2019 Contest Winners

Western Sunrise

Compiled by
Susan K. Marlow
Western Sunrise—2019 Contest Winners
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The Circle C Adventures, Beginnings, and Goldtown Adventures short-story writing contest is open to young writers ages 6 to 17. The contest runs annually from September 1 through January 15.

A big thank-you to this year’s five judges, who are well acquainted with the “Andi” and Goldtown books.

Karla Cook
Heather Fitzgerald
Judy Nill
Donna Patton
Colleen Reece

Thank you, 2019 contestants! Without your delightful contributions, this collection could not have been compiled. Young authors’ names can be found with their story entries.

To learn how you can enter upcoming story-writing contests, email Susan at:

CircleCAdventures@gmail.com

Or visit the Circle C website:

CircleCAdventures.com/writing-contest
2019 Contest Winners

AGES 6-9
1st Place: Sophia Engesser, age 9  
“Sadie Hollister and the Fire”
2nd Place: Moriah, age 6 - “Andi’s Little Cougar Cub”
3rd Place: Ava Keup, age 9  
“The Upside-down Mystery”
Honorable Mention: Trinity Santoro, age 9  
“Trouble on the Range”
Honorable Mention: Susie, age 8  
“Too Much Trouble”

AGES 10-13
1st Place: Patience Yeh - “The Midnight Nightmare”
2nd Place: Sophia Davis, age 13 - “Stolen Treasure”
3rd Place: Gabriella Widman, age 13  
“Change of Plans”
Honorable Mention: Alivia Ulrich, age 13  
“Facing One’s Fears”

AGES 14-17
1st Place: Emily Siburt, age 17 - “Proper Andi”
2nd Place: Hannah Mead, age 17  
“Friendship from Tears”
3rd Place: Martha Abilene, age 14  
“The Tragic Friendship”
Honorable Mention: Christiana Thomas, age 14  
“Turning Point”
Contents

AGES 6-9
1. First Place: Sadie Hollister and the Fire . . . . . . . . 7
2. Second Place: Andi’s Little Cougar Cub . . . . . . . . 12
3. Third Place: The Upside-down Mystery . . . . . . . . 17
4. Honorable Mention: Trouble on the Range . . . . 23
5. Honorable Mention: Too Much Trouble . . . . 29

AGES 10-13
6. First Place: The Midnight Nightmare . . . . . . . . 32
7. Second Place: Stolen Treasure . . . . . . . . . . . . 42
8. Third Place: Change of Plans . . . . . . . . . . . . 53
9. Honorable Mention: Facing One’s Fears . . . . 64

AGES 14-17
10. First Place: Proper Andi . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 73
11. Second Place: Friendship from Tears . . . . . . . . 89
12. Third Place: The Tragic Friendship . . . . . . . . 104
13. Honorable Mention: Turning Point . . . . . . . . 120

BOOKS BY SUSAN K. MARLOW . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 136
WESTERN SUNRISE
1. Sadie Hollister and the Fire

Sophia Engesser, age 9
Minnetrista, Minnesota

Sophia P. Engesser, though born in Ohio, now calls Minnesota her home. She enjoys reading, writing, and playing with her six siblings. Happy reading!

Sadie Hollister is Andi’s friend in the Circle C Stepping Stones series. This is a story before she meets Andi.

Sadie lay on her bed and wondered why she didn’t have any friends. It was so hard not to live in town.

Even at age eight, Sadie could not stand being without people. Though she had her family (mother, father, her older brothers Zeke and Tom, older sister Lily, and the younger kids too), she still needed a friend.

As her thoughts wandered off, she heard her mother call teasingly, “Sadie, you lazy head, get up for breakfast! It’s past seven o’clock!”

Sadie quickly got her clothes on and dashed to breakfast. She hurriedly got her spoon into the bowl and ate her food as she raced out the door.

She heard her mother call again, “Go feed the sheep
and don’t dawdle!”
Sadie sighed. “Why do I always have a chore?”
She looked out at the rows of sheep quietly munching grass. *There’s nothing fun I can do today,* she thought. Then she peered over the fence.
Looking out, the creek caught her eye. It was bubbling and laughing.
Suddenly, she got a great idea. She would follow the creek, for that’s what she liked to do. Carefully stepping onto a stone, she jumped to another stone as she skipped forward. She wondered where the creek would lead her.

As her thoughts wandered, Sadie heard the bushes move. Swiftly, she moved to where the sound was coming.

She slowly looked up, and then right before her eyes, a small Indian girl stood there. She looked like she was Sadie’s age.

Hey,” Sadie called, “What’s your name?”
The girl shook her head
“Well, I am Sadie,” she replied happily. *Maybe she will be my friend,* she thought. “Want to be my friend?”
The girl failed to answer, but shook her head yes.
Day after day, Sadie played with the girl and eventually learned the girl’s name was Choo-nook.

Their friendship grew, and Sadie learned some Indian words. Also, Sadie taught Choo-nook some English words. Sadie met Choo-nook’s father, who knew English.

Sadie and Choo-nook played every day. Many
nights Sadie thought about Choo-nook as she fell asleep.

One morning, the sky appeared redder than usual, but Sadie didn’t notice. Joyfully, she skipped down the steps and quickly did her chores. When she was done, she mounted her horse, Jep, and they galloped to the Indian camp.

Choo-nook was there, but her face looked sad. The camp was getting packed up.

Choo-nook’s father stepped up. “Sadie, we leave,” he said. “Sky say fire come.”

Sadie’s head shot up. Had he said forest fire? Sadie’s family had always worried about a forest fire, and now their worries had come true! What was going to happen now?

Sadie’s stomach felt like a million butterflies were tickling her insides. As she thought about all this trouble, she heard a faraway scream.

“Sadie! Get over here! Where are you?”

Sadie wondered who it could be. Certainly, her family could not have yelled that loud.

Off in the distance, she could see two little dots. As they came closer, they turned into shapes, then shapes into horses, with her two brothers Zeke and Tom on them.

Sadie didn’t want them to scare the Indians, so leaping onto her horse, she bounded in their direction.

Sadie awoke. The sky told her it was nearly midnight, and the bumping she felt told her they were
in Pa’s old, good-for-nothing wagon, driving far away. 
   But why? 
   Suddenly, the day came back: red sky, Choo-nook leaving, forest fire, the frantic packing and swift loading of the wagon.
   Sadie shivered. “Ma, where are we going?”
   Mother answered, “Shh. Aunt Mildred’s.”
   Sadie closed her eyes and didn’t wake up again until they were in Aunt Mildred’s house in the nearby village. It was morning.
   From the window, Sadie saw children playing. Finally, the reality struck. Choo-nook was gone. Would she ever come back? If she did, would they still be friends? It all made Sadie’s stomach feel queasy.
   Before she could think anymore, Sadie’s brothers skidded into the room. “Come on, Sadie, let’s go play! Ma said we could go to the village shops.”
   After a good day of playing and exploring, as well as a good night’s rest at Aunt Mildred’s house, Sadie and her family packed their wagon to head home, anxious to know what became of their home.
   To Sadie, the journey home seemed to take a long time. The bumpy ride gave Sadie a great big headache.
   She never remembered falling asleep in the wagon, but when she woke up, she saw the house. Logs had fallen, leaving great big holes. Most of it was burned.
   It would take Pa at least three months to rebuild it without help.
   Where would they live? What had happened to all their stuff? What food would they eat? Where would
they get the wood to rebuild?

These thoughts came to Sadie like a lightning bolt, but in every thought, Choo-nook was there. Sadie would do all her chores without complaining if only life was the same as before the fire.

As the family stood looking at their ruined house, there was a rustling in the bushes.

“Who are you? Come on out!” Pa shouted gruffly.

An Indian stepped out of the bushes. Sadie recognized him. But before she could say a word, a younger Indian girl stepped out, as well. The moment she did, Sadie screamed, “Choo-nook!”

Choo-nook’s father stepped forward and said, “We help fix.”

Pa’s mouth dropped open. “Who are you, anyway?”

“I Lum-pa,” the Indian stated.

Sadie’s mother stepped up and pushed Pa to the side. “How nice of you. But why?”

“Your daughter nice. Play with my daughter,” he replied.

Sadie, amazed by what Choo-nook’s father said, was too dazed to thank him. Instead, running over, she and Choo-nook reunited in a big hug.

As the days passed, their house started to look like a house again, rather than a pile of rubble. The families worked side by side.

Sadie and Choo-nook spent the days playing, and laughing, and also doing chores . . . together.
Moriah, age 6
Ohio

Moriah is a homeschooled first-grader and the youngest of four children. She loves all animals, especially her pet cats Olivia and S’mores. She enjoys reading, playing basketball, and camping out in her backyard over the summer.

Will Chad let Andi keep her new pet?

San Joaquin Valley, California, summer 1874

Andi was on a weekend camping trip in the mountains with her brother Chad.

She had been looking forward to this trip all year long, but now the California sun was too hot. The temperature had climbed to one hundred degrees.

“Andi, I am going to go fill our canteens in the creek. I will only be gone for a few minutes. You stay here and rest in the shade. Don’t wander off,” Chad added as he bounded away through the trees.

This is boring, Andi thought. Maybe going for a walk would be more exciting. However, she wouldn’t go too far. She would make sure she got back before
Chad came back. So, she took off into the shadows.

She was excited to explore around the camp a little bit. *This is fun! Chad would never let me explore by myself,* she thought. *He thinks that just because I’m six I am a little baby.*

But what was that crackling noise? It sounded like paws. It was coming from behind a bush. Andi creeped carefully around the bush. It was a cougar cub!

*It’s so cute,* she thought.

Andi reached down and picked up the little cat. Its fur was so soft, and it was as light as a feather! The baby cougar licked Andi’s finger with its warm tongue.

Andi giggled. *I wish I could bring it home,* she thought. *I bet I could hide her in the hayloft of the barn.*

As Andi started walking back toward camp, the cougar looked up at Andi with its cute violet eyes. “Hey! I think I am going to name you Violet. Do you like that?”

The cub meowed.

“Okay, then,” Andi said, “Your name will be Violet.”

Andi had only been at camp for a few minutes when she heard Chad coming back.

What would Chad do if he caught her with a baby cougar? Where would she hide it? She thought for a moment.

In her traveling bag! The cub wouldn’t be strong enough to open the bag. So, she squeezed it into her traveling bag and whispered, “See you later, Violet.”

As soon as she tucked it in the bag, Chad walked into camp holding a string of fish and two canteens.
“Ready for dinner, Andi?” Chad asked.

“Yes,” Andi replied, sneaking a glance at her bag. She didn’t see anything wiggling inside, so Violet must have settled down to take a nap.

When it became night, and Chad had tucked her into her sleeping bag, Andi pretended to fall asleep. She waited for Chad to fall asleep. When he finally did, Andi crept over to her traveling bag to check on Violet. She picked up the cub and carried her back to her sleeping bag.

“Be good while I’m asleep,” she whispered, without much hope. Then she snuggled Violet’s furry body against her own and fell into a deep sleep.

Then, it was Violet’s turn to wait for Andi to fall asleep. When Andi was finally sleeping, Violet made a mess of the camp. First, she knocked down a jug of water, then one of Chad’s work bags.

Finally, Andi woke up. She looked beside her. There was no furry body lurking in her sleeping bag.

“Violet, where are you?” she called.

Her answer came. Crash! Then she saw the huge mess. What would she do now? Chad would ground her for seventy years! How could she get everything exactly as it was before?

*I see why Chad never lets me have wild pets,* Andi thought.

“What did you do? This is terrible!” she said to Violet. The cub held a big chicken in her mouth. “That’s what we’re having for lunch! Chad will definitely notice.” Andi groaned.
I had better get started on this dreadful mess, she thought. Maybe she could tell Chad there was a hurricane, or the horses tried to kick down the jug of water.

Just then, Chad woke up. His eyes weren’t fully open, but she heard a groan. Andi immediately slipped Violet back into her traveling bag.

Chad sat up and stretched. Then he looked around the camp. “What is this mess?” he asked.

Andi tried to think of an excuse, fast. “Um, Chad, I just woke up. How would I know?”

“Didn’t you hear anything?” he asked.

“Well, if you didn’t hear anything, then why would I?” Andi replied innocently. She stole a glance at her squirming bag. Then she heard a meow.

Chad groaned. “Andi, are you hiding something?”

Andi had no more excuses. “Um, um, I have a baby cougar,” she blurted.

Then Chad said, “Andi, what did I tell you about not going anywhere while I was gone?”

“Please, can I just keep it this one time? I even named it,” Andi pleaded.

“No, you cannot,” Chad grumbled.

“Fine,” Andi pouted.

“Andi,” Chad explained gently, “you can’t keep a wild animal. Wherever there is a baby there is probably a mommy. And did you see what it did to our camp? Half my tools in my bag are broken, and it spilled our water, and it is so hot.”

Andi sighed. “Then I guess we have to put it back
in the forest.”

Andi showed Chad the bush where she had found Violet.

Chad spotted a little den nearby. “Let’s put it by the den. We can hide behind this rock to watch and see if the mommy comes,” he said.

Andi and Chad crouched behind the rock for an hour. Finally, a majestic cat came and picked the kitten up by the scruff of its neck.

Andi was sad to see the cute, little, furry cougar leave, but it was for the best.
Ages 6-9
Third Place

3. The Upside-Down Mystery

Ava Keup, age 9

Ava is a fourth-grade homeschooler. She enjoys reading, creating, writing, and playing the piano. Her outside adventures include running, exploring, and hunting with her dad.

Sadie and Andi are solving a mystery together!

One crisp spring morning, Andi awoke to birds singing. “It’s morning!” she exclaimed. “After chores, I can play with Sadie at my special spot.” She hurriedly got dressed, ate, finished her chores, and rode Taffy to her special spot.

Sadie was there as promised. “Why’d ya take so long?” she asked.

“I couldn’t help it,” replied Andi.

“Well, at least you’re here now. I’ve got something ya might like, Andi, but it’s at my house,” said Sadie.

“Let’s go!”

When they got to the sheep ranch, Sadie led Andi out back to a lean-to shed. “Close your eyes,” Sadie said excitedly. A sudden happy bark pierced the air.

Andi opened her eyes and saw a big, cute, furry
dog. “This is our new sheep dog, Chilly,” Sadie said. Andi smiled with pleasure. “Chilly is really cute.” After playing with Chilly, Andi had to get back home.

“Meet ya tomorrow?” inquired Sadie.
“I’ll try,” replied Andi.

The next day after chores, Andi rode to her special spot in hopes of seeing Sadie again. Sadie was there, all right, but her face was pale white.

“Are you okay?” Andi asked with concern.
“It’s Pa,” said Sadie. “After you left, the sheriff came and took him. Ma and us kids were real frightened. I overheard the sheriff say, ‘You know, it’s bad to steal those calves.’ Who d’ya think stole the beef, Andi? I know it wasn’t Pa.”

“Hmm,” Andi pondered, then exclaimed, “I’ve got an idea!”

“What’s yur idea?” Sadie asked hopefully.
“My idea is that this is a mystery for A.S.”
“What’s A.S.?” asked Sadie.
“A.S. is short for Andi and Sadie,” Andi explained.
“So, what do we do?” asked Sadie.
“Well, for a start we’ll need to know what ranch the calves were stolen from,” Andi said. “Do you know?”
“No,” replied Sadie sadly.
“I’ll ask Justin,” she said as she mounted Taffy, “but you’ll have to stay here.”
Sadie nodded as Andi loped away.

When Andi reached the ranch, she went straight to
Justin’s room. She knocked on the door and softly called, “Justin?”

“Yes?” came a voice inside, “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Justin!” Andi giggled. He invited her in. “Justin, did Mr. Hollister come into court yesterday because of stolen calves?”

“He did,” Justin answered. “Why do you ask?”

“Well . . .” Andi said, “Sadie doesn’t think her pa did it, and I really want to help find out who actually stole the calves. Do you know which ranch the calves were stolen from?”

Justin answered that it was from the Upside-down Horseshoe ranch.

Andi knew that ranch. The new girl from school’s grandparents lived there.

She hugged Justin, thanked him, ran outside, and jumped off the porch, because that’s how she preferred to use them. She got on Taffy and rode away.

“Sadie!” she called when she got back to the special spot. “The calves were stolen from the Upside-down Horseshoe ranch.”

Sadie made a point that it was getting dark, so they quickly got Chilly and started out toward the ranch.

Then Andi got an idea. “We’ll have a stakeout!” she exclaimed.

“What’s a stakeout?” Sadie asked.

As Andi explained how the stakeout would help them find proof that her pa wasn’t a thief, the Upside-down Horseshoe ranch came into view.

When they got to the ranch, they tied up their
horses hidden from view and went to see Mr. Critter, the new girl’s grandpa.

“Mr. Critter,” Andi said, “we’re here to gather proof that Sadie’s pa is innocent.”

“Oh, really?” he said, smiling. “And how are you going to do that?”

“Well,” Andi said, “we haven’t quite worked out the kinks yet.”

“You girls can look around as much as you’d like,” offered Mr. Critter.

“Thanks!” said Andi and Sadie together.

Chilly barked.

As they looked around the ranch, Sadie saw something by the cow pen. “Hey, what’s that mark on the ground?”

“Hmm,” Andi said, “let’s go look at it.”

“It looks like a boot print,” observed Sadie. “I think it’s a clue to who stole the calves.”

After the girls had examined the mark in the pen, something creaked by the barrels in the corner. They whirled around but saw nothing.

“What was that?” Sadie whispered.

“I don’t know,” Andi whispered back.

“Wanna find out?” Sadie asked.

Andi nodded.

The girls tiptoed toward the corner of the barn and looked in the barrels.

“Andi, look at this!”

It was a torn WANTED poster for Jim Susler.

“I’ve seen these all around town,” Andi said. “I bet
it was him who stole the calves."

