

Courageous Love

AN ANDREA CARTER BOOK

• STORY EXCERPT •

Susan K. Marlow

(Taken from *Courageous Love* © 2016 by Susan K. Marlow. Published by Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI. Used by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.)



Courage

COURAGE IS BEING SCARED TO DEATH
BUT SADDLING UP ANYWAY.

~ JOHN WAYNE

*Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou
dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever
thou goest.*

Joshua 1:9



CHAPTER 1

San Joaquin Valley, California, Spring 1885

I'm nearly seventeen years old and "quite grown up now" according to my sister Melinda. That's her way of saying it's time to put running and racing and ranching behind me and start thinking about a beau. I'm not ready to think about a beau. And the only thing I've put behind me is school.

It's a good thing Melinda can't see me on Saturday afternoons.

"Take it easy, Andi. Slow down!"

With the April breeze tearing at her long, dark braid, Andrea Carter only dimly heard the warning shout from twenty yards behind her. Slow down? Just when she and her colt had hit their stride and were doing so well together?

If one of her brothers had bellowed at her like that, Andi would have paid no attention. She was tempted to ignore Riley Prescott too, but an inner caution slammed down hard against the *you're-not-my-boss* syndrome that had plagued Andi from early childhood. Her quick temper had landed her in trouble more times than she could count.

Not this time, she decided. Especially when Riley really *was* her boss this afternoon.

She gave Shasta's reins a reluctant tug to show Riley she was listening but was not happy about it. Shasta tossed his head at the slight pressure on the bit and kept up his smooth, loping stride.

"I don't blame you," Andi soothed him. She pressed her lips tightly together and huffed. "We better do what he says, though, or no more trick riding for us."

She wanted to glimpse behind her shoulder and give Riley a dirty look for spoiling their fun, but she dared not. Standing atop her chocolate palomino's back at a steady lope took all her concentration. A sudden misstep or an abrupt change of gait and off she'd fly.

Smack! Lesson over. For good. Andi could take a tumble, but she'd better not take one while disregarding Riley's instructions.

She eased Shasta to a slower pace and waited for Riley to catch up. When he trotted up alongside her, a smile of approval split his sun-browed face. Hazel eyes twinkled from beneath his wide-brimmed hat. "Well, you're learning."

"What do you mean? This trick is easy as pie." Andi nudged Shasta over a fallen log in her path. The horse took the low jump without a break in his stride. Andi grinned and gently dropped to a sitting position in the saddle. "I can do this in my sleep."

The standing-while-riding stunt *should* be easy. Andi had worked on it often enough the past two months. Every Saturday afternoon—rain or shine—she badgered Riley until he set aside what he was doing and accompanied her to the soft ground up by her special spot in the high pasture.

"Your stunt looks fine," Riley assured her. "No worries there. Shasta is a natural, and nine-tenths of any stunt depends on the horse. However . . ." He paused. "I saw you stiffen before you reined Shasta in. You didn't want to do what I asked but then thought better of it." He winked. "Good choice."

Oh. That. Andi rolled her eyes. "You know it was my *only* choice."

"Yes, it was," Riley agreed with a meaningful nod.

It had taken a heap of convincing, but Andi's plea to learn a few safe riding tricks had finally fallen on sympathetic ears. After her close brush with death last spring and the devastating loss of her mare, Taffy, it appeared Mother had thawed. Perhaps she thought this distraction would bring back the sparkle to her youngest daughter's eyes.

Big brother and ranch boss Chad had stayed wary. He saw nothing safe about reckless, risky stunts. "Father was killed when he was thrown off his horse," he reminded Andi. "Why would I let you do something that could result in the same tragic end?"

But he couldn't brush aside Andi's wistful pleading for very long and eventually gave in. "All right, all right. If it means that much to you, go ahead. I reckon you're old enough to make your own decision. But—"

Andi's squeal of thanks had cut off whatever else Chad planned to say. She engulfed him in a bear hug and then whirled for the back door. Her knee twitched, evoking memories of past injuries, but it didn't slow her down. She dashed outside to share the good news with Taffy's colt, Shasta.

Later on, Andi wondered if learning to trick ride had really been her own decision after all. The way Riley stuck to her side like a stubborn tick and watched Shasta's every step made Andi suspect she didn't have as much say in the matter as she had first thought. The promise she gave Chad to never practice a stunt alone or without Riley's say-so also rankled her.

"Chad doesn't trust me," she muttered, remembering his long list of conditions.

