Chapter 1

December 1878

Ten-year-old Andi Carter bounded into the ranch house after school one December afternoon. She flew straight into her mother’s arms.

“This is going to be the best Christmas ever! Guess why.”

Big brother Chad walked in just then. “Because it might snow for once?” He took a bite of his apple and grinned.

Andi rolled her eyes. “That would be nice, but no. It’s something much better than snow.”

Mother smiled. “I see you’re bursting with news.”

“Spill it before you explode,” Chad said.

Andi untangled herself from Mother’s embrace. She stepped back and stood up tall. “Out of all the girls—even pretty Mary Ellen Meyers and ladylike Priscilla Johnson—Miss Hall chose me.”

She bounced up and down on her tiptoes. “Isn’t that the most exciting news you ever heard?”

“Depends on what she chose you for,” Chad said. “To clean the blackboards? I wouldn’t consider that much of an honor.”
“Chad, please.” Mother waved his teasing away. “Let her finish.”

“I’m to play the part of Mary in the Christmas pageant at school on Christmas Eve!” Andi couldn’t stand still.

Mother smiled. “That’s wonderful, sweetheart.”

“I was sure Mary Ellen would get the part,” Andi said. “On account of her name is Mary. And how pretty she is. Or Priscilla, since she was Mary last year and knows the part.” Andi twirled. “But Miss Hall chose me.”

Andi could not believe her good fortune. Last year she had played a shepherd boy. Her head covering fell off during the pageant, and her dark, tangled hair tumbled down, exposing her as a shepherd girl.

Oh, the shame!

The year before that Andi had played an angel—one of many. Johnny Wilson, the classroom bully, said they put all the leftover kids in the angel choir.

*Leftover* didn’t sound very nice. But then, Johnny was never nice. He always played the part of King Herod.

Johnny came by the king’s meanness naturally.

“The older girls usually get the part of Jesus’ mother,” Andi said.

“Remember when Melinda played Mary?”

Mother nodded.

Andi sighed. “I’ve always wanted to play the part of Mary,”

But it never happened. Another girl was always chosen.

Perhaps Miss Hall wanted only ladylike children to play such an important role. Andi knew she would never be ladylike enough to be Mary.

Until this year.

“When Miss Hall said, ‘Andrea Carter will be Mary this year,’ I almost
fell out of my seat,” Andi said breathlessly. “I was so surprised!”

Chad looked surprised too.

“Congratulations,” Mother said softly. “It is an honor to be chosen to portray the mother of our Lord. I know you will do your best.”

“I sure will!” Andi promised. “I’ll memorize every last line word-perfect.”

“And who will play the devoted Joseph?” Chad’s blue eyes teased.

Andi’s cheeks grew warm. “It’s . . . it’s Cory.”

Then she brightened. “The older boys begged Miss Hall not to have to play any parts this year. They said they’re too old. They would rather haul in the hay and the animals for the backgrounds.”

*Thank goodness!*

Andi would die if she was matched up with fourteen-year-old Frank Allen or Charles Atkins. She might get teased about Cory playing Joseph, but at least she could look him in the face while she held Baby Jesus and not blush.

Speaking of Baby Jesus . . .

“Guess what else, Mother? Mrs. Samuelson is letting me hold her little Richard. He’s one month old and perfect for the Baby. She says he sleeps all the time.”

Andi let out a happy sigh. “I will never forget this Christmas, not for as long as I live.”

She threw her arms around Mother once more, let Chad ruffle her hair, and flew up the stairs to share the good news with her big sister Melinda.
Chapter 2

The next two weeks flew by quicker than a wildfire. Besides keeping up with her schoolwork, Andi had to learn her lines. She had more lines than anybody else in the pageant.

That was fine with her. Andi was happy to be playing Mary. She whipped through her homework every day, so she could practice her part.

The short and easy lines came first, when the angel Gabriel visited Mary. “Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord,” she said over and over again.

There were a lot more lines to learn for the scene when Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth. A lot more.

“Once I get through Mary’s song of praise, I won’t have to say anything more,” Andi said at supper one night.

“Why not?” Big brother Mitch asked.

“During the manger scene, Miss Hall says I just need to gaze down at Baby Jesus and act . . . well . . . her exact words were ‘blessed and serene.’”

“I look forward to seeing how you pull that part off,” Chad said.

