresh for this evening’s adventures.
“You’re just in time,” Andi greets. “I packed a picnic supper. We can find a spot to eat, if that’s all right with you.”

“Sounds wonderful, sweetie.” I pause to kiss her cheek, and then duck around the side of the barn to wash up in the rain barrel.

As I submerge my arms to my elbows in the water, I hear Andi speak. “Sam, would you do me a favor and take care of Riley’s horse?”

I come back around the corner of the barn in time to see Sam doff his hat and practically bow at my wife’s feet. “It would be an honor, Mrs. Prescott.”

He glances my way, smart enough to keep his smirking face partially hidden under his hat brim.

“Try not to drown, boss,” he drawls under his breath, hardly loud enough to be heard. Then he grabs the reins of both horses and skedaddles through the open barn doors.

“Drown?” Andi holds Dakota’s reins out to me, then swings up onto Shasta’s back. “Why does he think you have a chance of drowning out in the valley?”

Sam’s lame attempt at humor is the last thing I want to talk about this evening. “It’s . . . kind of a joke.” I mount Dakota, hoping that will satisfy her curiosity.

Thankfully, she doesn’t prod for more. I start out of the yard with Andi at my side.
We’re still in sight of the ranch when Andi draws up closer to me and sends a grin my way. “Race?” she suggests, eyes alight with mischief.

“Sure. I feel like being victorious.”

She laughs and bends forward to rub Shasta’s neck. “Then I guess you wouldn’t be interested in giving ourselves a little more incentive.”

_She is definitely up to something._ “Like what?”

“Hmm . . .” She looks ahead, surveys the area, and then shifts her gaze back to me. “We race to that rise. Loser cooks supper for a week.”

Before I can open my mouth to reply, Andi and Shasta take off, galloping full speed toward the rise in the land she indicated.

Shaking my head at her antics, I nudge Dakota to a quicker pace and take off after my bride. I might as well enjoy the run.

Truthfully, I’ve never wanted to lose a race more than I want to right now.

A week’s worth of my own cooking? Sounds pretty good to me, and Andi knows it.

I lean low over Dakota’s neck and enjoy the feeling of the wind rushing past me. I have no intentions of winning this race, but that doesn’t mean she should have the pleasure of an easy victory.

As we near the end of the horse race, I blow past Andi and Shasta. I snicker to myself as I imagine her current thoughts. After giving her a moment to fret over her losses, I ease off and let her catch up.
We crest the rise running neck and neck.

“Don’t think for a minute that I missed what you did back there, Riley Prescott,” Andi calls to me as we slow our mounts.

Laughing, I turn Dakota in a loping ring and circle back to her. “I have no doubt that you caught on to me, my dear.”

She rolls her eyes, but accepts my help down from the saddle. “You’re horrible.” She squints at me in the waning sunlight and wrinkles her nose. “I don’t know why I put up with you.”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing at her adorableness and drop a kiss to her forehead. “I don’t know either, but I’m glad you do.”

With an expression somewhere between a smile and a smirk, she reaches up and yanks a blanket off the back of her horse.

Turning around, she whacks me in the chest with
the blanket. “Make yourself useful. I’ll bring the food.”

“Yes, ma’am.” With a tip of my hat, I move to select a spot to spread the blanket.

Once I’ve arranged the blanket on the ground for the two of us to sit on and ground-tied the horses a few yards away, Andi approaches with saddles bags of sandwiches and a canteen of lemonade.

We relax on the ground and eat our meal. The food is pretty good, especially for Andi. Maybe she’s improving under Melinda’s tutelage.

The sun sets over the valley, dipping low along the horizon and painting the sky with hues of orange and pink. We pack up and meander back toward our small ranch, walking our mounts.

Realizing that Andi is no longer beside me, I stop and glance back.

She stands a few yards behind me, her face uplifted as she drinks in the beauty of the sky.

A smile brightens my face at the beautiful sight. I backtrack and draw her into my arms. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

“Amazing that the God who created all of this also cares about you and me? Very amazing.”

“All of that.” Her words touch my heart. I drop a kiss to the top of her head. “I’m glad we could build our home here, sweetheart. What did you used to call this spot?”
Her hair brushes my chin as she leans back against me. “I always called it my ‘special spot.’ It was my happy place, a place to escape to when things weren’t exactly rosy.”

“Ah, yes. I remember.”

