

**Circle C Stepping Stones #2**

# Andi Under the Big Top

**Susan K. Marlow**

*Andi Under the Big Top*

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## New Words

**acrobat**—a person who performs skillful gymnastic acts like tumbling and tightrope walking

**big top**—the large tent where the circus performances take place

**calliope**—(kuh-LIE-uh-pee) a musical instrument that produces sounds by pushing steam through large pipes of differing lengths

**gelding**—a male horse that cannot father a foal

**green broke**—describes a horse that knows the basics and has carried a rider but is not completely trained

**jack-in-the-box**—a toy box containing a figure (like a clown) on a spring that pops up when the lid is opened by turning a crank

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**menagerie**—a collection of wild or unusual animals on display

**paddock**—a small fenced pasture where horses are kept or exercised

**ringmaster**—the person who announces the performances in the circus ring

**sideshow**—a small show at a circus or fair that often displays odd twists of nature like a two-headed calf

**stilts**—upright poles with supports for the feet that allow a person to walk high above the ground

**surrey**—a horse-drawn carriage with two wide bench seats and a canopy top

**trapeze**—a very high swing that circus performers use for doing tricks

**Uncle Sam**—a symbol of the United States, pictured as a man dressed in red, white, and blue

❖ CHAPTER 1 ❖

# Here Comes the Circus

*Late Summer 1877*

**A**ndi Carter stood next to the hitching post and scratched at her hot, sticky black stockings. There wasn't a speck of shade in the entire churchyard. A straw hat kept the sun out of Andi's eyes, but it couldn't keep away the scorching heat.

"I know you're hot too," she told the matched pair of bay horses hitched to her family's surrey.

Jingo and Barney stood drooping, heads down. Their black tails flicked at the buzzing flies. Their reddish-brown bodies quivered. Biting insects gave them no peace.

Andi felt squirmy too, but it wasn't because of any

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pesky flies. “Why do grown-ups have to stand around so long after church and talk, talk, talk?” she asked.

Neither horse gave so much as a nicker in reply.

Andi scratched harder and looked across the yard.

Mother was chatting with Mrs. King by the church steps. Big brothers Justin, Chad, and Mitch had found a group of ranchers. Even Melinda, who usually wanted to go home as fast as Andi did, giggled with two other girls her age.

Moisture dripped down the back of Andi’s neck. She rubbed away the prickly feeling.

“Hey, Andi!”

Cory Blake skidded to a stop next to the horses. Dust puffed up around his high-top shoes. His Sunday go-to-meeting clothes were rumpled and dark with sweat.

The dust tickled Andi’s nose. She sneezed. “You’re crazy to run around in this heat.”

Cory adjusted his cap farther down over his straw-colored hair. “Can’t be helped. I’ve been looking for you.” He grabbed her hand. “C’mon. I wanna show you something.”

Andi didn’t budge. “I better not. We’re leaving in a minute or two.” She let out an impatient breath. “I hope.”

Cory laughed. “I bet you’re not.” His blue-gray eyes told Andi he knew something she didn’t.

Andi slid her hand from Cory’s sweaty grip and



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glanced back toward the church steps. Another lady had joined Mother.

“Oh no.” Andi groaned. Gossipy Mrs. Evans never stopped talking.

“Your ma won’t be getting away from her for at least another fifteen minutes,” Cory said. “Plenty of time to show you.” He pointed to the Fresno Hotel just across the street. “It’s not far.”

“All right.” Andi patted Barney’s nose. “I’ll be back.”

Cory shouted a happy *yee-haw* and took off.

When Andi caught up with her friend, he was studying the south side of the two-story hotel. “Looky here.” He grinned. “Have you ever seen such a sight?”

Andi’s eyes went straight to the three large posters pasted on the building. She caught her breath. “Oh my!”

Cory was right.

Never in all her nine years had Andi seen such bright colors or more alive-looking paintings. A lion with a wide-open mouth stood on his hind legs. He looked ready to gobble somebody up in one bite. The brave lion tamer, dressed in his African safari clothes, held only a whip.

“Clyde Bates in single-handed battle with the most savage jungle beasts known to man,” Andi read in a whisper.