“We have to have that stakeout thingy-ma-doodle to get . . . how’d ya say it? Pur-oof?”

“It’s proof, Sadie,” corrected Andi.

As evening rolled in, Mr. Critter locked the gates. He thought the girls had already gone home. Later, as the moon rose high in the sky, there was a rustling sound coming from the east side of the ranch.

Sadie grabbed Chilly and told him to be quiet as a dark figure stepped in the moonlight. Andi whispered to Sadie that it was indeed Jim Susler. As he moved toward the calves’ pen, Chilly jumped on top of him.

Andi ran to the Critters’ porch and banged on the door. “Mr. Critter, Mr. Critter! We caught the thief!”

“What?” Mr. Critter said as he opened the door, startled to see the nine-year-old standing on his porch. “You caught the thief? Where is he?”

“He’s over here!” Andi told him.

“Hurry,” cried Sadie, whose voice was coming from the calves’ pen. “He’s gonna hurt Chilly!”

Andi and Mr. Critter rushed down the porch steps. At this point in time, Mrs. Critter had woken up and sent someone for the sheriff.

Mr. Critter, Andi, and Sadie all helped Chilly pin down Jim.

When the sheriff arrived he shouted, “What’s going on here?” He hurried over. “Whoa!” he cried when he saw the man. “It’s that filthy Jim Susler.”

“He was try’n to steal the beef,” Sadie told him. She showed him the boot print they had found.
“It wasn’t me,” Jim said feebly.

“Yes it was,” the sheriff said as he compared Jim’s boot to the track. “These girls have proof.”

The sheriff cuffed him and took him to jail until morning. He would be questioned, and the calves would be returned.

Andi yawned. It had been a long night.

Mr. Critter thanked them and offered to see them home. Andi and Sadie accepted the offer. Mr. Critter said that they should have told him that they were staying and asked his permission.

The next morning, Andi woke up and did her normal chores, in addition to the ones Mother said she had to do for punishment for being out so late. Then in the afternoon she went up to her special spot to read.

“Hey, Andi!” a familiar voice called out.

“Sadie!” she cried. “Is your pa back yet?”

“Yup!” Sadie said. “Did you get punished?”

“Well, sort of. I had to do more chores, but that’s it. Mother was glad I was safe. Did you get punished?”

“No,” Sadie told Andi. “My ma was thankful that I was safe also. Pa’s happy to be out of jail. We did a great job yesterday. Oh, and Andi, thanks for helping me get my pa back.”

“You’re welcome, Sadie,” Andi said.

The two friends spent the rest of the day playing, fishing, and riding their horses.
AGES 6-9
Honorable Mention

4. TROUBLE ON THE RANGE

Trinity Santoro, age 9

Trinity is nine years old and lives in Arizona. She loves Jesus, animals, reading, writing, drawing, cycling, triathlons, and hiking.

Andi and her friend are in for some kind of trouble!

There!”

Ten-year-old Andi Carter yanked a large trout out of a creek on her ranch in California. “Got another one, Sadie!”

Sadie Hollister looked up from her fishing. “Is that your fifth fish?”

“Sixth.”

A loud whinny from Andi’s palomino mare, Taffy, made Andi look up. Fifty yards away, a beautiful white horse stood, looking at Taffy. The horse shook its mane and nickered.

“Look, Sadie! That’s the most beautiful white horse I’ve ever seen!” Andi cried.

Sadie nodded, her gazed locked on the horse.

Taffy shook her mane, trotting toward the magnificent creature.
“Taffy, no! Come back!”
Andi’s call frightened the white horse. Her eyes widened as she realized the horse was going to run.
The horse reared, spun around, and ran. She looked beautiful, leaping in long strides.

*If only I could have her, Andi thought. I bet I could beat anyone in a—*

“That’s too bad. She was pretty.” Sadie’s voice broke into Andi’s envious thoughts.

“Wait!” Andi’s face lit up. “I bet I can ask Chad to round her up. It’ll be easy as pie for him.”

Suddenly, Andi realized that Taffy had not yet returned. She looked around wildly. “Taffy!”
To her relief, Taffy was grazing a few yards away. The mare swung her big head around and rubbed her muzzle against the pretty saddle, as if trying to get it off.

Andi laughed. “Sorry, Taffy, but not right now.”
Sadie looked up. “It’s only mid-morning. You can take the saddle off, and I’ll help you put it on when you have to go.”

“Okay,” Andi agreed amiably. She unbuckled the girth, and the two girls said, “One, two, three, lift!”

Andi and Sadie grunted under the heavy weight of the saddle. Finally, they set it down on the ground.

“That’s one heavy saddle!” gasped Sadie.
Andi agreed.

A loud whinny made Andi and Sadie look up. Taffy and Jep, who had been grazing, also looked up.

“The white horse!” Andi and Sadie said together.
Andi gasped. “It’s not a mare, Sadie. It’s a stallion. He’s looking for mares. Quick, grab Jep!” She lunged and successfully grabbed Taffy’s bridle. “Gotcha!”

But Taffy didn’t want Andi hanging on to her. She danced around, stamped her hooves, snorted, and shook her mane.

Sadie was having a hard time with Jep. The two stallions were trying to get at each other.

“Hold on tight, Sadie! Don’t let go!”

But Sadie was already losing her grip on the excited horse. A few seconds later, Jep had gotten out of Sadie’s grip, and the horses clashed.

****

After Jep lost the fight, Andi took out a bandage kit and put medicine on the nasty bites the stallion gave Jep. On the way back to the house, Andi met Chad.

He looked worried. “Three mares went missing,” he said.

“What?” Andi gasped.

“Do you know where they are?” Chad asked.

“No, I have no idea,” Andi cried.

What Chad said puzzled Andi throughout the day. The next day, it struck her.

“Chad! Guess what? The other day, Sadie and I saw a stallion I have never seen before. Maybe he—”

“ Took our mares,” Chad finished.

Andi nodded.

“I’ve got Sid and others searching the ranch. I—”

“Can I help them?” Andi interrupted.

Chad smiled. “That’s just what I was going to ask
you. Do you want to?”
“Really? Sure! I’d like to!”
“Good. Go get Taffy and we can look together.”
“Yes, Chad. The stallion was pure white and was so beautiful.”
They went out to the barn. Andi instantly went to Taffy’s stall. It was empty. *Maybe Sid let her out into the pasture,* Andi thought.
She went outside and slipped between the rails of the pasture fence. “Taffy! *Taaaafffy!* Here, girl!”
No answer. Taffy wasn’t there. Andi whistled, but Taffy didn’t answer.
She ducked back between the fence rails and almost collided with Diego, one of the ranch hands.
“I’m sorry, *senorita.* I tried to stop her, but the stallion came and took the pretty horse away.”
“What? Taffy? The s-stallion t-took her? How?”
“I’m sorry, Andi,” Chad said sadly.
“I’ll take Patches, Chad.”
“No, don’t. They’ll—”
But Andi wasn’t listening. She entered the barn and bridled Patches. His saddle was much lighter than Andi’s, so she could saddle him by herself.
She jammed herself into the saddle and galloped away.
“Andi, wait!” called Chad.
She didn’t look back.

***
After an hour or so of looking, Andi decided to turn back. She would look more later. Yanking him around,
she kicked Patches into a gallop. Soon, he tired and slowed to a lope. Suddenly, he stopped short, and his ears flattened against his head.

“Whoa, boy. Easy,” Andi said as he reared and pawed the air with his hooves.

He screamed a challenge.

Andi’s eyes widened. She knew what would happen next.

Sure enough, the white stallion appeared, and he looked angry. He answered Patches, and the two stallions fought. The white stallion’s first blow made Patches stumble back.

Then Andi was flung from the saddle. She hit the ground and lay still.

****

Andi woke up with a groan. She rubbed her sore head and opened her eyes. The stallions in her mind faded away. She blinked. She was not in the woods with Patches. She was in her own room, in her bed, safe.

“What happened?” Andi groaned.

“Chad found you unconscious deep in the woods,” Mother said. “Thank God you are all right. What were you doing?”

Andi yawned. “I . . . I was looking for the stallion.”

Suddenly, Chad burst into the room. “Andi! You’re awake! When Sky and I went looking for you, Sky fought the stallion. And guess what? Sky won. I brought the herd of mares, Taffy, Patches, and the stallion back home.”
Andi smiled.
“And the stallion is young,” Chad said.
“Chad,” Mother scolded. “She’s tired. Let her rest.”
“Yes, Mother.”
Andi fell back asleep, dreaming happily about the stallion.

The white stallion of Andi’s dreams.
5. TOO MUCH TROUBLE

Susie, age 8

Susie likes to ride her family horse, read, and play with her bunny, Fudgy, and her chicken, Lucy-Belle. Susie lives on a little ranch near the mountains and likes to play outside.

Andi wanted to see what Coco was doing, so she skip-hopped to the barn and peeked over the stall.

Coco was gone!

Oh, no! What am I going to do? Andi said to herself. She ran inside to her room.

Melinda was standing in front of her door.

“Why are you in my room?” Andi asked.

“Mother told me to sleep in here because a guest is coming and sleeping in my room.”

“Oh. Where's Chad?” Andi asked.

“He is in the hay loft,” Melinda answered.

Andi raced to the barn and climbed up the ladder.

“Chad, Coco is missing. Do you know where he is?”

“No,” Chad said. “Is he in the pasture?”

“Maybe. I’ll go check.” Andi ran to the pasture, but Coco was not there. A lump appeared in her throat.

What am I going to tell Mother? Andi thought. She was shaking.
Andi walked back to the house. She wanted to run to her room so she could cry alone, so she did. But she ran so fast that she accidently broke Mother’s special vase.

_I’m in way too much trouble today!_ Andi said to herself.

“Andi, what happened!” Mother asked worriedly.

“I . . . I accidentally broke your vase,” Andi said slowly.

“How did you break it?”

“I ran so fast my hand slipped out of my pocket.”

“Why are you crying?” Mother asked in a curious voice.

“Because Coco’s gone,” she answered.

“How is he gone?”

“I do not know. Can I please go to my room?”

“Yes, you may. And please do not break anything on your way to your room,” Mother said.

Andi ran to her room and laid on her bed. She thought about where Coco could be, and what she had done by leaving the pasture gate open.

“This was my fault,” Andi whispered.

***

The next morning, Andi got up and got dressed. She heard a horse outside. “Coco?”

Andi looked out her window. It wasn’t Coco. It was another horse. She went downstairs and ate breakfast.

“Andrea, you have school today. Don’t be late, please,” Mother said.

“Yes, Mother,” Andi said in a slow voice.
When Andi came back from school, she tried to find Coco. But it got too hot. Her whole face was red when she went inside and ate lunch.

“Can someone please help me find Coco?” Andi asked.

No one wanted to help Andi. It was too hot.

Chad told her, “You should probably wait until it’s a little cooler,” he advised.

*I guess I have to do it by myself,* she told herself.

****

Andi kept on looking for Coco, but she still couldn’t find him. She wanted to go inside, but she had to keep looking for Coco. Andi was hot, thirsty, and she was red everywhere.

Two hours later, Andi came inside.

“Where were you?” Melinda asked.

“I was looking for Coco,” Andi answered.

“Did you find him?” Melinda said.

“No,” Andi replied. Andi went upstairs and into her room. *Tomorrow is Sunday,* she told herself.

Andi couldn't stop thinking about Coco. “I should have played with him more,” she whispered.

Andi got up the next day. She got dressed, and Mother put her blue ribbon in her hair. When they went to church, Andi went to Sunday school.

On the way home, Andi heard something. “Coco, is that you?”

It was Coco! As soon as they got Coco home, Chad put Coco in his stall.

“I love you, Coco!” said Andi.
AGES 10-13
First Place

6. THE MIDNIGHT NIGHTMARE

Patience Yeh

Patience is a homeschooled ninth-grader. She is the sixth child in a family of eight children. She likes to play the violin, rollerblade, read, draw, and write.

Andi’s family is thrust into a real-life historical drama.

Mama, are we almost there?” twelve-year-old Carrie Prescott complained.

“Be patient, Caroline,” Andi said. “We’ll soon be aboard.”

“I sure hope so,” ten-year-old Thomas said. “I’m getting hot standing out here.”

It was mid-afternoon, and the sun was high in the sky. Andi leaned to the side and looked past the long line of people ahead of her. She could barely make out the outline of a ship. She saw giant gold letters on the bow of the ship spelling Titanic.

She looked at her husband, Riley, and asked, “Why are there so many people?”

Riley turned to look at her and answered, “One of the reasons is that it’s the biggest ship built in the world.”
Andi nodded, satisfied at his answer.

It was April 10, 1912. Riley, Andi, and their two youngest children were waiting to board the Titanic, after having visited her Aunt Rose and Uncle Clive. It was the first time Andi had ever visited her aunt and uncle in England.

The couple had invited Andi, Riley, and their family to come for a visit, but only Carrie and Thomas had come. Jared, the oldest, was still in law school. He had hopes of becoming a lawyer like his Uncle Justin. Riley and Andi’s oldest daughter, Lucy, was busy preparing for her upcoming wedding.

Thirty minutes later, they were making their way into the ship. As soon as they were aboard, they were met by the grandness of the lobby. Gold-plated light fixtures hung from the ceiling, and sunlight shone through a big glass dome overhead.

“I want to explore the ship,” Carrie pleaded.

“Me too!” Thomas’s eyes shone with excitement.

“First, let’s find our cabin, then we’ll explore the ship,” Riley said.

They all walked up the Grand Staircase. When they reached their first-class cabin, they went inside to drop off their luggage. The size of the room could easily hold a small family, and the inside was decoratively furnished.

“This room is so grand!” Carrie gasped. She looked around the room, examining each item.

There was a writing desk, a dressing table, and a small sitting area, with a round coffee table and two
armchairs. In the back was a washstand with two sinks, its coloring the same as the wardrobe. There were lamps on each table, which brightened the room.

“Now can we explore the ship?” Thomas asked impatiently.

Riley chuckled. “Since we know where our room is, we can look around.”

“There are so many floors to explore,” Thomas said excitedly.

“But we only have one hour before the ship sets sail,” Riley reminded him.

When they reached the Grand Staircase, Carrie begged, “Can we please take the elevator?”

“Yes, we can,” Andi said, smiling.

The four of them stepped into the elevator and went to the bottom floor. As they stepped out, Carrie excitedly squealed, “Look how big the swimming pool is!”

After they looked at the swimming pool, they looked at the dining room, libraries, writing rooms, and restaurants.

Soon it was noon. They hurried to the boat deck to watch the *Titanic* pull away from the dock. The passengers cheered as the biggest ship in the world started its long journey.

Andi, Riley, Thomas, and Carrie waved good-bye to Rose and Clive, who were standing on the dock. The Prescott family stayed on the deck until Southampton was only a speck in the distance.

****
A few days later, when the Prescott family was strolling along the dock on a chilly afternoon, Andi sighed and said, “This has been a very enjoyable trip, but I miss Memory Creek ranch.”

“Don’t worry, Andi,” Riley said with a smile. “Before you know it, we’ll be back home.”

That night Andi fell into a deep sleep.

She was woken up by someone frantically shaking her arm. “Andi, wake up,” she heard Riley plead.

Groggily she turned on her side and asked, “What’s the matter?”

“I just got word from a steward that all passengers are supposed to go to the deck immediately.”

Andi was out of her bed in seconds. She hurriedly changed out of her nightgown, then she woke up Thomas and Carrie.

While they were changing out of their night clothes, Riley searched for lifejackets. Andi found coats for Carrie and Thomas, knowing it would be cold outside.

When Riley returned, he was only holding two lifejackets. “I guess they don’t have enough.”

“Thomas and Carrie can wear them,” Andi said, taking them from Riley and handing them to the two children to put on. As soon as the lifejackets were zipped up, the Prescott family hurried out of their cabin.

The ship’s deck was crowded with frightened passengers.

“What happened?” Several passengers asked.
“I heard we struck ice,” answered another.
But a few passengers didn’t seem worried and went back to their cabins.
Soon, they found out that the Titanic really had struck ice, and there were several holes in the ship’s hull.
“Riley, what should we do?” Andi asked frantically.
“Let’s find a lifeboat,” he answered.
“I’m scared, Mother,” Carrie whimpered.
“It’s all right, dear,” Andi said soothingly. “Just hold my hand, and you’ll be fine.”
Carrie grabbed Andi’s hand tightly.
The ship’s deck was so crowded with people that it was hard to find a lifeboat. One lifeboat they went to was too full, and they weren’t allowed aboard.
“Over here, Andi!” Riley called.
Andi weaved in and out of the thick crowd and soon caught up to Riley, who was standing in a line of people. “There’s enough room in this lifeboat.”
When it was their turn to get in, the crewman lifted Carrie in first, then Thomas. Then he assisted Andi. Riley was about to follow, but the crewman held him back.
“I’m sorry, sir,” he said. “Only women and children are allowed on board.”
Andi gasped. “No! Sir, you have to let him on.”
“I’m sorry, miss,” he said sadly. “I’m only following my orders.”
“Don’t worry, Andi,” Riley comforted her. “You and the children will be all right.” He bent down and gave
Thomas and Carrie a kiss on their foreheads.

When he came to Andi, he said, “I’ll be all right.” He kissed her forehead and whispered, “Be brave.”

“Excuse me, sir,” the crewman said impatiently. “We have to lower the lifeboat now.”

Riley moved out of the way and watched the lifeboat lower.

Andi looked up. Tears gathered in her eyes. Soon, Riley slipped out of sight.

The lifeboat lurched when it reached the icy water. Carrie grasped Andi’s hand in fright. Andi held her and Thomas close.

As the crewman started rowing away from the ship, Andi looked back at the Titanic. A bright red flare exploded in the dark, midnight sky. Thousands of passengers were still on board the sinking ship.

Andi turned away, unable to bear the sight of the trapped people. Sitting across from her, a small girl no older than twelve years caught her attention. “What’s your name?” she asked kindly.