Chuckles rippled around the table. Even Mother and Andi’s oldest brother Justin were smiling.

Andi ducked her head. That will be harder than learning my lines.

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Andi practiced her lines to Justin on the way home from school every day for the next two weeks.

“I can nearly recite the lines myself,” he said. “You sure are giving this
your all.”

“I’m going to be the best Mary ever,” Andi told him. “I want to make Miss Hall glad she chose me.”

When the buggy came to a stop in the yard, Andi leaped out and ran into the house. She flew up the stairs to her sister’s room. “Melinda, I’m home!”

Melinda had agreed to help Andi learn her lines. She opened the Bible and found the spot. “All right, I’m ready.”

“Don’t you remember the lines from when you were Mary?”

Melinda shook her head. “Some parts, but I want to make sure you get it right.”

Andi smiled. *Good idea.*

She took a deep breath. “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and”—she wrinkled her forehead—“and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.”

She paused.

“Well, go on,” Melinda said.

“I’m trying to.” Andi took another breath. “For he hath . . . hath . . .”

She let out a breath. “Oh, dirty rats! This part always stumps me. It’s like a bump in the road. Once I pass it, I can finish the rest.”

Melinda frowned. “For one thing, Andi, I can tell you that Mary would never say *dirty rats.*”

*True.* Andi bit her lip. Losing her temper was not a good way to practice being blessed and serene. And she wanted to be, so very much!

“The next word is *regarded,*” Melinda said. “For he hath regarded the low estate of his—”

“His handmaiden!” Andi cut in. “I can do it now.” The verses rolled off her tongue, one after the other, with only a few more pauses for help.

Melinda grinned. “You’re doing much better. By the time Christmas
Eve arrives, you’ll know your lines perfectly.” She held up a piece of cloth. “Mother said I could stitch your outfit. Shall we try it on?”

Andi fingered the soft blue wool. It matched her eyes perfectly. What a beautiful robe it would make. And the long white, lace-edged dresser scarf Melinda had borrowed from the top of her dresser made a perfect head covering.

Surely, wearing such a lovely costume would help Andi remember to behave like a blessed and serene mother!

At least she hoped it would . . .

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“Johnny Wilson, stop that horseplay this instant and stand still.”

Miss Hall was riled up, no two ways about it.

Andi knew why. Every time the teacher’s back was turned, King Herod started a riot. He got the shepherds and the angels to go after each other.

The little-girl angels shrieked when the little-boy shepherds whacked them with their makeshift staffs.

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David!” Eight-year-old Julianna Ross shrieked to be heard above the racket.

Toby Wright bumped into the little angel.

Julianna shoved him away and yelled louder. “For unto you is born this day—”

Toby fell into Mercy Thompson. They hit the floor with a loud thump. Mercy wailed.

“For unto you is born—”

“Oh, hush, would you?” Johnny yelled. “Your screechy voice is burning my ears.”

Julianna burst into tears.
“Children!”

Miss Hall waded into the commotion and sorted everybody out. When they quieted down, she brushed a strand of hair from her forehead and nodded at Julianna.

“Start over, please. From the beginning.” She sighed. “Remember, dear. Angels do not shriek their message. They announce it in a loud and happy voice.”

Andi held a beat-up ragdoll in her arms and listened to Julianna announce Baby Jesus’ birth. The doll looked nothing like Baby Jesus—or even like baby Richard. But it would have to do for now.

There were still ten whole days to go until the pageant, but today Andi knew her lines perfectly. Better yet, she could say them with feeling, as if she really was Mary.

Mary, who had seen a real, live angel. Mary, whom God had chosen to be the mother of the Savior.

Even Miss Hall was pleased. She’d smiled at Andi during practice yesterday and praised her. “Such feeling, Andrea! Very good!”

But today, Andi didn’t want to put feeling into her words. She didn’t want to say her lines at all. She wanted to go home. She felt strange—

“Andrea, did you hear me?”

Andi’s head snapped up. “No, ma’am. I’m sorry.”

“Let’s hear Mary’s Song now, if you please.”

Andi set the ragdoll down and crossed the room. She looked at Susannah Warner, who was playing the part of Elizabeth. She had a lot of lines too. “Blessed art thou among women . . .”

Susannah recited her lines with gusto.

Andi barely heard the long speech. Her head spun, and her tongue felt fuzzy. She stared at Susannah and wished she was anyplace else.
“. . . And blessed is she that believed . . .”