Riley shoved his hat back from his forehead. "Did you say something?" He squinted at her against the sun.

Andi slowed Shasta to a walk. She had plenty to say. "I want to know why you yelled at me to slow down." Her waving arm took in the gently sloping pasture, still green and lush with the kiss of spring. "The ground is smooth, or at least as smooth as it gets up here. The trees are well out of range of any accidental collision."

"That's true."

"I've explored every square inch for more than a hundred yards up and down the creek," Andi challenged. Years ago, she had claimed this section of the Circle C ranch for her own. "There was no reason to slow down."

"None that you know of," Riley put in quietly.

Andi hesitated, not certain how to respond. She had to watch her step with this young man. They'd been good friends as children, but Riley left the ranch early on. During his eight-year absence, he had grown up much faster than Andi. At nineteen, he already showed all the patience of her brother Justin but with Chad's hard-headedness.

A tricky combination in Andi's mind.

When she didn't reply, Riley pointed out a clump of oak trees just ahead on the left. "I spotted a couple of deer nosing around in there. You never know which way they'll spring when startled. They headed up the creek, but they could just as easily have jumped out in front of Shasta."

Andi ducked her head, chagrined. She had not seen the danger. "Oh. I thought maybe you . . ." She left the rest unsaid.

"That I hollered just to see what you'd do?" A hint of annoyance slipped into his voice. "I don't toss orders around for the fun of it. You should know that by now."

Andi reddened. She did know it.

"My reputation's on the line here," he went on. "You get seriously injured just *once* with this stunt-riding folderol, and my word is not worth a dime to your family. I'll be sent packing."

Andi's head snapped up. "No, you won't. Chad's grooming you to take over as one of his foremen, especially since your Uncle Sid is really showing his age this spring."

"That may be," Riley said. "But there are plenty of other solid candidates for foremen on this spread. Chad, however, has only *one* baby sister." He smiled to soften his words.

Andi ignored the baby-sister remark. "Then why did you agree to teach me the stunts in the first place?" she asked, suddenly fearful for Riley's career on the Circle C. "I mean, if something goes so wrong that you're afraid you'd lose your job."

She had taken several spills while learning the stand-up trick, minor falls that did nothing more than exasperate her or knock her breath out. From Riley's point of view, however, it

might appear he was taking a big chance letting Andi play at stunt-riding. Why would he risk it?

"That's easy to answer," Riley said. "So I could see for myself the sparkle return to your eyes. Besides, I'm having fun too. As long as you do what I say, you won't get hurt beyond a little tumble now and then." He winked. "And I won't lose my job."

Andi gave him a scheming grin. "Then you'll teach me the somersault trick?"

Riley set his jaw. "No, not that one."

"Why not?"

"It's too dangerous. Your skirt could get caught when you leave the saddle. You might fall on your head and break your neck, or be thrown from the horse too soon and get trampled." He shook his head. "The timing has to be exactly right, and you have to be willing to take some bad spills to perfect it."

"I'm willing." Andi held her breath, remembering how splendid the cowhand Toledo looked spinning over his horse's head and landing right beside him. Even after two years, the somersault trick stayed fresh in Andi's mind. It couldn't be *that* risky. Toledo had made it look incredibly easy.

"I'm *not* willing," Riley said with finality. "Neither you nor Shasta are ready for that one."

Andi blew out the breath she'd been holding.

"But," he added quickly, "I'm willing to teach you the pickup stunt. It takes two riders—one a lot bigger than the other. If we do it right, I swing you up from the ground and you land just behind the cantle of my saddle."

"You'll teach me today? Right now?"

"Sure. It won't take long." Riley trotted his appaloosa to the nearest tree and waved Andi over. "Come tie Shasta up. We'll need Dakota for this trick. You've got a big, well-muscled colt, but he's not quite four years old. I don't want to strain his back."

Andi hurried over. She eagerly alighted from Shasta and flung the reins around a low-hanging branch. “What do I do?” She stepped clear of the trees. Her heart set up a steady drumming. It was always scary to try a stunt for the first time.

Riley brought Dakota around. “Just stand in one place and face me. Hold out your left hand real high and get ready to let me grab it when Dakota gallops past.”

“Sounds easy enough.”

In spite of her confident words, Andi’s hands felt slick with sweat. She wiped them along the sides of her split skirt and hoped she wouldn’t slip out of Riley’s grip when the time came.

