

The Last Ride

AN ANDREA CARTER BOOK

• STORY EXCERPT •

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Forgiveness

A DELIBERATE DECISION TO LET GO OF
RESENTMENT TOWARD AN OFFENDER.

*If any man have a quarrel against any:
even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.*

Colossian 3:13



CHAPTER 1

San Joaquin Valley, California, Early Spring 1884

I used to look forward to letters, especially from kinfolk we don't see very often. Not anymore. Any letter in a cream envelope makes my heart skip, and not with glad anticipation.

"Look at this, Melinda!" Andrea Carter stepped out of the Fresno post office waving a cream-colored envelope. "A letter with a New York postmark." She held it up, squinting against the noonday sun. Mail for the Circle C ranch did not often include letters from clear across the country. "It must be from Aunt Lydia."

"Maybe it's not," Melinda said, holding out her hand. "Other people live in New York City too."

Andi kept the letter just out of her sister's reach and pointed to the upper left-hand corner. "The return address says 'Carter.' Who else could it be from?"

"Aunt Rebecca," Melinda teased.

Andi groaned. Their fussbudget aunt had left California right after Christmas to spend the rest of the winter with her brother's family in New York. It would be just like her to interfere from afar and send long-distance promptings for proper behavior.

"Perhaps Rebecca is writing to persuade Mother to send you back East for a visit. An early birthday gift?" Melinda's face turned dreamy. "Aunt Rebecca took me to New York for *my* sixteenth birthday. It was a whirlwind of delight."

Andi's heart sank clear to her toes. *I'd rather go on another cattle drive.*

She kept that unladylike thought to herself and regarded the envelope with suspicion. The excitement of getting news from family back East lost its appeal. She only half-listened while Melinda prattled on about shopping for fashions fresh from Paris, dining in fancy restaurants, and attending a concert by the New York Philharmonic orchestra.

The other half of Andi's mind whirled with anxiety. For reasons known only to God and Aunt Rebecca, Father's older sister took particular interest in her youngest niece's introduction into polite society. She badgered Mother constantly about Andi's lack of decorum and improper attire.

"It's high time that girl's skirts were let down and her hair pinned up," Rebecca had declared on Christmas Day. Her holiday visit was filled with similar decrees, to which Mother simply replied, "We'll see."

Andi was grateful that her mother had so far managed to keep Aunt Rebecca at bay. But in two short months Andi would turn sixteen. It was possible Mother might agree to expand Andi's horizons, and off she'd go—even if she balked—to New York or one of the other Atlantic states with Aunt Rebecca. Or worse, to the European continent.

Andi slumped and handed over the letter, as well as the rest of the mail. "You sure know how to dump cold water all over me."

Melinda's blue eyes danced with merriment. "Don't look so glum, Andi. I was just kidding. This isn't from Aunt Rebecca. Her letters always come in lavender envelopes."

Andi perked up. "In that case . . ." She snatched the envelope back and hiked herself up on Taffy. "Let's see what Aunt Lydia has to say."

Melinda gave Andi a little shake of her head. "That's not a good idea."

"It's addressed to the Carter *family*. That's us, Melinda. I want to make sure it's not from Aunt Rebecca. She could have borrowed stationery from Aunt Lydia."

Melinda looked thoughtful. "And if it's from Rebecca?"

"Then I'll rip it up."

“You better not.” All amusement faded from Melinda’s voice. She crossed her arms and gave Andi her grown-up, I-know-better-than-you look. “Wait until we get home. Mother will read the letter at supper.”

“For pity’s sake, Melinda! What’s the matter with you lately? Aren’t you the least bit curious? Or has being courted by Peter for so doggone long dulled your wits?”

At Melinda’s furious glare, Andi reddened. That wasn’t very nice. *Why do I always blurt the first thing that comes to my mind?*

Andi loved her sister, but sometimes she could be maddening. Just last month, Peter Wilson had finally—after two long years—gathered up his courage and asked for Melinda’s hand in marriage. She should be giddy with joy, not sober as a spinster schoolmarm.