We remain in the spot a few moments more, observing as the colors above us begin to dim and night falls. I’m about to suggest we mount up and head back, but Andi breaks the silence first.

“Maybe it’s not any longer, though.”

Her statement throws me off, as does the serious tone of her voice. All we were talking about was a name she gave to a spot of land in her childhood.

What’s so sentimental about that?

“Maybe it’s not what?” I ask.

“This place will always be special,” she begins again, “but I see now that it’s not the physical place that matters so much. It’s the people you share it with.”

She twists in my arms and smiles up at me. “You are my happy place, Riley Prescott.”
A Kansas farm girl, Kaitlyn enjoys singing, playing stringed instruments, graphic design, and laughing at her brothers’ antics. She also likes to write, read, and tag along with her twin to check his cow herd.

Chapter 1

A horse’s ear-splitting cry pierced the morning air, sending shivers down Andi’s spine.

She gazed longingly at the buckskin beauty from the circle Chad had drawn and placed her in—a safe distance away—on the opposite side of the corral fence.

She shifted her stance, then drew nondescript shapes in the dirt with the toe of her shoe, averting her attention before she did something she would later regret.
The horse whinnied again.
Andi’s head snapped up. She took an involuntary step forward.

“No you don’t, missy.” A warning glare from her big brother banished all thoughts of approaching the horse.

_I wish he’d trust me for once_, Andi thought bitterly. She knew her past experiences with horses and Chad hadn’t always ended admirably, but still . . .

_Will he let me help? Isn’t nine plenty old enough?_

She glanced back toward the house, suddenly hungry, torn between the stallion in the corral and the rumbling in her stomach.

Finally, she backed away and started toward the two-story building, visions of freshly baked loaves of bread making her mouth water.

“Andi, where are you going?”

Chad’s shouted demand caused Andi to turn around. She resisted the strong urge to roll her eyes.

“I’m _hungry_, Chad. Is it okay if I get something to eat?”

Without waiting for an answer to her sarcastic reply, she spun on her heel and resumed her course.

_Nothing like bread to ease the pain of helplessness._
Chapter 2

No! You can’t do that!”

Andi’s annoyed voice broke the silence in the library, where she and her brother concentrated intently on a game of checkers.

Chad raised an eyebrow. “Who says I can’t?”

“Me.” Andi frowned, wishing that Mitch hadn’t gone into town tonight. Of all the nights that Justin has a big case to work on too.

“I’ve been playing this game longer than you’ve been alive, Andi. Don’t you think I’d know the rules backwards and forwards by now?”

Andi crossed her arms defiantly. “That doesn’t mean you can’t be wrong just this once.”

Chad shook his head and let out a frustrated breath. “Don’t tell me how to play a game I’ve been playing for better than twenty years.”

“Then stop playing wrong.”

Justin’s voice interrupted from his seat at the desk in the corner. “Will you two kindly take your argument outside where you’re not disrupting my concentration?”

“We wouldn’t be disrupting your conversation if our dear little sister would trust my knowledge of the rules for checkers,” Chad returned.

Justin sighed and shook his head. “You two have
been at each other’s throats more and more recently.” He smirked. “Maybe it’s time for a little bonding between you two.”

Mother looked up from her book with a smile. “Excellent suggestion, Justin.”

She turned to Chad. “Why don’t you take her out to work with you on Monday? I’ll arrange for her to get out of school.”

A muscle in Chad’s jaw jumped. “I’d rather take work off completely.”

Andi opened her mouth to retort, but Justin interrupted.

“Sounds good to me. You can spend your Sunday tomorrow praying for patience enough to keep you from knocking each other’s heads off.”

“That’s not what I—” Chad broke off and sighed. “I don’t think so.”

Mother raised an eyebrow. “And why not?”

“For one thing, that stallion. I can’t just leave for a day right in the middle of his training.”

“Then don’t leave first thing in the morning,” Justin suggested. “Spend however long you must with the stallion and then leave. Go in the late afternoon and come back the next morning, even.”

He shrugged. “Even if you don’t want to do this—you’re an adult, you can make your own decisions—you both need to make more of an effort to get along.”
After a moment of silent thought, Chad nodded reluctantly. “All right, I’ll do it—just this once. But never again.”

Andi broke into the conversation. “Do I get a say in any of this?”

Justin smiled slightly. “Go ahead, honey.”