“It *is* easy, but there’s a tricky part,” Riley warned her. “A split second before our wrists meet, you need to kick up your right foot to get a head start off the ground. I’ll hold you tight and—if we’ve timed it right—you’ll fly up in an arc and land behind the saddle.” He grinned. “Nothing to it. I do all the work. You’re in charge of the timing.”

Andi bounced up and down on her toes, barely able to stand still. “Are you sure Dakota won’t shy away when he passes me?”

Riley shrugged. “If he does, I’ll bring him around again. He’ll get used to it in a jiffy.” He nudged Dakota, and the horse immediately broke into a trot. When they’d crossed the clearing, he whirled and patted Dakota. “Get ready!” he called.

Andi stuck her left hand out at an angle so Riley could reach it. Her heart thudded against the inside of her ribcage as fast as the appaloosa’s galloping hooves. She’d practiced the stand-up trick in stages—first kneeling, then crouching, then finally standing up on Shasta’s back. But this new trick was all or nothing. She mentally begged Dakota not to shy away at the last second.

Before Andi knew it, Riley and his horse were racing past. Just before they clasped hands, Andi kicked off the ground. She sailed smoothly into the air and came down hard right behind the saddle. Riley let go.

Andi cheered. “We did it, Riley! It’s like fly—”

Dakota's frightened whinny cut off Andi's victory shout. He snorted at the dumped weight on his rear end and threw back his head. Then he crow-hopped mid-step to dislodge the unwelcome rider.

Andi gasped her surprise. She made a grab for Riley's waist, but Dakota's jerky movements wrenched her free. She flopped to her belly and scabbled for the cantle, all the while slipping farther over Dakota's rump. "*Riley!*"

"Whoa there." Riley twisted around in the saddle and lunged for Andi's arm.

Too late. The sudden drop from lope to halt wrenched Andi loose from her precarious perch. Time stood still as first her legs then the rest of her body slid away.

Andi was going over and there was nothing she could do about it.

CHAPTER 2

I am not sure how I will cover up the results of today's spill. I would prefer to stay in hiding until the swelling goes down. However, tonight is Chad's engagement party, and I am expected to attend.

It wasn't as far to the ground as Andi feared. She landed on her feet, staggered a few steps, and tripped. Before she could catch her balance, she nosedived into the grassy field. The ground slammed up against her as if she'd smacked into the cobblestone streets of San Francisco.

She closed her eyes and moaned. Her whole face felt smashed. "This was not one of my better falls."

"That's for sure."

Andi cracked her eyes open and raised herself just high enough to see a white-faced Riley hovering over her. "That hurt." She collapsed back to the ground. Had the appaloosa never carried two riders before? "I guess we took Dakota by surprise."

Riley crouched next to Andi and rolled her over. He frowned his concern. "Anything broken?" When Andi shook her head, Riley helped her sit up. His eyes widened. "Uh-oh." He fumbled around in his back pocket and withdrew a large, blue bandana. "You're gonna need this."

"What for?" Andi sniffed. Something warm and wet dripped from her nose.

Riley pressed the square cloth against her face. She winced and drew back. "Ouch!"

"You have a bad nosebleed." He took her hand and gently guided it to the bandana. "It's going to hurt, but hold this tight for a few minutes to stop the bleeding."

Andi did what she was told. Her nose throbbed.

Riley sat back on his heels and shook his head.

“What’s wrong?” Andi mumbled through the bloody bandana. All things considered, she’d come through this fall without too much damage. A bloody nose was a small price to pay to learn the pickup trick.

“I am *so* sorry, Andi. I take full blame for this.”

Andi pulled the bandana away to keep her voice from muffling. “Why should you? I took a little spill, like always. Next time I’ll—”

“There’s not going to be a next time,” Riley growled, clearly disgusted with himself. He shoved her hand back up against her face. “You’re still bleeding. Keep that bandana tight and pinch your nose.”

Andi obeyed, but inside she was seething. There wasn’t going to be a next time? Why not? How was this tumble any different from all the rest?

Then it hit her. It was visible. Having her breath knocked out never left any evidence of a hard fall. But this? *Mother will not be pleased. Chad will yell at Riley.*

She cringed, and not just because her nose stung. It was never fun being on the receiving end of Chad’s hollering.