The little girl looked up, and Andi could see tears on her cheeks.

“Ruth Becker,” she answered in a wavering voice.

“Do you have a family?”

“I came with my mother and younger brother and sister, but when we were getting on the lifeboats, we got separated.” Tears started streaming down Ruth’s cheeks again.

“I’m sure you’ll find them—”

Andi was interrupted by the sound of screaming.
She and the other passengers in the lifeboat turned around at the sound.

The Titanic’s stern had risen out of the water and was practically vertical.

After a few seconds, the lights of the ship flickered and went out. Everything after that happened in a blur. The middle snapped, and the ship’s bow rapidly sank.

Andi squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block out the sounds of the trapped people’s screams. When she opened them again, she watched as the remainder of the ship disappeared under the deep ocean.

She held Carrie and Thomas, who were crying. Soon, their sobs quieted, and they fell asleep under one of the blankets the crewman had handed out.

Andi shivered as the night air seeped through her drenched jacket. Try as she might to stay awake, she soon nodded off to sleep.

She was startled awake by the sound of shouting.

“What’s going on?” Carrie asked sleepily.

Several people in their lifeboat started to wave their arms. Up ahead was the silhouette of a ship. Andi noticed that Ruth had also woken up from all the commotion.

As the lifeboat got closer, Andi saw a dozen other...
lifeboats coming in from different directions. In the dark, Andi couldn’t read the name of the ship.

Carefully, the crewman steered the lifeboat so that it was parallel with the ship.

By this time, Andi was able to read the ship’s name—Carpathia. A rope ladder was lowered, and one by one the passengers climbed up. Once it was Carrie’s turn, the crewman had to tie her into a wooden seat since her hands were too numb to hold on to the ladder.

After Thomas, it was Andi’s turn. Her hands were shaking so much—not just from the cold, but also from the fright of wondering where Riley was—that she almost asked to use the wooden seat too.

As soon as her feet touched the solid deck of the ship, she gathered Carrie and Thomas into her arms. “I can’t believe we’re safe,” Andi cried.

Nurses went around, handing out blankets and hot drinks. One nurse came over to them and offered a blanket.

Andi took it gratefully. “Thank you, Miss—”

“Jessop, Violet Jessop,” the young nurse replied.

Andi smiled. “Thank you, Miss Jessop.”

She gave a small smile and said, “You’re welcome.” Then she hurried off to check on other passengers.

The Prescott family found a seat on the crowded deck and huddled under the blanket.

Andi saw Ruth sitting by herself and asked her if she wanted to sit with them. Andi could tell that she had been crying again.

THE MIDNIGHT NIGHTMARE
“I can’t believe we were rescued,” Ruth said. She sounded happy, but Andi could tell by her face that she was still worried about her family.

Andi talked to Ruth to get her mind off her family. While they were in mid-conversation, a woman walked up to them and tapped Ruth on the shoulder, “Are you Ruth Becker?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Your family is looking for you.”

Ruth let out surprised gasp. “They’re really here?”

“Yes. I’ll show you where they are,” the lady said.

Ruth was about to follow the woman but turned and gave Andi a hug. “I’ll never forget you,” she whispered in her ear.

“I’ll never forget you, either,” Andi said, hugging her back. This time when Andi saw the tears in Ruth’s eyes, she knew they were from the joy in knowing her family was alive.

Ruth said good-bye to Carrie and Thomas. Then she followed the woman away.

“I’m glad she found her family,” Carrie said. But she sighed sadly.

“What’s wrong?” Andi asked.

“I wonder where Daddy is.”

“Don’t worry,” Andi said, giving her a hug. “The Lord will protect him.” But she couldn’t shake off her own worry.

After all the passengers from the lifeboats boarded the *Carpathia*, the ship headed to New York.

The next day, the Prescotts were walking along the
deck. As they were walking, a young man’s voice called out, “Andi!”

Andi recognized the voice immediately. When she turned around, she saw Riley standing behind her.

“How did you get off the ship?”

“Whoa, watch my arm,” he said, but he hugged her back tightly.

When Andi stepped back, she noticed the sling.

“What happened to your arm?”

Before Riley could tell her, Carrie came running. “Daddy!” She ran over and hugged her father. Then Thomas ran up and hugged him also.

“How did you get off the ship?” Andi asked again.

“After they lowered your lifeboat, a crewman called me over. He needed someone to row one of the other lifeboats. I almost didn’t make it.”

Andi gasped.

“The lifeboat I was in was the last to leave,” Riley explained. “When they lowered it, I hurt my arm. But when I got on the Carpathia, a nurse helped me.”

He hugged them all tightly. “God kept me safe.”

“He kept us all safe,” Andi said.

The family stood in silence, remembering all of the lost lives. They were never going to forget the fateful night and the journey on the great Titanic.

Historical note: Ruth Becker and Violet Jessup were real-life survivors of the Titanic disaster.
Sophia Davis has seven siblings. She fell in love with horses at a young age and loves Andi Carter and Taffy.

*Something precious of Andi’s is missing!*

The sound of hooves on the dew-moistened ground echoed through the still, cool air hanging around the Circle C ranch.

A lone rider appeared on a horse covered with sweat. He pulled up quietly to a clump of bushes close to the back door of the tall house, quickly dismounted, and sank into the deep shadows along the wall.

The dark-clothed figure moved cautiously toward one of the tall walls of the Carter family house. He reached the side he was looking for and—as he looked up—spotted a group of sturdy vines growing up the side of the wall.

He took a quick glance around and then began to climb the growth with great agility. He soon reached the balcony and pulled himself up and onto the floor.
He then went through the double French doors and crept inside, like a cat sneaking up on a mouse. He stopped just inside the doors and looked intensely at a large bed close by . . . and the sleeping figure.

After standing there for a few seconds, he quietly started toward a bureau on the other side of the bed but closer to the door. He went over to the top drawer and opened it, digging around in the drawers.

The unwelcome visitor next took up a box that lay on top of the bureau. Opening it, he pulled out a long, golden chain with a locket on it. His face twisted into a sly smile as he pocketed the treasure.

After this, he grabbed a few other little trinkets and then quickly exited the room of the unsuspecting inhabitant.

Back on his horse, the darkly clothed man slapped his beast forward and out of sight just as the rooster crowed.

****

The sun rose with the chirping of birds, the barking of dogs, and the neighing of horses. Fifteen-year-old Andrea Carter sat at her bureau, trying unsuccessfully to pull her long, dark hair into a braid. Finally, Andi got it how she thought her mother would approve and stood up.

Andi fixed one of her overall straps, took one more look in her mirror, and rushed out of the room into the hall that led to a long set of stairs. When she got there, her gaze landed on the smooth, long banister that led all the way down to the first floor.
Don’t do it! a little voice in Andi’s head told her.
Just this once, she thought.
Andi hiked her leg up and over the banister railing. Then with her hands, she pushed off. She sailed down the shining, smooth banister, giggling the whole way as loud she dared.

With the air of much practice, Andi quickly slid off and onto the last step of the stairs with a quiet thud.
Thankfully, Andi’s mother, Elizabeth Carter, or the housekeeper, Luisa, didn’t hear.
Andi hurriedly walked into the dining room, where she found most of her family.
“Good morning, Andrea,” Elizabeth said from the head of the table.
“Good morning, Mother.” Andi sat down next to her older sister Melinda.
“Goodness, Andi! Must you wear those horrid boy’s overalls?”
Andi grabbed her napkin and spread it over her lap. One look from Elizabeth sent Melinda into silence.
Andi looked around the table and spotted the empty chair across from her. “Where’s Chad this morning, Mother?”
“He and Sid were talking over a matter,” Mitch interrupted.
Mother looked at Mitch.
“Oh! Sorry, Mother.” Mitch looked down at his plate.
Andi grabbed a biscuit as the platter passed her way. “Justin, please pass the peach jam.”
“Sure, honey.”
Andi spread a generous amount of butter and jam on her biscuit and began to eat.

“So, Andi,” Mitch suddenly exclaimed, “You ready to go back to school in a couple of weeks?”

Suddenly, the biscuit that had been so wonderful to Andi now tasted like coarse sand in her mouth.

*Why did Mitch have to bring that up? Brothers!*

Andi had enjoyed her summer break so much, but school would start very soon, much to her dismay.

She set her biscuit down on her crumb-covered plate and glared at Mitch. She could tell from the place where he sat next to Chad’s empty chair that there was a twinkle in his eye.

“Oh, you!” she sputtered.

Mitch just laughed.

***

After Andi finished her breakfast that had stopped being delicious, she tripped up the stairs, forgetting her troubles of the morning. She was just happy that she had persuaded her mother to let her go riding with Taffy this morning.

Andi went into her room, over to her bureau, and sat down in front of her mirror. She pulled her hair into an even tighter braid, very different from the sloppy braids that she usually wore.

She opened a little wooden box and dug around in it. When she didn’t find what she was looking for, she jumped up and took off down the stairs on a run. She burst into the kitchen, where Elizabeth stood talking
to Luisa the cook and housekeeper.

“Mother, I—” That’s as far as she got.

“Chica! Why do you run in here like that?” Luisa’s voice was stern.

Andi didn’t even hear her. “Mother, I can’t find the locket Father gave me. I put it in my jewelry box last night, and now it’s gone.”

Elizabeth’s face looked distressed. “Andrea, are you sure you put it in your jewelry box? You couldn’t have put it on top of your bureau?”

Andi shook her head in despair. “No, Mother.” She sobbed and ran into her mother’s opened arms.

“Don’t worry, little chica. I will do my best to find your missing locket,” Luisa said, leaving the kitchen for Elizabeth to calm her daughter.

****

Later in the barn, Andi stood leaning against the pitchfork that she was using to clean Taffy’s stall. She sighed and picked up the handles of the wheelbarrow she had just filled.

As she pushed it, she thought about her morning.

_Almost everybody searched the house for my locket, and yet no one found it,_ Andi thought gloomily. _Of course, they all said they were sorry, but that doesn’t seem to be helping._

She put the handles down and stretched her aching back. Then she straightened. _I know what will make me feel better. I’ll go and ride Taffy._

So, Andi scurried away to saddle her mare and take a swift ride.
Soon, the two friends were galloping away from the house and barns and heading toward a clump of trees far in the distance.

After Andi reached her “special spot,” as she called it, she dismounted and let Taffy graze freely.

Andi went and sat on the bank of the stream that happily made its gurgling way past her and over the hills beyond.

*How in the world did I lose my locket?* Andi thought, mentally blaming herself. *If Father were still here with me, I am sure he would be very displeased. Or even mad.*

Andi shuddered at that thought. Silently, and without meaning to, a tear slipped its way down Andi’s freckled face and onto her lap. She wiped the tear away and sniffed.

Just then, she heard pounding hooves on the ground coming toward her. She jumped up and raced over to Taffy, so the fast-approaching rider and horse wouldn’t spook her.

Andi soon recognized the rider. It was Cory Blake and his horse, Flash. Andi and Cory had raced their two horses over that very spot frequently.

*And I always win,* Andi thought.

Cory pulled up, a cat-like grin on his face. He dismounted and carelessly dropped Flash’s reins, who then immediately trotted over to Taffy.

Andi gave a tiny smile at her friend’s fake swagger, hoping that there weren’t any tears left on her face.

“Hi ya, Andi,” Cory called, approaching.

As he looked in her face, he lost his grin. It was
replaced by a concerned look that Andi had seen before. He quickly led her over to the bank, where they both sat down. “What’s the matter?”

Andi looked down at her lap in shame at having to tell her best friend that she had lost her most prized and expensive possession. But she told him everything, ending with her fears of her father being angry with her.

A look of understanding came into Cory’s blue eyes. “Aw, Andi. I am sorry you lost your locket, but you ought to know better than to think that your father would ever be angry or displeased with you.”

His voice had a teacher-like tone in it, and he searched Andi’s face.

“Oh, Cory. This is serious.” Andi turned her face away, wiping tears that were quickly spilling down her face.

Cory softly grabbed Andi’s chin with his hand and pulled it back to look in his face. “I know it is. And I have a theory of what happened.”

Andi’s face brightened. “You do?”

“Yes. Did you read in the paper this morning about the jewelry that has gone missing all over the countryside?”

“No. Justin reads the paper, not me.”

“Well,” Cory continued, “it has to be more than all of those people being careless. So”—Cory got his mysterious tone of voice now—“I believe that your locket was stolen.”

Andi was shocked. “Well, what should I do?”
Cory grinned. “Well, I have a great idea!”

****

“Are you sure this was the best idea?” Andi asked impatiently, scratching at a tickly spot on her neck.

She heard a sneeze somewhere beside her, and then heard Cory’s voice. “I must admit that this wasn’t my best plan ever.”

Why in the world did I agree to climb into a hay pile and wait for the thief to come back for more treasure? Because you want your locket back, Andi’s mind told her.

Well, that was right. They were staking out in a haymow close by the house but in the shadows.


Andi sat stock-still, straining her ears to try to pick up a sound. Then she heard it too. Soft rumbling of hooves over the soft ground.

So that’s how they do it so quietly, she thought. They come over from the north pasture, where it holds water and is soft.

“Shh, Andi!” Cory whispered in Andi’s ear.

She carefully peered out through the hay and vaguely spotted a darkly clothed figure riding up to the house on a dark horse.

The man and horse pulled up quietly to the back side of the house. He put his horse in a clump of bushes and then stepped without a sound onto the back porch. Pulling something out of his pocket, the unwelcome visitor somehow unlocked the door and disappeared inside.
“All right, Andi. Let’s start carefully moving toward the house.”

Cory and Andi soon reached the porch and entered into the dark opening of the door. They stepped inside and quietly shut the door and locked it behind them.

At Andi’s questioning glance, Cory held up his hand and mouthed to her to be quiet. They slowly walked over to the kitchen door.

Cory motioned Andi forward, and they stepped into the dining room.

Andi looked around the dark room but did not spot anything. Then she heard a small sound coming from above. She tugged on Cory’s sleeve and motioned up into the library.

He nodded and slowly led the way up the stairs, keeping to the shadows along the wall. They reached the second story, and Andi saw a small light coming from inside the library.

*Please, God, keep us safe,* Andi silently prayed. Just then a verse from the Bible flew into her mind. *Be strong and of good courage.* She held onto that hope as she and Cory stepped up to the door.

Cory motioned what they were going to do.

Andi nodded and held a rope that she had grabbed on the stairs. She had purposefully left it there for this very reason. They stepped forward.

Cory pushed open the door and stepped in, followed by Andi, holding the rope tightly in her hands.

The figure jumped at the sound of the visitors. His
eyes grew wide, and he quickly recoiled at the sight of Andi and her companion.

“Come on, Andi. Let’s go get him.” Cory surged forward and grabbed the intruder’s hands, wrestling to keep his grip.

Andi moved toward the back of the man and placed a loop under his feet. Then with a tremendous tug, she pulled the rope and the man’s feet off the ground.

His body hit the ground with a big thud. He lay motionless after letting out a groan.

“Good work, Andi. That was quick thinking.” Cory pushed on the man’s shoulders to get him in a sitting position. Just then his hat fell off, revealing a head full of long, silky hair.

“It’s a woman!” Andi almost shrieked.

The lady gasped, realizing they had discovered her secret. “Yes, I’m a woman. And I almost made off with a great deal of money,” she growled.

Cory finished wrapping the rest of the rope around her arms and helped her stand up.

Suddenly, there were pounding footsteps on the stairs. Chad and Mitch ran in with drawn revolvers.

“Whoa, wee!” Chad exclaimed. “What happened in here? We were waiting on the other side of the house but didn’t hear a thing. Then I saw a light coming from in here and came to check it out.”

“Well,” Cory said proudly, “we’ll tell you that later, but we should get this thief to the sheriff. Come on, Andi. Show our guest to the door.”

Andi rushed to the door. “A pleasure,” she said.
The five of them left the room triumphantly.

****

“Good morning, Andi. I am so proud of you for catching Vanessa Scotts,” Justin said, beaming as Andi walked into the kitchen.


Justin took a sip of coffee. “Oh, he’s hitching the buggy up for us. You do remember that today is your first day of school, don’t you?” Justin looked down at the morning paper.

Andi stared in disbelief. “What?”

*Andi’s missing locket.*
AGES 10-13
Third Place

8. CHANGE OF PLANS

Gabriella Widman, age 13
Sergeant Bluff, Iowa

Gabriella, an eighth-grade homeschooler, is the oldest of six and enjoys raising chickens, cats, and sheep. She also enjoys playing basketball, reading, math, journaling, and music.

Aunt Rebecca comes for a visit, much to Andi’s dismay.

Howdy, Andi."

Thirteen-year-old Andrea Carter spun around to find her friend Cory walking behind her. School had just let out. It was a warm Wednesday in the beginning of fall. “Don’t sneak up on people like that!” she exclaimed, but she was glad to see him.

“Sorry,” he said, grinning. “What were you thinking so hard about, anyways?”

“I’ve been thinking about Saturday,” Andi told the tall, blond boy walking next to her. “It will be so much fun. I can’t wait.”

“Do you know what we’re bringing in that lunch we’re taking?”

Andi knew Cory liked thinking of food. “I’m not sure.” She laughed. “Don’t forget your fishing pole.”
They walked the few blocks from school to where they had to split ways.

“See you on Saturday!” Cory called as he turned to go to his house.

Andi turned the other way and headed for her oldest brother’s law office. Justin would drive her home.

****

Andi glanced around the dinner table at her family a day later, on Thursday evening. Chad and Mitch, her older brothers, were discussing the events of the day.

They had taken over the ranch after their father had died several years ago in a ranching accident. Mother was talking to Justin about the upcoming trial that he was working on. Andi’s older sister Melinda was listening to Justin.

None of their conversation sounded interesting to Andi. A typical day, she thought.

