



ANDREA CARTER AND THE

Price of Truth

Chapter One excerpt

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Chapter One

TOO MANY PEACHES

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, SUMMER 1881

“Oh, no. Not again.” Andi Carter watched in dismay as her bushel basket of plump, golden peaches toppled over and spilled to the ground.

“I told you this was a *loco* idea,” her best friend, Rosa, grumbled in Spanish. “We should go back to the house before your brother catches you out here.” She glanced around warily, as if Chad might pop out from behind a peach tree at any moment.

“No,” Andi said. She squatted next to the overturned basket, righted it, and began piling the ripened fruit back in. This was not the first basket of peaches Andi had ruined during the past three weeks, nor did she expect it would be her last. The full baskets were heavy and awkward to handle—especially for a girl barely turned thirteen. Even together, she and Rosa had a hard time lifting the fruit into the wagons.

“Rodrigo threatened to fire us if we spoil any more fruit,” Rosa said crossly. She made no effort to help Andi pick up the fuzzy golden balls scattered at her feet.

Andi paused and gave Rosa a quick smile. “He won’t fire us.” She brushed aside her long, dark braid and reached for another peach. “He needs every pair of hands he can hire.”

“But he will scold us again. I do not wish to be yelled at by your brother’s foreman.” She gave Andi a pleading look. “Dressing up in my clothes and speaking Spanish might disguise you for a few weeks, but you cannot go unnoticed by the *capataz* forever. One of these days he will see who you are and then . . . how he will scold!” She cringed.

Andi knew in her heart that Rosa spoke the truth. She should not have talked her friend into joining her in the orchard with the harvest hands. The girls’ harvesting skills were an embarrassment to the other pickers, and the work was exhausting. It was only because

Rodrigo was so shorthanded that he tolerated their presence at all.

“Can we *please* give up this idea and go home?” Rosa asked.

Andi sat back on her heels and pondered. It had seemed like such a splendid plan a few weeks ago, and the only way she could think of to earn some money of her own. And wasn't it for a good cause? For once in her life, Andi wanted to buy her mother a special birthday present with money she earned herself. She was tired of being just another name on the gift, scribbled in at the end. Often, she didn't even know what her older brothers and sister had bought—no one bothered to tell her. She was the little sister. Who cared what she thought?

Andi rose to her feet. “Not this year.”

“*Cómo?*” Rosa wrinkled her brow.

“I was thinking about Mother's birthday,” Andi said. “And I'm not quitting this job. I finally figured out one good thing about being the youngest in the family.” With a practiced eye, she spied a ripe peach and yanked it from the branch.

“*Sí?*”

“With Mother away in San Francisco visiting Aunt Rebecca and Kate, no one pays me any mind—so long as I get my chores done. Justin's in town all day, Chad and Mitch are out on the range, and Melinda's so busy playing lady of the house that she doesn't ask how I spend my days.” She grinned. “This money-making venture is working perfectly.”

Rosa looked doubtful. “What would your mother say if she knew you were buying her gift with money you earned by working like a *peón* in your family's orchard?”

Andi lost her smile. “She wouldn't like it. That's why we're not going to tell anybody, remember? As soon as I earn enough money to buy that fancy music box I saw at the mercantile, I won't pick another peach.” She settled the golden piece of fruit in the bushel basket and reached for the handle. “Here, let's try lifting it again.”

Rosa grasped the other handle. Together they struggled to balance the load between them and walk at the same time. “Why do you not buy the music box with the reward money you got from returning the stolen bank gold this summer?” the Mexican girl asked.

Down went the basket, harder than it should, considering the delicate load it contained. Three peaches rolled off and thudded to the ground. "Because like the nitwit I am, I put all the reward money in the bank," Andi said. "It's locked up tight. I can't draw out a penny of that fifty dollars without Mother's signature." *How stupid could I be?* In her excitement to open a bank account of her own, she hadn't considered keeping any money back. She couldn't very well walk up to Mother *now* and ask her to co-sign.

Rosa shrugged, which was her way of agreeing that Andi was a nitwit. She motioned to the basket. "*¡Pesa tanto!* – it's so heavy. How much farther is the wagon?"

Andi didn't know. More than likely the pickers had filled their baskets, loaded the wagon, and moved on to the next section. She cocked an ear and listened to the sounds of rustling branches and chattering voices. Faint laughter drifted on the breeze. "I think they left us behind again." She slid to the ground under a tree and yawned. "Maybe someone will come by and give us a hand."

