



ANDREA CARTER AND THE  
*Family Secret*

Chapter One excerpt

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## *Chapter One*

### UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, FALL 1880

When twelve-year-old Andrea Carter brought her golden palomino mare to a skidding halt near her favorite fishing spot, she expected to find a bubbling, splashing creek full of trout just waiting to be snatched up for supper.

Instead, she found a dead man.

Face down, he lay sprawled in the middle of a nearly dry creek bed. Thick, dark mud plastered his clothes and head. One hand dangled limply in a pool of dirty water. The creek, which usually ran strong and fast year round, trickled past the lifeless stranger in shallow, muddy channels.

Andi swallowed her shock and fought to calm her racing heart. She knew she had to dismount and see if the man was really dead, but she couldn't move. Gripping Taffy's reins, she glanced over her shoulder at the two riders galloping toward her.

*This is what I get for always coming in first, she thought. Her heart thumped wildly. Next time we race, Cory can win. Let him find the nasty surprises!*

"I'm not going near any dead man—not by myself," she muttered. "You hear me, Taffy? We stay put until Cory and Rosa catch up."

A minute later Cory reined his chestnut gelding alongside Andi and made a face. "You beat me, but it wasn't a fair race. I didn't see that little gully until..." His voice trailed off.

"What's the matter, Andi?"

She pointed toward the creek bed. "Him."

Cory's eyes grew round.

Rosa pulled up on her horse and gasped. "*¡Dios mío!*" She crossed herself and mumbled

a quick prayer. “*¿Quién es? ¿Qué pasó?*”

Andi shook her head. “I don’t know who he is, and I don’t know what happened. I-I didn’t want to do anything until you got here.”

Cory dismounted and tossed his reins around a scraggly branch of a scrub oak. “Let’s go see. Maybe he’s not as dead as he looks. We should leastways get him out of the mud.” He grinned. “I didn’t figure we’d be fishing a fella out of your creek today, Andi. I’d kind of counted on trout.”

Andi dropped to the ground and tied up her horse, not smiling. She didn’t find anything funny about a dead man half-buried in the creek bottom. She looked up at Rosa, still mounted. “Aren’t you coming?”

Rosa shook her head. “I will stay with the horses for now.”

For once, Andi Carter agreed with her cautious Mexican friend. This wasn’t the kind of mess Andi usually stumbled into. Trampling the schoolmaster during a spur-of-the-moment horse race or breaking a window playing baseball was more her style; even a close call with an unbroken horse, or crashing into her brother’s law office during an important meeting with a client. But not this. Not a *dead* man.

She shivered, in spite of the blistering California heat.

“Andi! You coming?” Cory hollered and clambered down the shallow creek bank. “Hurry.”

Andi sighed. “I guess I’d better help him,” she said to Rosa. She scurried over the bank after her friend and grimaced her way through the squishy, stinking mud. Each step sank her deeper into the muck. By the time she reached Cory, the legs of her overalls were splattered with mud. She squatted next to her friend and swallowed. Close up, the man looked *very* dead. His face was ashen between the streaks of dirt. “Is he...is he...?”

Cory shook his head. “Nope. Not dead yet. I shook him, and he moaned.”

Andi let out the breath she’d been holding. “That’s good.”

“But he’s in bad shape,” Cory said. “There’s no telling how long he’s been here. A day?”

A week? He's not dead right now, but he won't last much longer if we don't get him out of the sun and into some shade." He reached under the man's shoulders and yanked. Nothing happened. "He's stuck tight."

Andi jumped up to help, but no amount of grunting and groaning and heaving moved the man so much as an inch. "What're we going to do?" She panted and let the man's arms drop to the ground. "Even with Rosa's help, we're never going to get him out on our own. We're not strong enough."

"One of us could ride to your place and bring back some of the ranch hands to help," Cory suggested.

"That'll take too long," Andi said. She glanced up to where Rosa sat in the shade. She'd dismounted and was leaning against the trunk of an old oak. "I've got an idea. I'll be right back."

A few minutes later she returned, carrying a coil of rope from her saddle, which she thrust into Cory's hands. "Here. Loop this end under his arms and across his shoulders. Then cinch it up." She whistled, and Taffy stepped to the edge of the creek bank. Rosa stood beside her. "Here, Rosa!" Andi hollered and tossed the rest of the rope at her friend. "Tie it around the saddle horn. Then slowly back Taffy up when we say so."

Rosa caught the rope and nodded.