“Well . . .” Andi took a deep breath. “I just have one thing to say. If we’re going to do this, do I get to decide where we go?”

Chapter 3

A matched pair of fishing poles lay on the ground beside two lazy figures.

Andi’s eyelids drooped as she watched the bobber bounce monotonously on the gently flowing creek.

This trip hadn’t been as exciting as she’d thought. After being granted the choice of their destination, she had excitedly chosen this shady spot.

It wasn’t her special place, but it was almost as special.

Once they had arrived, they baited their hooks with doughballs, threw out the lines, and waited in silence.

If she’d been by herself, Andi would have been perfectly content to sit this way for hours. However, sitting next to Chad, her neck prickled, and the
silence that had stretched for the better part of the trip so far was awkward.

“We’re not accomplishing anything, are we?” Chad’s voice broke the stillness.

Andi’s concise, one-word reply confirmed his statement. “Nope.”

“Should we be?”

“Well . . .” Andi tilted her head. “Why did we come out here in the first place?”

Chad nodded. “True. And it’s not going to happen without effort, is it?”

“Nope.”

They both lapsed into silence again.

Suddenly, the string on Andi’s fishing pole went taut. Her rod took off.

Scrambling to her feet, Andi took off running after it. She took a flying leap and caught the end of the pole with her small fingers as she crashed down onto the rough gravel of the creek bank.

Sharp, pricking pains erupted in her hands, but she ignored them. She hopped to her feet and began pulling anxiously on the string.

“Whoa there, little sister.”

Chad’s voice froze Andi. What had she done wrong?

Yet, instead of receiving a tongue-lashing, a pair of gentle, calloused hands covered hers and helped her pull slowly. “You know that if you pull that hard
you’re liable to lose it,” he murmured in her ear.

“I forgot.” Andi didn’t bother to explain that she had forgotten because she was wound up tighter than a spring trying not to displease him.

As they carefully pulled the fish closer, she could make out its shape in the somewhat-murky water. Forgetting that Chad was bent over her, she began to jump excitedly.

“It’s a big—” Her words were cut off when her head collided with something solid. A muffled grunt caused her to wince, then she slowly turned around.

Chad motioned toward the water, not making eye contact. “Keep pulling,” he said through clenched teeth.

Finally, she held the fish by the gills. Once Chad had stepped away, she began to dance again. “Look, Chad! See how big he is?”

Her smile faded when Chad returned her excitement with a glare, rubbing his jaw.

“I’m sorry, Chad. I forgot you were there, and . . .” Her voice trailed off. Staring at her boots, she licked her lips, waiting.

Finally, he sighed. “I’m not mad.”

Andi’s head whipped up. She stared, wide-eyed, at her older brother. “You’re not?”

Chad smiled, then winced. “I’m not happy about your attempt to knock my teeth loose, but no, I’m not mad.”
He nodded to the fish flopping in Andi’s hands. “That’s a right-fine catch you’ve got there. You gonna help me clean it and cook it for supper?”

Giving one of her plaited pigtails a gentle tug, he took the fish from her hands, then winked. “You’d better bait your hook again, little sister.”

A spark of tenderness in his eyes—something Andi didn’t see in the rancher’s weathered face very often—caught her gaze and sent warmth spreading through her insides.

After giving him a grin and a quick, impulsive hug, she grabbed the bucket of bait close at hand and dashed back to her pole.

Chapter 4

The fire’s hypnotizing flames danced, sending sparks flying into the air, dissolving to blackness against the inky night sky.

Squinting in the firelight, Andi inspected her hands. She touched a red spot, slightly swollen, then winced, sucking in a sharp breath.

“Hey, what’s this?” Chad asked softly. He lowered himself to the ground beside her.
“Oh, I just scraped up my hands when I dove for my fishing pole,” Andi said.

“Hurt some, does it?”

Nodding, Andi blinked back tears. “A lot.”

Chad grabbed his canteen, untied the bandana around his neck, and dampened it. Cradling her hand in his, he gently wiped away the dirt, gravel and blood.

Andi couldn’t hold the tears back any longer. Whimpering, she closed her eyes and rested her head against Chad’s arm.

“I know it stings, little sister.” She could hear the smile in his voice. “Did I ever tell you about the time I tried to ride a calf?”

Andi shook her head.

