

Circle C Stepping Stones #1

**Andi
Saddles Up**

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Andi Saddles Up

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New Words

alfalfa—the best kind of hay for horses and cattle

cinch—(*verb*) to fasten tightly; (*noun*) the wide strap that goes under a horse's belly and holds the saddle in place

conchos—silver decorations on a saddle

doughball—a small lump of dough used as bait for fishing

filly—a young female horse

palomino—a golden-colored horse with a white- or cream-colored mane and tail

ranch hand—someone who works for the owner of a ranch; also called a “cowhand”

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range—wide-open, natural grazing land for horses, cattle, and sheep

saddle broke—a horse that has been trained to carry a rider

stringer—a line that holds fish to keep them alive in water after being caught

tack—equipment used on horses: saddles, stirrups, bridles, halters, and reins

tack up—to prepare a horse for riding with saddle, reins, and other tack

whicker—a soft neigh or whinny

woolgathering—daydreaming

卐 CHAPTER 1 卐

Birthday Wish

Spring 1877

“**T**oday is the day,” Andi Carter chanted in a sing-song voice. “Today is the day . . .” She paused, thinking hard. Then she burst out, “Oh, how I love the month of May!”

She ran a brush along the back of her palomino filly. “Did you hear that, Taffy? My verse rhymes. Miss Hall is teaching us poetry in school.” Andi wrinkled her forehead. “I never found much use for it before today.”

Taffy tugged a wisp of hay from her feeder and turned her large, dark eyes on Andi. She chewed but made no other sound.

“Don’t you *know*?” Andi jumped down from the

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overturned bucket she always used to reach Taffy's back. She tossed aside her brush and grabbed Taffy's golden head with both hands. "It's our birthday today. Yours and mine. You're three and I'm nine."

Another rhyme! She giggled. "Remember?"

Taffy didn't nicker. She didn't snort or whinny. Instead, she jerked her head out of Andi's grasp and grabbed more hay.

Chomp, chomp, chomp.

Did Taffy ever think of anything besides eating her sweet alfalfa?

"You should be more excited about this," Andi said. "I've waited three whole years to finally be able to ride you whenever I want." She pulled her filly's head down and whispered in her ear. "With your own saddle. You and me. Horse and rider at last."

Andi had ridden Taffy bareback plenty of times during the past year. But she always rode under the watchful eye of her brother Chad, the ranch boss. He was *her* boss too, when it came to training Taffy.

"Patience, little sister," Chad said much too often for Andi's liking. "Taffy will have a saddle on her back soon enough."

Soon enough always seemed like such a long way off. "But not anymore," Andi said happily. She rubbed Taffy's golden nose. "Today is the day!"

Tingles raced up and down Andi's arms. She would ride Taffy with her very own saddle!

Birthday Wish

Up till now, Andi could ride almost any horse on the Circle C ranch. A ranch hand stood ready to help her lift a heavy saddle and cinch it on Patches, the paint horse, or Pal, the bay. She only had to ask.

But those saddles were meant for grown-up cowhands. Andi always slid around on those big, full-sized seats.

She could also ride her pony, Coco. Andi could saddle Coco all by herself anytime she wanted—which wasn't very often. Riding Coco wasn't much fun with or without a saddle. He was too old and too tired. He trotted slower than a muddy creek in summer.

And he never, *ever* galloped.

Andi looked at Coco's small saddle. It hung over the stall railing just across the walkway. She sighed. Was there ever a saddle more worn out? Or cracked? Or one that showed more slash marks than this scraggly piece of tack?

Big brother Chad was sure handy with a knife, even when he was a little boy. He'd scratched up the saddle, but the words were still visible. Andi read them out loud and made a face.

Chad Age 6
KEEP OFF



Birthday Wish

Andi turned her back on Coco's saddle. She had never thought of it as her own. Not with Chad's name gouged into it. Grown-up brothers Justin, Chad, and Mitch had used that old thing. Big sister Melinda had used it too.

And me.

No more. Taffy was too pretty to lug around a shabby piece of leather on her golden back.

"Besides," Andi said, "the cinch would never fit around your belly." She giggled. "Especially the way you've been eating these days."

Taffy's ears pricked up. She whickered and shook her creamy mane. Then she stamped her foot. The straw bedding rustled.

Andi laughed. "I knew you would agree."

"Agree about what?"

Chad's voice pulled Andi around. "Taffy and I agree that she will never wear that old thing." She jabbed her finger at Coco's saddle.

Chad joined Andi in the stall. He raised his eyebrows at her. "Really? Do you plan on riding Taffy bareback all the time? Where will you keep your lasso?"