“Honestly, Melinda. If having a beau and being courted means I have to turn serious and dull all the time, then no thanks. No beau for me. Not ever.”

Melinda silently mounted her sorrel horse, Panda. Her expression shouted louder than words: *Stubborn little sister. Do what you like and see if I care!* She nudged Panda and took off down the street at a lope.

Andi knew Melinda really did care. She was only trying to keep Andi out of trouble. Clutching the letter from back East, Andi touched her heels to Taffy’s flank and caught up with Melinda a mile out of town. “I’m sorry for snapping at you.” She held out the letter that had cut a sudden rift between them. “I can wait. Here. Take it.”

Melinda shook her head. “No, Andi, you’re right. Sometimes I do act like a cranky old aunt. I guess I’m just a little nervous about planning the wedding and”—she took a sharp breath—“leaving home.”

“You are?” Andi’s eyes widened at this secret slice of Melinda’s heart. Leaving home *did* sound scary. She vowed right then to be nicer to Melinda before she left home for good.

Melinda nodded. She grinned an apology for her earlier bossiness. "The letter's addressed to all of us. Let's hear what the folks have to say."

Their relationship restored, Andi smiled back.

She slowed her horse and dropped the reins, giving Taffy her head. Before Melinda could change her mind and get sensible again, Andi tore open the envelope and pulled out three pages of onionskin. Lifting the delicate paper to her nose, she breathed in the faint scent of lilac.

"It's from Aunt Lydia, all right," she announced in relief. "I'd recognize that perfumed stationery anywhere. And her writing isn't spidery like Aunt Rebecca's. It's rows and rows of perfect script." She smoothed out the letter, relaxed in the saddle, and read, "Dear Ones out West."

She looked up. "See, Melinda? She *did* write to all of us."

"You're just trying to soothe your conscience."

Andi laughed. "You bet I am." She took a breath and plunged into Lydia's letter:

It's been so long since our last correspondence. Benjamin and I hope you are faring well. Thank you for the Christmas gifts you sent by Rebecca's hand. They were much appreciated, as was the delightful news she brought concerning all of you. Justin and Lucy's little Samuel James sounds like such a blessing!

Andi paused. Aunt Lydia was right about Sammy. He *was* a blessing—and the main reason Andi had forgiven her oldest brother for marrying Lucy Hawkins a year and a half ago.

The baby had just turned four months old, and he had already wrapped his tiny hands and feet around Andi's heart. Best of all, Justin and Lucy seemed to spend more time out at the ranch than they did at their house in town.

Rebecca seems so happy since Katherine and the children moved in with her three years ago. I know she misses them dreadfully and plans on returning to San Francisco before too long.

"I wonder if Kate and the kids miss *her*. I bet they're having a fine time running Auntie's mansion on their own." Andi shook her head. "Our big sister has a lot more gumption than I. Living with Aunt Rebecca must take loads and loads of—"

"If you're going to talk discourteously, I'll take the letter," Melinda interrupted. She held out her hand.

Andi ignored her and kept reading.

Which brings me to my reason for writing. Benjamin and I are grateful for your understanding of the concerns I expressed in my previous letter, and we humbly accept your gracious invitation to take Daniel for an extended stay on the ranch. Traveling arrangements are underway for Rebecca and Daniel to head West in the coming weeks.

Andi paused. A frown furrowed her brow. She gave Melinda an accusing glare. "What's all this? Have you heard anything about our cousin staying on the ranch? I sure haven't. I'm going on sixteen, but *still* nobody tells me anything."

"If it makes you feel any better, Mother didn't tell me, either." Melinda bit her lip, a sure sign of her uneasiness. "Go on," she urged. "Read a little more. I prefer not to be caught unawares. Daniel is . . ." She cleared her throat. "Never mind. Just read."

Andi skimmed the fine script to find her place.

Benjamin insists that you be fully aware of the situation with Daniel. We believe time away from the city and its negative influences will greatly benefit our son, as well as give us time to decide the best course of action

regarding Daniel's future. Working on your ranch in the fresh, open air may well turn the boy around.