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“Circus posters went up all over town yesterday,” Cory said. “Pa let the men paste two of them on our livery stable.” He smiled wider. “I helped smooth out the wrinkles and air bubbles.”

“The circus?” Andi’s heart skipped a beat. “Coming to Fresno? When? Where will they set up the tents? How long will it—”

“The posters tell you everything,” Cory said. “Me and Jack read ’em all when we followed the men around. We saw posters with bareback riders and trapeze artists. A man juggling burning torches. Tigers and tightrope walkers and”—he took a deep breath and recited—“the most daring feats of skill and courage ever seen on this American continent.”

Andi stepped closer to the posters. Her heart beat fast. In sparkly reds, blues, and yellows, Miss Minnie Mae, the champion female bareback rider of the world, stood atop two matching palominos. The horses leaped through a ring of blazing fire.

Another poster showing acrobats and a clown read: FREE STREET PARADE SATURDAY MORNING. Just below the lettering, Andi read the performance times: THREE O’CLOCK AND SEVEN O’CLOCK AUGUST 25TH. **ONE DAY ONLY!**

Cory placed his hand over the lion’s head. “This is the best circus act. A roaring lion. The crack of the lion tamer’s whip, the—”

**COLEMAN'S**  
American CIRCUS

Miss Minnie Mae

Female Back Rider  
of the World

FREE  
STREET PARADE  
SATURDAY MORNING

Performances:  
THREE O'CLOCK  
AND SEVEN O'CLOCK  
AUGUST 25TH

**ONE DAY ONLY!**

**COLEMAN'S**  
American

CIRCUS

Clyde Bates in single-handed battle  
the most savage jungle beasts known



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“How would you know?” Andi interrupted. “You’ve never been to the circus.”

The painted lion’s mouth and huge teeth made Andi shiver. Cory was mighty brave to touch it. *Show-off!* She slapped her hand over the ring of fire. “*This is the best act.*”

Cory huffed. “You’ve never been to the circus either. Maybe it isn’t real fire at all.”

“And maybe it’s not a real lion,” Andi said. “Maybe—”

“I’ve been to the circus,” Melinda said from behind Andi. She strolled up to the posters. In her big-sister way she waved her hand to take them all in. “It’s all real. The jugglers, the acrobats, the wild animals. Everything.”

Cory’s hand slid down the poster. He stared at Melinda, eyes wide and admiring.

*No fair!* Andi thought. Why did the youngest child in the family always miss the excitement? “When did you see a circus?” *I probably wasn’t even born yet.*

“I was nine,” Melinda said. “It wasn’t a big circus like this one. The railroad track had just been put down. A small circus train came through the valley.”

Andi’s face puckered into a scowl. *If Melinda was nine, then I was four years—*

“You saw it too, Andi.”

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“I did?” Her eyebrows shot up.

Melinda nodded. “You sat on Father’s lap and spilled lemonade down your dress. All over Father too.” She started laughing. “He jumped a foot in surprise.”

Sweat suddenly beaded Andi’s forehead, and not because of the noonday heat. Melinda’s words had jogged a long-forgotten memory. “I was scared,” she whispered.

“That’s right.”

“What was I scared of?” Andi glanced at the poster-lion’s gaping mouth. “The lions?” That fear was not hard to imagine. “Or maybe the elephants?”

“Not at all,” Melinda said, smiling. “There weren’t any elephants or lions. Just a few acrobats, some jugglers, and a bareback rider. And clowns. You were terrified of the clowns. One came up and tried to shake your hand. You shrieked and lost your lemonade.”

“You’re scared of *clowns*, Andi?” Cory laughed so hard he held his stomach. Then he wiped his eyes and pointed to the top poster. “You’re scared of that smiling, silly-looking clown?”

Andi had no memory of the clowns. “Course not. Melinda’s making up a story.”

“Am not. Ask Mother or the boys.” Melinda lost her smile. “But there was one truly frightening part of that circus.”

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“What?” Cory asked. “Did an acrobat fall off the high wire?”

“No. It was Mitch. He was fourteen, just my age. All he talked about was running off to join the circus.”

“Like being a part of it?” Cory’s eyes gleamed.

Melinda nodded. “He went on and on about the colors, the excitement, no school.” She bit her lip. “I was scared I’d wake up one morning and find Mitch gone.”