Chuckling, Chad took her other hand and began to clean it as well. “I was about your age, and the calf was a little thing—just a few weeks old—and perfect for a boy like me to ride. Or so I thought.”

His hands slowed, then stopped completely, settling in his lap while he gazed into the firelight. “I caught that calf, then straddled his back. It just stood there, legs shaking, until it finally gave a little buck and tossed me off.”

He grunted, smiling. “I seem to remember getting my hands cut up just like yours—my face too.”

Andi giggled. Then she moaned when he began to wash her hands again.
“You’d think I was digging a bullet out of you,” he muttered.

Andi gave him a punch in the shoulder, instantly regretting it. Pain exploded through her hand. “Just because I’m nine doesn’t mean I’m tough all the time!”

Chad broke into a laugh. “I guess not.”

Andi changed the subject. “You fry fish pretty good . . . for a fellow.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?” He glared, pretending to be offended, but his eyes twinkled.

She smiled sweetly. “Well, let’s put it this way. It’s a good thing I wasn’t the one cooking. Otherwise, we would be choking on burnt bones.”

Chad chuckled. “No comment on that.”

Heaving a contented sigh, he grunted, then laid the cool cloth over her hands. “This day hasn’t been too bad, after all.”

“Mmm.” Andi closed her eyes blissfully as Chad finished washing her hands and laid the cool cloth on them.

She wriggled under his arm and laid her head on his lap. “I love you, Chad.”

He smiled down at her. “Love you too, little sister. To the moon and back.”
Chapter 5

As Andi drifted off to sleep, Chad hesitantly reached out a hand and brushed a lock of hair out of her face.

*That’s as good as it’s going to get. Never let it be said that Chad Carter liked touching people.*

He stared at the child halfway in his lap. *She should go to her own bed.*

Yet he made no move to make her leave. Instead he sat there, watching the flames flit back and forth, until they died down nearly to embers. His legs grew stiff and cramped, his back ached, and his eyelids drooped.

Finally, he gently shook Andi’s shoulder. “C’mon, Andi. It’s time for you to find another place to sleep.”

She yawned and turned over onto her back, stretching and rubbing her eyes. She stared up at him. “Can’t I stay on your lap tonight?”

He winced. “I don’t think so.”

Her face fell. “Please? I don’t want to sleep way over there by myself. In the dark. Outside.”

“Andi.” Chad shook his head. “I’ll be two feet away. You’ll be fine, all right?”

She sighed and nodded.

Chad helped her to her feet. Then he groaned. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to get up.” Chuckling, he
rolled onto his side, pushed himself to his knees, and slowly stood.

Andi giggled when his back and knees popped.

He waggled a finger at her, smirking. “Don’t laugh, girl. You’ll be my age soon enough.”

“But I’m not.” Andi sleepily walked to her bedroll and curled up inside the blanket.

She was almost asleep when a wolf howled. “Chad!”

His name, though whispered, was a high-pitched squeak. He grimaced, then turned.

His sister was staring at him, wide-eyed.

“It was just a wolf,” Chad said. “Nothing to be afraid of.”

“I’d rather stay close to you.” After a pause, she whispered, “Chad, are you still awake?”

Heaving a sigh, Chad flipped his blanket aside and sat up. “C’mon, before I change my mind.”

_Though I won’t sleep a wink with this bundle of warm energy on my lap._

Andi’s face lit up. She crawled into his lap and nestled her head against his chest.

_She’s taking every advantage of this trip._

Chad forced himself to relax, settling in for a sleepless night, and preparing to be a bear in the morning. _But then again, she’s worth it._

A small voice interrupted his thoughts. “I love you, Chad.”
Chad smiled. His gaze turned to the widespread starlit sky, making him feel small and insignificant. Yet, here was a little girl who thought the world of him.

“Love you too, little sister,” he whispered. “To the moon and back.”
Chapter 1
Saturday

Jem brought the wagon to a stop in front of the general store and set the brake.

“I’ll go see if they’re almost finished,” Jem said as he climbed down from the wagon. He quickly headed toward the door of the store.

The bell above the door jingled when he entered. The smell of peppermint wafted around him.

A quick glance showed Aunt Rose at the counter, paying for her purchases. His sister Ellie leaned
against the candy barrel, looking longingly at the red-striped candy.

Jem walked over to Ellie “Are you ready to go?”