Andi looked up. "'Turn the boy around'? This is getting interesting." When Melinda didn't reply, she eagerly continued.

Please understand, Elizabeth. Daniel is a good boy, although perhaps a bit high-strung and headstrong.

Andi's heart skipped a beat. Aunt Lydia's letter had just turned a corner. It now sounded like a personal plea to Mother. Andi suddenly felt like an eavesdropper, but she couldn't keep herself from learning more.

I was heartbroken when he was expelled from Porter Academy last year, but Benjamin insisted it was nothing more than an unfortunate misunderstanding. This latest string of schoolboy pranks, however, has turned serious and resulted in Daniel's expulsion from his third school this year. Charges have also been brought over an alleged assault—

"Stop," Melinda interrupted. "I think you've read enough. Put it away."

"Put it *away*? Why? I want to find out more about this cousin of ours. Especially if he's coming for a visit. I've never met him and—"

"You've met him," Melinda said. "We all did. At Father's funeral a long time ago."

Andi furrowed her brow, but no childhood image came to mind. Father's death all those years ago was just a blur.

"I don't think Aunt Lydia intended this part of the letter for all our ears," Melinda went on. "At least not until Mother reads it first."

Andi opened her mouth to snap out a protest, but she clamped it shut at Melinda's troubled look. It warned that she knew something about Daniel—something she was unwilling to share just now.

Andi sighed. She would learn nothing by arguing. The harder Andi pushed, the tighter Melinda's lips would stay sealed. The only insight she'd gleaned was the sinking feeling that inviting Daniel to stay on the Circle C ranch was probably not a good idea.

CHAPTER 2

If only every day could be like today. No school, riding Taffy, working with Shasta—and with any other horse that comes my way. I know it's hard work, but that's all right. A rancher's life for me!

Scowling, Andi stuffed the half-read letter back in the envelope and slapped it into Melinda's outstretched hand. She flung her long, dark braid behind her shoulder and slouched. "I don't see why I can't finish the letter. We don't know if Daniel's coming for sure. Or *when* he's coming. We didn't learn if he's traveling by train or by steamer or—"

"I'd prefer not to know anything at all." Melinda slipped the envelope inside her saddlebag. "You'll just have to wait until supper. Mother will probably read the letter then."

"She didn't read the previous one to us," Andi reminded her. "And even if she does, I bet she leaves out all the interesting things." Being the youngest was a difficult cross to bear. Her three brothers and older sister were grown up, and now Melinda had joined their ranks.

Andi nudged Taffy into a trot. Why did Melinda look so anxious when she heard Daniel might be staying on the ranch? So what if he'd been expelled from school? Hadn't Andi endured the same fate a few short years ago?

Maybe the superintendent and teachers held a grudge against Daniel, the same way Mr. Foster, Andi's schoolmaster, had once held a grudge against her. True, she should not have run him down during that silly horse race with Cory, but the man could have been more forgiving.

And I suppose knocking Virginia Foster to the ground could be called assault.

Andi brightened. She and Daniel may not be so very different, after all. Perhaps her sister was overreacting—as usual.

Andi chuckled. She'd outgrown knocking schoolmates to the ground long ago. She and Mr. Foster had mended their fences and were on excellent terms. Still, Andi had no regrets that this was her last year in school. Most of her friends had left the classroom after the eighth grade, but Mother insisted Andi attend until she turned sixteen.

Andi was counting down the days.

"What's so funny?" Melinda asked.

"It sounds like Daniel and school don't get along. I can certainly understand how he feels. I'm thinking he and I might have a few things in common."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. You haven't been in trouble in school since you were a child. Daniel's nearly grown, and it appears he's *still* in trouble."

Melinda had a point. However, how well did her sister know Daniel, anyway? Andi shrugged. Leave it to Melinda to fuss over a cousin she hadn't seen since he was a little boy. "You look so gloomy all of a sudden." She grinned. "Let's race back to the ranch."