Andi's mouth dropped wide open. She would ride Taffy with a saddle, of course! But with a saddle all her own. *Not* with a hand-me-down one.

Before Andi could tell Chad what she was thinking, he said, "Or will you dig around in the tack room

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for a different saddle?” He shook his head. “You aren’t strong enough to lift any of those.”

“But—”

Chad waved his hand toward Coco’s saddle. “It appears to me that, for now, this saddle is more your size. I can rig a longer cinch to fit around Taffy’s belly.”

Plunk! Andi’s heart dropped like a stone into her stomach.

Was Chad teasing her? How could he not know Andi wanted a saddle for her birthday? She had given her family about a million hints during the past month.

She peered into Chad’s bright-blue eyes. No teasing sparkles laughed back at her. He looked serious, like he knew best.

This is terrible. My worst birthday ever.

Tears watered Andi’s eyes, but she would not cry. Chad didn’t know everything. He would probably be surprised when he saw a new saddle sitting in Andi’s chair at breakfast. A saddle was too big to hide and too lumpy to wrap.

“It’s Taffy’s birthday today too, Chad,” she said, blinking hard. “Didn’t you remember?”

“Of course I remembered.” He rubbed the white blaze on Taffy’s nose. “Happy birthday, girl.”

Andi’s spirits rose a little at her brother’s cheerful words. For three years, he had helped her train Taffy.

Birthday Wish

For three years, Andi had taken extra good care of Coco—just to show Chad she was old enough to train and take care of Taffy.

As Taffy grew stronger, Chad let Andi ride her. What happy days those were! The best news of all? Chad and Mother agreed that when Andi turned nine, she could ride Taffy whenever she wanted.

To Andi, that meant a saddle of her own.

Weeks ago, Andi had picked out the perfect saddle. Every day after school, her oldest and favorite brother, Justin, drove Andi and Melinda home in the buggy. Every day she begged him to pass by Beckman's saddle shop.

"That one right there in the window," she said, pointing. "The one with the swirly designs and the pretty silver conchos. I'm sure it's just my size."

Melinda always rolled her eyes, and Justin always nodded. But neither ever said a word. Andi knew her sister was tired of hearing about saddles, but—

"Andi!"

She jumped. "What?"

Chad tugged one of her long dark braids. "I came to get you for breakfast, birthday girl. Let's go inside."

Andi pushed her worried thoughts aside. It was time for breakfast—her birthday breakfast.

And hopefully a birthday saddle.

❦ CHAPTER 2 ❦

Birth day Interruption

Andi skipped behind Chad all the way across the yard. The rising sun peeked over the mountains, promising a fair day. Best of all, it was a Saturday.

No school on my birthday!

Andi's joy soared higher than the lone hawk circling way above her head. She ducked around Chad and clattered up the porch steps. A quick scrub at the kitchen pump and she was ready for breakfast.

Her special birthday breakfast.

Only on birthdays did Mother and their housekeeper, Luisa, take the time and trouble to heat up the heavy cast-iron waffle maker. It sat on the cookstove now. Steam curled up from around its edges. A delicious waffle aroma filled the kitchen.

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Andi's mouth watered. She burst into the dining room, eager to taste that first sweet bite.

"Happy birthday, Andi!" her family called out.

Andi's gaze immediately flew to her place at the table. A waffle rested on her plate, fresh and hot, with a big pat of butter on top. A cup of steaming chocolate sat beside it. Everything Andi had asked for. Everything but . . .

She hurried over to her chair. It was empty. Five colorfully wrapped packages surrounded her breakfast plate. One was big, but not big enough to hold a saddle. Not by a long shot.

Andi lifted the tablecloth, bent over, and peeked under the table. No saddle lay hidden there. Only four pairs of feet and legs. Five when Chad sat down.

"What are you doing, Andrea?"

Andi dropped the tablecloth and stood up. "Nothing, Mother." She glanced at the dining room corner, just in case. No saddle there either.

She sighed, but kept it to herself. Chad had not been teasing after all. Apparently, Andi was not old enough for a saddle of her own. *Please, God, don't let Mother see how disappointed I am.*

Andi was nine years old today, which sounded so much more grown-up than eight. She would be thankful for her birthday breakfast and for whatever the pretty packages held. She put a smile on her face and sat down.

Birthday Interruption

Justin asked the blessing.

When he said “amen,” Andi picked up the pitcher and dumped syrup until it flooded her plate. The waffle tasted good, but some of the sunshine had gone out of her birthday. She sipped her chocolate and thought hard about a new saddle.

The day was just beginning. Mother would bake Andi’s birthday cake this afternoon. Surprises sometimes happened later in the day. Not often, but it was possible. Maybe it wasn’t too late to hope for a saddle.

