



ANDREA CARTER AND THE

Long Ride Home

Chapter One excerpt

Susan K. Marlow

(Taken from *Andrea Carter and the Long Ride Home* © 2005 by Susan K. Marlow. Published by Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI. Used by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.)

Chapter One

IT'S NOT FAIR!

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, SPRING 1880

"It's Saturday at last!" Andi Carter leaped from her bed and threw open the doors that led onto the balcony of her family's two-story ranch house. She hurried out into the early morning, leaned far over the railing, and breathed deeply of the fresh new California day. "This is going to be a great day," she announced in delight, tossing her unruly mass of long dark curls behind her shoulder. She could not hide her joy at the thought of a whole day to ride her horse, Taffy, and do as she liked.

She leaned farther over the railing, hoping to catch a glimpse of her brother Chad's new stallion. The corral next to the barn was just beyond sight, but if she climbed over the railing and balanced on the narrow overhang, she might be able to see the magnificent animal—if only for a moment. Putting thoughts into action, she scurried over the top, hampered only slightly by her long, white nightgown. She could almost hear her mother's disapproving voice. "Really, Andrea. Proper young ladies do *not* climb balconies in their nightgowns!" She smiled at the thought and shaded her eyes against the rising sun.

Before she could get a good view of the horse, the sun cleared the distant peaks of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and she was forced to narrow her eyes against the brightness that erupted around her. The ranch house, styled after the lovely and practical Spanish *haciendas* of an earlier age, burst into dazzling white against the bright blue sky.

"I can't see a thing," she muttered, disappointed.

"*Buenos días, señorita,*" a cheerful voice hailed her from below. "What are you doing?"

Andi whirled around, slipped, and nearly lost her balance. She reached out to steady herself against the railing, then looked down. Diego, one of the hired hands, stood leaning against a rake, grinning up at her.

"I...well...I was trying to see Chad's new stallion," came her embarrassed reply. She hastily climbed back over the railing and onto the safety of the balcony.

Diego glanced in the direction of the corral, then up at the girl. He shook his head. "Why do you not go and look at the horse from nearer the corral, like everyone else?"

Andi felt herself turn red and said nothing. Instead, she spun around and re-entered her bedroom, closing the doors with a bang. "What a way to start the day," she mumbled. But she couldn't help breaking into a grin at how she must have looked, hanging onto the balcony and wearing only her nightgown. No doubt Diego was having a good laugh over it while he tended the gardens.

Andi hurried across her room and began to dress, pulling on her favorite pair of faded overalls and a gingham shirt. How glad she was that her mother didn't always force her to wear what other young ladies going on twelve had to wear—dresses and tiny slippers and other uncomfortable trappings. On Saturdays, she was allowed to wear what she pleased, so long as she didn't step foot off the ranch.

"After all," Andi declared, pulling on one of her riding boots. "This *is* 1880. There are a lot of new ideas about what a girl can wear out west."

A door slammed loudly. Andi paused in her dressing and listened. Only her brother Chad slammed doors like that, and then only when he was upset about something.

"Andi! Get down here!" Chad's voice traveled up the stairs and through her bedroom door like the sound of a gunshot.

Andi winced. *Oh, great. I wonder what I've done wrong this time.* She quickly pulled on the other boot and made her way to the vanity. She poured the tiniest amount of water from the milk-white pitcher into the washbasin and splashed the cold liquid onto her face. A

small knot of worry began to form in her stomach as she hastily braided her thick dark hair into two long plaits. What could have upset Chad first thing in the morning?

She stood up, gave a quick glance around her less-than-spotless room, and frowned. She knew she should take time to straighten it, but if she didn't find out what Chad wanted, he'd start yelling again. "I'll clean it later," she decided, half hoping Luisa, their housekeeper, might look in on her room and spare a few minutes to clean it for her.

Andi made her way from her room and stopped at the top of the stairs. She reached out her hand and ran it along the smooth surface of the banister. *Just this once*, she persuaded herself. Determined not to let Chad ruin her morning, she settled herself onto the railing. Lifting her feet, she sailed down the banister and landed on the foyer floor with a loud *thump*. She picked herself up from the floor and grinned. Sliding down the banister was such fun!

Her cheerful mood instantly restored, Andi entered the dining room with a spring in her step. She greeted her mother and older sister, who were finishing their breakfast in companionable silence.

"Good morning, Andrea," her mother replied with a smile. "Luisa just brought in a fresh plate of hotcakes. Sit down and have some before they get cold."