Melinda shook her head. "I don't want to arrive home breathless, with my hair mussed. Go on without me. I have a lot to think about."

"Imagine that! Your head is full of your beloved Peter—"

"You're wrong," Melinda cut in sharply. "I'm not thinking about Peter just now. Daniel is on my mind. You were too young to remember him, but I do."

"That's silly," Andi said. "You can poke along and fret to your heart's content. I'm going to race the wind. C'mon, Taffy. Let's go!"

When Melinda had shrunk to a small, black dot far behind, Andi left the road and cut across the open fields. Alone at last, she dug her heels into Taffy's sides and whooped her delight. No matter what age she turned—even if she grew as old as Aunt

Rebecca—she would never lose the thrill of racing at breakneck speed across acres and acres of empty rangeland.

“We better ride while we can,” she told Taffy when they slowed for a short rest near a stand of oak trees. Not far away, hundreds of cattle grazed, their new calves frisking beside them. “If Aunt Rebecca ends up visiting again, she’ll watch my every move like a cat watches a mouse hole. ‘Ladies never ride astride, my dear,’” she mimicked in a high, demanding voice. “‘Proper ladies ride in a carriage.’”

Taffy snorted her impatience to be off, and Andi obliged her.

Spring had arrived in all its glory on the Circle C ranch. The orchards were bursting with pink and white blossoms. Wild poppies dotted the hills, and a sheen of green covered the range. It wouldn’t last long, but for now the streams and rivers overflowed with icy runoff from the Sierra Nevada, whose jagged peaks rose in the distance.

By the time Andi arrived at her favorite spot on the ranch, both she and Taffy were sweating. She slid from her mount and splashed cold creek water against her flushed face. Then she threw herself down on the grassy carpet and stared up at the sky. How often through the years had she come here to be alone?

“Hundreds of times,” she murmured the answer. “Usually when I’m mad or in trouble with Chad.” But lately she’d begun coming here just for fun or to think—and not because she was running away from her older brother’s bossing.

Andi stretched, closed her eyes, and wondered what it would be like to have Daniel staying on the ranch for the summer. Her young nephew, Levi, had spent last spring and summer on the Circle C. The two of them had grown close during the three-week cattle drive to Los Angeles, but Chad and Mitch had kept Levi busy with ranch work the rest of the season.

“Do you suppose Daniel can ride?” she asked Taffy. She grinned at the thought of having someone to race against.

Then reality struck. If her brothers had put twelve-year-old Levi to work last year, they'd surely do the same with a nearly grown Daniel. "If he's coming out here to work, maybe I can show him how to lasso, or flush strays, or cut out calves for branding."

Taffy snorted her opinion of that and went back to cropping the new grass with short, quick bites.

"Chad knows how much I want to help run the ranch," Andi said. "He even admitted I pulled my weight on the drive. I just have to keep reminding him I can do the job." She sat up and drew her knees up underneath her wide, split skirt. "This dratted skirt is sure a bother. I miss my overalls."

At least Mother didn't insist Andi spend every waking moment in tightly corseted stays and proper ladies' garments. Only on Sundays and special occasions.

Andi dreaded Sundays and special occasions.

Talking to Taffy always made the hours fly. By the time the sun dropped halfway to the western horizon, Andi had gone over every possible outcome involving Daniel's visit.

Would he want to be called Daniel? Dan? Danny? What did he look like? Was he tall? Short? Muscular? Skinny? Would he want a girl tagging along behind him? Would she and Daniel be friends, or would he prefer Melinda's ladylike company?

The more Andi thought about her only cousin, the more excited she grew. She stuffed Melinda's concerns into a little-used corner of her mind and mounted Taffy to return home.

Deep in thought, Andi didn't notice the welcoming whinny as she and Taffy shot past a small herd of adolescent horses. One young fellow, a striking chocolate palomino, broke away from his companions and streaked their way.

He caught up to the pair and planted himself smack in their path. The colt rose to his hind legs, flicked back his ears, and came down hard, digging his front hooves into the ground. He whinnied a challenge.