Riley sucked in a shuddering breath. “We should have ridden Dakota to get him used to the extra rider on his rump before you landed on top of him so unexpectedly.” His hazel eyes met Andi’s. He looked stricken with remorse. “I know better than to make such a tinhorn mistake. I can’t afford to miss something like that again. I . . .” His voice trailed off. “I’m sorry.”

Andi’s stomach turned over. Did Riley intend to quit teaching her altogether? Just because Dakota had been taken by surprise *one time*? “Don’t beat yourself up. It’s a splendid stunt. I like it. We did it perfectly the very first time.” She loosened the bandana and gently touched her swollen nose. “It’s tender, but I think the bleeding has stopped.”

When Riley nodded, Andi crumpled the cloth and jammed it in her pocket. Then she stood up. Her world spun, but she pushed the dizziness aside. From other falls, she knew the sensation would soon pass. "Let's get Dakota used to me and then try that stunt again."

She shaded her eyes. Not far away, the horse busily cropped away at the new grass. His tail flicked a fly. "He looks calm as can be. It's not his fault we spooked him. Please, Riley?"

Riley slowly rose. He bent over, snatched Andi's hat, and plopped it on her head. "We need to call it a day and head back." Putting two fingers in his mouth, he whistled. A small, black-and-white, collie-like dog sprang from a shady spot under the oaks and bounded toward his master.

Riley scratched Tucker and glanced up at the sky. The sun hung halfway to the western horizon. "It's getting late. Chad's engagement party is this evening and—"

Andi gasped her dismay and sank back to the ground. The party! All thoughts of talking Riley into trying the pickup stunt one more time fled. She looked up into his face and gingerly felt the puffiness around her nose. "How bad is it, really?"

Riley cleared his throat. "Well . . ." He doffed his hat and scratched the top of his head, clearly at a loss for words.

Andi groaned. "That bad, huh?" She buried her throbbing face in her hands. Visions of walking into the Fresno House—with half the valley in attendance—spun her imagination out of control. Little Red Riding Hood's "*my, what a big nose you have, Granny*" brought a sudden, unbidden thought. *I can't go, and that's that.*

Yet, Andi knew in her heart she was only fooling herself if she thought she could avoid her brother's gala on account of a swollen nose. It was far better to gather her shattered dignity, hold her head high, and behave like the young lady Mother supposed her to be. She would just have to overlook the snickers that were sure to come her way tonight.

"No matter how hard I try not to, I always end up in the middle of a muddle." Andi moaned. "But this has got to be the worst one ever."

A warm tongue swiped at Andi's hands. She shoved Tucker's sloppy ministrations aside. "Sorry, but doggy kisses can't fix this. I have to go home and face Mother's quiet disappointment and Aunt Rebecca's loud disapproval and . . ." Her voice trailed off thinking about the rest of the evening.

"Maybe the swelling will go down by tonight." Riley peered closer. "Except for your nose and a scrape above your left eyebrow, most of your face escaped injury."

Small comfort. There was a chance an unsightly bruise would appear later on.

Andi let the balmy spring breeze play with her hair for a few more minutes. She wanted to trick ride so badly, but was it worth it? Not even the new, sapphire-blue party dress Melinda had helped Andi choose for tonight's affair could hide the fact that Miss Andrea Carter had trouble remembering she would soon turn seventeen.

Riley's hand on her shoulder interrupted Andi's gloomy thoughts. "We really oughta be going."

"I know." She let Riley take her hand and help her to her feet.

"Listen, Andi. Next Saturday we'll try it again, all right? It's just . . . well . . . I'm a little shook up right now. You didn't see Dakota lash out with his hind foot. He missed your head by a hair's breadth." Riley paused and squeezed Andi's arm. "It's not only for the sake of my job or to avoid Chad's wrath that I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

Andi nodded. "This is one of those things we won't worry Mother about. I mean, all's well that ends well, right?"

But a little shiver tickled the back of her neck at her close call. The fact that Mother and Chad had given Riley the go-ahead to teach Andi to stunt ride showed how much they respected the young wrangler and trusted him to keep her safe. She didn't want her family's confidence in Riley to be shaken on account of one bloody spill.

"Besides, God was watching out for me," she said firmly.

Riley chuckled. "I'm sure Chad would agree that watching over you is a full-time job for the Almighty."

Andi couldn't help smiling at the truth in Riley's words. She sometimes avoided serious mishap only by the skin of her teeth. "He will give his angels charge over thee," she quoted.

"Lots and *lots* of angels," Riley quipped.