“I sure am!” Ellie exclaimed. “I don’t understand why—”

Ellie was cut off by a loud crash as the display window shattered. Someone screamed.

Jem tackled his sister and yanked her down behind the candy barrel.

“What the—” Mr. Walsh stared at his display window—or what was left of it—in shocked disbelief.

“Ellie, are you okay?” Jem helped her to her feet.

Ellie nodded. She reached up and brushed some glass shards off Jem’s shoulder.

“Oh, Ellie!” Aunt Rose gasped, wrapping her arms around Ellie.

Jem dashed outside to find out what happened. A small crowd had gathered on the boardwalk in front of the store.

“Stuart broke the window,” Nathan was saying.

“Shut up!” Stuart hissed, glaring at Nathan.

“I saw him across the street with his slingshot,” Nathan said.

“Is this true?” Jem’s pa asked, grabbing Stuart by the arm.

“No!”

“And that’s why you have a slingshot in your hand?”
Stuart scowled and gave Nathan a furious glare. “I’ll get you back for talking,” Stuart hissed at Nathan.
Pa pushed Stuart toward the store’s door. “Move, boy. You’ve got some explaining to do.”

Chapter 2
Sunday

Jem jabbed his sister in the ribs. Ellie awoke with a start and gave him an angry scowl.

Jem smiled, amused. He turned his attention back to what the pastor was saying, trying to look interested in what was being said.

Beside him, Nathan tapped Aunt Rose on the shoulder. “Can I go out and get a drink?” he whispered.

Jem remembered when he used to use that same ploy to get out of church. He’d wait out by the wagon till the service was almost over then slip in the back and act like he had sat back there.

It worked for a while, but it wasn’t long till Pa had caught on to Jem’s tricks.
Aunt Rose gave Nathan a consenting nod.
Jem saw the joy in his cousin’s eyes as he slipped past him and Ellie and headed outside.
Ellie folded her arms and slouched in her seat. “He gets away with everything,” she mouthed.
That earned her another jab in the ribs from Jem. “And you don’t?” he whispered.
Ellie stayed silent, knowing she was cornered.
A few minutes later Ellie tapped Jem on the shoulder. “Nathan’s been gone for a while now.”
“What did you expect?”
“We should go out and find him.” Ellie looked ready to use any excuse she could come up with to get out of there.
Jem had to agree. The church was hot and stuffy. The cool evening air would feel so good! He leaned over and whispered to Aunt Rose, “We’re going out to find Nathan.”
“Okay,” she whispered.
As Jem and Ellie slipped out of the pew, Jem caught Pa’s warning look. Jem gave his pa a slight nod and followed Ellie outside.
Ellie sucked in a deep breath of cool night air.
Jem headed for their wagon. “Nathan?” He didn’t see him.
Jem stepped up on a spoke of the wheel to look into the back of the wagon. It was empty except for the fence posts he was supposed to have unloaded yesterday.
Whoops!
“Jem, do you smell that?” Ellie asked.
Jem dropped to the ground and took a deep breath. His eyes narrowed. Something was on fire. He could smell the distinct tang of smoke.

“Miss Cheney’s house is on fire!” Ellie took off running across the schoolyard toward the small house at the back of the property.

Jem caught up and grabbed her arm, spinning her around. “We need to get help!”

Ellie broke free. “No! She’s in there!” She spun back toward the house that was now engulfed in flames.

“No she’s not. She’s at—” Jem stopped. Come to think of it, he hadn’t seen her in her usual seat in church.

“Aunt Rose said she was sick,” Ellie said.

Jem grabbed Ellie’s shoulders and spun her around. “Go get help!” He gave her a shove toward the church.

He turned and ran toward the burning house, praying that his spunky little sister would, for once, do as she was told.

“Please, Lord, help me not to be too late,” Jem prayed as he pounded up the porch steps.

He coughed when smoke swirled around him, making his eyes water. He slammed into the door and charged into the house.

Staying low to the floor, he made his way to the steps. Moving by feel rather than by sight, he found
Miss Cheney’s bedroom and fell against the bed.

It was empty.

Confused, Jem dropped to the floor and tried to get a breath of clean air. He crawled on his hands and knees toward the door. Maybe this was a guest bedroom or—

Jem stumbled over something in the middle of the floor. “Miss Cheney!”

He rolled the person over. “Nathan!” Jem shook his cousin’s shoulder.