She thought back to the plans she’d made with Cory that week for their Saturday afternoon. Cory would be coming out to the ranch, and they would spend the day riding their horses, Taffy and Flash, in the pastures and fishing in the creek.

I can’t wait! she thought.

It was a rare occasion when Cory could come out to the ranch because he was usually kept busy working at his father’s livery. His father let him have a day off because he’d been working hard, and his uncle was in town so he could help with the livery.
“Andrea,” her mother’s voice broke into her thoughts.

“Yes, Mother?” Andi looked up.

“I was just going to read the letter that Aunt Rebecca sent.” She held a small lavender envelope.

Aunt Rebecca, Father’s older sister, lived in San Francisco. She was very picky about what she thought was proper behavior for young ladies, so Andi often found herself in trouble whenever her aunt visited.

“Dear Elizabeth and family,” Elizabeth Carter read. “I hope all is well with you and your family. I am doing well, as are Katherine and the children. I have not seen you in several months and am planning to pay you a visit.

“I will be arriving on the evening train on Friday and will stay for a week. Katherine and her children are not able to come, because of school. Levi and Betsy are progressing in all their studies and keeping busy.”

Her mother continued reading, but Andi had stopped listening.

Aunt Rebecca? she thought, disappointed. Arriving tomorrow? And Kate and the kids can’t even come?

Then she had a worse thought. What about our plans for Saturday? Surely Aunt Rebecca won’t want me riding all day with Cory!

Her aunt was constantly, it seemed, saying that “proper young ladies don’t ride astride,” and that Andi should “settle down and stop racing around the ranch in such a disgraceful manner.”

She will insist, and Mother will have to agree. She is
always a good hostess, Andi grumbled.

When her mother finished the letter, Andi spoke up. “Mother, what about the plans Cory and I made for Saturday?”

Her mother thought a moment. “Well, dear, I’m afraid we will have to honor your aunt and respect her wishes, because she is our guest.”

Andi sighed. She knew that meant no riding and no fishing with Cory this Saturday. “Yes, Mother,” Andi replied, disappointed.

There goes my perfect afternoon, she thought angrily. Instead, I’ll have to stay inside and entertain Aunt Rebecca like a proper young lady, while she corrects everything I do and say.

“I’m sorry, Andrea,” Mother said gently. “Can you postpone your plans until the next Saturday?”

“No, Cory will have to help his father,” she replied. “This might be his only free weekend for a while. Couldn’t we have just a couple hours?”

“No, Andrea.”

Andi sighed again. It would be a long weekend.

When she told Cory the next day about her aunt’s upcoming visit, he also was disappointed.

“Do you think we could do it in a couple weeks instead?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “It depends on if I’m busy.”

“Okay,” she grumbled. “Well, while you’re in town most likely having fun, I’ll be trying to survive a whole week with Aunt Rebecca.”
True, her aunt sometimes stayed longer than a week, but a week was still a long time.

When Andi arrived home from school on Friday, their housekeeper Luisa, their cook Nila, and Rosa, her daughter, were cleaning the house and preparing dinner.

That evening, Justin picked Aunt Rebecca up from the train station and drove her out to the ranch. The family enjoyed a delicious meal of mashed potatoes, gravy, ham, biscuits, jam, and apple pie, along with some other dishes.

Aunt Rebecca told Mother about everything that had been happening, Melinda discussed fashions with her, and everyone wanted to know how Kate, Levi, Betsy, and Hannah were doing.

Then Aunt Rebecca wanted to know how Andi was doing in school, how the ranch was doing, and how Justin’s law business was faring.

It also seemed to Andi that Aunt Rebecca found a hundred things to correct or criticize about Andi’s behavior. With each one, Andi became more and more frustrated.

Aunt Rebecca looked tired from traveling, so everyone went to bed soon after dinner.

Andi, however, had a hard time falling asleep that night. A Bible verse kept repeating itself in her head. *Honor thy father and mother,* she thought. *I wonder if that applies to aunts.*

She realized that she had not been honoring to God, her mother, or her aunt with her attitude the past
couple days. Dear God, she prayed. Please help me to honor you with the way I treat Aunt Rebecca, even though I don’t always agree with what she says.

Andi decided to try to be kind to her aunt and keep her temper, although she knew it wouldn’t be easy. Soon, she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Andi jumped out of bed. Outside, the sun was shining brightly. Andi heard birds singing.

*What a perfect day to ride Taffy,* she thought.

Then she stopped, remembering there would be no riding Taffy with Cory today. *Maybe I can take a short ride while Aunt Rebecca naps,* she reasoned.

She dressed quickly, making sure her clothes were neat and wrinkle-free, and braided her hair neatly.

*I’ll try to give Aunt Rebecca as few chances as possible to find fault with me,* she told herself. It was such a happy kind of morning that she unthinkingly hurried down the stairs.

“Andrea!” her aunt said as she came into the dining room. “How many times have I told you that a lady walks slowly and gracefully, and does not thump down the stairs like a herd of horses? Calm down, dear. I was afraid the house was on fire.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’m sorry,” Andi said, immensely deflated. She took her seat at the table and helped herself to some delicious breakfast.

After eating, Chad and Mitch went to work on the ranch, and Justin went to town. Andi excused herself to take care of Taffy and do her other chores. Melinda,
Mother, and Aunt Rebecca went into the parlor to talk.

In the barn, Andi gave Taffy some oats. She grabbed a currycomb and began to comb out her palomino mare’s long, creamy mane and tail.

“Just think, Taffy. I could be getting ready for a nice, long ride with you and Cory. Instead, I can’t, because Aunt Rebecca is here.”

_Honor thy father and mother_, she remembered. _That was disrespectful_, she thought suddenly.

“I’m sorry, Taffy,” she said. “That wasn’t very nice of me.” She sighed. “Listen, Taffy, I’ll try to ride you later, but now I should probably finish up out here and get back inside.” She always enjoyed talking things over with Taffy.

When Andi returned, Aunt Rebecca insisted on taking her and Melinda to town to pick out some fabric and ribbon. Aunt Rebecca was planning to order them some new dresses in the latest fashions.

_Probably with too many layers and ruffles and lace_, Andi thought.

Melinda, however, was excited about this trip. She spent what Andi thought was a long, tiring, boring morning in town, but Melinda enjoyed it very much.

When Andi got back to the ranch, her stomach was growling.

Aunt Rebecca took a nap that afternoon, so Andi asked her mother if she could ride Taffy.

“Yes, you may, but be back in an hour, please,” her mother replied.
Andi couldn’t get out to the barn fast enough. She saddled Taffy and rode out to the pastures. She didn’t go too far, because she only had an hour.

However, the ride was the perfect thing to cheer her up. The weather was beautiful. It was sunny but not too hot.

Too bad Cory can’t be here, she thought. This is a perfect spot for racing. Then she pushed the thought to the back of her mind, determined to let nothing spoil her ride.

When she got home, Aunt Rebecca had awoken from her nap. Andi took the back staircase to avoid being seen before she could clean herself up.

Later, she entered the parlor, where Melinda, Mother and Aunt Rebecca were sitting.

Aunt Rebecca looked up. “Andrea, where have you been?”

Andi hesitated. “Outside with Taffy,” she replied, hoping her aunt wouldn’t get upset.

Aunt Rebecca turned to Mother and said, “I hope Andrea hasn’t done something reckless or wild. It’s disgraceful the way she rides everywhere, Elizabeth. You need to do something to help her grow up and become a respectable lady.

“She didn’t like any of the new, fashionable styles that we looked at in town,” Aunt Rebecca went on, “and I don’t want her to become a—forgive my language—a hayseed and a disgrace to the family.”

Andi gasped. It was a well-known fact that Aunt Rebecca did not approve of Andi riding all around,
especially since she rode astride and not sidesaddle like proper ladies were supposed to.

But to say she was a disgrace was going too far. Andi’s anger almost boiled over.

*I wasn’t doing anything reckless or wild,* she thought hotly. *And being the most proper lady is not the most important thing. I don’t want to grow up.*

She quickly bit back a mean reply.

“Well, girls, now that you’re both here, I should give you the presents I brought,” Aunt Rebecca said.

“Uh-oh,” Andi muttered.

Dozens of images flooded her mind. Usually when Aunt Rebecca brought a present, it was something that, in Andi’s mind, was too big, had too many ruffles, or was just terribly impractical for ranch life.

Aunt Rebecca took two identical small parcels wrapped in brown paper out of her reticule and handed the first to Melinda.

Melinda ripped open the paper wrapping a little suspiciously. She had experience with Aunt Rebecca’s gifts too. Then she gasped. Inside, she found a silk fan with a design of red roses painted on it.

“Thank you so much, Aunt Rebecca!” Melinda cried happily.

“You’re very welcome, dear,” Aunt Rebecca said. “It’s made of real silk. Now for you, Andrea,” she continued, handing Andi the other package.

Andi took it, fearing what she would find inside. What was she ever going to do with a fancy fan painted with roses on it? Especially one of real silk! She tore off
the paper, and sure enough, she found a cream-colored silk fan.

However, when she unfolded the fan, she was surprised by the painting on it. A herd of five horses galloped through a pasture. One of them even looked like Taffy.


The painting was so well done that it looked like the horses were actually in motion. Then another thought struck her. “But Aunt Rebecca, I thought you didn’t want me riding Taffy because it is not respectable. So, why did you get me a fan with this design?” Andi asked, confused.

“Well, when I saw it, I couldn’t help thinking of you. I don’t really disapprove of you riding your horse. I am just concerned for your safety.” Aunt Rebecca smiled. “I want you to keep out of trouble and help you maintain a proper and respectable reputation, so that people will not look down on you.”

“It’s perfect,” Andi said. I don’t know that I have a use for a fan, she thought, but I could put it up in my room on my dresser. She thought about what Aunt Rebecca had said.

She really loves me, Andi realized. She just wants me to be safe.

After receiving Aunt Rebecca’s gift, Andi realized that she did love her aunt and wanted to be kind to her. Aunt Rebecca still found plenty of things to correct about her niece’s behavior, but Andi tried to
remember that Aunt Rebecca was trying to help because she loved her. It helped hold her tongue when she wanted to say something rude.

The fan found a nice spot to sit on Andi’s dresser, and Andi and Cory were able to spend a fun Saturday afternoon a few weeks later, just like they’d planned.
AGES 10-13
Honorable Mention

9. FACING ONE’S FEARS

Alivia Ulrich, age 13
Crete, Nebraska

Alivia is from southeastern Nebraska and lives with her parents and siblings Preston and Ellia. She is homeschooled and loves reading, writing, and animals.

This story is based on actual events surrounding the author’s ancestor.

Heavy rain pounded against the windows and the roof. Lightning lit the night sky and thunder boomed overhead.

Ten-year-old Andrea Carter—or Andi, as she preferred—hid under the covers of her bed. Her eyes were closed tight. Every time she tried to think of something happy, like her horse Taffy, the thunder interrupted her thoughts.

Suddenly, a huge bang of thunder shook Andi’s room, frightening her.

“Mother!” Andi cried.

A minute later, Andi’s mother, Elizabeth, came through the door.

Andi stood up and hugged her mother tight. They
both sat down on the bed.

“Andrea, dear, are you all right?” her mother asked softly.

Andi nodded, too frightened to speak.

“You know that thunder can’t hurt you,” Elizabeth continued.

“I know . . . but it’s just so scary!” Andi exclaimed. “I wish I could be brave like you . . . and everyone else.”

“You are brave, Andrea. You just have to keep being brave, until you’re not scared anymore.”

“But I don’t feel brave,” Andi whispered.

Another clap of thunder made Andi jump. She scooted closer as Elizabeth put an arm around her.

“I bet your father didn’t feel so brave when he was almost robbed of his gold.”

Andi’s eyes widened. “Father was robbed?” she cried.

“Well, almost. Your father kept a journal of his time mining for gold. Let me go get it, and I’ll read you the story.”

When Elizabeth came back, she sat down on the bed and opened the leather book she held in her hands. *James Carter* was written on the first page.

“Why don’t you lie back down, and I’ll read you the story?” Elizabeth suggested.

Andi crawled back under the covers, remembering Father. Sadly, he had died when she was about six years old. Andi smiled at the memories she had of Father, while Elizabeth began the story . . .
1849 Mining for Gold

September 14

I brought this journal with me to keep track of things and to write down if anything exciting happens . . . not sure, though, if anything will. But I’ve heard there can be some adventure while mining for gold.

The journey traveling here went well, except for a thunderstorm that I had to sit out. I camped where I was for the whole night, until in the morning, it was only drizzling.

When I got to the mining camp, I bought basic supplies and started right away. Found a bunch of rocks and some fool’s gold. Other prospectors told me that while gold was pretty rare, fool’s gold wasn’t. I would have to be careful, so I could tell the difference between them.

That’s all for now.

September 17

Found a nugget but was disappointed that it was only fool’s gold. I panned for gold by a rocky area today. It had some weeds and the grass was all dried up.

The water was rocky too, so I thought it would be a good place to find gold.

I was kneeling in an area filled with pebbles and sand and was panning, when I heard a rattling sound.
Startled, I looked around, and was surprised to see a rattlesnake lying in a sunny spot on a rock! It must have been only about a couple feet away from me, because I could see its gray eyes staring at me, and its long, fast tongue flicking out at me. Another rattle gave a warning.

I stumbled backward and quickly stood up. I started to step away from the poisonous rattler, when, as quick as lightning, it lunged out at me. I leapt out of the way, barely missing the snake’s bite.

I jumped up, unsure if I should back away slowly, run, or try to fight it off. I didn’t have anything to defend myself with, so I wanted to run. But I decided to just back away slowly.

Found a little piece of gold later, but not much.

**SEPTEMBER 21**

Found more fool’s gold over the past few days. Haven’t had time to write down what’s been happening, so I’ll write it now.

I found a little more gold. Not very much still, but pretty happy with what I’ve got. Met an acquaintance from our state a few days ago. Talked a bit while we worked. The sky was getting stormy that day, but we decided to keep trying for a little longer. We only left when the rain started pouring down hard. I thought I had a chunk of gold, but later discovered that it was nothing but fool’s gold again. It sure fooled me.
SEPTEMBER 26

Not much to write about. Today is my last day here. I’m heading home tomorrow. More mining, but little found the past few days.

You will never believe what happened this afternoon!!!

The water was cold and refreshing as I dipped my pan into the mountain water. I lifted one hand up and tipped my hat downward, blocking out the hot sun. Water dripped from my hands and onto my clothes before I took hold of the pan again, shaking it as I did.

I had already filled the little trunk that I had brought with me halfway with mostly tiny pieces and gold dust. There was just one more day to fulfill my dreams.

I slowly lifted the pan up, shaking out the water as I did. I saw only rocks, or so I thought . . .

As I looked through the pan, my heart began to beat faster. Something golden began to appear.

Yes, it was gold! I had struck gold again!

But I calmed myself as I dug through the pan. I stopped. I couldn’t believe it! More gold!

I collected several small to medium pieces. When the sun started setting, I threw up my hat and gave a holler. I collected nine gold nuggets! When I put them in my small trunk that evening, it was nearly filled to the top.

I’m excited to get home and show everyone my find!
Haven’t written until I got home. Everything is still a blur from that night. It seems so long ago, but I’ll write it down as best as I can remember.

I traveled several days back from California. Before the sun was even up that last morning, I took off toward home on my horse, Lightning.

It was going pretty smoothly, and when I was almost there, I began to think nothing could stop me.

But I was wrong.

As the sun began to set, my horse slowed down, which worried me. His ears were turning, listening, and he was twitching eagerly.

“What’s the matter, boy?” I asked. “Hear something?”

Lightning suddenly turned his head and completely stopped. I began to worry more. What was wrong?

A cold breeze blew through the already cold dusk, sending a chill up my spine. An owl hooted then flew away.

Silence. Absolute silence.

I was ready to tell Lightning to run. Then I heard bushes rustle, which sent Lightning looking and listening in that direction.

I whirled my head around, towards the sound I had just heard.

“Hands up!” someone yelled.

My heart nearly stopped at the scare, and I once
again whirled around to see a horse and rider in front of me.

In that instant, Lightning reared up. I let go of the reins, sliding off Lightning’s back, and landed on the hard dirt road.

I got the wind knocked out of me. For a second, I just lay there trying to catch my breath. I then struggled to get up, but I heard the cocking of the gun. I looked up to see a man sliding off his horse.

The mysterious man wore black, completely black. He had a black handkerchief covering his face. His black hat covered his eyes. His black horse matched its owner. I didn’t recognize the man at all.

My heart began to beat faster and faster, thumping in my chest as I slowly stood to my feet. The thief began to rummage through my things. Lightning couldn’t stay still as the man looked through my satchel. He threw many things to the ground, until he found my trunk.

I wanted to run, but I knew I wouldn’t be fast enough to reach the nearest town before the thief got away. I wanted to shout, but I knew I wouldn’t be loud enough to be heard. I wanted to do anything but just stand there and watch all my hard work and gold be taken away.

I hung my head, not knowing what else to do. I heard the man close the trunk and prepare to leave. Then there was silence. Strange silence.

I looked up to see the thief staring at me. What was wrong? Then, to my amazement, he slowly
put the trunk down. He tipped his hat and said, “In my good conscience, I cannot take the gold away from you, for I know you are a man of good standing. I’m sorry for the disturbance.”

With that, he climbed up on his horse and rode away.

I stood there, dumbstruck. What had just happened? Why did he leave without the gold?

The only answer, I thought, was that he had recognized me. Of course, I didn’t know who he was. I quickly shook off my shock, gathered my things, and rode Lightning as fast as I could towards home.

So here I am, still with the gold. I knew mining for gold would be an adventure, but I didn’t know it could be that exciting! Wonder what I’ll do with the gold now . . . and I wonder what the future will bring. But I guess only God knows.