Andi sat down in the empty seat next to her sister and pretended not to notice that seventeen-year-old Melinda hadn't returned her greeting. She shrugged it off and helped herself to a stack of still-warm pancakes, smothering them in butter and maple syrup. *She's probably mad at me*, Andi concluded. *Somebody's always mad at me these days*.

"Chad's looking for you," Melinda announced, breaking the silence.

"I know," Andi replied uneasily. "I heard him. The whole ranch can hear him when he yells."

"I wonder what upset him this early in the day," their mother remarked with a frown.

Andi didn't know, but she was certain it wouldn't be long before she found out. Her cheerful mood began to dissolve.

“So, here you are.”

Andi looked up. Her twenty-six-year-old brother stood just inside the doorway. It was easy to see he was irritated about something. He wasn't smiling, and his blue eyes were stormy. He lifted a finger and pointed it at Andi. “I'd like a word with you.”

“What about?” She speared a forkful of pancakes and swirled it around in the syrup. She hoped Chad wasn't in one of his bossy moods. Just because he was in charge of running the ranch, it certainly didn't mean he could tell her what to do all the time. She scowled.

“I've just come from the barn,” Chad explained, “where I discovered about a dozen thirsty horses—yours included.”

Andi sprang from her chair in sudden panic. Her blue eyes widened at the awful realization she had neglected her chores. “Oh, no!” she burst out. “I'm sorry! I forgot. I'll do it right away.” She hurried around the table, but Chad held out his arm to prevent her leaving.

“Never mind. Mitch is taking care of it.” He shook his head. “You were supposed to do it yesterday after school.”

“I know. But . . .” Her voice faltered. “Some of the men were breaking those new broncos out in the north corral, and they said I could watch for a few minutes. I was going to check the horses after supper, but—” She broke off. “I'm sorry,” she finished lamely.

Chad folded his arms across his chest and looked down at his sister. He nodded at her overalls and boots. “I'm glad to see you're dressed for work today. You're going to muck out every stall in the horse barn.”

“Muck out the *stalls*?” Andi's voice rose in disbelief. “That's the ranch hands' job, not mine.”

“Today it's your job.”

“It'll take all day!”

“Good. It'll keep you out of trouble.”

“Mother!” Andi turned to her mother in a desperate appeal. “Please don’t make me clean stalls today. It’s my only free day. I want to go riding.”

Elizabeth Carter’s soft blue eyes were full of understanding, but her voice firm. “I’m sorry, Andrea. This is the third time in two weeks Chad’s had to remind you about those horses. Checking their water is not a difficult task. Perhaps cleaning out stalls will help your memory.”

Andi opened her mouth to protest. She closed it when she realized her mother was not going to budge. Ever since her father’s death in an accident during spring round-up six years ago, her mother had turned over the running of the ranch to Andi’s three older brothers. She rarely went against any decision Chad made regarding the day-to-day management of the ranch.

“Better get started,” Chad suggested. He poured himself a cup of coffee and joined his mother and Melinda at the table.

“It’s not fair,” Andi grumbled, reaching across the table for some sugar for her horse. “One little mistake.” She pocketed the sugar and turned toward the door. “My whole day is ruined.”

She left the house and kicked the dust in frustration as she made her way toward the huge barn that stabled some of the finest horses in the San Joaquin Valley. While most of the working horses were kept outdoors in a large corral, to be lassoed each day for work, there were always a few stabled in the barn. It was Andi’s job to feed and water them.

She reached the barn and leaned briefly against the wide double doors before entering. “Oh, Justin, I wish you were home. I’m hardly ever in trouble when you’re around.” She sighed. Her oldest brother had gone to Sacramento—again! Why couldn’t he stay home and help Chad and Mitch run the ranch instead of rushing off to San Francisco or Sacramento every few months? “I’m sure the governor can run the state of California without your help,” she muttered angrily. It was an old story. Justin was often away—

doing whatever it was lawyers do—and no amount of wishing would bring him home any sooner.

With a sudden, urgent desire to get the miserable stall-cleaning job done, Andi pushed Justin from her thoughts. She shoved the heavy barn doors open and slipped inside, adjusting her eyes to the dim interior. The familiar odors of dusty hay, horses, and old leather greeted her.

She paused a moment to enjoy the sweet smell of last summer's alfalfa, then picked up a pitchfork, found the wheelbarrow, and made her way to her horse's stall. The palomino mare whinnied with eagerness to see her young mistress. She thrust her golden head over the stall's half-door and nipped playfully at Andi's shoulder. *Let me out of here!* she seemed to be saying.