On and on she went.

Her words blurred in Andi’s head. She missed her part.

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,” Miss Hall prompted.

When Andi realized she had ten verses to recite before she could sit down, she whipped through them as fast as she could.

Then she stumbled to her seat beside Cory to wait for the manger scene.

“Goodness, Andrea!” Miss Hall frowned. “What’s come over you? You must show more feeling.” She clucked her tongue. “After the manger scene we’ll try it again.”

_I don’t want to_, Andi thought with a heavy sigh. She slumped.

She had felt poorly ever since Justin had dropped her off at school this morning. The school day had crawled by. This afternoon practice was crawling even slower.

Andi’s cheeks felt flushed. Her throat hurt. _I want to go home._

When the angels finished their lines and brushed by Andi on their way back to “heaven,” she shivered. They’d stirred up a draft.

A wave of dizziness suddenly washed over Andi. She clutched the doll and bent over to steady herself.

“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem . . .”

Andi barely heard the shepherds talking to each other.

“You feeling all right?” Cory whispered.

Andi nodded. “Just tired.” She glanced at the clock. “It’s almost four o’clock.”

Maybe she would feel better when she crawled into the buggy. She could lean against Justin on the long ride home.

“Mary and Joseph!” Miss Hall clapped her hands. “Quickly, now.
School’s nearly out. Come up here so the shepherds can visit the manger.”

Cory shot up and grabbed the sturdy oak branch he was using for a staff. When Andi didn’t move, he reached down and yanked her arm. “C’mon, Andi. Miss Hall means business.”

“Hurry, Andrea,” Miss Hall said. “After the manger scene, you will need to go over your lines with Susannah again.”

Andi rose and squinted at Cory through bleary eyes. He seemed to be spinning. Or I’m spinning.

She swallowed. Her throat burned. The world spun faster. “I want my mother.”

Andi closed her eyes and fell to the floor with a noisy thunk.

Chapter 3

Andi did not get her wish.

When she opened her eyes, it was not Mother but Justin who was lifting her up in his arms. His face was pale, and his eyebrows were scrunched up in a worried frown.

“What’s the matter, honey?” he asked softly. “How do you feel?”

Hot tears gathered behind Andi’s eyelids. She blinked. A tear dribbled down the side of her face and into her ear.

“I’m hot.” She shivered. “No, I’m cold.” She shook her head. “I’m—”

She broke off and whimpered. “I want to go home. I want Mother.”

“All in good time,” Justin said. “But first we need to make a call on
Dr. Weaver. You’re burning up.” He straightened up and lifted Andi higher. “It won’t take long.”

Andi felt her feet dangling. She snuggled her head against Justin’s chest and tried to make sense of where she was.

“I do hope it’s nothing serious, Justin.”

Hearing Miss Hall’s frightened voice made everything click. School. The pageant practice.

Andi moaned. *I swooned, just like a weak, silly young lady.* A worse thought followed. *In front of everybody!*

Andi raised her head, horrified that she might see her schoolmates laughing at her. But the classroom was empty. Miss Hall must have dismissed school and shooed the students out the door while Andi was unconscious.

She let out a shallow breath of relief.

“If you could find Andi’s cloak please,” Justin was saying, “we’ll be on our way.”

Miss Hall put a hand to her chest. “Of course. Come with me.”

Justin’s steps lulled Andi into a daze. She barely noticed when Miss Hall and Justin wrapped her up in her outerwear.

“Use my shawl to cover her head,” Miss Hall said. “It’s pouring rivers outdoors.”

Andi fingered the wooly garment. It smelled like the classroom. *Ugh.* But she was too tired and too miserable to yank it from her face.

Justin mumbled his thanks and hurried from the schoolroom.

Andi’s world blurred into the sounds of splashing hoof beats, pattering rain, and Justin’s clattering footsteps. She felt herself heaved to and fro.

Her throat burned. It was worse than any scratchy throat she had
ever had.

A slamming door and the doctor’s cheerful voice woke her completely.

Dr. Weaver helped Andi sit up. He peered into her eyes. He looked down her throat and frowned. “Under your tongue, missy,” he instructed.

A cold thermometer poked into her mouth.

A few minutes later he checked the thermometer, patted Andi’s arm, and let her lie down. “Rest easy, Andrea, while I talk to Justin.”