Elizabeth looked at Andi, who was wide-eyed. She didn’t jump at the next boom of thunder but quickly said, “Did that really happen, Mother? I can’t believe it!”

Elizabeth smiled. “Yes, it really did happen. He loved telling that story to your siblings whenever they asked. I know you were there once, when he told the story.”

Andi closed her eyes, trying to remember.

“After he found the gold, he bought the Circle C ranch,” Elizabeth finished.
A huge boom made Andi’s eyes fly open, but she smiled. “I’m not so scared anymore,” she whispered.

Elizabeth smiled at Andi, who was now half asleep. She kissed her on her forehead then quietly walked across the room and closed the door.

Andi smiled as thunder continued, because now she wasn’t afraid anymore. She fell asleep, thinking and dreaming about Father’s amazing story.
AMES 14-17
First Place

10. PROPER ANDI

Emily Siburt, age 17

Emily is a seventeen-year-old Christian writer who lives in Ohio with her awesome family, her border collie, and an overflowing bookshelf.

Will Andi and her friend Jenny’s scheme backfire?

San Joaquin Valley, California, late spring 1881

Andi crashed into her room at Miss Whitaker’s school for young ladies and jumped onto her bed.

Jenny slammed the door behind them and gave a wild-cat yell that made Andi shiver. “No more school!”

Andi flung her pillow at her, and Jenny reached for her own. She whacked at Andi until the seam in one of the pillows came open and a few feathers floated out.

They stopped and looked at each other sheepishly.

Then Andi sprang into action. She yanked a drawer out of the dresser and dumped it into her suitcase. “We’re going home, Jenny! I can’t wait to show you Taffy. You and I can race up by my special spot—”

She stopped as she saw Jenny’s face. “What?”

Jenny’s freckled face split into a huge grin. “Two
Andi tried to close the lid on her suitcase. The clasps didn’t meet. Jenny sat on it, and Andi locked it quickly. “Nope!”

A worrying thought popped into her head and she frowned. Mother will be disappointed that I haven’t become more ladylike.

The little worry began to grow. Melinda will expect me to act like a fashionable young lady. What will the boys think? Do they all expect me to come home different?

Suddenly, going home wasn’t as exciting as it was a couple minutes ago.

Jenny noticed Andi’s glum expression. “What’s the matter?”

Andi abandoned the suitcase and sat down on the floor. “Do you think our families will be very . . . ” Her voice trailed off into an unspoken question.

Jenny grew sober. “Disappointed?”

Andi nodded.

“I don’t know, Andi. Mama had pretty high hopes of my turning out a lady under Miss Whitaker.” She tossed thick red hair over her shoulder. “My brothers knew it would never work, though.”

She brightened. “And Papa was doubtful. So maybe it won’t be so bad.”

“It’s different for me,” Andi said. “Everybody in my family thinks it’s high time I started acting like a young lady. Especially Mother and Melinda.”

She pulled a brush through her thick hair and then
dropped it into a small carpet bag. “I just can’t be fashionable. It’s not natural, and I don’t think they understand how hard it is for me. It’s not who I am.”

Jenny’s hand shot out and pointed at Andi. “That’s it!” She jumped on her bed. “Andi, I’ve got an idea.”

“What’s your idea?” Andi asked warily.

The last idea had landed them in Chinatown. Andi shivered. She did not want a repeat of that adventure.

Jenny frowned. “I know what you’re thinking. This is not that kind of idea.”

Andi raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“My plan is this. You and I will act like perfect ladies all the way out to the ranch. Only, we overdo the manners and delicate nerves and whatever else ladies act like. Then, when your family sees how proper you are, they’ll wish you were the old Andi quicker than scat.”

She smiled with satisfaction and waited for Andi to give her approval.

Instead, Andi shook her head. “I don’t know, Jenny. I can’t even pretend to have delicate nerves or proper manners. Besides, they won’t be convinced.”

Jenny huffed and buried her head in her arms.

Suddenly, she jerked her head up and stared at Andi. “They don’t have to be convinced. They just have to see how you would be if you were like all the other girls in this place.”

She smiled. “Pretend you’re Florence or Lydia and be as snooty and annoying as you can be for a while. It’ll probably only take a couple of days.”
Andi considered. All she wanted was to have this lady debate settled once and for all. She wanted to be like Mother, but it seemed so hard, and everyone was impatient with her when she didn’t get it right.

“I’ll do it,” she told Jenny before she could change her mind.

Jenny screeched again. “Whoopee!”

****

“Welcome home!” The whole family stood smiling on the platform of the train station.

Andi smiled and waved a delicately gloved hand at them. She descended from the train straight into her mother’s arms.

Andi felt tears well up and she sniffed quickly. Fashionable ladies didn’t cry in the middle of a public place.

Chad stepped forward and ruffled her hair.

Andi slapped his hand away. “Stop it!”

Her family froze.

Andi smoothed down her hair. “Gentlemen never ruffle a lady’s hair.” She tilted her nose up and airily kissed Melinda on the cheek.

Chad gave Andi a hurt look but backed away and let Mitch take his place. The youngest Carter brother learned from Chad’s mistake and gave Andi a quick peck on the cheek.

Justin and Mother shared a confused look as Andi straightened her skirts and turned to Jenny.

“Jennifer, I’d like to introduce you to my family. This is my mother, Elizabeth, and my brothers Chad,
Justin, and Mitchell.”

Eyebrows raised when Andi called Mitch by his full name. “And my lovely sister, Melinda. Everyone, this is my friend, Miss Jennifer Grant.”

Jenny made her nicest curtsy. “I’m very pleased to meet you all. Andi has told me all about you, and—”

Andi cleared her throat. Jenny caught her mistake. “I mean, I’m happy to make your acquaintance.”

An awkward silence settled before Andi made the first move to the surrey waiting for them. “Come along, Jennifer. You must be tired and will want to get settled in your room.”

She glided to the rig, and Jenny followed.

The family stared for a moment then caught up.

Andi grabbed Chad as he passed and fixed him with a warning look. “Help Miss Grant into the surrey, Chad Aaron Carter, and do try to remember your manners.”

The look on Chad’s face made Andi laugh. “You didn’t think that after two full terms at dear Miss Whitaker’s I would still be a tomboy, did you?”

Chad opened his mouth, but for once he appeared at a loss for words.

Andi went right on. “Really, Chad. I think it’s too bad that Mother didn’t take your advice and send me to Miss Whitaker’s years ago.”

The family was speechless.

The time when Chad had threatened Andi with Miss Whitaker’s, everyone saw the drastic measures Andi was willing to take to avoid the establishment. And now she wished she had been sent years ago?
Impossible!
Andi began to enjoy shocking her family on the way home. Mother and Justin seemed to take it in stride, but Chad and Mitch had expressions of surprise and distaste on their faces.
Melinda listened in silence.

****

The surrey rolled into the yard and stopped at the barn. Chad jumped out and grudgingly held up his hand for Andi.

Andi took it and hopped down. “Why are we stopped here?”

“I thought you’d like to see Taffy first.”

Andi laughed. “I’ll see Taffy after dinner. I’m exhausted and dirty from my journey. I want to clean up and eat. Taffy can wait.”

Chad stared, speechless. Then a flush spread over his face. “I want to know what’s going on, Miss Frills and Manners. Do we mean nothing to you?”

He glared at her. “What about Taffy? She’s missed you for two whole months, and now that you’re home, you don’t care?”

Andi bit her lip angrily. They all wanted her to be a lady, and now that she was acting like one, Chad was yelling at her.

“That’s touching, but I really must clean up. Tell Taffy I missed her too.” Andi blew a kiss toward the barn and glided to the house.

Jenny jumped out of the rig and ran after her. They disappeared into the house, tore up the stairs to Andi’s
room, and slammed the door behind them.

Andi sat down on her bed and buried her face in her hands.

“You’re doing great, Andi. See? Already Chad hates you like this.” Jenny jumped onto the bed and whacked Andi with a pillow. “Don’t give up yet. It’s working.”

Andi couldn’t help laughing. She grabbed a pillow and swung it hard. Jenny lost her balance and crashed to the floor, giggling hysterically.

Footsteps came up the hall, and both girls froze. Jenny clapped a hand over her mouth and wheezed, her eyes twinkling. There was a knock at the door.

“Are you girls all right?” Mother’s voice came through the door.

“Yes, Mother.” Andi tried to sound nonchalant.

“What happened?”

“Oh, Jenny—I mean Jennifer—fell. We’re fine.”

“I see.” Mother’s tread slowly moved back down the hallway.

Jenny took her hand away from her mouth. “That was close,” she whispered.

Andi nodded. “I guess we’d better get ready for supper, but first I want to see Taffy.”

“That’s not a good idea—” Jenny began.

Andi cut her off. “Taffy and I have been separated for two months. I’m not waiting a minute longer.”

Jenny pursed her lips. “Well, all right.”

The girls peeked out of the door, then tiptoed along the hall and down the back stairs.

Steps thumped angrily in the back door.
“She completely ruined my day,” Chad grumbled to someone as he threw his hat onto a hook and made his way to the kitchen. “I was so happy to see her, and she slapped me away like a mosquito.”

“I don’t understand it,” Justin said quietly. “And I don’t like it.”

Andi and Jenny slipped out the door and ran to the barn.

“Taffy!” Andi called.

A nicker answered her, followed by the sound of pawing at the stall door.

In another moment, Andi had her face buried against her beloved mare. “Oh, Taffy, I’ve missed you so much!”

Jenny smiled. “Andi, I’m getting nervous. Don’t you think we’d better go in?”

Andi rubbed Taffy’s face for a second longer. Then she kissed her mare good-bye. “I’ll see you soon.”

She turned to Jenny with a miserable look. “I don’t think this is a good idea. Chad’s mad at me, and I’m pretty sure Mother isn’t happy about this, either.”

“Don’t back out on me now, Andi. It’s working. Promise me you’ll at least wait until tomorrow before you drop the act.”

Andi wavered.

“Come on, Andi. Just a few more hours.”

Andi gulped. “All right.”

Jenny squealed then looked around stealthily. “Great. Can we go now?”

Andi let herself be pulled back toward the house.
They changed into frilly dresses and hair ribbons and went down to the dining room.

The family was already seated.

“Well, you haven’t changed in one way, Andi,” Chad commented. “You’re still late.”

Andi did her best to ignore the remark. “My name is Andrea, Chad.” She tilted her chin up as she quoted Aunt Rebecca. “I was named for my two grandmothers. And anyway, Andi is so boyish.”

She sat down with a flounce.

Silence greeted her remark.

Andi saw Justin watching her from the corner of his eye. She could see his mind turning. It wouldn’t be long before he figured out what was going on.

He said nothing, however, and bowed his head to say the blessing. His final words cut Andi to the heart. “Thank you for bringing Andi home safe and sound. Amen.”

Andi cleared her throat and started chatting with Melinda and Jenny about the latest fashions. “The riding habits,” she gushed, “are absolutely beautiful. I’ll wear mine tomorrow when I ride Taffy.”

“Can you ride astride in that thing?” Jenny asked innocently.

Andi stopped short. Then she got an idea. “No, of course not. But riding astride is so unladylike. I’ll never ride that way again.”

She turned to her brother. “Chad, where is the sidesaddle that Aunt Rebecca gave Mother?”

Chad’s fork was halfway to his mouth, but Andi’s
question stopped him cold. “We sold it.”

“Why?”

“Father thought riding sidesaddle was dangerous and wouldn’t let any of you girls ride that way.” Chad frowned warningly at Andi.

“I don’t understand why,” Andi pouted. “I was counting on showing you all how a proper lady rides.”

Melinda shifted. She rode astride, and so did Mother. They were both perfect ladies.

Andi went right on. “I had to take a special class because all the other young ladies knew how to ride sidesaddle, and I didn’t. I felt like such a country bumpkin.”

She sighed. “But dear Miss Whitaker was so kind. She made me feel as if I could become a lady despite my rough upbringing.”

Jenny choked on a sip of water. Miss Whitaker had never been very kind or encouraging. The memory of the look on her face when Andi told her she rode astride, coupled with the words ‘dear Miss Whitaker,’ were too much for her composure.

Mitch patted Jenny’s back as she coughed and sputtered into her napkin. When she recovered, her eyes sparkled at Andi with unspoken mischief.

The family watched intently, clearly wondering what was going on.

Andi did her best to keep a straight face, but a grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. She dabbed at her lips with her napkin to hide the smile.

She slowly looked up and flushed when she saw
everyone looking at her. Jenny was the only one who looked like she was enjoying herself.

Justin gave Andi his you-better-straighten-up look.

She turned her nose up at him. He had lectured her on ladylike behavior once too often. This was revenge on her entire family for pushing her to be something she would never be.

Even her mother was a small part of it. Andi wanted to be like her mother, but she shouldn’t have to stop doing what she loved to do to be like her.

Unfortunately, the current standards for ladylike behavior forbade ranching and roping cattle.

The rest of the meal was awkwardly silent. Nobody wanted Andi to start talking again, and Andi wished with all her might she could go back on her promise to Jenny to wait until tomorrow before she quit her charade.

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After supper, they adjourned to the sitting room. Mitch and Justin buried themselves in their respective dime novels and newspaper, Chad picked up a harness he was mending, and Elizabeth and Melinda sat down to sew.

Andi avoided sewing. Her stitches didn’t lie, no matter what kind of manners she put on for the moment. She hoped Jenny would do the same, but the cheerful tomboy from Washington state plopped down in a chair and brought out an embroidery hoop.

Mother glanced over, then furrowed her brow at the tangled stitches.
Andi began to turn away, but her mother looked up and caught her eye. Andi didn’t know where to look. Obviously, Jenny was no lady. Andi shrugged and picked up a well-worn copy of *Little Women*.

Suddenly, Mitch looked up from his dime novel. “Say, Andi, I’m heading up into the mountains in a few days. Going to the Sugar Pine logging camp. Too bad you and Jenny can’t come.”

Andi’s heart leapt up then crashed down. “Why can’t we come?” she asked carefully, even though she knew the reason all too well. Young ladies didn’t ride into the mountains to visit a logging camp.

“We-l-l,” Mitch drawled. “I thought maybe you’d like to, but it’s a long ride, two weeks, and we’d be roughing it . . .”

He trailed off and let her think out the rest, clearly expecting her to beg to be allowed to go.

Andi swallowed hard. Jenny’s plan was backfiring big time. Two whole weeks? Just her and Jenny and Mitch, riding into the mountains and visiting a logging camp?

She’d always wanted to go, but the boys never let her. Now, a golden opportunity was staring her in the face, and she couldn’t jump at it.

Jenny looked up. “You’ve never seen a logging camp, Andi?”

Andi shook her head. *Tomorrow I’m going to beg to go on that trip*, she fiercely promised herself with a glare at Jenny.

“It’s pretty exciting.” Jenny went on, oblivious to
Andi’s glare. “The loggers chop down a tree and then drag it to a flume. The logs float down the flume and go to the sawmill, where they’re cut up for timber. Papa took me to a sawmill once. It was real noisy, but it was fun to watch those huge logs whittled down into useable pieces.”

She chuckled. “Nearly got myself killed though. That’s why I only went once. Papa wouldn’t ever take me again.”

Justin looked up from his newspaper. Chad raised an eyebrow, and Mother and Melinda looked from Jenny to each other and back again.

Mitch cleared his throat. “Well, I guess you know all about it then, and it wouldn’t interest you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t mind seeing the logging camp. That’s my favorite part. A bunch of fellas working hard, with no folks to criticize their manners.”

She punched her needle through the fabric and yanked at her tangled thread. “Drat,” she muttered. “Anyway, I wanted to be a logger like Papa and my brothers until Mama told me girls couldn’t be loggers. But maybe one of these days . . .”

Andi slipped out of the room. Jenny had blown any pretense of being a young lady. Best to lie low for a while. She went up to her room and got ready for bed.

Jenny came in a few minutes later. Finally, she broke the silence. “Sorry, Andi.”

Andi grunted. “I’m not any good at it either. I nearly exploded when Mitch offered to let us go with him. I’ve always wanted to see the logging camp.”
Jenny shot up out of bed. “And why shouldn’t you? I tell you what, Andi. Let’s go down and explain what we’ve been doing and ask to go.”

“No,” Andi said sourly.

Jenny ripped the covers off Andi and yanked her out of bed. “Come on. I convinced you to do this, and I’m going to get you out of it.”

Before she realized it, Andi was in her dressing gown and Jenny was pulling her downstairs. They paused for a moment at the door to the sitting room. One voice was raised inside.

“Well, I think we all figured out that Miss Grant isn’t a sissified young lady.” Chad snorted. “I’ve never seen anybody so clearly not one of Miss Whitaker’s prize pupils.”

Jenny giggled, and even Andi smothered a smile.

“Chad, please, that’s enough,” Mother said firmly. “Remember she’s your sister’s friend.”

“Correct,” Justin broke in. “Which leads me to wonder why my very ladylike little sister”—Andi winced at his voice dripping with sarcasm—“is friends with her. The only reason I can think of is they have something in common.”

“Which might just happen to be the fact that neither of them are fashionable young ladies,” Mitch finished.

“Right.” Justin warmed to his topic. “In which case, Andi must be putting on some kind of act. But why?” He questioned his listeners as if he were in court.

“Because we wanted to show you that dear Miss
Whitaker’s pattern for young ladies is not what you really want Andi to be.” Jenny had pushed open the door before Andi could stop her and answered Justin’s question.

The surprised looks on the faces of Andi’s family intimidated Jenny for just a second, but she put up a bold front and stood ready to make her case.

Justin sat down. “So, would you mind explaining what exactly you wanted to do?”

Jenny started from the beginning and told the whole story of their two terms at Miss Whitaker’s.

She finished with, “You see, Miss Whitaker thinks young ladies should stick to needlepoint, French, and beaux, but Andi and I just can’t do that.”

Andi nodded.

