

*Chapter One*

## RACING INTO TROUBLE

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, LATE SUMMER, 1880

**T**welve-year-old Andrea Carter wrapped her fingers around the reins of her palomino mare, Taffy, and glanced at the rider to her left. Her friend Cory caught her look and grinned. He blew a strand of straw-colored hair from his forehead and tightened his grip on his own mount—a large chestnut gelding.

“I’m gonna beat you today, Andi,” he said. “You wait and see. I can’t hold my head up in this town anymore—not since the Fourth of July.” He leaned over the side of his horse and lowered his voice so only Andi could hear. “You winning that race was nothin’ but luck. And I’m gonna prove it.”

Andi tossed one of her thick, dark braids behind her shoulder and laughed. “Flash couldn’t beat Taffy back in July, and he sure can’t beat her now. I don’t know why I let you talk me into this.”

“Because you like to race as much as I do,” Cory shot back. He turned to the dark-haired boy standing on the ground beside the horses. “You ready, Jack?”

Jack Goodwin nodded. He stepped up and balanced himself on the corner of a nearby watering trough. In a loud, clear voice he announced the coming race. “Ladies and gentlemen of Fresno! Step right up for the match race of the season.”

A few curious citizens stopped at the sound of the boy’s voice. When they realized the race involved nothing more than some idle youths wasting time, they shook their heads and continued down the boardwalk.

“Get on with it, Jack!” A tall, redheaded boy called from several yards away, where a handful of children had gathered to watch. “It’s hot out here.”

“Aw, keep your shirt on,” Jack said. He cupped his hands to his mouth and continued his speech. “This race is for the 1880 fall championship of the county. Riding the sleek chestnut gelding, Flash, is Cory Blake. Cory’s pa runs the best livery in the whole valley.”

“We know who’s riding Flash,” another boy yelled.

“I’m puttin’ up the prize money,” Jack snapped, “so I can do the announcin’ any way I like.” He raised his voice. “Next to Cory, mounted on the beautiful palomino mare, Taffy, is Andi Carter. Most of you know her folks own the biggest spread around these parts. Finest horseflesh in—”

“Hurry up!” Cory cut in.

“Please, Jack,” Andi pleaded. “It’s mighty hot.”

“Oh, all right.” Jack took a deep breath and looked at the riders. “Listen up, you two. This match race is a short loop around town. It starts here, in front of the mercantile. Turn right on Tulare and head outta town ’til you come to Kincaid Vineyards.”

Andi opened her mouth to tell Jack she knew the course better than he did, but clamped her jaw shut when he waved an impatient hand in her direction.

“You each snatch a bandana from Ike and head back to town,” Jack went on. “Past the schoolhouse. Turn right on J. I’ll be here with the prize for the winner.” He held up a silver coin. “A dime’s worth of anything in my pa’s store!” There were cheers and shouts from everyone but Andi and Cory.

Cory rolled his eyes. “We shoulda raced real quiet-like—just you and me—before half the kids in town found out about it,” he told Andi.

Andi nodded but didn’t answer. Her gaze was fixed on Jack.

He jumped down from the wooden trough, bowed for his audience, and lifted his arm. “Go!” He dropped his arm to his side.

Flash and Taffy leaped forward as one. Shouts of “go, Andi” and “you can beat her, Cory” exploded from the sidelines.

Joy surged through Andi as she nudged her horse into a gallop. Cory was right. She loved to race. There was nothing she would rather do. She didn’t care if the sun beat down on her bare head or the wind against her face felt hotter than a blacksmith’s forge.

*I’m racing, and I’m going to win!*

Andi and Cory galloped their horses along J Street. The buildings blurred together into one continuous streak of boards and brick. The Arlington Hotel blended into the hardware store and pharmacy. The Sequoia Restaurant appeared as a smudge of glass and color.

Cory swerved to avoid a buckboard wagon, giving Andi a sudden, unexpected advantage. The red-faced driver stood up and shook his fist. He shouted something Andi couldn’t make out, which was probably just as well.

She passed the *Fresno Weekly Expositor* newspaper office and flew around the corner of Tulare Street. The sound of hoofbeats a few feet away spurred her to go even faster. Cory was making up for his unexpected interruption.

Andi knew her friend was partly right about the Fourth of July. Sometimes luck *did* play an important part in a horse race. Cory’s gelding wasn’t named Flash for nothing. He could very easily gain the lead.

