



ANDREA CARTER AND THE

*Price of
Truth*

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Chapter 1

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.

"*Si?*"

"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.”

Chapter 2

CHAD

Andi leaned her head back against the rough planks of the shed and closed her eyes. An hour under the blistering August sun had drained away what little energy remained after being discovered by Rodrigo. The tiny slice of shade she and Rosa occupied offered no relief from the heat. Sweat trickled freely down Andi's back, plastering her once-white cotton blouse to her skin.

A quiet *plunk* caught Andi's attention, and she opened her eyes. A few yards away, under a tree, a ripe peach lay on the ground. A gust of hot wind brushed by her, and another peach plopped to the ground. Although her throat was dry as dust and her stomach rumbled, Andi didn't touch the fruit. Instead, she contented herself with a drink from the canteen Rodrigo had brought them. The warm, stale water slid down her throat. She splashed some water over her head and gave the canteen to Rosa. "I never thought Rodrigo could be so heartless," she said.

Beneath the foreman's stiff formality toward her, she sensed a seething rage. He kept them clearly in sight at all times, as if he knew she'd grab Rosa and run the first chance she got. Rodrigo's smoldering gaze kept Andi in her place and prevented her from venturing even so far as to snatch a peach ten feet away.

Rosa did not respond. She sat ramrod straight, clearly terrified out of her wits.

Andi picked up a rock and chucked it at the peach on the ground. "Why are *you* so scared? You've got every right to work in our orchard if you want to." She picked up another rock.

“I told you this was a bad idea,” Rosa said. “*Rodrigo está furioso. Señor Chad will yell and yell.*”

Andi cringed. When her brother was angry, he could really holler. “Chad will yell at *me*, not you. It’s Andrea Carter who can’t work where she likes, or when she likes, or anything!” She hurled the rock at the peach and scowled when she missed her target. What was taking Chad so long? Why was Rodrigo making her sit out here in the heat when she could be home, resting behind the cool, thick stucco walls of the ranch house?

Whatever the reason, Andi had plenty of time to brood over her actions of the past few weeks. All her plans to buy her mother’s gift were crumbling. The sensible thing would be to ask Justin for the money. She knew her oldest and favorite brother would help her out. Why couldn’t she accept a favor? Why, instead, did she always have to do crazy things that landed her in trouble?

“No matter how hard I try, I’m always in some kind of fix.”

Rosa didn’t deny it. She smiled and said, “Ah, but your heart is kind . . .”

“But not always connected to my head,” Andi finished. “Remember the time I ran off and Taffy was stolen?” She shivered, in spite of the heat.

Rosa nodded. “But if you had not been searching for your horse, you would not have met me or helped my family find work. Your ranch is the best place we ever worked.” Her eyes shone with gratitude.

“What about that race with Cory last fall? It seemed like so much fun, until I trampled the new teacher.”

Rosa shook her head. “No, that was not so good. Trouble does seem to follow you, but I think it is because you have so many . . . *ideas interesantes*. You do them without thinking and—”

“I usually end up in a heap of trouble. Just like this time.” Silently she added, *Because I want to do things myself, without being treated like a little kid.* When would her older brothers and sister figure that out?

Hadn't she proved she was grown up when she saved her brother's life this summer? She winced. *But I told Mitch I didn't want to grow up.* Everything was so mixed up!

"I don't know what I want," she said with a sigh.

A few minutes later, Chad rode up. Andi peeked around the corner. She was almost glad to see him. Nothing, she decided, could be worse than sitting on the dusty ground, roasting in the heat, bored to death, and squirming under the watchful gaze of the Carters' harvest foreman.

She was wrong.

"Rodrigo!" Chad dismounted and ground-tied his horse. "What in blazes is so urgent that it can't wait for this evening?" He yanked off his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Your boy wouldn't give me any details. I was clear out at—"

"*Señor*," Rodrigo interrupted. He held up his hand to forestall further outbursts. "I apologize for pulling you away from your work, but this is a matter that could not wait. If you would follow me, please." Without another word, he led Chad around to the back of the shack and pointed to the two girls sitting in the narrow strip of shade.

Andi jumped to her feet, as did Rosa. Chad's mouth fell open. Before he could speak, Rodrigo began to express his annoyance in a stream of sizzling Spanish. It was worded respectfully, but neither Andi nor Chad had any doubt that the foreman intended to let his employer know exactly what he thought.

"This is no place for your sister, *señor*. Many shiftless, no-account *hombres* are lurking about the orchards this season, as you well know." Rodrigo went on to describe the improper advances two of the workers had made toward the girls. "I cannot continue to watch her every moment or be responsible for her safety," he finished with a grunt. "You must keep her away from here."