"I know you hate being cooped up, Taffy. I guess I'm just being selfish. You stay so much cleaner indoors." She unlatched the stall's door and entered, patting the horse in apology. "I'm sorry, but your troubles are nothing compared to mine." She began to clean the stall and unload her complaints onto her best friend, the one companion who always listened patiently. "I can't do *anything* right these days," she complained.

She stopped and leaned on the pitchfork. "Oh, Taffy! How could I have been so *stupid* to leave that open jar of spiders in Melinda's room last week?" She lunged savagely at a pile of soiled bedding and tossed it through the open doorway. The load missed the wheelbarrow and landed in the middle of the walkway. She sighed. "Nobody believed me when I said it was an accident. I only wanted to see the new stallion Chad and Mitch were bringing home. Everybody knows Melinda's room has the best view of the corral. I didn't mean to forget about the spiders. Really I didn't. Everything just happened so fast when the stallion broke out. Two of the men almost got trampled, and Jake Barnes got his arm broke!"

Andi gave Taffy a shove to encourage her to move over. "You should have seen Melinda at breakfast the next morning. She slammed the empty jar down right in front of

me. When I saw those red bites all over her face and arms, I knew I was in trouble. Guess what I did the rest of the morning?" She walked around to face her horse. "Are you listening, Taffy?"

Taffy stamped an impatient foot. Andi took it as a sign she should continue her tale. "I spent the entire morning searching for and killing spiders. Then Mother made me scrub every crack in Melinda's floor and wash down the walls. I've decided not to collect spiders any more." She shook her head sadly, remembering her sister's mood at breakfast. "I think Melinda's still mad at me."

Andi leaned the pitchfork against the wall and turned back to her horse. She gave the animal an affectionate pat. Taffy snorted and tossed her head, as though eager to hear more.

"If spiders aren't bad enough, listen to what happened in school last week." She grabbed a brush and started grooming her beautiful golden palomino. "Remember that big frog I found near the creek a couple of weeks ago? I took it to school. Cory and I had a deal. He was going to swap me five aggies for the frog. But before we could make the trade at recess, Miss Hall found the frog in my desk." She cringed at the memory. "She scolded me in front of the entire class and sent me to the corner. The corner, Taffy! I was in disgrace the rest of the day." Andi sighed. "Now, I've got no frog and no marbles."

She tossed the brush into a corner and picked up the pitchfork once more. Spiders, frogs, forgetting her chores, leaving her room a mess, losing her homework—the list went on and on. She shook her head sadly. Absolutely nothing had gone right since Justin left for Sacramento, and here she was on her only free day—stuck in the barn.

Andi heard a sudden, distinctive whinny and returned from another spell of daydreaming. She finished up Taffy's stall and leaned the pitchfork against one of the large posts that supported the loft above. The whinny came again, a call from the corral next to the barn.

She peeked through the open barn door and into the corral. A rush of longing filled her heart. There he was. Chad's new black stallion. He was a monstrous horse—well over sixteen hands high—with a temper to match his size. He was the most beautiful horse Andi had ever seen. And the most dangerous.

From the moment the stallion had arrived on the ranch, Andi begged to help out with the gentling. Horses trusted her, she insisted. There wasn't a horse on the entire ranch she couldn't ride.

All her pleading amounted to nothing. She was allowed to watch Chad work with the stallion—from a safe distance—but told never to go near him alone.

"It's not fair." Andi scowled and watched the horse run along the corral fence. "If only Chad would give me a chance. I'd show him that horse would like me."

She leaned against the doorpost and shoved her hands into her pockets, ignoring her chores and gazing at the gorgeous black animal. She felt a few small, hard lumps at the bottom of her pocket and remembered Taffy had not yet been given her weekly treat of sugar.

With a sigh, Andi pulled the sugar from her pocket and turned towards Taffy's stall. She paused. A tiny flickering of an idea tickled the back of her mind. She uncurled her fingers and stared at the small white lumps lying in her palm. Her heart fluttered. *I know I can do it*, she decided suddenly. She raised her head and looked over at the stallion. *I'll show Chad his stallion isn't as wild as he thinks*. She took a step away from the barn and into the yard.

(Taken from Kregel Publications release, *Andrea Carter and the Long Ride Home* © 2005 by Susan K. Marlow. Published by Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI. Used by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.)