Andi laughed at her colt's antics and brought Taffy to a stop. She dismounted and ran straight for the youngster. "Shasta!" she cried merrily. "I apologize. Honest, I do!"

After a quick nose greeting and a soft whicker for Taffy, Shasta gave all his attention to his young mistress. He nodded, shook his flaxen mane, and stamped the ground with his left foot.

Andi grabbed his muzzle with both hands and brought it close to her face. "No tantrums, mister. I went to town and came back the long way. I'm sorry I didn't take you along when Taffy and I went up to my spot, but it would have been clear out of my way to come back for you."

Shasta whickered and settled down. He nibbled at the long braid hanging over Andi's shoulder. Then he snorted. *You're forgiven*, he seemed to be saying. *But don't let it happen again.*

It was true that Andi, Taffy, and Shasta usually rode together these days. They'd been a threesome almost since the day Shasta had been foaled. His twin, Sunny, had found a home almost two years ago, but Andi refused to be parted from Taffy's other colt.

Shasta stood like a perfect gentleman while Andi prepared to mount. At fifteen hands, the colt already matched his dam in height. He wasn't quite old enough to be seriously ridden, but Andi didn't weigh much, and it was only a short jaunt back to the ranch yard.

"How much simpler this would be in a pair of britches," Andi complained. Her split skirt allowed her to ride astride, but it didn't make mounting bareback any easier. Shasta was patient, though, and Andi finally hiked herself up on his back.

With the barest shift of her weight and a quiet voice command, the young horse took Andi into the yard and stopped in front of the barn. Taffy followed, as if watching over her young charges.

"Show off," someone remarked with a snort.

Andi turned toward the old cowhand. "I'm not showing off."

Sid McCoy, the ranch foreman, crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a crooked smile. "I don't mean *you*, Miss Andi." He nodded at Shasta. "I mean that young upstart of a colt you're riding. He thinks he's the cleverest thing on four hooves."

"And the prettiest, most spirited—"

"Orneriest!" Sid barked.

Andi slid from Shasta's back and went nose to nose with the old man. It was hard to do, since Sid towered over Andi by a full head. "Shasta is *not* ornery!" She stepped back. "Maybe a mite spoiled, but—"

"A *mite* spoiled?" Sid unfolded his arms and planted his fists on his hips. "Shasta's the 'little prince' of this spread and everybody knows it. Fact is, Chad's been so busy this spring he went and hired himself an experienced wrangler to work with that whole bunch o' two-year-olds." He smirked. "Shasta included. That should bring his highness down a peg or two."

Andi's mouth dropped open. "Chad never said a word about it to me." She narrowed her eyes, suspecting Sid was pulling her leg just to see her squirm. "Your joke is not very funny. Hire an outsider? That's the craziest thing I ever—"

"It's the gospel truth, Miss Andi," Sid interrupted. "The new man showed up this morning."

He pointed across the yard, where a tall figure in scruffy ranch clothes straddled the top railing of the big corral. Just below, a small black and white, collie-type dog lay perfectly still. Both man's and dog's gazes were fixed on the young horses trotting around inside the circular pen. Andi recognized two black fillies and a bay colt, all nearly the same age as Shasta.

Sid gave a sharp whistle.

The horseman turned and waved. The dog bounded to his feet, suddenly alert, tail wagging.

Andi's stomach somersaulted. *Experienced?* This youngster didn't look old enough to shave. What was Chad thinking? "He's not going anywhere near *my* colt," she said. "And neither is his dog. We've got enough dogs around this ranch already."

Sid ignored Andi's grumbling and motioned to the new hand. "Come on over here a minute." He caught Andi's sleeve before she could take off. "Stay put. I want him to meet Shasta, and you too."

"Why? I see no reason to—"

"Cuz I'm the ranch foreman, and I'm tellin' you to."

Andi closed her mouth. Sid meant business. "Yes, sir."

The young wrangler dropped lightly from the corral railing and hurried over. Dark-brown hair blew across his forehead. Hazel eyes peered out from under his broad black hat like two dusky pools of water.

