



ANDREA CARTER AND THE

*Dangerous Decision*

Chapter One excerpt

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## *Chapter One*

### **THE RACE**

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, LATE SUMMER 1880

Twelve-year-old Andrea Carter wrapped her fingers securely around the reins of her palomino mare, Taffy, and glanced at the rider to her left. A grinning, freckle-faced boy caught her look and winked mischievously. He blew a strand of straw-colored hair from his forehead and tightened his grip on his own mount—a large chestnut gelding.

“I’m gonna beat you today, Andi,” the boy challenged. “I can’t hold my head up in this town no more—not since the Fourth of July.” He leaned over the side of his horse and lowered his voice so that only Andi could hear. “You winning that race was nothin’ but luck. And I’m gonna prove it.”

Andi tossed one of her thick, dark braids behind her shoulder and laughed. She fixed a bright blue gaze on the boy. “Oh, Cory! Your chestnut couldn’t beat Taffy in July, and he can’t beat her now. I don’t know why I let you talk me into this.”

“Because you like to race as much as I do,” Cory shot back. He turned to a dark-haired boy standing on the ground beside the horses. “You ready, Jack?”

Jack Goodwin nodded. He stepped up onto the corner of a nearby watering trough and balanced himself carefully. In a loud, clear voice he announced the coming race. “Ladies and gentlemen of Fresno!”

A few curious citizens stopped at the sound of the boy’s voice. When they realized the race involved nothing more than some idle youths wasting time, they shook their heads and continued down the boardwalk.

“Get on with it, Jack!” a tall, redheaded boy called from across the dusty street, where a handful of local children had gathered to watch the race. “It’s hot out here.”

“Aw, keep your shirt on!” the young announcer shouted back. He cupped his hands to

his mouth and continued his speech. "This race is for the 1880 fall championship of the county. Riding the impressive chestnut gelding, Flash, is Cory Blake. Cory's pa runs the best livery in the whole valley. He—"

"We know who's riding Flash," the red-haired boy heckled. There was laughter from the bystanders.

"You keep quiet, Seth," Jack ordered. "I'm puttin' up the prize money, so I can do the announcin' any way I like." He raised his voice. "Next to Cory, riding the beautiful palomino mare, Taffy, is Andi Carter. Most of you know her folks own the biggest spread around these parts. Finest horseflesh in—"

"You talk too much," Cory interrupted impatiently.

"Please, Jack," Andi pleaded. "It's mighty hot."

"Oh, all right," Jack muttered unhappily. He took a deep breath and looked at the two young riders. "Listen up. The race is just a short loop around town. It starts right here, in front of the mercantile. Turn right on Tulare and head out of town 'til you come to Kincaid Vineyards. Snatch a bandana from Peter and head back to town, past the schoolhouse. Then, turn right on J. I'll be here with the prize for the winner." He held up a silver coin and raised his voice. "A dime's-worth of anything in my pa's store!" There were cheers and shouts from everyone but Andi and Cory.

Jack jumped down from the wooden trough, bowed dramatically for his audience, and lifted his arm. "Go!" he shouted, dropping his arm to his side.

Flash and Taffy leaped forward as one, surrounded by shouts and squeals of laughter from the sidelines. Joy surged through Andi as she nudged her horse into a gallop. Cory was absolutely right. She loved to race. There was nothing she would rather do. She didn't care if the sun beat down unmercifully on her bare head or the wind against her face felt hotter than a blacksmith's forge. She was racing, and she was going to win!

The businesses along J Street blurred together into one long, continuous streak of boards and brick. The two-story Arlington Hotel blended quickly into the hardware store

and pharmacy. The Sequoia Bar and Restaurant appeared as a smudge of glass and color as Andi and Cory raced by, neck-to-neck.

Cory swerved to avoid an old buckboard driven by a local farmer, giving Andi an unexpected advantage. The red-faced driver stood up from his seat and raised his fist at the two young riders. He shouted something Andi couldn't make out, which was probably just as well.

She passed the newspaper office of the *Fresno Weekly Expositor* and got ready for the turn that would take her out of town and past the neighboring vineyards and orchards of the valley. She heard the sound of hoofbeats gaining on her. Cory was making up for his unexpected interruption.

"Come on, Taffy," Andi urged her horse. She knew Cory was partly right about the Fourth of July. Sometimes luck *did* play an important part in a horse race. Cory's gelding wasn't named Flash for nothing. He could very easily gain the lead. She mustn't let her guard down for an instant.

Making the turn onto Tulare Street, Andi pulled a little ahead of her opponent. A finger of worry tickled at the back of her mind. Racing down this particular street was risky. She'd have to pass right by her brother's law office. Although Justin was remarkably patient with her most days, she doubted he would approve of her racing through town at breakneck speed. If he noticed, he'd probably send her back to the ranch with a few choice words about the proper conduct for young ladies visiting town.

Before she knew it, the danger of discovery was past and she was heading out of town. Cory galloped up beside her, gave her a cheerful wave, and pulled out ahead. Andi leaned forward and willed Taffy to catch up. They were neck-to-neck again when the Kincaid Vineyards came into sight.