Andi closed her eyes but kept her ears wide open.

“I’ll wait for the rash to show up before I make my final diagnosis,” Dr. Weaver said. “But offhand I’d say she’s got herself a case of scarlet fever.”

Justin squeezed Andi’s hand. “How bad?”

“Can’t say at the moment.” Dr. Weaver’s voice dropped. “You need to bundle her up and whisk her home as fast as your buggy can carry you. She’ll need careful nursing, but your mother will have my hide if I keep her here with me.”

Justin chuckled, the first happy sound Andi had heard so far this afternoon. “You’re right about that, John.”

Dr. Weaver did not laugh. “I reckon I’d best get ready for another round of this wretched illness.” He let out a deep sigh. “I thought we had our fill of it last spring.”

Andi’s mind cleared in an instant. *Scarlet fever?* She went cold all over.

A scarlet fever epidemic had sent Andi to Aunt Rebecca’s last May. San Francisco was a safe place when the rest of the valley was suffering. *Scarlet fever? Oh, please, no!*

Cory had come down with it, as well as Andi’s other town friends. Even big brother Mitch had caught it.
Had they felt this awful? She hurt all over.
Justin fumbled with Andi’s cloak. “Time to go, honey.”
Andi opened wide, scared eyes. “Do I have scarlet—”
“Shh.” Justin accepted a woolen blanket and a package of licorice lozenges the doctor held out. “Thanks.”
“The lozenges, along with ice chips, will help soothe her throat,” Dr. Weaver said. “But she’ll have to fight off the fever herself. There’s no quick cure.”
Justin’s jaw clenched. “I know.”
When Andi was wrapped up like a caterpillar in a cocoon, Justin hiked her up in his arms and turned to go.
Dr. Weaver opened the door. “I’ll drop by the ranch tomorrow to check on her,” he promised. He laid a gentle hand on Andi’s forehead and smiled. “You lie quietly, do what your mother tells you, drink lots of tea, and suck on the lozenges.”
“Do I really have scarlet fever?” Andi croaked.
The doctor winked. “Maybe. But you’ll be fine in a couple of weeks.”
A couple of weeks?
Andi’s heart leapt to her sore throat, making it feel tighter than ever. Her eyes were too dry for tears, but they stung anyway. “I can’t be sick. Not now. I’m Mary in the pageant and—”
“Hush, my dear,” Dr. Weaver scolded her softly. “Don’t irritate your sore throat with talking. And don’t excite yourself. You’ll only make your illness worse.”
How could she make herself any sicker than she already felt? Andi wanted to argue with Dr. Weaver—beg him even—to give her medicine that would make her well by the next day.
I have to go to school. I have to be there for the practice.
By the time she gathered her woozy wits to form the words, Justin had bundled her out the door and into the covered buggy. He climbed in beside her and slapped the reins over Pal’s back.

The horse leaped into a fast trot.

Andi remembered no more.

Chapter 4

It took Andi less than a day to figure out that scarlet fever was nothing like a cold.

Or chicken pox.

Or influenza.

None of those illnesses set her throat on fire or made her see wild horses racing around her room. The horses snorted and reared, and Andi couldn’t get away.

The next minute, the horses galloped far, far away down a long, dark tunnel that turned into the size of a pinprick. A second later, the pinprick swelled to a gigantic horse’s head, which opened its mouth and—

“Mother!” Andi clutched the sheets and rolled her head from side to side. “Make them go away.”

Mother’s quiet voice whispered “there, there.” She laid a cold cloth on Andi’s forehead.

Andi opened her eyes. The light of a low-burning lamp shone from her nightstand. Mother sat beside her.
“Oh, Mother!” Andi told her all about the horses. “They were all around me,” she finished with a sob.

“Shh,” Mother said. “You’re delirious.” She stood up.
Andi grasped her hand. “Don’t go!”
“I’m only going to ask Mitch to break off more ice chunks from the block in the icebox. I’ll be right back.” She bent down and brushed Andi’s sweat-soaked hair from her face. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”

But Andi did not feel better in the morning. She felt worse.
Dr. Weaver checked her neck and her face, then gently rolled her over and peeked at her back. “Yes, it’s scarlet fever, all right. There’s no mistaking this rash.”

He looked up at Mother. “Two more cases broke out during the night. I hope that’s as far as it goes, but one can never be sure.”