She finished her waffle, drank the last chocolaty drops in her cup, and looked around. Everybody else was finished too. They were waiting for Andi.

Luisa took away Andi’s plate and cup. Fourteen-year-old Melinda plunked a small, ribbon-tied package in front of the birthday girl. “Open mine first. I picked it out specially for you.”

Andi tore away the wrappings. A bright red-and-black square of cloth fell out. “A bandana!”

“It’s not very ladylike,” Melinda said. She shrugged. “But I knew you’d like it better than an embroidered hankie.”

“I do.” Andi reached over and hugged her sister. “Thank you.”

The other gifts made Andi gasp with delight. A beautiful new halter for Taffy. A bridle and shiny bit. Reins. Even a new hoof pick.

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“Don’t lose this one,” Mitch said, laughing.

Everybody knew Andi went through hoof picks like Taffy went through grain.

Andi neatly laid out her gifts on the table to admire them. She had everything she needed so she and Taffy could be horse and rider. Everything except a—

Bang, bang, bang!

Andi jumped in her seat. So did Melinda.

Chad scowled. “Who would beat on our front door first thing in the morning?”

“It could be trouble out on the range,” Mitch said.

Andi knew better. The ranch hands usually came to the back door.

Bang, bang . . . crash!

Even from the dining room, Andi heard the front door slam against the wall. Someone was not only interrupting her birthday breakfast, but they had barged right into their house!

Andi held her breath. Who would be so rude?

Thumping footsteps drew nearer. A flood of Spanish words followed the footsteps.

Luisa must be very angry to scold the intruder in Spanish, Andi thought. Luisa only scolded Andi in Spanish when she was especially mad at her. Like when Andi slid down the banister railing once too often.

Birthday Interruption

A large man suddenly filled the doorway.

Chad sprang from his seat. "Hollister, what are you doing here?"

Luisa pushed past the man. "I am so sorry, *Señor* Chad. He walked right in and demanded to speak to you." She put her hands on her hips and glared at Mr. Hollister.

Andi slid down in her chair. The tall, black-bearded stranger looked mean . . . and angry. He didn't politely take off his hat. His grubby overalls were missing a buckle. And he carried a shotgun in one hand.

"Get your hat off right now, and put that thing down." Chad waved at the shotgun. "What do you want?"

Andi gulped back her surprise. Most of the time, guests at the Circle C ranch were offered coffee and a cheerful "howdy."

Not this time. Chad sounded just as angry as Mr. Hollister looked.

Andi tried to make herself small. She wanted to crawl under the table, but she was too old for that. So she closed her eyes instead and prayed that Mr. Hollister would go away.

For a few seconds, Andi heard nothing. Had God answered her prayer so quickly? Had Mr. Hollister left? Curious, she opened her eyes.

Mr. Hollister still stood in the dining room, eyes

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blazing, his hat in his hand. He and Chad stood nose to nose, scowling at each other but not saying a word. Fortunately, his shotgun leaned against the wall.

Then Mr. Hollister began to shout. “Don’t you *ever* show up at my place again when I’m not there! You scared the womenfolk and kids half to death.” He shook his finger in Chad’s face. “That chunk of land is mine now. God changed the creek’s course. You can’t do nothin’ about it, so stay away. You hear me, boy?”

Chad was not a boy. He’d run the ranch since their father had died over three years ago. Standing next to the angry Mr. Hollister, though, Chad looked even younger than his twenty-four years.

“It’s not your land,” Chad said. “It’s two hundred acres of our best grazing land. No sheep are going to chomp it down to the bare roots. Not while *I* own it.”

“You don’t own it no more,” Mr. Hollister yelled.

“Hold on, Chad.” Justin pushed back his chair and stood up. “You too, Vince. This boundary disagreement cannot be settled in our dining room. Let’s—”

“Sure it can,” Mr. Hollister cut in. “It’s clear as glass. Spring Creek has always been the boundary between our two places. Spring Creek is *still* the boundary.” He grinned, showing a mouthful of broken yellow teeth. “It’s just in a different place now.”

Birthday Interruption

He plunked his raggedy hat down on his head. “God sent that spring flood, boys. It changed the creek’s course. Live with it.”

“Vince . . .” Justin tried again.

“Y’all keep away from my place.” Mr. Hollister eyed Chad. “I got no problem shootin’ trespassers, specially rich ranchers.” He turned to Justin. “Or cocky young lawyers.”

Mr. Hollister grabbed his shotgun and tipped his hat to Mother. “Sorry, ma’am, for disturbin’ your breakfast.” He turned on his heel and stomped out of the room.

The front door slammed.

Andi sat up. Her heart pounded. *What a terrible way to start my birthday!*