As if in answer to her wish, the laughter she'd heard grew louder. A moment later, two young harvest hands emerged from behind the trees. They were whistling and joking with each other. When they saw the girls, they stopped.

"Ah, *chicas*," one of the men said, "you are too slow. The *capataz* is not pleased. He has sent us to hurry you along."

Andi and Rosa exchanged glances. *Another scolding!*

The other young man eyed their basket. "Of course you will need help to carry your heavy load, *no?*" He nudged his friend. "We are happy to do this, eh, Rico?"

"*Sí*, Carlos." Rico grinned. "It is our pleasure."

Andi felt a stab of uneasiness as she listened to the young men's banter. On the surface they seemed eager to help, but there was something unsettling about their presence. Something that made Andi's heart beat faster. She looked at Rosa and saw her friend's face reflecting her own discomfort.

"*Vengan, chicas* – come," Rico urged. "We are wasting time." He nodded at Carlos, who

swept up the girls' bushel basket with no effort and started walking ahead of them. Still grinning, Rico took Rosa's arm and reached for Andi.

"I can walk by myself," Andi said in fluent Spanish, but Rico held her fast.

"*Señorita*," he said with an amused twist of his lips, "please allow us to escort you back to Rodrigo. The *capataz* wishes to speak with you. I think you will be losing your place in the orchard after today."

Andi stopped struggling. "We're getting fired?"

Rico nodded. "*Sí*, but have no fear." His teeth gleamed in his dark face. "My brother and I told Rodrigo that we are your cousins, and you will stay with us from now on. We will see to it that you work hard and do not fall behind. And when the day is over, we will enjoy your company even more."

Andi met Rico's laughing eyes with a cold, blue stare. "You're not our cousins, and Rodrigo's *loco* if he believes such nonsense."

Rico shrugged good-naturedly. "Then he is *loco*."

Andi stopped short, catching Rico off guard. She kicked his shin with all her might and twisted free from his grip. Rico yelped in pain.

Carlos, who had turned to watch, roared his laughter.

"Run, Rosa!" Andi grabbed her friend's hand and yanked. Together they plunged into Carlos. He and the basket he was carrying crashed to the ground. Peaches rolled everywhere. Andi and Rosa scrambled over the top, slipping and sliding on the soft, squishy fruit. Without looking back, they fled.

They didn't get far.

Blocking their way stood the tall, formidable figure of the foreman, Rodrigo. His face darkened at the sight of the overturned bushel basket, Carlos covered in sticky peaches, and Rico moaning and rubbing his leg. "What is going on here?"

"*Nada*—nothing," Carlos answered quickly. "We were fetching our cousins as you asked us to do. They will be no more trouble, I assure you."

“They’re no cousins of *mine*,” Andi burst out in English, too shaken and angry to realize her mistake. “They’re just a couple of worthless—”

“*Silencio!*” Rodrigo shouted, hands on hips. Then his expression changed from anger to bewilderment. He narrowed his eyes and peered closely at Andi, who immediately dropped her gaze to the ground.

With a flick of his wrist, Rodrigo snatched the *sombrero* from Andi’s head. “No, *señorita*, I can see that they are no cousins of *yours*.” He turned to Rico and Carlos. “Get back to work. You’ve wasted enough time with your foolishness.”

“But *capataz!*” Rico protested. “You asked us to—”

“*Váyanse*—get going!”

The two men left, grumbling.

Andi looked at the foreman. “Rodrigo, I’m sorry, but—”

He held up his hand. “No, it is not to me you will explain. Now, come.” He led them through the orchard until they arrived at the shack that served as the foreman’s office during the harvest. “You will wait here.” He motioned them into the shade behind the building.

Andi crumpled to the ground. “Please don’t tell Chad.”

Rodrigo pushed back his *sombrero* and gave Andi an incredulous look. “You ask me to disgrace myself by deceiving your brother—my employer?” He beckoned a young boy over.

“¿*Sí, Papá?*” The child listened to his father’s instructions with wide eyes. “¿*Señor Chad? ¿Aquí? Sí, Papá.*” Then he scrambled onto the back of a small sorrel horse and dug his heels into its sides. Within moments, the boy and his horse had disappeared between the rows of peach trees.

Andi watched the little boy gallop away. She hung her head. “There goes my job,” she mumbled, “and Mother’s birthday present.”