He rose, shaking his head. “So far, it looks like Andrea’s case is pretty mild. Not like what we saw last spring when we lost—”

Mother cleared her throat, and the doctor broke off.
Andi knew what he was going to say. *When we lost some of the youngest children.* They had died.

“Andi’s a strong, young girl.” He grinned and patted Andi’s knee. “You’ll beat this thing.”

“Not in time for the pageant,” Andi croaked.

Then she winced. It hurt so much to talk. Even if the doctor and Mother allowed her to go, Andi would never be able to say her lines. Ice chips numbed her throat for a minute, but the licorice lozenges did nothing.

After Dr. Weaver left, Andi slept. The frightening vision of the horses came and went. She remembered nothing but ice chips, cold cloths, fresh sheets, and lukewarm, *awful* tea.
Andi wondered if she would ever feel well again.

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Andi opened her eyes. The winter sun had just risen and was shining through the French doors of her balcony.

_How long have I been lying here?_ It felt like days and days. Her heart skipped a beat. _Has Christmas come and gone? Did I miss it?_

In the wingback chair next to the bed, her brother Mitch lay snoring. His head was thrown back over the top edge, and one leg hung over the chair’s arm. A blanket lay crumpled on the floor.

He looked very uncomfortable.

“Mitch?” Andi whispered. Her throat still burned, but she knew without taking her temperature that her fever was gone. “Mitch!”

“Huh? What?” Mitch jerked awake and slammed his feet to the floor. Jumping up, he closed the distance between the chair and Andi’s bed. “Your fever broke.”

His face split into a wide grin, and he wagged his finger at her. “You had us mighty worried, lil’ sis. You were fighting some kind of battle in your head.” He whistled. “One hundred and five. We’ve been praying day and night for your fever to break.”

Is that what being delirious meant? Fighting dream battles that seemed so real they scared her half to death? She smiled weakly. “Am I cured?”

Mother walked in just then. “Absolutely not!” She glided across the room. “But thank God the worst is over.”

She kissed Andi’s cheek. “You’ve been a very sick little girl these past four days, and you won’t be out of the woods for at least another week—possibly two.”

Only four days had passed. _I haven’t missed the Christmas pageant!_
Andi threw back her covers and sat up. “I’ve got to go to school this morning,” she said. “If I don’t, Miss Hall will choose somebody else to be Mary.” She swallowed past the burning lump in her throat, stood up—

And fell like a stone.

Mother and Mitch caught her halfway to the floor.

“The infection has sapped your strength,” Mother said. She guided Andi back into bed, propped her head against two fluffy pillows, and gave her a firm look.

“I may allow you up long enough to use the chamber pot, but you will stay in bed until this”—she slid Andi’s nightgown sleeve past her elbow—

“is completely gone.”

Andi stared at the bumpy, red rash. “Will I be well enough by Christmas Eve to be in the pageant?”

“No, Andrea. It’s next Wednesday, only six days from now.”

Andi opened her mouth to protest, but Mother shook her head.

“Your sore throat will disappear in a day or two, and the rash will be gone by Christmas, but you will still be too weak to go anywhere.”

“Please?” Andi whispered. Unwanted tears filled her eyes. She couldn’t miss the pageant!

“I’ll tie her down or sit on her if you need me to, Mother.” Mitch gave Andi the same look Mother had given her a minute ago. “We’ve seen for ourselves what happens when someone gets up too soon after being ill with this thing.”

Mother sat down on the bed and stroked Andi’s hair. “It happened to one of our ranch hands many years ago. He went back to work too soon and . . . well, he got sicker, and that time he did not recover.”

Andi’s mouth dropped open.

“A Christmas pageant is not worth losing you, sweetheart,” Mother
said. “You will stay in bed for at least another few days. Then we’ll see about letting you up to join the family for Christmas Day.”

“Yes, Mother,” Andi whispered. She suddenly felt very tired. Just talking with her family had drained her. She slumped against the pillow and closed her eyes. “I’m sleepy.”

A few minutes later, she opened her eyes. Mitch and Mother had left the room. Andi rolled over and let her unshed tears trickle down her cheeks. There would be no Christmas pageant for her this year.

And maybe no Christmas either.

Chapter 5

Andi woke from an afternoon nap four days later to find Justin sitting in the chair next to her bed.