Nathan gave a low moan, followed by a fit of coughing.

“Jem, get out of there!” Pa yelled from outside.

Jem raised his arm to breathe through his sleeve. The air was so hot and so thick with smoke it was hard to breathe.

He grabbed Nathan around the waist and pulled him toward the window. It would be faster to go through the window than to go down the stairs.

He shoved the window open. Air! Fresh air!

Jem took a deep breath and coughed. He lifted Nathan up and out through the window onto the porch roof. He climbed out behind him and moved toward the edge, dragging Nathan with him.

Suddenly, Jem felt the roof shift under him. There was a loud crack. Sparks flew as the roof started to cave in.

Jem all but threw Nathan off the roof and followed him.
Jem landed hard. The impact knocked the air out of his lungs. Trying to take a deep breath, he started to cough.

“Easy, Jem. Take it easy.” Pa rolled him over.

After a little while, Jem was finally able to take a breath of air. “Miss Cheney!”

He gasped and struggled to his feet.

Pa’s strong arms grabbed him from behind and pulled him away from the burning house that was starting to cave in.

“No!” Jem coughed, trying to twist away.

“It’s okay, Jem.” Pa tightened his hold, making Jem completely helpless as he tried to get away. “She’s not in there.”

“How—”

“She went to Doc Martin’s today because she wasn’t feeling well,” Pa reassured him. “She’s not inside her house.”

Jem stopped struggling. He let Pa take his weight and went limp, completely drained of energy.

Once Miss Cheney got over the shock that her house had burned down, she repeatedly expressed her thanks to Nathan and Jem for trying to save her.

Jem just wanted to get out of the doctor’s office, go home, and get some sleep. He was so tired.

It was very late when the Coulter family were
finally on their way home. Jem rested his head against Pa’s shoulder as they headed back.

Ellie was already asleep. She was sitting on Pa’s lap, with her head resting against his chest.

Jem closed his eyes and started to drift off to sleep.

“Uncle Matt, I know who did it,” Nathan whispered. His voice was hoarse from coughing so much.

“What do you mean?” Pa asked, glancing over at Nathan.

Jem sat up, wide awake now. Someone burned down Miss Cheney’s house on purpose?

“It was Stuart. He was on the porch when I saw the fire. I yelled his name, and he ran off,” Nathan explained between coughing spells. “When I couldn’t put the fire out I went inside to find Miss Cheney.”

Pa was silent for a while. “I’ll have a talk with him tomorrow,” he finally said. Jem could hear the underlying anger in Pa’s voice.

“I can’t believe—” Aunt Rose’s voice broke off. She reached over and slid her arm around Nathan’s shoulder, pulling him close.

Jem glanced over at Aunt Rose. In the light of the moon he saw tears tracing down her cheeks. That’s when Jem realized just how close it had actually been.

If Jem hadn’t gone in there when he did, Nathan would be dead. If they had been in there just a few
minutes longer they both would have been killed.

Jem sent a thankful prayer heavenward, but a nagging question kept surfacing in the back of his mind.

*Why did Stuart burn Miss Cheney’s house down?*

*Chapter 3*
*Monday*

**J**em, wake up!” Ellie yelled up the ladder.

Jem moaned. He had not slept very well last night, even though he’d been dead tired. He rolled out of bed.

Five minutes later he climbed down the ladder and headed for the kitchen.

“. . . and she wanted you to gather a search party to go look for him,” Dakota, one of Pa’s deputies, was saying.

“Look for who?” Jem asked, walking into the kitchen. He grabbed a plate of eggs and bacon and took a seat across from Pa and Dakota.

“Good morning to you too,” Pa said, taking another sip of his coffee.

“Morning. Who are you looking for?”

“For Stuart Warns,” Dakota said. “His ma said he didn’t come home last night, and his horse is gone from the barn.”
“Considering what Nathan told us last night, it doesn’t surprise me.” Pa drained his coffee. “Guess we’d better get going.”

Jem swallowed a bite of egg. “Can I come? We don’t have school today.”

Pa studied Jem.

“Come where?” Nathan asked, coming into the kitchen.

“To go find Stuart,” Jem said.

“Can I come too?” Ellie chimed in from beside Jem.

Pa glanced at Ellie and slowly shook his head. “I think it would be best if you stayed home today.” He got to his feet, grabbed his hat, and followed Dakota out the door.