"I'm ready," Cory said from his place next to the unconscious man. He shook his head. "Hope this doesn't kill him."

"We'll go slow," Andi said. She signaled to Rosa, who began to lead the palomino away from the creek. Gently, Andi and Cory held the limp form and waited. The rope went taut, and the man moaned. Then, with a loud sucking sound, the mud gave way and he slid quickly toward the bank.

"Hold up!" Cory shouted. The rope went slack. "Now pull him along real careful, Rosa." Slipping and sliding, they guided the stranger up and over the creek bank and into the shade.

"I don't think that did him much good." Andi squatted beside the unconscious man and brushed at the caked mud and dirt on her overalls. "You suppose he's still alive?"

Cory dropped down beside her. "Let's roll him over and see."

As soon as they rolled him over, Andi shook him. "Mister, are you all right? Wake up." She waited for a reply, but none came. The stranger lay still as death. "Go get your canteen," she told Cory. "A little water might do the trick. I caught Mitch napping under a tree a few Sundays back and poured a whole pitcher of water over his head. I never saw anybody wake up so fast!"

"Bet he was hoppin' mad, too," Cory said with a grin. Then he sprang to his feet and went after the canteen. "Did you catch it for soaking your brother?" he asked, dropping the canteen at Andi's feet.

"Yep. Mitch tossed me in the horse trough, and that was the end of it." She picked up the canteen and unscrewed the lid. "Here goes. Hope it wakes him up." A stream of lukewarm water spilled onto the man's face.

It was a miracle the way the man yelped and tried to sit up. He slapped his hands wildly against his face and sputtered, "You trying to—trying to—drown me?" His voice cracked, and he fell back with a groan.

Andi sat back on her heels, astonished. "It worked! Even on a half-dead fella."

Cory whistled. "I'll say." He brought his face close to the man's. "You know how close you came to never waking up, mister? We pulled you out of the creek, and none too soon. Another day or two in this heat and you'd have been buzzard bait."

Andi winced at Cory's blunt words. But at least the man was alive. For now.

The stranger rubbed his face, took a deep breath, and sat up. "Reckon I owe you kids some thanks." He studied Andi through narrow, bloodshot eyes and pointed at the canteen. "Mind if I put some of that on the inside?"

She handed it over.

The man bent his head back and took gulp after gulp of water before emptying the rest

of it over his filthy head. Then he tossed the canteen aside and ran his fingers through his dripping hair. "Much obliged." He swayed and looked ready to collapse. It was clear that even this short activity had drained him. "I feel like a herd of cattle ran right over the top of me."

"Who are you?" Andi asked, "And how did you end up in the middle of the creek?"

The stranger scooted next to the tree trunk and leaned back. "Name's T.J. Silver. I have no idea how I got here. I don't even know where I am." He looked around. "This California?"

"Yes."

T.J. nodded. "Good. Last thing I remember was finishing up a very unfriendly game of cards with the worst poker players I ever laid eyes on." He settled himself more comfortably against the tree and sighed. "I cleaned 'em out pretty good, but I guess they were poor losers and wanted their money back. I don't recall exactly how they did it, but I think they got it back." He winced and clutched his stomach with both arms. "Something don't feel right."

Andi and Cory carefully pushed T.J.'s arms aside. A bright red streak showed through the muddy shirt. Cory gingerly tugged open the shirt and gave a low whistle. "Boy, oh boy, mister. Looks like somebody sliced you up. All your moving around must've broke it open."

T.J. dropped his gaze to his stomach and frowned. "Don't remember how that happened."

"How long's it been since that card game?" Andi stared at the bright red wound. It was seeping blood slowly but steadily.

"Wednesday night."

"Today's Saturday." Andi frowned. "No wonder you passed out, riding around like that. You should see a doctor. Fresno's not far—not more than a couple hours."

Cory handed T.J. the bandana from around his neck.

"I don't need a doctor." T.J. took the kerchief with a curt nod of thanks. "I've lasted this long; I'll go on living." He stuffed the fabric under his shirt and pressed his hand against his belly. "I just need a few days rest and some grub, and I'll be on my way." He closed his eyes and leaned back. "If you'll hobble my gelding, I'd appreciate it."

Andi frowned. "We didn't see any horse."

"He's around here somewhere. Could you do a fella a favor and see if you can find him, Miss...?" He paused and managed a weak smile.

"Carter," Andi replied. "Andi Carter." She nodded to her friends. "And this is Cory Blake and Rosa Garduño."

"A pleasure," T.J. said. "Now...about my horse?"