Chad nodded wordlessly. He looked dazed.

Rodrigo had no problem filling the silence. "I apologize, *señor*, for

not noticing your sister earlier. I have not taken the time to acquaint myself with the harvest hands. If something bad had happened to her, I would have myself to blame.”

Chad swept Rodrigo’s apology aside and found his voice. “You did exactly right, Rodrigo. *Muchas gracias*. You’re a good foreman—one of my best—and your concern for Andi’s safety proves it. I promise you this will *not* happen again.”

“What about this one?” Rodrigo indicated Rosa, who trembled and stared at the ground.

Chad turned to Andi. “How did you two get out here?”

“On Taffy,” Andi whispered.

“Tagging around with Andi all day is punishment enough,” Chad told Rosa. “Find Taffy and take her home.” Rosa took off like a shot, without even a backward glance at Andi.

Chad slapped his hat against his leg and slammed it down on his head. “Andi will ride with me.” He crooked a finger at his sister. “Let’s go.”

Andi followed Chad to his horse and mounted up behind him. Any second she expected her brother to explode, but he urged his horse into a swinging lope and ignored her. *Just yell at me and get it over with!* she pleaded silently. Perhaps he was waiting until they rode into the yard, so he could yell at her in front of the entire ranch. *That would be just like him*, she thought in disgust. But right now she was too hot and too tired to care.

The sudden jerk from lope to walk startled Andi. She clutched her brother’s waist to keep her seat.

“What were you doing out there?” he asked.

Andi didn’t answer.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t? Or *won’t*?”

Andi paused. Would it be so terrible to tell him her secret plan to

surprise their mother? After all, he loved Mother too. He'd understand. Or would he? It was more likely he'd brush off her idea as just another one of her silly notions—which wasn't too far from the truth. *I don't want him teasing me*, she decided, *or telling me I'm being foolish*. Besides, knowing Chad, there was always the possibility that he'd slip and reveal the surprise. She couldn't take that chance.

Chad brought his horse to a full stop and turned around. "You better tell me. With Mother gone and Justin in town most days, it's fallen on me to watch out for you." His fingers tightened around the reins. "By the look of things, I haven't done a very good job of it."

It was no trick for Andi to figure out that her brother was frustrated. She'd done it again—plunged wholeheartedly into what she thought was a wonderful idea, only to discover her plans were full of deep, dark holes. Rosa had warned her. Would she never learn?

Chad was still talking, but he didn't sound angry with her. Leastways, he wasn't yelling. Instead, he seemed angry with himself. "How could I have faced Mother if . . . those . . . if you'd gotten hurt out there?"

Andi reddened. She knew Chad was remembering what Rodrigo had told him about the two harvest hands they'd met up with today. "I'm sorry, Chad," she relented. "I just wanted to earn a little money of my own."

Chad's eyebrows rose. "What do you need money for?"

Andi scowled. Nope. She would not tell him that—even if she *was* sorry she'd frightened him. Quickly, she changed the subject. "Are you going to telegraph Mother?"

Chad nudged the horse, and they continued on their way. "I'm not going to worry Mother. I'm not even going to yell at you. Scolding you can't rid me of the cold, sick feeling in my gut whenever I think about what could have happened to you." He shook his head. "You went too far this time, little sister. You deliberately deceived my foreman and put yourself in danger—for a few dollars."

“I didn’t think it was dangerous to pick a few peaches from our own orchard.”

“You are welcome to ride out to the orchard and ask Rodrigo for as many peaches as you like,” Chad told her coldly, “but you will go out there as *Andrea Carter*—properly escorted and treated with respect as part of this family—*not* disguised as a harvest hand. And you will not pick fruit. Have I made myself clear?”

Andi bowed her head. “Yes, Chad.”

“Good. See that you don’t forget.”

Andi bristled at the restriction but kept her mouth shut. It didn’t seem right. Rosa could pick peaches and earn a little spending money, but not Andi. She mentally kicked herself for putting all of the reward money in the bank. Well, perhaps there was a way of getting it out.

She set her jaw. She was going to get the money she needed if it was the last thing she ever did. And nobody was going to find out about it until they gathered for the party at the beginning of October. Her entire family, and especially her mother, would get the biggest surprise of their lives when they saw the music box.

Of course, she wasn’t sure how she was going to accomplish this—yet. *There are more ways to catch a calf than by tossing a rope over its head*, she decided as they rode into the yard.