“If we’d have done what Miss Whitaker wanted,” Jenny said, “we never would have helped Lin Mei and Kum Ju. We thought if we showed you how Miss Whitakers prize pupils really act, you’d change your minds.”

Mother’s eyes were red at the conclusion. “Andrea, you should know that being a young lady is about character and integrity, not about fashion and suitors. What I want most is for you to be a godly young woman who serves Christ in every area of her life.”

She held out her arms, and Andi humbly sat down on her mother’s lap. “Growing up is about learning to put aside childish things and pick up responsibility.”

“Yes, Mother. I’m sorry.”

Jenny nodded uncomfortably. “That sounds like
something my mama would say.” She shifted. “There is one more thing I’d like to ask.”

Justin nodded for her to continue.

Jenny looked down at her hands. “Could Andi and I go on that trip to the logging camp?”

Andi shot off her mother’s lap. “Please, Mitch?” she begged.

Mitch’s mouth slowly curved into a smile. “Oh, I guess if—” He didn’t get a chance to finish.

Jenny caught Andi’s hands and swung her around the room in a crazy dance. “Yahoo!”

*A nineteenth-century logging camp like Sugar Pine.*
Hannah Mead, age 17
Chippenham, England

Hannah lives with her loud and lively family in the beautiful, green countryside of England. She is an aspiring writer, a pro at devouring books at lightning speed, and a lover of all things historical.

For my dearest Anne, the friend God knew I needed.

June 1881

The wind whips my hair into my face, and the pounding of Fire’s hooves echo like drum beats in my head. I lean farther over Fire’s neck, urging him to go faster.

Maybe I can outrun my unhappiness.

“I hate it here!” I shout, but the wind snatches the words from my mouth and they melt into nothingness.

I never wanted to move. It was all Mama’s idea. Ever since Papa died, she’d been restless. Grief does that to a person, I guess. So, when she got an invitation to come help out in Uncle Whit’s dry goods shop, she took it up.
Now, don’t get me wrong, I like Uncle Whit. But not where he lives. Fresno, California, is a hot, dusty, out-in-the-middle-of-nowhere place. To top it all off, it has no forest near it for miles.

Up in Oregon, I’d spent my whole life in the forest. I loved it. It was my native habitat, my home. No place else could replace the cozy cabin in the woods, where I lived with my papa and mama. But now I’m here, in a strange place, without my beloved papa. And I hate it.

At least I was able to bring Fire with me. I don’t know what I would have done without him this past week. Every day, as soon as I can escape from the shop, I ride. I don’t know where I go, just out into the dusty country and scrubby hills.

When I’m alone on Fire’s back, I can try to forget the weight of loneliness and grief that hangs heavy on my heart.

***

I love to ride. When I was little, Papa used to toss me up in the saddle with him and we’d ride through the woods together. When I got bigger, he gave me my own horse, a black gelding I named Black Fire. I call him Fire for short.

Black Fire and Papa were my constant companions. Whenever I had a free moment, they were the two I wanted to be with.

We rode together through the towering pine trees and across lush, green fields, talking about everything and anything, laughing at the slightest provocation.
When dusk began to fall, we always turned toward home. Tired but happy, we eventually came through the trees and into the clearing where our cabin stood. Mama always stood in the lighted doorway, waiting for us to come in.

Oh, the love and joy I felt, surrounded by the people and place I loved! Papa’s ever-present laughter filled our house, and Mama’s gentle smile lighted it.

Our house was an island of happiness.

“It’s a puddle of heaven, Anna-girl,” Papa used to say as he hugged me tight.

Then this past winter, all that changed. A freak accident took Papa. In one swift blow, everything I knew and loved fell out from beneath my feet.

I felt like I was falling forever though a thick, black mist of sorrow. When I finally hit the ground, everything was different.

It seemed that all joy disappeared the day Papa never came home. Heartache came in to take its place.

Mama didn’t talk much. She seemed to withdraw inside herself, like a snail into its shell. The silence in the house screamed out that something was missing.

Fire was my constant companion in those dark days. Every day, as soon as school and chores were over, I’d take off on Fire, wandering the woods and remembering happier days. Many tears fell, and my heart throbbed until I wished I could die too.

But the woods were a healing balm to my soul. The familiar paths and hills, the never-changing beauty, and the pine-scented breezes soothed my heart.
The grief that at first stabbed me with sharp pain slowly but surely subsided to a dull ache.

In my own way, I was happy again. Never as happy as before, but still, I was content. I had Fire, and my beloved woods, and our home was again lighted by Mama’s quiet smile.

Then Mama announced that we were moving to Fresno, and once again everything changed. I fought the decision with everything I had in me. I couldn’t fathom leaving the home I had known my whole life.

Despite my pleadings and tears, Mama remained steadfast in her decision.

And so a week ago, we took the long journey down to Fresno. Leaving the cabin in the woods tore yet another wound into my already aching heart.

This time it felt like it would never heal.

***

All these memories and thoughts flash through my head as Fire and I gallop over the open country.

One thought pounds in my head above everything else, even louder than Fire’s pounding hooves.

*I hate it here! I want Papa back!*

Tears leak from my eyes and are immediately swept away by the wind that whistles in my ears. My breath comes in great gasps, and sobs tear through my body.


But there is no answer.

I slowly become aware of Fire’s sides heaving as he struggles to keep up the fast pace I’m urging him to. I slow him down, easing him out of a gallop and into a
lope, then a trot, then finally a walk.

“I’m sorry, old boy,” I say, patting Fire’s wet neck. “Guess I wasn’t thinking about what I was doing. Did I run you too fast?”

Taking a heaving breath, I scrub my tears away and take note of my surroundings for the first time. We’ve galloped out of the open country, into a sparsely wooded area. Nothing like the woods back home, just some trees here and there.

Fire whinnies softly and looks back at me with his dark, gentle eyes. He seems to know my pain, and his eyes are filled with pity.

“Oh, I love you, Fire!” I lean down onto his neck and hug him, ignoring his sweatiness. He whinnies again and then walks forward, deeper into the clearing.

It’s actually not that bad here. There isn’t a lot of dust and it’s quiet—something that town never is. I miss the silence of the woods back home. Fire pricks his ears back and forth, listening for something only he knows.

The silence is broken by a rustling noise coming from the far edge of the clearing. I sit up straight, gripping Fire’s mane with one hand and the reins with the other.

The realization suddenly comes upon me that I have no idea where I am. I’ve galloped for miles, and I have no clue who, or what, could be out here.

The quiet clearing becomes eerie to my nervously listening ears, and the silence I welcomed a moment ago now becomes unfriendly. My eyes dart quickly
around the circle of trees. I feel like I’m being watched.

“Wh-who’s there?” My voice comes out in a quaver.

Suddenly, something bursts through the trees and then stops. That something is a horse. I let out a shaky sigh of relief and grin at my nerves.

“Whew, that scared me. Did it scare you, Fire?”

He snorts and walks toward the other horse.

It’s a beautiful cream palomino, perfect from head to toe. I can tell it’s a horse of good breeding. The question is, why is it alone here, out in the middle of nowhere?

I slip out of my saddle and hit the ground in a puff of dust. Walking toward the horse, I reach my hand out and start sweet-talking.

“Hey, beauty. Whatcha doing here all by yourself? You sure are a pretty horse to be all alone out here. Come on, I won’t hurt you.”

I reach the horse and stretch my hand out to stroke its face. Its nose flares as it delicately sniffs my hand, then it turns its attention to Fire.

They touch noses and have a conversation in horse language, punctuated with little snorts, sniffles, and whinnies.

As they talk, I run my hand over the palomino’s creamy side and down to the flank, feeling its strong muscles beneath the soft skin. I can see now that it’s a mare.

And a very beautiful one at that.

“You are the most gorgeous hunk of horse-flesh I’ve ever seen,” I croon to the horse.
A jealous nicker sounds in my ear and I turn to see Fire behind me. “Oh, do pardon me. I meant excepting you, Fire,” I correct myself with a giggle. “You are the prettiest horse ever!” I give him a scratch underneath his forelock.

“But I wonder who you belong to,” I muse, turning back to the palomino. My eyes are caught by a brand on the horse’s flank, a C inside a circle. The Circle C. Have I heard of that before?

Before I can chase the thought, another something bursts out of the bushes.

But this time the something is a girl. She storms toward me, hands on her hips, dark braids swinging, and anger oozing out of every move she makes. I back up next to Fire, poised for a quick getaway.

“You thief! How dare you!” She throws her words at me, putting a protective hand on the palomino’s neck. The horse nickers and rests her head on the girl’s shoulder. “Did you know we hang horse thieves in this state?”

Her angry blue eyes throw me a challenge.

I stiffen at her accusation and draw my small frame up to its full height. My green eyes narrow, returning the challenge, and my hands clench into fists.

“I. Am. Not. A. Thief.”

I spit each word out with great disdain. “I was not stealing your horse. I was only wondering why a horse was wandering out in the middle of nowhere, and seeing if I could find out whose horse it was so I could return it.”
“She’s not wandering in the middle of nowhere. She’s on Carter land, and she’s a Carter horse. See the brand?” the strange girl says, pointing to the mare’s flank. “In fact, you are trespassing on Carter land. Right now.”

“I’m very sorry. I didn’t know I was trespassing,” I retort icily. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll get off your Carter land.”

I mount Fire, and we start to walk away from the girl. “And I was not trying to steal your horse!” I toss the parting shot over my shoulder.

“Wait!”

Her voice has a strange sound to it. I pull the reins and we stop, but I don’t turn around. I’m too mad.

“I’m . . . I’m sorry. I jumped to conclusions.”

Is she going to apologize? I slightly turn my head so I can see her out of the corner of my eye.

She’s standing next to the palomino, looking at me. “Taffy disappeared, and then I heard a noise. When I peeked through the bushes, all I saw was someone standing next to her. I guess I figured you were trying to steal her. I’m kind of protective of her, you see.”

I turn Fire around fully and stare at this strange girl. One minute she’s hopping mad, the next minute she’s apologizing. What kind of girl is she?

She smiles at me, hand still lying protectively on her horse’s neck.

“Umm . . .” I’m still wary of her and don’t really know what to say. I haven’t seen anyone as mad as that girl was two minutes ago in a long time. “Well—”
“Mother is always chiding me for my temper,” she continues. “I know I ought to be better at controlling it. It’s just hard to control it when you think someone is stealing your horse.”

She giggles awkwardly then stops when she sees I’m unamused. “I guess what I’m trying to say is—”

She stops, takes a deep breath, and then starts again. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have shouted at you like that. Will you forgive me?” She looks up at me, her eyes pleading instead of spitting fire.

My mind races. I guess I don’t blame her for getting mad. I would be furious if I thought someone was stealing Fire.

I give a small, reluctant smile. “Sure, I forgive you. I would be mad too if I thought someone was stealing my horse.”

“Oh, thanks. I really am sorry.” She shoots me a smile. “Shall we start over?”

“Huh?” My forehead wrinkles in confusion.

“You know, start over and get to know each other properly. I’m Andrea Carter, but you can call me Andi.” She sticks out her hand and gives me another grin.

Her grin is contagious, and I find myself shyly grinning back. I slide out of my saddle for the second time in ten minutes and walk over to where she and her horse are standing.

“I’m Anna Moore. Pleased to meet you.” I shake her hand and back up, not sure where to go from here.

“Nice to meet you, Anna,” she chirps. “How old are you?”
“I’m thirteen next month,” I reply. “And you?”
“I was thirteen in May. We’re practically the same age.”
“Yes,” I agree, and then silence falls.
I should keep the conversation moving, but my mind is still spinning from the rapid transition of events that have just occurred. The girl, or Andi as she calls herself, makes the first move.
“Your horse is beautiful. What’s his name?” She stretches out her hand and lets Fire sniff it. I can tell she has a natural connection with horses.
“Thank you,” I reply. “His name is Fire.”
“Oh, he’s so lovely!” She’s now scratching him under his forelock, his favorite place to be scratched.
Fire gives a little grunt of happiness, and a smile creeps across my face. Anyone who can make friends with my horse has found a place in my heart.
“You said your horse’s name is Taffy?” I question.
“Yes, it is. I’ve had her since I was six years old.” Taffy is still standing contentedly behind her, her ears whiffing at the sound of our conversation. “How long have you had Fire?”
“Since I was eight. My papa gave her to me . . .” I trail off and shift my feet in the dust. Those words bring back a slew of memories—memories that hurt more than they should.
“That’s nice. My brother Chad gave Taffy to me. I’d been simply longing to have my own horse, instead of a poky little pony. It was so hard being surrounded by horses and having to ride a pony instead.”
She stops her flow of chatter abruptly. “I’m sorry, I should explain. My family owns a ranch. The Circle C.”

She gestures to the brand on Taffy’s flank. “We have a lot of horses. You can imagine how delighted I was to have one of my own. Taffy is practically my best friend. We do everything together, don’t we, girl?”

She turns and strokes Taffy’s nose.

Taking the moment’s silence as a signal, Fire prods me in the back with his nose and nickers. I smile and grab his bridle to keep him from pushing me farther.

“Hey!” I chide gently

“Anyways, enough about me. I do tend to ramble on.” Andi chuckles. “So, where do you call home?”

My heart plummets into my stomach at this question. How I long to go back to the only place I’ve ever called home, the cabin in the Oregon woods.

But I can’t.

“I’m living with Whit Hereford right now. He runs the dry goods shop in Fresno.”

“Oh, yes, I know the one. I didn’t know he had anyone living with him. But then, I haven’t been to Fresno for a while. No need to, now that school is over and done with for the summer. Thank goodness.”

She gives a mock shudder, and her blue eyes twinkle.

“My mother is going to help Uncle Whit run the shop,” I tell her. “We moved there last week.” I shuffle my feet, uncomfortable at admitting this upsetting truth.

“Hey, that’s great!” Andi offers another grin. “What
does your father do?"

The question hovers between us as the warm breeze whispers in the trees. I struggle to keep my mouth from quiveringing and furiously blink back tears.

“I... ah... he... um... died,” I manage to get out. “In January. It was a logging accident.” I look down and scuff my boots in the dust. My vision blurs by tears swimming in my eyes.

“I’m so sorry.” Andi’s voice comes quietly, gently. “I’m so very sorry.”

“Thanks,” I manage to choke out.

“It’s hard, huh?” she softly asks.

“Yeah. Really hard.” I can’t stop my mouth from wobbling, and soon tears are once again spilling down my cheeks. “I-I’m sorry.” I gulp.

But floods are hard to stop once they’ve begun, and my tears just keep coming. I bury my face in my hands and turn away toward Fire, embarrassed to be sobbing in front of this girl I’ve only just met.

Fire lets me cry on his neck. He’s used to it these past months.

Then I feel something strange. An arm steals around my shoulders and I feel the comforting pressure of a hug. It makes me sob harder, but all of a sudden my heart feels warmer. It’s as if a soothing layer of balm has been spread across the recently opened wound.

After what seems to be an eternity, I take a deep, hiccuping breath and look up.

Andi’s face is full of compassion. “My father died
when I was five,” she says. “I know what it’s like.”

_She understands me. She understands my tears._ The thought is comforting, like the final squeeze she gives me before stepping back.

Fire whinnies concernedly in my ear and whooshes his breath over my cheek. “I’m all right. Don’t worry, Fire.” I smile and pat his neck to reassure him.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, I compose myself, wiping the tear stains off my cheeks and tucking away the wayward curls of hair that escaped from my braids behind my ears.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean—”

“No, don’t be,” Andi cuts me off. “Sometimes you just have to let it all out.” She smiles knowingly at me. “I come here when I need to do some letting off. It’s my special spot.”

She gestures around the clearing, and I realize that it is actually quite a pretty spot. A brook babbles off to my left and birds twitter among the trees.

“I can see why,” I say. “It’s lovely.”

“Yeah, it’s good to just come and be alone sometimes. As long as no one tries to steal your horse.” Andi shoots a sidelong look at me, and I see laughter twinkling in her eyes.

“Well, I don’t think a horse thief would get very far with you on their trail,” I reply. I shoot her a twinkling look of my own, and we both burst into laughter.

It feels good to laugh again.

“I should hope not!”

We burst into another round of laughter, and I feel
a weight lift from my shoulders. All of a sudden, life doesn’t seem as bleak as before. Perhaps it is possible to find joy again.

Our laughter dies, and we share a companionable grin.

Andi looks up at the sky. “Oh dear, I must dash. Mother will be expecting me back for supper soon.”

“Yes, I suppose I should be getting back to town too.”

“Do you know how to get back to town?” Andi asks. “If you head straight south from here, you’ll hit a road. Just follow that west and you’ll ride straight into Fresno.”

“Thanks. I wasn’t exactly following a map when I stumbled upon this place.” I giggle.

It feels funny to be smiling so much. But it feels pretty good too.

“Are you free tomorrow?” Andi questions while climbing easily onto Taffy’s bare back.

“I think so.” I put my foot into the stirrup and heft myself into the saddle. “Why?”

“I figured I might ride into Fresno, just to see what’s new. While I’m at it, I might stop by the dry goods store and see if anyone there fancies a ride.”

She shrugs carelessly, but I can see the grin she’s trying to suppress.

I smile. “Sounds like a good plan.”

“Right then, see you tomorrow.” She waves and turns to go.

“See you tomorrow!” I echo.
“Good-bye!” Andi throws one last beaming smile over her shoulder and then urges Taffy into a gallop.

I watch her ride until she is out of sight and then pick up my reins. “Come on, Fire, let’s go.”

Within seconds we are hurtling faster and faster straight south. I laugh with joy, but the wind that whistles in my face whisks the sound away.

Our speed is exhilarating, but more so are the strange, new feelings that bubble up inside, feelings that I haven’t felt in quite a long time—the feelings of thankfulness and joy.