“Thanks, Ellie. You just ruined it for me.” Jem scowled.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t look by ourselves,” Ellie said, just quietly enough so that Aunt Rose couldn’t hear.

Jem considered it. He didn’t feel like hanging around the house all day. Taking a ride through the woods did sound like fun. He nodded. “You want to come with us, Nathan?”

Nathan gave a short laugh that ended in a cough. “No thanks.”

Jem shrugged and got up from the table. “If Aunt Rose asks where we are, just say . . . we went to go check on the herd.”
“I don’t think I’ve ever been out this way before,” Ellie said.

After quickly checking on the herd so they wouldn’t make a liar out of Nathan, Jem and Ellie had gone off into the woods and were now close to the railroad tracks.

Ellie leaned around Jem to see where they were going. “What’s over that way?”

Jem pulled Copper to a stop with one hand and pointed. “That’s the train trestle that runs across the river.”

“Can we go on it?” Ellie asked.

“No! It’s too dangerous.” Jem pointed Copper in that direction.

“You think Stu would come all the way out here?” Ellie asked.

“Maybe.” Jem guided Copper over the top of a dead tree branch. “He used to come up here a lot after his pa died.”

“And you know this because . . .”

“I followed him a couple of times,” Jem said with a small grin.

They followed the tracks toward the bridge. As they got closer, they could hear the rushing water of the river that snaked its way through a narrow valley.

“Wow!” Ellie gasped when they emerged from the
woods and stopped at the edge of the steep valley. The bridge was at least fifty feet above the cold, rushing water below.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want to go out on—” Ellie gasped. “Jem, there’s someone out on the bridge!”

Jem yanked Copper to a stop. “That’s got to be Stu.” He cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled, “Stuart, are you crazy? Get off there!”

Stuart didn’t give any indication that he heard Jem.

“I’m going to get him,” Jem said. “You stay here.” He slid off Copper and headed for the bridge.

“Are you crazy?” Ellie shouted.

Jem glanced back. Ellie’s eyes were wide and scared. He looked back at the bridge—at the long drop and the rushing water below—and almost chickened out.

He took a deep breath and fixed his sister with a determined look. “I’ll be right back.”

Jem focused on putting one foot in front of the other. “Please, Lord, don’t let there be a train coming.”

He strained his ears, listening for anything that might indicate his worst nightmare might come true. All he heard was the chirping of birds and the rushing water below.

“Stuart, what are you doing?” Jem asked as he got closer.
Stuart turned and stared at Jem with wild, panicked eyes.

His face was chalk white, with a smudge of dirt across his forehead. His clothes showed evidence of a night out in the woods. He was breathing hard.

“Come on. We need to get off this trestle.” Jem reached out and grabbed Stuart by the arm.

“No!” Stuart yanked his arm free, almost losing his balance.

“Come on, you idiot. It’s dangerous up here,” Jem said. “You could get killed.” He took a step toward Stuart.

Stuart backed up closer to the edge. “So? What does it matter anyway?” he said in a despairing voice.

Jem was bewildered. “What do you mean?”

“I honestly didn’t do it on purpose. It was an accident. I didn’t mean to set her whole house on fire. I was just going to light a small fire on her back porch, blame it on Nathan, and then put it out.

“It was just to get Nathan in trouble. To get him back. It was really stupid of me . . .” Stuart’s voice trailed off.


“No. Get out of here.” Stuart gave Jem a shove.

Jem stumbled backward, trying to regain his balance. “Hey! You may have a death wish, but I
don’t. So cut it out and let’s get off of here.”

“There’s no way I’m going back. No way.” Stuart seemed to say it more to himself than to Jem. He took another step closer to the edge and stared down at the river as it wound its way around the rocks.

“Stu, what are you—”

The stunning realization slammed into Jem like a hammer. This kid really did have a death wish. He could see it in Stuart’s eyes—the desperate eyes of someone who had decided to give up. Just take a dive off a fifty-foot high bridge to an almost-certain death, and end all your problems.

Stuart took a deep breath.

“No!” Jem yelled, diving forward. He grabbed Stuart around the neck and yanked him back onto the middle of the bridge.

Jem’s forehead connected with the iron track. He saw stars and thought he was going to pass out.

Everything stared to spin.

Stuart rolled, breaking Jem’s hold, and shoved him away.