He grinned. "Yes, sir?"

Sid snorted. "Since when did you start calling me 'sir,' boy?"

"Since I started earning wages on this ranch. You're my boss, aren't you?"

Sid shook his head. "Not this time around. Chad hired you." He jabbed a finger at Shasta. "Meet his royal highness, soon to be one of your charges."

The wrangler let out a long, low whistle. "What a fine-looking colt. He'll be a pleasure to work with."

Andi bristled. Who was this stranger? Chad ran the ranch, but Andi was mighty tired of her brother running her life. Or her colt's. She and Chad were training Shasta, not some wet-behind-the-ears outsider. *Why didn't Chad ask me what I thought about this hiring business?*

She whirled on the new man. "Chad can do what he likes with the rest of the colts, but Shasta's mine. I'm in charge of his training."

The wrangler looked taken aback. He shoved his hat back off his forehead and said, "Yes, *ma'am*." A smile twitched his lips.

Sid burst out laughing. "She's still got a mind of her own, ain't she, boy?" He turned to Andi. "Sorry I didn't make a proper introduction sooner, Miss Andi. It's been a while since you two saw each other. Riley's grew up some, ain't he?"

Riley whipped off his hat. "Howdy, Miss Carter. It's good to be back on the Circle C after all these years." Smile lines crinkled his face. "And you've grown up too, I see."

Andi stared at Riley, dumbstruck. Riley? Sid's *nephew* Riley and Andi's constant companion when she was small? She peered into his face, searching for a hint of the little boy who had filled her days with adventure so many years ago.

It was no use. Andi didn't recognize him. She did recognize, though, that *this* Riley was quite old enough to shave, and he should have taken care of it this morning. She flushed.

"What is it?" Riley chuckled at her close scrutiny. "Have I got a wart on my nose?"

Andi blinked and stepped back. Her flush deepened. "I-I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't mean to be rude." How long had she been gawking at this young . . . stranger? *Yes, he's a stranger. A stranger with Riley's name.*

A soft yelp from Riley's feet saved Andi from embarrassing herself further. Riley reached down and scratched the dog. "This here's Tucker. Smart as a whip. Pa gave him to me a few years back. Sid says another dog on this big ranch is no trouble." He paused and straightened, as if waiting for Andi's approval.

It wasn't any of Andi's say-so. She shrugged and rubbed Shasta's nose. As if from nowhere, a lump of sugar appeared in Riley's hand. Shasta gobbled it up and nuzzled the wrangler for more.

Sid broke the awkward silence. "Your brother knows what he's doin', Miss Andi. Shasta's good blood. Chad only wants the best for him." He scratched at his whiskered chin. "He wouldn't hire Riley if the man didn't know his business."

Man? Andi frowned. "He's too young to have any experience."

"I am *well* into my nineteenth year, Miss Carter," Riley protested, all the while stroking Shasta's neck. "When I left your ranch and rejoined my family, Pa was transferred to Fort Bridger, then to Fort Laramie, and later all over the west. When Fort Yuma closed last fall, I figured it was time to strike out on my own."

"Tell Miss Skeptic what you've been up to at all them forts, boy." Sid's eyes blazed with pride.

"There wasn't a fort in the last eight years where I didn't have full charge of the army's horses, including training their young stock," Riley explained. "You've nothing to fear from me regarding your colt's training. Horses take to me, see?" He let Shasta rest his head on his shoulder. "We're friends already."

"He's got the gift," Sid said.

"We'll see." Deep down, Andi knew Sid was right. What her brother didn't know about horses could not fill Mother's thimble. If Chad thought Riley could handle the job, he undoubtedly could.

But do I want him to?

Andi didn't like the idea of any stranger—even Riley—training Shasta. She sighed. Chad pretty much did what he figured was in the best interest of the ranch. There wasn't a lot Andi could do about it when her bossy brother made up his mind.

There was one thing she *could* do, though. She could find out if the new wrangler was in charge of all the two-year-olds, or if Shasta would be left in her hands.

I'll ask Chad at supper.

The Last Ride

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