I give a whoop of delight and urge Fire to go faster. I can’t wait for tomorrow.
12. **THE TRAGIC FRIENDSHIP**

Martha Abilene, age 14

*Martha is a homeschooled student who lives in the Pacific Northwest. She enjoys writing, reading, country dancing, acting, and singing. She is a follower of Jesus.*

*This story chronicles the life of a young Aunt Rebecca.*

**Spring 1828**

With an impatient sigh, Rebecca Carter wrenched off her hat and plopped down onto her four-poster mahogany bed. She pulled her pink slippers off her feet and dropped them to the ground, where they landed in a lifeless heap.

Letting out another annoyed breath, the young woman lay down on the smooth quilt and propped her head up with one hand.

She had just been downstairs with her mother, discussing the reasons why—in her mother’s eyes—she *must* get married this year, before she turned seventeen.

*I don’t need Mother to choose for me,* Rebecca thought, disgruntled. *She’ll pick someone I don’t like.*
“It’s for your own good, dear,” Mother explained. “You must get married so that you’ll be properly looked after. You’re old enough, and I need to take care of James and Benjamin.”

_I don’t care for anyone wealthy!_ Rebecca mentally argued. She knew in her heart that her mother really did want the best for her, but she could not accept the fact that it was _required_ that she marry well.

Mother wouldn’t stand for Rebecca married to someone of “low rank.”

Rebecca cared for no one except Joel Moorland, the son of her family’s butler.

“Rebecca?” the quiet voice of her six-year-old brother James came from behind her closed bedroom door. “Can I come in?”

Rebecca slid off the bed and walked to the door. “Sure, you can come in.”

James ran in, delighted with his older sister’s generosity. “Can I go on your bed? Please?”

At Rebecca’s nod, he scrambled to the top of her bed and flopped down on her pillows. “C’mfy!”

“Please don’t ruin my sheets,” she admonished, shutting the door. She strode over to her little brother and joined him on the bed.

“You’re sad.”

The blunt statement caught Rebecca’s attention. She turned and looked at him.

“I saw you and Momma fight. You don’t want to marry anyone else, do you? I see you when you go to the kitchen. You smile at Joel like you lo-ove him.”
He grinned. “Oh, James!” Rebecca blushed and gave the boy a push. “Stop teasing.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it?” he persisted. “Momma wants you to marry a rich man, but you don’t care about them ’nough to marry them. I mean, you don’t love those p-pomuse”—he said slowly, trying to pronounce the word correctly—“pompous men that have lots of money, do you?”

He puffed up his chest. “I got the word pompous from Poppa.”

Rebecca suppressed a laugh at James’s solemn proclamation. “Where did you hear that I care for Joel?” She gave him her big-sister, you’d-better-tell-me look.

“I see it, and I hear it. You don’t act like you love ’em, but you do like Joel,” he replied innocently. Then he leaned closer and said in a confidential whisper, “Don’t tell Momma I’m saying this, but I don’t like them either. I like Joel. He’s nice. Handsomer too.”

He sent her a probing glance.

“I guess so,” Rebecca agreed, smiling fondly. “And your secret is safe with me. I won’t tell a soul what you said.” She drew a finger across her lips.

“Good. Thank you.” James tumbled forward and gave her an affectionate hug. “You’re my fav’rite sister!”

“I’m your only sister.” Rebecca laughed.

She untangled his arms from about her neck. “Thanks for making me laugh. Now I need you to keep the secret between Joel and me to yourself. You think
you can do that?”

At James’s hurried nod, she leaned forward and hugged him. “Thank you. Now, you’d better get back downstairs before Mother wonders where you are.”

“Okay,” James agreed. He hopped down from the bed and ran over to the door. Tugging on the knob, he opened it with a *bang*. “See you later!”

He disappeared down the hall.

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“Rebecca, come here please. Now.”

The kind but insistent request from Rose Carter made Rebecca groan. *Here we go again. I’m sorry, Mother, but I will not marry William.*

Then even worse words met her ears. “My dear, William is here to see you. Please come down.”

Mother would come up to get her if she didn’t obey, so Rebecca called out in her most polite tone, “Oh, of course, Mother. Do excuse me for a minute.” Shutting the door carefully, she decided that for Mother’s sake, she would be as nice to William as possible.

*But no one can make me marry him instead of Joel.*

She made the trip down the stairs take as long as possible. When she arrived at the parlor ten minutes later, William stood and bowed dutifully. He wasn’t such a bad-looking man, with his sandy hair and green eyes.

And thank goodness he was only twenty, not twenty-eight—the age of the man whom Rebecca’s dear friend had married at fifteen years old.

She curtsied. “Hello, William. I am dreadfully sorry
it took me so long to come down.” Liar! she mentally accused herself. “I hope my delay has not caused you inconvenience in any way.”

“Oh, of course not, of course not.” William smiled, revealing even, perfect teeth. “I count it an honor to wait for you, Rebecca,” he said. “Shall we sit down?” He motioned to the plush chair next to her.

“Indeed,” Rebecca answered. She sat carefully, so as not to rumple her dress, and held William’s thoughtful gaze. “What is it?”

“My dear Rebecca,” William began, “I am planning on attending the Foregers’ dance on Wednesday. I was wondering . . .” He paused. “Would you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you there?” He held her startled stare and waited patiently for an answer.

“Oh! Well, I-I . . .” she stammered. She glanced at her mother, who nodded slightly. Then Rebecca collected herself and answered, “I am most honored by your proposal, but . . .”

She saw an expression of worry on her mother’s pretty face and knew she feared a rejection. “I have decided . . .” Just say yes. What can it hurt?

Then Rebecca saw that standing in the foyer, listening for her response, was Joel. He looked up and caught her stare. An expression of hope and sorrow appeared on his handsome face.

All of a sudden, Rebecca knew she could not give William the encouragement he needed to seriously pursue her. “I am terribly sorry, but I must decline your offer. I must think it over, if you will permit me.”
She felt the burden of having to make a weighty decision being lifted off her shoulders.

“Oh, of course,” William replied, clearly surprised. “You may think it over. I am in no dreadful hurry.” The slightest hint of disappointment lingered in his voice as he added, “Shall I call on you before the dance?”

Rebecca considered this and promptly told him, “No, I think not.” She rose and said respectfully, “Until we meet again, William.” She curtsied deeply, as she had been taught.

William took a step forward, caught her hand, and brought it to his lips for a kiss. “Good-bye.” Without another word, he turned on his heel and left.

*Continental manners of the nineteenth century*
As soon as he was out of sight, Mother exclaimed to her daughter, “My gracious, child! Why did you not accept his offer?”

Rebecca drew a deep breath and replied, quietly and firmly, “For the same reason, Mother, why I cannot marry a man I do not love. Good day.”

She left the parlor, leaving her mother staring at her in open astonishment.

****

It was drizzling that evening when Rebecca trudged out to the stables to tell Raymond to hitch up the rig for her mother’s drive.

She pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders and shivered. Boston’s damp and muddy streets reflected her feeling of cold, wet, and unhappiness.

Why, oh why, was life so difficult? Why couldn’t she marry whom she pleased?

She stomped along, for once not caring that her slow, clumsy steps were not ladylike.

She could have had a servant fetch Raymond, but instead she had jumped at the chance to get out of the gloomy house, where her mother worried and fretted over her.

Pushing open the heavy wooden doors, Rebecca breathed in the smell of hay and horses. Lady though she be, she did enjoy the smell found only in a stable, though she’d never told anyone.

Sighing contentedly, she ripped her gloves off and brought her hands up to her face to blow on them. Then she caught sight of Raymond’s brown hair bent
over a harness.

“Raymond,” she said, attempting to sound cheerful, “my mother would like the buggy to be hitch—”

The man turned at the sound of her voice, but no, it wasn’t Raymond. It was none other than Joel, his warm brown eyes smiling at her. He set down the harness and said politely, “Miss Carter.”

Rebecca stopped dead in her tracks. A hot flush burst in her cheeks, and she dropped her gaze to the ground. “J-Joel,” she whispered, embarrassed.

The eighteen-year-old boy gave her a friendly smile. “Miss Carter, you need not be embarrassed. I can hitch it up. At your service.” He bowed like a proper gentleman. “Your wish is my command.”

Rebecca flushed again. She so enjoyed the way Joel spoke to her. His bold look and good-natured attitude helped ease her discomfort with the day’s events.

Then she asked quietly, “Joel, might you have happened to hear the conversation earlier between William and me?”

Joel’s grin faded ever so slightly, but he nodded. “I did.”

“You heard my response?” Rebecca pressed gently. The nod came again.

“I see.” Rebecca bit her lip. Should I tell him, before it’s too late? Making up her mind, she stepped closer and spoke in a voice just above a whisper. “That response was because of you.”

At his look of surprise and confusion, she explained quietly, “I-I care for you, Joel.”
A breath escaped Joel. He looked at her with an unreadable expression. “Miss Carter,” he murmured, almost downcast, “Rebecca . . .”

Rebecca’s heart leaped when she heard Joel say her first name. Her eyes lit up, and she smiled, delighted. “Joel, do you like me at all? If you promise to keep a secret—”

Joel’s head bobbed up and down.

“I will tell you.” She inhaled deeply and let it all out in a nervous whoosh. “Mother wants me to marry William, but I don’t want him. I . . . I want you.”

A blank stare from her friend greeted Rebecca’s blunt announcement. He glanced up at the ceiling and gaped at the boards above, as if they held a sign with the words he should say.

He abruptly lowered his head and looked at her. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Rebecca, he said softly, “I do care for you, Miss Carter . . . Rebecca . . . but I have nothing to offer you right now.”

At this, Rebecca let out a sigh. “All I want is you. I don’t care if we had to live on the streets.”

Joel’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. He seemed sad yet pleased. “I know,” he told her fondly, “but it is mandatory that I get a house before I marry.” He clasped his hands hopefully and watched her reaction.

“Then,” Rebecca proclaimed, gazing at him with a firm smile, “I shall wait. As long as it takes, I shall wait for you.” Her blue eyes sparkled with joy at his sudden grin.
Joel strode up to her, took up her hand gently, and laid on it a firm kiss. It felt, somehow, so much more real than the one William had given her earlier that day.

He looked up into her radiant face. “Then,” he said gently, “I shall try to make the wait as short as possible.”

“Agreed.” Rebecca giggled. “Make sure you stick to your promise, young man.”

“My fair lady, you have my word.” He grinned, playing along. He went down on one knee onto the dirty stable floor and snatched up her hand again. “And if I do not live up to my word, I shall readily consent to die as punishment.”

“Oh, Joel!” Rebecca laughed. “I would never have you sentenced to die.” Reaching out, she grasped his other hand and tugged, encouraging him to stand. “But I approve of your loyalty.”

Chuckling, and pleased that he’d succeeded in making her laugh, her knight in filthy-kneed pants rose from his kneel and squeezed her hand. “I still must ready your noble steed, yes?”

“Indeed,” Rebecca answered solemnly, trying not to burst out laughing in his face, “My mother waits. She is eager to catch some fresh air as she travels far to visit the dressmaker.”

“Oh, then it is urgent. I shall hurry, my lady. Until we meet again.”

He dropped his hand to his side and then, waving a quick goodbye, he disappeared around the corner to
get the materials needed to hitch up the “noble steed.”

Rebecca let out the laughter that had been building up inside. Shaking her head at Joel’s playacting, she grinned and turned to leave and return to her house.

*I’m so glad I decided to deliver the message myself.*

****

“So, Rebecca,” Rose Carter prompted, “have you made a final decision yet?”

Rebecca jerked up from where she sat staring dreamily at her beef. All visions of Joel fled, along with any signs of oblivion. She sat up straight and gave her inquisitor her full attention. “Yes, Mother?”

Her mother sighed and repeated, “Have you made a decision yet?”

Then Rebecca’s father, Paul Carter, joined his wife in looking at their daughter expectantly.

Rebecca swallowed. “You mean about William?” At her parents’ nod, she let out a little breath and straightened her shoulders. Smiling as best as she could, she replied, “No, Mother, I am not going to the dance with him.”

Surprise and dismay appeared on Rose’s face, and she protested, “Now, now, dear. Please be reasonable. Why will you not go with him?”

“Because I do not love him, nor will I marry him,” came the firm but respectful reply.

This was clearly not what her mother wanted to hear. “My dear,” she addressed Rebecca, “there is someone else, isn’t there? Is that why you are disrespecting my wishes?”

114
Heat crept up Rebecca’s neck and exploded in her face, but she ignored it and got right to the point. “Yes, Mother, I do care for someone else. William does not suit me and I’m afraid never will. I’m no longer hungry. May I be excused, Father?”

Her father nodded, but her mother said helplessly as she disappeared behind the dining room door, “But, Rebecca!”

“Let her be,” was the last thing Rebecca heard before she ran upstairs to her room.

****

The rain had long since ceased, and the sun revealed itself the next morning when Rebecca headed outside after the morning sermon. Sucking in deep breaths of fresh air, she leaned against the hitching post and surveyed the area.

Nearly every shop in this part of the city closed on Sundays. The few who were still open were quiet and still. She sighed peacefully and shut her eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sunshine on her face.

Just then, someone clutched her arm. Swallowing a shriek, Rebecca whirled to see her attacker. James, his eyes big and full of awe, held her arm in an iron grip. He was remarkably strong for such a young boy.

“Lookie! An enorm . . . en-enormous horse!” James stammered in awe. He pointed at a large black horse about seventeen hands high standing quietly at the hitching post. Eyes bulging in admiration, James ventured fearlessly forward and held out his small hand to the animal.
The horse lowered its head and sniffed at the boy. Rebecca held her breath.

“Something wrong?” The sudden inquiry startled Rebecca, causing her to jump. Joel chuckled. “Sorry for startling you.”

He came around and stood beside her, shaking his head in perplexity. “I have no clue why William bought that horse.”

“Why?” Rebecca asked, glancing uneasily at the distance between her brother and the equine. “Is there an issue with it?”

Joel nodded. “It’s actually a runaway.” He sighed. “I know the man who raised him. His name’s George Collin. He gentled him—tried to, anyway—but he’s never been able to train the wild streak out of him.

“That horse will sometimes spook at the tiniest thing that startles him. Other times, he’s gentle as a lamb. You should get your brother away from him.”

Rebecca nodded. “James, come here,” she called.

“What?” James turned around abruptly. His jerky movements loosened a coin he’d tucked in his pocket.

*Ting!* The coin hit the sidewalk and rolled into a crack.

Joel and Rebecca froze, terrified at what the horse might do. The big horse merely pricked up his ears and turned his head but did nothing else. They let out sighs of relief.

But it was short-lived.

“No! My coin! It’s gone!” James wailed, dropping to his knees in an attempt to rescue the shiny circle.
His actions startled the horse. Whinnying shrilly, it rose up on its hind legs and pawed the air, snapping the rope that held him hostage. His hooves crashed to the ground ten inches from James’s huddled body.

The horse began to dance nervously, jumping around James, seemingly trying to stop whatever noise that was frightening him.

“Becca!” James screamed, terrified at the horse’s reaction. “Help! He’ll stomp me up!”

Throwing his small arms over his head, he began to sob loudly for someone to rescue him before he got squished.

Joel didn’t blink. He shoved his suit coat into Rebecca’s momentarily paralyzed arms and ordered, “Stay here!” Then he rushed over to the stallion and said soothingly, “Hey, it’s okay. Settle down.”

To James, he exclaimed, “James, you’re scaring him.”

The only response was another high-pitched yell.

Agitated out of its senses, the horse screamed in terror and reared up once more. Clearly, Joel’s attempt did nothing to calm it. Its flailing hooves began to fall directly toward the blubbering child.

In one swift motion, Joel jumped in front of James. He snatched him to his feet and gave him a rough shove, which propelled him out of harm’s way and into the street.

The crazed horse moved forward, slamming into Joel and sending him tumbling to the ground. It tried to land on him, but Joel rolled out of the way. The
horse reared once more, came back down, and was off like a streak.

Suddenly, the mangled rope caught around Joel’s arm. With a yell, he flew forward and began to get dragged behind the runaway.

“Joel!” Rebecca shrieked, flinging his coat to the ground and darting after the pair.

Suddenly, the horse skidded to a halt, crow-hopped backward, and landed full-force on the captive. A strangled yelp burst out from under the crazed animal.

The horse jerked back up as though struck with a whip, causing the rope to be loosed from around Joel’s arm. It sped away, leaving the young man in a hurting and disheveled heap.

“Joel! Oh, Joel!” Rebecca choked out in anguish, falling to her knees next to him. “Joel, please, please say something to let me know you’re alive,” she begged.

A weak cough erupted from his dirt-crusted mouth. He drew in a shallow, shuddering breath. “Reb-becca,” he forced the word out.

His filthy hand closed gently around Rebecca’s small, trembling one. He gazed at her through half-closed, glassy eyes. He swallowed and, with the little strength he still possessed, managed a faint whisper, “I l-love y-you-u . . .”

With that, his last breath escaped, and his tousled head lolled to the side.

“No! No! Please, no!” Rebecca’s breath caught in her throat. She felt as if all the air was being squeezed
out of her. Tears sprang to her eyes and began to fall rapidly as she sobbed loudly, unashamed.

*Please God, please . . . please,* she prayed silently. Her heart stabbed her with the agony of a thousand swords piercing her side.

A gentle hand was placed upon her shoulder, and William’s low, “Rebecca, I—”

“No!” She whirled on him, sending tears splashing onto his fine clothes. “William, I won’t marry you. And I never want to see your horse again.”

She bowed her head and returned to her spot on the dusty street. “I’ll never marry anyone except for Joel.”

“Rebecca,” William managed, “he’s d—”

“I know,” Rebecca said, pain-filled determination coloring her tone. “And that means I shall never marry. Not *anyone.* I’d . . . I’d rather be a lonely old spinster.”

Looking into Joel’s still face, she knew the words she spoke were the truth. She knew in her heart that she’d end up just as she said—a lonely old maid—for she could never love another man as she’d loved Joel Moorland.
Christiana loves Jesus, horses, reading, writing, poetry, singing, music, and being with her big family. Her goal is to make others “laugh and be happy.”