It didn't take long to find T.J.'s gelding. He was grazing on the parched, brown grass not too far from where his rider had gone into the creek. The horse lifted his head and gave a challenging whinny when the three young riders drew near.

Andi brought Taffy to a stop and started to dismount.

"He doesn't look friendly," Cory warned. "Don't get too close. Just grab the reins and lead him back."

Andi dropped to the ground and yanked open her saddlebags. With a confident smile she brought out an apple and waved it at Cory. "I don't know any horse who'd turn down a treat like this." Cautiously, she approached the large bay gelding. "Easy, fella. Look what I've got for you."

The horse pricked up his ears but kept his distance. He shook his mane and snorted, then took a few careful steps toward Andi. His neck and flank were dark with dried sweat.

"Be careful, Andi. Don't spook him."

Andi threw Cory a disgusted look and moved closer. "It's all right, fella." She held out her hand. "Come get this apple, and I'll take you to your rider. Then I'll get rid of that nasty saddle. What do you say?"

The horse walked over and took a bite from the apple. With her other hand, Andi

reached out and snagged the reins. "I got him. Let's go."

Cory shook his head. "One of these days you're gonna meet a horse that doesn't like you. Then what'll you do?"

"I haven't met one yet I couldn't sweet-talk into behaving." She gave the bay a friendly pat and mounted Taffy.

"Oh, no?" Cory teased. "What about that wild stallion of Chad's? I seem to recollect hearing about a ruckus out at your place last spring. Let's see..." He snapped his fingers. "That's it! You didn't get along real well with that big black horse and you almost—"

Andi bristled. "I don't want to talk about that."

Cory chuckled.

Back at T.J.'s "camp," Andi loosened the cinch, and the heavy saddle tumbled to the ground. The horse, freed at last from his uncomfortable burden, lay down and rolled. Andi grinned. "That feels a lot better, doesn't it?"

"You really gonna stay here?" Cory was saying to T.J., "When you're so bad off?"

T.J.'s lips twisted into a lopsided grin. "I don't favor bouncing around on a horse for a couple hours just to see a doc. I'm feeling better already." He turned to Andi, who was at work hobbling T.J.'s horse. "I'd be obliged if you let me stay up here on your ranch, Miss Carter. If you really want to play Good Samaritan, you could rustle me up some grub and bring it out here the next few days. What do you say to that?"

Andi traded glances with her friends. It was her decision. After all, it was her family's ranch this poor fellow had collapsed on. Cory lived in town, too far away to be running errands back and forth. Rosa would go along with whatever Andi decided, even if she didn't approve—which she probably didn't by the look on her face.

"I think you should tell your brothers about this stranger," Rosa said in rapid Spanish. "*Señor Chad* will decide what is best to do."

"Chad's too busy haying to be bothered. Besides, it's just for a few days," Andi answered in the same language. "The least we could do is bring him a few supplies."

T.J. spoke up. "All I'm asking is a little something to hold me over. You can ride by on a fast horse and toss it to me if you're uneasy. I'll be off your ranch before you know it." He lowered his head. "I'd be much obliged if you didn't mention my being up here. Those fellas who came after me might still be in the area and eager to finish what they started."

After a brief, whispered conference, Cory and Rosa reluctantly agreed to help settle T.J. Silver with the food they'd brought and two canteens.

Andi spilled the contents of her saddlebags next to the man. A couple of cloth-wrapped roast beef sandwiches tumbled onto the grass, along with a few apples and half a dozen molasses cookies. "I can't promise when I can bring more," she said.

T.J. eyed the food with a hungry gleam and reached for a sandwich. "This'll hold me. Much obliged. You three've done me a good turn. I won't be forgetting it." He bit into the sandwich.

"I'm glad we could help, Mr. Silver," Andi said. "I hope you heal up real fast."

"My friends call me T.J.," he said between mouthfuls.

Andi smiled. "All right, T.J. Take care yourself. I'll see you later." She grasped Taffy's reins and swung into the saddle. Cory and Rosa joined her, and the three riders headed out.

Andi felt her friends' displeasure at her decision to keep quiet about T.J. A sliver of worry that she wasn't doing the right thing pricked her conscience, but she shrugged it aside. *They're acting like a couple of 'fraidy cats, worried about nothing. What's wrong with being kind to a poor drifter?*

Cory glanced at Andi and shook his head, as if he could read her thoughts. "You're making a mistake, Andi. A big one." He touched his heels to his chestnut's flank and galloped away.