Jem was jerked back to reality when he felt everything drop out from under him. He felt the wind in his face . . . heard Ellie scream his name. He searched for something—anything—to grab hold of.

His hand smacked into a support. His fingers went momentarily numb, but he grabbed it. Jem was jerked to a sudden stop. He hung suspended over a
forty-foot drop above the rocky bottom of the river.

Stuart’s eyes widened in horror. He stumbled to his feet and ran in a blind panic off the bridge and disappeared into the woods.

“Jem!” Ellie ran to the middle of the bridge and leaned over the edge, staring down at her brother with terrified eyes. Jem was too far down. She couldn’t do anything to help him.

Jem could feel gravity trying its best to pull him from his precious lifeline. He tightened his hold—even as the rough edges of the wooden supports cut into his hands—determined not to let go.

Suddenly, he heard something that turned his blood to ice. A train whistle!

Just when he thought this day couldn’t get any worse. “Ellie, run!” he yelled. “There’s a train coming!”

Ellie hesitated. “But what about—”

“Run!”

Ellie whirled and took off running.

Jem swung his legs back and forth to get enough momentum to swing a leg up over the support. He wrapped his legs around it and hung on tightly.

Jem felt the vibrations as the train roared across the trestle. It seemed as if it was determined to jar him lose from his precarious perch.

“Please, Lord, help Ellie to have gotten off in time,” Jem prayed as he tried to get a better hold. He didn’t know how much longer he could hang on.
Chapter 4

The train whistle faded into the distance.

Jem loosened his grip on the support, his energy spent. He had to figure out a way to get down from here without killing himself in the process. He slid over to a support that slanted its way toward the ground and started to shimmy his way down.

Jem’s slow descent soon turned into a controlled fall. He hit the ground, twisted his ankle, and started to slide down the steep embankment. He tried to stop sliding by jamming his boot into the ground, but that only turned his slide into a roll.

He tumbled down the embankment and landed in the river with a splash.
Jem pulled himself out of the water, coughing. Pain shot through his ankle when he tried to stand. He fell to his knees and groaned as a wave of dizziness washed over him.

“Jem!” Ellie called.

She was working her way down the embankment, her descent a bit more controlled than what Jem’s had been. She slid to a stop beside Jem and threw her arms around him, not caring he was soaked.

Brother and sister clung to each other for a few moments.

Jem eased back. “Are you okay?” He winced and sank to the ground.

“I’m fine,” Ellie said. She studied Jem. “You don’t look so good. Your forehead’s bleeding.”

Jem grimaced and ran a hand across his forehead. It came away sticky with blood. “Listen, Ellie. You’ve got to go for help. I don’t think I can get home on my own. My ankle really hurts.”

Ellie glanced up at the sun that was just starting to set. She sucked in a deep breath and nodded. “I’ll be back soon.”

With that, she spun around and started up the steep embankment to get help.
“You have a visitor,” Aunt Rose said from the doorway. She glanced at Jem, Nathan, and Ellie.

Jem twisted around from where he sat on the couch, his sprained ankle propped up. Stuart stood timidly in the doorway. He was the last person Jem wanted to see.

Ellie sprang to her feet. Her stool fell over with a crash. “What are you doing here? You almost killed Jem and Nathan!” Anger flashed in her eyes.

Stuart hesitated. “I . . . I came to—”

“Don’t take another step toward my brother, or I’ll make you sorry you ever set foot in this house,” Ellie snapped.

Aunt Rose gasped. “Ellianna!”

“I came to say I’m sorry,” Stuart said. “Okay? I’m sorry . . . I’m sorry for everything.” The last part of Stuart’s apology came out in a whisper. His eyes filled with tears.

Ellie stepped back, clearly shocked. It was probably the first time in her life she had ever been at a loss for words.

Jem broke the awkward silence first. “I forgive you.”

Tears slid down Stuart’s cheeks. He looked over at Nathan, who gave Stuart a silent nod.

Ellie lifted her chin and placed her hands on her hips. “I forgive you too, even though you don’t deserve it.”
“I know.” Stuart glanced at the three and gave a slight nod. “Thanks.” He backed away and left.

“Wow!” Nathan said. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard Stuart apologize before.”

“I believe he’s taken a step toward turning his life around,” Aunt Rose said. Remember, ‘all things work together for good.’”

Jem nodded. “You never know.”

But he sure hoped so.
Saddle up for more adventure!

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