Macy (Thick as Thieves) is back for an adventure!

Chapter One

Fifteen-year-old Marcella Walker bit her lip with excitement as the train doors were pulled open and passengers poured out. The platform filled rapidly with a mixture of suits, hoopskirts, carpet bags and a few cowboy boots.

She stood on her tiptoes, pushing herself higher than her five-feet-three inches. The person she was looking for shouldn’t be hard to spot.

“If I could see around that hat . . . There she is! Andi! Andi Carter!”

Andrea Carter spun around, looking for the owner of the voice. Their eyes locked through the mass, and both girls broke into large grins.
“Macy!”
Andi excused her way through the crowd and hugged her friend long and hard. “How are you?”
“I’m grand. Oh Andi, Aunt Hester’s wonderful!” Macy said lovingly. “How’s your mother? And Melinda and the boys? How’s Taffy doing? I haven’t heard anything since the telegram about your accident, asking me to pray.”
Andi’s happy face dimmed. “Mother’s fine. And the others. Macy—”
A boy crashed into Andi, causing her to stumble forward. He hurriedly apologized and ran off.
“Here’s your luggage.” Macy took the bag and grabbed Andi’s hand. “Come on, the carriage is just out back. We can talk there.”
Away from the bustle of the station platform, the girls quickly made their way to an old but clean carriage. An equally old mare was tied to the hitching post.
They climbed in and Macy gently slapped the mare with the reins. “Get-up, old girl, get going.”
“Where’s Sunny?” Andi asked curiously. “Why didn’t you bring him?”
“As if I would hitch Sunny to this trap! No, Sunny’s out in the back pasture, grazing to his heart’s content. He’s gorgeous. Just wait till you see him. He rides beautifully too. I trained him myself, with some help from Aunt Hester’s hand, Jacob.”
“I can’t wait to see him. Do you suppose Sunny will remember me?”
“How could he forget you?” Macy smirked. Then she sobered and asked gently, “Andi, what happened?”

Andi sighed and twisted her hands in her lap. “I suppose the telegram didn’t tell you much. We were riding out in the range, when somebody spooked Taffy. We fell off the edge of a ravine. I was hurt terribly, but Taffy never made it out of the draw.”

Macy drew in a breath and blinked back tears. “What did you do?”

“I was unconscious when the boys put her down, but I was hurt so bad that they didn’t tell me until about a month later, for fear it would make me worse.

“When I did find out, I got extremely upset with my brothers. They were only trying to protect me, but I blamed them for Taffy’s death and would not even speak to them for weeks. I wouldn’t listen to reason from anyone.”

Macy’s eyes were big. “And now?”

“And now, thanks to a childhood friend, I’m back to rights with God and the boys.” Andi smiled, though her eyes filled with tears. “He fairly wouldn’t let me alone without coming to my senses.”

“Who? God or your friend?”

Andi giggled. “Both.”

“Oh, Andi.” Macy dropped the reins and wrapped Andi in hug. “I’m so very sorry.”

“Me too. But God knows what’s best, and I’m trying to accept that.”

“Good for you. Oh!” Macy exclaimed as she released Andi and looked around. “We’re almost
The horse had plodded on without direction and was turning off the main road onto a drive lined with oak trees. Through the trees was a grand old Victorian house with a wrap-around veranda, turrets, and balconies.

Many more oak and cherry trees, along with roses and lilacs, surrounded the stately place and gave it an elegant air.

“You live here?” Andi gasped, much as Macy had when she first visited the Carter ranch.

“Yes, isn’t it beautiful?” Macy smiled. “Aunt Hester sure has a way with beauty, especially with her plants.”

They pulled up to the front porch and stopped.

“Come on.” Macy grabbed Andi’s hand and pulled her out of the carriage. “I’ll show you to Aunt Hester and get your bags in. After that we can go see Sunny.”

Chapter Two

Thump! Something landing hard on Macy made her yelp with surprise and pain.

“Ahh!” She opened her eyes and squinted up at a head full of tangled hair, a teasing grin, and cheerful eyes. “Andi, really! You nearly scared me out of my wits,” Macy said in mock anger. “Just what would your Aunt Rebecca say if she saw you now?”

Andi turned her head upside down and shook it, making her tangles even worse, then sat back and looked at Macy with raised eyebrows and an uplifted
chin. It was a perfect picture of pride and arrogance, and Macy couldn’t help laughing out loud.

“She would say”—Andi pursed her lips in a lifelike imitation of her aunt—“there never was such an unruly young lady and that Mother ought to curb my wild ways.”

“As you should,” Macy said slyly. “You’re sixteen now, and you look perfectly unfit for the gentlemen that must be lining up outside your door.”

That remark began such a battle with pillows, blankets, tickling, and the occasional brush, that it took Aunt Hester to break it up.

“I declare!” exclaimed that good lady. “I came up here expecting to find Jacob’s grandsons romping around. You look no better than six-year-olds, though it appears to have done you good.”

Advancing on the girls, Aunt Hester shooed them toward the armoire and their dresses. “I expect you to be downstairs and eating in ten minutes. Then outside and away with the both of you.

“Don’t worry about your chores, Macy,” she said as her niece opened her mouth. “I’ll take care of them today. Young women need a chance to play.”

She smiled, and after thank-you and good-morning hugs, she left the girls to themselves.

“Such a dear!” Macy said softly, “I love her so.”

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Four days flew by packed with horseback riding, picnics, splashing in the pond, fishing, and helping Aunt Hester run the house.
The fifth day, taking a packed lunch, Macy took Andi on a longer ride, saying she had something to show her.

Andi rode Sunny. Much to her delight, he seemed to remember his former mistress and answered her whistle almost as quickly as Macy’s.

He was indeed a gorgeous horse, who minded his manners as politely as his twin, Shasta, who was Andi’s pride and joy.

“How much farther, Macy?”

Macy twisted in her seat on Aunt Hester’s other horse, Grant. She glanced around, taking note of her surroundings. “About fifteen minutes. Maybe less.” She squinted at Andi. “You thirsty? It is hot today.”

Andi smiled. “No, I’m just curious. You sure you can’t give me a tiny hint about this fantastic place of yours? I’m dying from suspense.”

Laughing at the wheedling tone, Macy shook her head. “Nope. You’ve survived this far. You can last a little longer.”

A few minutes later, they stopped and surveyed a scene below them. Nestled between the hills, sparkling from the morning sun, was a small lake. A little waterfall spilled over a rock and into the beauty below it.

“Oh!” Andi gasped. “It’s wonderful!”

“And that’s not all,” Macy said. “I found a cave on the other side of the lake close to the waterfall. Come on. We can explore it.”

The girls made their way around to the opposite
side, where they dismounted on the grassy shore. They hobbled their horses near the lake edge and left them to graze while they hiked up the hill.

“Hey, Macy,” Andi said suddenly. “Have you ever considered trick riding on Sunny?”

Macy laughed. “I dream of it, but both Aunt Hester and Jacob have the greatest horror of the idea. Do you and Shasta trick ride?”

“Yes, I just started. We’re learning the standing-while-riding trick, and believe me, it’s not as easy as it looks.”

“Your mother and Chad are letting you? Did you twist their arms?”

“No, I didn’t. I think it had more to do with Riley convincing them it was safe, if you respect healthy boundaries and don’t do anything rash. They trust him, and he’s our teacher. He can do all sorts of tricks with his horse, Dakota. You’d love to see them.”

Macy smiled to herself. Young Riley Prescott peppered Andi’s conversations, and Macy had her suspicions.

“Here we are,” she said aloud.

Directly ahead was a rock outcropping. Going around one of the boulders, they were faced with a gaping hole in the side of the hill.

“This is nifty,” Andi exclaimed.

Macy smiled and ducked under the opening, then she turned and looked out into the sunshine. “The tunnel goes this way, but—” She paused.

“But it’s awfully dark,” Andi finished.
Macy glanced sheepishly at her friend. “I never did like the dark, so I’ve never gone down it. Maybe with you, we can try it.”

“I’m game if you are,” Andi said.

The girls clasped hands and made their way into the blackness. At first, they couldn’t see a thing and used their hands to feel their way. But soon their eyes adjusted to the dark and they moved a little faster.

Rounding the second corner, Macy jerked Andi back around the bend and put her finger to her lips.

Chapter Three

“What is it?” Andi whispered.

“There’s a light.”

“Do you suppose there’s another entrance?”

“No.” Macy swallowed uneasily. “It was orange and flickering.”

“Fire?”

Macy nodded and put her head around the corner. The fire was around another bend and, except for the crackling of the flames, it was quiet.

“Come on,” Macy whispered. She narrowed her eyes and tiptoed down the tunnel toward the light.

“Where are you going?” Andi asked, but she could not resist following.

They were almost to the end when a man’s gruff voice broke the silence.

“I’m going out. There’s not enough air in this confounded cave.”
“Fine with me,” another man answered. “But don’t be seen, and don’t be long.”

A man’s shadow rose up on the wall, and heavy footsteps began to come their way.

Macy whirled and pushed Andi back toward where they had come. Neither required encouragement and moved as quickly as their need for silence allowed.

They were almost to the corner when the footsteps stopped. A voice exclaimed in surprise, “What in—”

“Run!” yelled Macy.

The girls took off, with the man pounding after them. Right as they were about to turn the last corner, a hand yanked Macy’s and Andi’s skirts and dragged them to the ground.

“You little devils,” the man said, pulling them to their feet. He started to push them back down the tunnel but yelled as one of Andi’s kicks connected with his shin.

He slammed her against the wall in return and did the same to Macy when she managed to twist around and punch his face. “You stop, or I’ll be happy to give you more of the same!”

“What’s going on?” the other man asked, turning the corner.

“We got ourselves visitors, Ty.”

“Well, bring them back. I can’t see a blamed thing in this-here tunnel.”

Ty grabbed Andi and started toward the fire. He held her arms behind her back.

The first man pushed Macy in the same direction.
The fight had left her, and her shoulders were slumped in defeat. Andi was also quiet.

Though their eyes were open, Macy knew they were both praying with all their might.

The group rounded the corner and entered a cavern. In the center was a small fire. Stretched out beside it was a third man. He was asleep, though a kick from Ty soon woke him up.

“Get some rope out, Jase, and be quick about it. Rudy,” he said to the other man, “you watch these girls.”

Jase rubbed his eyes then rolled over and started digging through a pile of belongings.

Ty sat Andi down next to the fire and went to help look for rope. Rudy threw Macy next to Andi and pulled out his pistol. He lowered himself to the ground and studied the girls.

Andi glanced at Macy. She had shaken her hair down around her face.

Rudy leaned forward, his eyes on Macy, squinting in the dim light. Suddenly, he reached forward and tossed Macy’s hair behind her neck. Their eyes locked, and Macy jutted her chin out defiantly.

“Well, I’ll be!” Rudy exclaimed and sat back. “Ty, Jase, look what we got here.”

“If it ain’t Macy!” Ty walked over and squatted down in front of her. “And all grewed up too.”

Jase twisted around. “Macy-girl, is it ye?”

“Aye, it’s me,” Macy said gruffly.

Andi looked at her in surprise. She hadn’t heard
Macy speak that way since three years before, when she had last been in contact with her older brothers.

Chapter Four

“It’s been awhile, Sis.”

Ty rubbed his beard and surveyed the girl with an air of authority. “It seems that you’ve had a mite better time than the rest of your family. Looks like you haven’t forgotten all we taught you,” he said, glancing at the bruise on Rudy’s cheekbone.

Rudy scowled and doubled up his meaty fist. “I could give her a refresher lesson, just like old times.”

“None o’ that,” his older brother said sharply as he headed back to the pile. “You gave ’em both enough already. ’Sides, she’s too old for that.”

“Aw, leave the rope, Ty,” Jase appealed. “She won’t run. We’re kin. We stick together. You know that.”

“I ain’t gonna tie ’em up. Here”—he threw a rag at Macy—“stick that to your head.”

Macy put a hand to her head in surprise. Sure enough, just below her hairline, blood was running through her hair and onto her shoulder.

A bump on Andi’s forehead was starting to turn purple.

Both were aching from being slammed into the jagged rock wall.

“We were just on our way to collect you,” Rudy informed his sister. “Looks like you’ve saved us the trip.”
He picked up a cup and pointed at Andi. “Who’s this?” He took a drink and eyed her over the brim.

Rudy stared at her braids in confusion, before his eyes snapped back to her face in recognition. He spat out his mouthful and stuck a trembling finger in her face. “You?” he sputtered, “You, here?”

“I have just as great a right to be here as you, mister,” Andi shot back.

“Boy, have we got ourselves a problem.” Jase sighed as he too recognized the girl.

Rudy tossed the liquid into the fire and stood up, his eyes hardening in anger. “Why is she a problem?” he said, thinking aloud. “I say we tie her up and leave her here. That oughta take care of things nicely.”

“No!” Macy burst out.

“No,” Ty repeated, “I ain’t stooping that low. I know we were talkin’ of doin’ it a couple years back, but I don’t know what I was thinkin’ to agree to it.”

“Why not?” Rudy burst out. “She put us in the state pen for eight years. If it hadn’t been for her, we’d have ourselves a fine little spread by now, eatin’ beef every day. Or better yet, we’d be livin’ it up in the big city, with a pocketful of money to keep us there.”

“Stolen beef, and stolen money!” Macy put in.

“You, gal, shut your mouth. You ain’t part o’ this conversation.”

“Well, I am a part of this family, and I want to know what you’re doing here.”

“You’re not gonna know.”

Ty stepped between them. “There you two go
again, fightin’ it up like cats and dogs, just like before. Rudy, you sit, and Macy, you keep still. Jase can share you the story, and then I have somethin’ to say.”

Rudy sat, still fuming.

Macy closed her mouth, eager to hear why her cattle-rustling brothers were out of prison five years before their sentences ended.

“Not much of a story,” Jase began. “We all three of us planned to get out early on good behavior, because jail ain’t exactly our favorite place. But seems it’s impossible for Rudy to be good, and after six months a doin’ so, he exploded.

“After that, it was up to Ty and me, but Ty lost it with one o’ the other prisoners.”

Jase cracked a smile. “So, I finished up my good behavior, got out early, and helped these two escape. We been on the move ever since and were just about to look you up.”

“And now what?” Macy asked glumly. “I’m not going back to stagecoach robbing or cattle rustling, no matter what you do.”

“This is where I have my say.” Ty lifted his head and pointed at Rudy. “I know you ain’t gonna agree with me”—he looked to Jase—“and I’m not sure what you’ll think, but I’m bound and determined that the both of you listen.”

He took a deep breath. “After having it out with the other inmate, the chaplain came and talked with me. For once, I listened. That talk has been eatin’ at me ever since. I’m sick and tired of makin’ a livin’ off of
other people, and I want to get straight with the law and with God.”

Ty stood and began pacing. “I’m sayin’ I want to go back and make it right, and then live an honest life. I’m thinkin’ I want to give my life to God. The only reason I left that jail was to see how Macy here was gettin’ on. I was afraid she’d have frothed at the bit after a couple years and taken off.”

He stopped and smiled down on his sister. “I’m right proud to see you all grown up and ladylike and havin’ a learned air about you. I always wanted you to get some schoolin’, remember?”

“It was the best idea you ever had,” Macy exclaimed, “with the exception of this one.” She jumped up and ran to her brother, laughing through her tears.

Andi witnessed through wet eyes what was probably the first real embrace of the two siblings.

Rudy sat, staring with glassy eyes, looking as if someone had hit him with a sledgehammer.

Jase however, stood up and shook Ty’s hand. “Good for you, Ty,” he said warmly, “I’ve felt so too, but couldn’t bring myself to tell you.”

At that, Rudy seemed to wake, starting to his feet with a frown on his face and his fists clenched. He glared at his brothers and stalked out of the cave.

The others sat down around the campfire, the men listening intently as Macy told them about her life during the three years they’d been apart.

Andi listened, clearly amazed, as Macy shared the
things that the Lord and Aunt Hester had taught her, and the scriptures she had memorized.

“Here is a family that through the grace of God has come back together,” Andi whispered. “The last time I saw them, they were cattle rustlers and horse thieves, and they were threatening to kill Macy and me. But now?”

She gazed in awe at the scene before her. “Thank you, God.”

“I suppose we oughta be gettin’ you two back to Aunt Hester’s place,” Ty remarked regretfully after a couple hours of talking.

“What about Rudy?” Macy asked anxiously.

“Rudy’ll come around,” Jase said. “Maybe we can influence him for good.”

“I’ll go talk to him.” Ty rose to his feet. “We’ll leave you at the gate, and then Jase and I’ll be off to turn ourselves in.”

“Oh, you must come and see Aunt Hester,” Macy cried. “She’s prayed for you ever since we first left and would love to see you. I know it. She isn’t angry at you, if that’s what you’re thinking. And, well, you’ve got to,” she finished passionately.

“When you put it that way, Sis”—Jase smiled and started to pack up their few belongings—“of course we’ll stop by.”

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Aunt Hester burst into joyful tears upon seeing her nephews and rejoiced to hear how God was calling Ty and Jase to Himself and bringing them into His fold.
Rudy refused to enter the house, but Aunt Hester ran to him, and even he seemed moved by her love and true joy.

A few days later, Ty and Jase turned themselves in. After a week of evading the authorities alone, Rudy begrudgingly but voluntarily followed.

The girls ended their visit in high spirits, especially after Aunt Hester gave Macy permission to start the basics of trick riding—if she found a reliable teacher.

Andi and Macy made the most of the time they had left, including drilling each other on new verses on trust so they might be prepared for anything.

When the train carrying Andi back home pulled out of the station, each girl was all the more ready for a new adventure.

Outlaw brothers Ty, Jase, and Rudy turn respectable.
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