He smiled. “You look better every day.” He held out a plate of sugar cookies and a cup of steaming chocolate. “Luisa fixed you a Christmas treat. I wanted to talk to you, so I offered to bring it upstairs.”

Andi scooted up against the headboard. For the first time in the week since she’d fallen ill, she felt hungry.

“The cocoa is still warm,” Justin said.

Andi eagerly accepted the plate on her lap and bit into the crispy, sugary treat. Her mouth exploded in delight. When she swallowed the hot chocolate, her throat no longer burned.

“Mmm.” She sighed. “Tell Luisa thank you.”

“I will,” Justin promised. He helped himself to a cookie and leaned
back in his chair. “I have some school news I thought you might like to hear,” he said, taking a bite.

Andi stopped chewing. There were only two more days until the pageant. Her throat tightened. *Don’t think about it!*

“I’d rather not hear the news that Priscilla Johnson took my part as Mary.”

Justin chuckled. “I wouldn’t ruin your Christmas by telling you that, honey. Actually, the schoolboard closed school at the end of last week. With half a dozen new cases of scarlet fever, Dr. Weaver ordered a quarantine. Classes won’t resume again until after the holidays.”

Andi lost her appetite, even for sugary treats. She no longer felt sad because she couldn’t be Mary in the pageant. Now, *none* of the townsfolk would enjoy the schoolchildren’s retelling of the Christmas story.

“Wh—what about the pageant?” Andi sniffed back tears. “Our town’s Christmas is ruined.”

Justin took another cookie from the plate and grinned at Andi. “Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about our Christmas being ruined. I heard a rumor that the school’s yearly Christmas pageant has not been canceled—merely interrupted.”

Andi wrinkled her eyebrows. “Huh?”

“As long as no new cases of scarlet fever break out, Miss Hall hopes to present the pageant on New Year’s Eve this year. By then, you’ll be well enough to take up your role as Mary and—”

“Really?” Andi clasped her hands and stifled a squeal. Mother would scold if Andi hollered. She glanced around the room. “Where’s my Bible? I need to relearn my lines!”

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“My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God
my Savior.” It was easy for Andi to put feeling into her words tonight. By the time she reached “for He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is His name,” Andi’s whole heart was praising God.

He had done mighty things for her. Wasn’t standing in front of half the town of Fresno as Mary proof of God’s goodness?

No new cases of scarlet fever had broken out, and the townsfolk packed themselves into the community hall.

The angels sang sweetly and only muffed their lines once.

Johnny Wilson told the Wise Men to find the baby king and report back.

Only one shepherd boy tripped when the ragged group bowed before the infant in Mary’s arms.

Andi didn’t have to work very hard to look blessed and serene during the final manger scene. She felt utterly worn out from the evening’s excitement. She clutched the sleeping baby Richard and hoped she didn’t fall over with him into the feedbox.

When she swayed, Cory wrapped an arm around her. The crowd murmured their approval of Joseph’s care for Mary.

Andi prayed that the last song, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” would end soon.

A bleating from one of the lambs on loan from a local sheepherder rose above the singing.

Baa, baa! A second lamb joined its brother. A small calf lowed and stretched its neck against the rope that tied it to the backdrop.

The scenery wobbled.

Andi hugged the baby closer. Would the background stay put?

The choir of angels and shepherds finished their song. Reverend Harris offered up a short prayer and dismissed the crowd. He clearly did
not want to keep praying until the calf brought down the house.

The applause thundered, waking the baby. Baby Richard howled his unhappiness. Mrs. Samuelson rescued her son and moved off.

Andi slumped against a hay bale and closed her eyes. There was food and drink and fellowship in the large hall—enough to bring in the New Year. Very soon, a New Year’s ball would also be in full swing at the Fresno House, the big hotel down the street.

_Not for me._ Andi dozed.

Chad’s hand shaking her shoulder woke her Andi with a start. “You did good, little sister. A more blessed and serene Mary I’ve never seen.” He chuckled. “And I know the reason.” He winked.

_So do I,_ Andi thought drowsily.

Chad hauled her to her feet then swung her up in his arms. “You’re done in. Let’s find the rest of the family and go home.”

Andi nodded. She was too tired to reply. But she was not too tired to smile to herself. It had been a close call, but her Christmas had not been canceled after all.

Merely interrupted.

**The End**

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