Andi laughed and hurried over to Shasta. Mounting up, she coaxed her colt to Riley's side. "What about our race?" Rain or shine, smashed face or not, the two of them raced home each week after practicing their stunts.

Riley gave her a sour look. "You always win."

"You're right. I do." Andi stroked Shasta's neck in satisfaction. He was now the fastest horse on the ranch, even outdistancing her brother Mitch's horse, Chase. Of course, Chase had very few opportunities these days to knock the young, upstart colt from his pedestal. Mitch had turned his sorrel gelding out on the range when he headed for Berkeley last fall to study agriculture.

Andi tightened her grip on the reins, but her thoughts were not on the race. *I miss Mitch.* She hadn't seen him for over a month. Why would he choose more schooling after all this time?

For once she agreed with Chad. "Whoever heard of a cow college?" he'd joked. "You go 'head and learn all those newfangled ranching methods. Reckon it's better you than me."

Or me, Andi mentally concurred.

"Andi!"

Andi jumped, startled. Shasta shook his mane and snorted.

"You were a million miles away," Riley said.

"I was thinking about Mitch. He's coming home this afternoon for Chad's party, you know. He might even be there before we get back." Andi crouched and nodded at her racing partner. "You ready?"

"Whenever you are."

Today's race cut through a section of the ranch Chad had set aside for a breeding experiment the "college boy" was working on. Galloping downhill from her special spot,

Andi spied a large tract of fenced-off pastureland far below. Instead of a natural, muddy waterhole or a bubbling creek, a tall windmill turned idly in the breeze.

Andi grinned. Special cows, indeed, to have access to their own, private drinking trough. She had shown only mild interest in the yearling heifer calves Mitch had brought in earlier this year. He planned to use a blooded Angus bull next fall and raise up a strain of cattle that would be more resistant to . . . to . . .

Andi wrinkled her forehead and yanked her thoughts back to the race. She couldn't keep track of everything Mitch prattled about when he was home. Cattle were cattle. She glanced behind her shoulder. Riley was only a length behind her and catching up fast. Tucker raced at his master's side, keeping pace with the horse.

"I'll not lose this race because I'm woolgathering over a bunch of cows!" She dug her heels into Shasta's flank.

In spite of Andi's determination to stay in the lead, her daydreaming cost her precious time. Riley and Dakota caught up. He didn't nudge his horse to leap ahead like she expected but instead waved her to a stop. "I didn't think I'd catch you," he said, panting. "Hold up."

Andi slowed Shasta to a leisurely trot. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know." Riley jerked his chin in the direction of the distant herd. "Something doesn't look right." He urged his horse toward the fenced rangeland. "What do you see?"

Andi strained her eyes to take in the scene. The windmill twirled, the watering trough looked full from up here, and the pure-black Angus heifers grazed or lay like ink blots on the rich, green grass. "Everything seems all right."

Angus. Strange beasts. Andi couldn't get used to a breed of cattle with no horns—long or short. She prodded Shasta to tag along behind Riley. Halfway down the hillside, she caught her breath. "Wait, Riley. I do see something. Look at the fence. It's—"

"I see it." Dakota sprang into a gallop.

Andi stayed at Riley's side, and together they sped downhill. Up close, she noticed several animals walking around outside the enclosure. Others lay clumped near the distant windmill.

"Mitch will have a fit when he discovers his precious heifers can get out." Andi brought Shasta to an abrupt stop and glanced around in worry. "Or worse, a different bull might get *in* and set Mitch back a whole year. Oh, would that ever aggravate him!"

"I'm already aggravated," Riley said. "I promised Mitch I'd keep an eye on these critters. I checked them a week ago, and this fence was fine. How in tarnation did a perfectly good fence go down all at once?"

He scanned the gap where the fencing had come apart. Four strands of shiny barbed wire lay in wide loops on the ground. "This makes no sense at all." Riley dismounted and tossed Dakota's reins around a post. "I better see how bad it is. Can you and Tucker round up those strays and convince them to join their sisters inside? Shasta can show off his cow sense."

Andi nodded and turned Shasta toward the dozen wanderers. With Tucker nipping at the heifers' heels, the three of them made short work of herding the yearlings back inside the enclosure. She returned to the fence line, dismounted, and joined Riley, who was crouched over the wire strands.

"Did you figure out how it broke?"

Riley held up a strand of barbed wire and turned toward her. "This fence didn't break. It was deliberately cut."

Courageous Love

January 2017

Visit: CircleCMilestones.com