Andi reined Taffy to a dead stop in front of a tall, grinning youth. Without a word, she snatched the bandana from Peter's hand and drew Taffy around in a sharp pivot. Cory was right beside her on Flash. She could hear him pleading with his horse to go faster.

"Come on, Taffy!" Andi encouraged her mount. "You can beat that ol' gelding any day." The palomino leaped ahead, gaining speed on the flat stretch of road that led back into town.

In no time, Andi found herself in the lead, racing down the final stretch of the course. She flew past Davy Cooper, who was sitting on the steps of the two-story schoolhouse, looking bored. He jumped up when he spotted the riders and waved his encouragement. Then he hurried away toward the finish line.

Andi glanced over her shoulder and flashed Cory a smug grin. He'd never catch her now. It was only a few more blocks.

"Andi! Look out!"

Cory's shout sliced through Andi's triumph. She whirled and gasped, "Whoa, Taffy!" At the same time, she gave the reins a frantic jerk.

Taffy planted her hooves in the dusty street and nearly sat down. A thick cloud of fine yellow dust rose up and engulfed both horse and rider. The mare struggled to regain her footing, then reared up with a frightened whinny.

"Easy, girl," Andi reassured her horse with a pat. "Settle down."

Taffy snorted and tossed her head. Her hooves crashed to the ground only inches from a figure sprawled in the middle of the street.

It was a man. He lay on his back with his eyes squeezed shut and his arms flung across his forehead as if warding off a blow. Two traveling satchels lay open beside him, with books and papers scattered in disarray. Already, a few sheets of paper were drifting away on the afternoon breeze.

"Oh, *no!*" Andi slid from the saddle and dropped down beside the man. "Are you all right, mister?" she choked out, waving away the dust. Her heart raced.

Slowly, as if he couldn't believe he had escaped death, the stranger lowered his arms and opened his eyes. He didn't seem to notice Andi kneeling beside him. His hands trembled as he pulled himself to a sitting position. He moaned softly and shook his head.

Cory ran up. "Is he hurt?"

"I don't know. He hasn't said anything yet." She laid a tentative hand on the man's arm and gave him a gentle shake. "I'm really sorry, mister. Can I help you up?"

The man blinked and seemed to come to himself. He narrowed his eyes and yanked his arm from Andi's touch. "Let me be, you young hooligan!" he snapped, suddenly alert.

Andi rose and stepped back in alarm. The bandana she'd been clutching fell from her hand. "Are you hurt? Do you want me to run for the doctor?"

"Certainly not." The man struggled to his feet and began brushing dust from his well-tailored, dark blue suit coat. He coughed, took a few cautious steps, and let out a relieved breath. "No bones broken," he muttered, glaring at Andi. "No thanks to *you*. Is this the usual welcome a stranger receives in this town?"

"It was an accident," Andi explained quickly. She picked up a book, dusted it off, and held it out. "Honest. I didn't mean to run you down. We were racing and—"

"Shame on you!" He snatched the book from Andi's hand and stuffed it into his satchel. "No reputable family would allow a girl to make such a spectacle of herself—racing publicly through the streets, trampling innocent bystanders." He brought his dust-caked face close to Andi's. "Do you realize I could have been killed?"

Staring into the man's dark, frightened eyes, Andi felt sick. It was true. Another step or two, and Taffy would have run right over the top of him. She swallowed her distress and whispered, "Yes, sir. I'm sorry."

The stranger snorted his opinion of Andi's apology. Then he reached down and began gathering up his scattered papers. "Rowdy, undisciplined youngsters. The sheriff will certainly hear about this."

Andi felt a tug on her shirtsleeve.

"Let's get out of here," Cory hissed in her ear. "He's not hurt. He just needs a chance to simmer down." He edged closer to his horse, pulling Andi along.

Trembling, Andi mounted Taffy and gave her a nudge. The mare broke into a trot.

“Stop!” the stranger bellowed. “How dare you run away!”

Andi hesitated. She watched Cory gallop down the street to safety. Then she glanced over her shoulder to see the man snatch up his satchels and stomp off toward the schoolhouse. He disappeared inside the building, slamming the door shut.

Andi urged Taffy into a canter. “We’re in a heap of trouble,” she announced when she caught up to Cory. “We shouldn’t have run away. When Sheriff Tate finds out and tells our folks . . .” Her voice trailed away in misery.

Cory slowed his horse to a walk. “He doesn’t know who we are. Besides, it was an accident. Give him a day or two and he’ll forget all about it.”

“He went into the schoolhouse,” Andi said. “You don’t suppose—”

“Don’t even think it,” Cory said, cutting her off. “He can’t be the new schoolmaster. Your brother wouldn’t agree to hire such a bad-tempered man . . . would he?”

Andi didn’t know, nor did she care to guess what Justin and the school board had been up to this summer. “But what if he is?” she persisted.

Cory sighed. “If he is, then you’re right. We are in a *lot* of trouble.”