Andi caught her breath. “Gone for keeps?”

“Yes.”

Andi could not imagine life without her cheerful, laughing big brother. When Chad bossed her too much, she often ran to Mitch. He always took her side.

“Father didn’t let Mitch out of his sight until the circus left town,” Melinda said. “He also kept a close eye on him for a whole week afterward.”

She paused and glanced at the posters. Then she held out her hand. “Come on, Andi. Mother sent me to find you. It’s time to go home.”

Andi took her sister’s hand, but her gaze stayed fixed on the poster of the bareback rider. Glittery costume, happy smile.

*No school.* A thrill shot through Andi.

She understood Mitch’s feelings exactly.

## Ready, Set, Go

**A**ndi counted the days until the Saturday street parade. Her head was crammed full of circus plans. Not once all week did she ask anyone to saddle Taffy.

*I am a world-champion bareback rider on my prancing golden steed.*

Andi and Taffy jumped logs and small fences. With her eyes closed, she imagined the two of them leaping through the circus poster's flaming ring. *Just like Miss Minnie Mae!*

Later that week, when she swung from the rope swing in her favorite tree, Andi pretended to be a trapeze artist. She hung upside down and let the blood rush to her head.

Then her fingers slipped.

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*Thud!* Andi hit the ground. She landed flat on her back and got the breath knocked out of her.

A grinning ranch hand walked by just then. He picked her up and brushed her off. "You hurt, Miss Andi?"

It took a few seconds to get enough breath to speak. "No. I don't think so. But I don't think I want to be a trapeze artist anymore." She looked around the yard. Her gaze fell on Duke, Prince, and King, the ranch dogs.

A lion tamer!

Andi cheered right up. She yanked the buggy whip from its socket and lined up the dogs in a straight row. "I'm in single-handed battle with you savage jungle beasts!"

*Crack!* She snapped the whip above their heads.

Yipping, the dogs scattered and ducked behind the barn.

"Come back here, you lions!" Andi hollered.

"Enough nonsense, madame lion tamer." Chad took the whip away. "This belongs in the buggy, not left lying on the ground for me to pick up later."

Andi tried to snatch the whip, but her brother was too tall. "Give it back!"

Chad shook his head. "Nope. You never put anything away." He shoed her off to play someplace else.

Andi scuffed the dirt. *I guess it's back to bareback riding.*





On Saturday morning, Andi was up before the rooster stopped crowing. She finished her barn chores and slid into her breakfast chair with a sunny smile.

“May we go to the street parade, Mother? It’s free. The circus posters said so.”

Mother sighed. “I have too much to do this morning, sweetheart. Besides, I’d rather not stand around wilting under the sun for two hours.” She shook her head. “No, I think this afternoon’s show will be enough excitement for one day.”

Andi slumped. *I’m not a flower. I won’t wilt.*

She didn’t speak her thoughts out loud, though. Mother usually put her foot down even harder when Andi argued or talked back.

She peeked at Melinda. *Your turn.*

“I heard the entire town is turning out for it,” Melinda said. “The weather has cooled a few degrees. We don’t have to stay for the whole parade. Please, Mother?”

Mother hesitated.

“How about this?” Mitch asked. He swallowed his last drops of coffee. “I’ll take the girls to the parade. After all, how often does the circus come to town?”

Joy bubbled up inside Andi when Mother said yes. “Yippee!” She shot out of her chair and threw her arms around Mitch’s neck. “Thank you!”

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“Don’t keep them out too long,” Mother said. “And, Andrea?”

“Yes, Mother. I know. I’ll wear my hat and—”

“Change out of those overalls and into something decent for visiting town.”

Andi didn’t argue.

She was dressed and waiting in the barn when her brother and sister walked in. “Please, Mitch. No buggy. Can we ride? I need to make up for all those weeks when my arm was healing.”

She held it up. “See? Good as new. Doesn’t hurt a bit.”

“Sure.” Mitch turned to Melinda. “If it’s all right with you, Sis.”

Melinda eyed her horse. “So long as you saddle Panda for me.”

“Don’t saddle Taffy,” Andi piped up. “I’m a champion bareback rider.”

Mitch gave her a puzzled look.

“I’m a *sitting-down* bareback rider,” Andi quickly added. “Taffy and I jump through flaming rings, but I always stay seated.”

It was best to remind Mitch that she was not trying any new riding tricks. One broken arm was enough.

“Good idea.” Mitch chuckled and set to work saddling Panda and Chase, his sorrel gelding.

The sun was up and already blazing when Andi,

## Ready, Set, Go

Mitch, and Melinda prodded their horses along the twelve-mile road to town. Andi wanted to gallop, but Mitch held her back.

“No sense arriving ruffled and sweaty,” he said. “They have to unload the circus wagons from the train and line them up before the parade can even begin. We have plenty of time.”

Andi slowed Taffy to a bouncy trot and edged her way back to Mitch’s side. “You know lots about the circus, don’t you?” Melinda’s words from last Sunday swirled around in her head. “Did you really want to run away and join them?”

Mitch burst out laughing. “Melinda’s been tattling on me again.”

“Well, you did,” Melinda said in a huff. She stuffed her blowing skirt and petticoat more securely under her legs.

“Do you still want to?” Andi held her breath. Mitch was nineteen years old and all grown up. He could do whatever he wanted. *I hope he doesn’t still want to join the circus.*

Mitch shook his head. “Not anymore. Father was right to keep me home.”

Andi sighed in relief. *Thank you, God!*

“But I sure wanted to back then,” Mitch said. “So did all of my friends. We had never seen anything like it. The excitement of a circus made ordinary life look dull. The bright colors, the breathtaking

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acrobatic tricks”—he paused and winked at Andi—  
“and those clowns!”

Andi’s heart skipped a beat. “What about them?”

Mitch grinned. “I dreamed of being a circus clown, walking around on high stilts. I wanted little kids to look up at me and *ooh* and *aah*. I didn’t waste any time nailing together a pair of stilts to practice with.”

Melinda giggled. “I remember you stumbling around the yard on those stilts. You had bruises from head to toe from falling so much.”

“The circus left town before I got the knack of using them,” Mitch admitted.

Walking around on high stilts sounded like fun. If Andi could figure out how to do it, she would be taller than anybody else on the ranch. “Where are those stilts now?” she asked.

Mitch shrugged. “In a dusty corner of the barn, maybe.”

“They’ve most likely been burned up as firewood,” Melinda said.

The rest of the way to town, Andi kept herself busy thinking about how she could talk Mitch into making her a pair of stilts. Before she knew it, they were trotting down Fresno’s main street.

“Look!” she squealed.

Two blocks away, huge draft horses were slowly pulling circus wagons down the street. The parade

stretched from the railroad depot all the way past the new courthouse, headed for the large field just outside town.

Townsfolk crowded the wooden sidewalks along both sides of Tulare Street. Boys and girls dashed between the red-and-yellow baggage wagons hauling the circus tents. Jugglers tossed balls.

Buglers on white horses blew their trumpets, calling everyone to the parade. Acrobats turned cartwheels and did backward flips in the middle of the street.

“Hurry,” Andi cried. “We’re missing it!” She slid from Taffy’s back and tugged on the reins. No time to find a hitching rail. Most looked full anyway. She broke into a run. Taffy trotted along behind, snorting.

“Hold your horses, Andi,” Mitch shouted. “Wait for us.”

“I *am* holding my horse!” Andi gripped Taffy’s reins and squeezed through the crowd near a side street. The bystanders made way for the palomino. But they quickly filled in around Taffy, blocking Andi’s view.

“I can’t see,” she grumbled.

No matter how hard Andi pressed against the grown-ups, they didn’t budge. With all the jostling, shouting, laughing, and bugle blowing, nobody heard her either.

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A firecracker exploded nearby. Taffy whinnied. Andi held on tighter.

The smothering heat made Andi pant for breath. Angry tears pricked her eyes. She'd come all this way to watch the parade, but nobody would let her wiggle to the front. She saw only dark skirts, black trousers, tall hats, and wide, floppy bonnets.

Suddenly, a strong pair of arms lifted Andi high over the heads of the blocking crowd. She gasped and let go of Taffy's reins.

"Is this better?" Mitch settled her on his shoulder.

It was much better . . . until she came face-to-face with a clown ten feet tall.