Andi pulled a little farther ahead of her opponent. A finger of worry tickled at the back of her mind. Racing down Tulare Street was risky. She’d have to pass right by her oldest brother’s law office. Although Justin was remarkably patient with her most days, Andi doubted he’d approve of her racing through town at breakneck speed.

Before she knew it, the danger of discovery was past and she was heading out of town. Cory galloped up alongside her, gave a cheerful wave, and pulled out ahead. Andi leaned forward and willed Taffy

to catch up. They were neck and neck when Kincaid Vineyards came into sight.

Andi reined Taffy to a dead stop in front of a tall, smiling youth. Dust flew everywhere. She snatched the bandana from Ike's hand and drew Taffy around in a sharp pivot. Cory was right beside her on Flash, pleading with his horse to go faster.

"Come on, Taffy," Andi encouraged her mount. "You can beat that ol' gelding any day." The palomino leaped forward, gaining speed on the flat stretch of road that led back into town.

In no time, Andi found herself in the lead, racing down the final stretch of the course. She flew past Davy Cooper, who was sitting on the steps of the two-story schoolhouse, looking bored. He jumped up when he spotted the riders and waved them toward the finish line.

Andi glanced over her shoulder and flashed Cory a smug grin. He'd never catch her now. It was only a few more blocks.

"Andi! Look out!"

Cory's shout sliced through Andi's triumph. She whirled, gasped, and gave the reins a frantic jerk. "Whoa!"

Taffy planted her hooves in the dusty street and nearly sat down. A thick cloud of dust engulfed horse and rider. The mare struggled to regain her footing. She reared up with a frightened whinny.

"Easy, girl," Andi patted her horse's neck. "It's all right. Settle down."

Taffy snorted and tossed her head. Her hooves crashed to the ground only inches from a figure sprawled in the middle of the street. More dust puffed up.

Andi waved the fine powder away from her face and leaned over Taffy's neck for a better view. "Oh *no!*" Her stomach turned over.

A man lay sprawled on his back in the middle of the street. His eyes were squeezed shut, and he'd flung his arms across his head as if to ward off a blow. Two traveling satchels lay open beside him, with books and papers scattered in disarray. A few sheets of paper drifted away on the afternoon breeze.

Andi slid from her saddle and dropped down beside the man. “Are you all right, mister?” Her voice shook. *Oh, please let him be all right*, she silently prayed.

Slowly, as if he couldn’t believe he had escaped death, the stranger lowered his arms and opened his eyes. He didn’t answer Andi. Instead, he groaned and pulled himself to a sitting position. He seemed dazed.

Cory ran up. “Is he hurt?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t said anything yet.” Andi laid a hesitant hand on the man’s arm. “I’m really sorry, mister. Can I help you up?”

The man blinked and glanced around. Then he narrowed his eyes and pierced Andi with an angry look. “Let me be, you young ruffian!” he snapped, suddenly alert.

Andi jumped up in alarm. The bandana she’d been clutching fell from her hand. “Are you hurt? Do you want me to run for the doctor?”

“Certainly not.” The man struggled to his feet and began brushing dust from his well-tailored, dark-blue suit coat. He coughed, took a few cautious steps, and let out a relieved breath. “No bones broken.” He glared at Andi. “No thanks to *you*. Is this the usual welcome a stranger receives in this dusty frontier town?”

“It was an a-accident,” Andi stammered. She picked up a book, dusted it off, and held it out. “Honest. I didn’t mean to run you down. We were racing and I didn’t see you—”

“Shame on you!” He snatched the book from Andi’s hand and stuffed it into his satchel. “No reputable family would allow their daughter to make a public spectacle of herself—racing through the streets, trampling innocent bystanders.” He brought his dust-caked face close to Andi’s. “Do you realize I could have been killed?”

Staring into the man’s dark, furious eyes, Andi knew he spoke the truth. Another step or two, and Taffy would have run right over the top of him. He might have been killed or crippled. Shivers skittered up her neck. She swallowed her horror and whispered, “Yes, sir. I’m *very* sorry.”

The stranger snorted his opinion of Andi's apology. He reached down and began gathering up his scattered papers. "Rowdy, undisciplined youngsters. The sheriff will certainly hear about this."

The sheriff? *Oh no!* "Please, sir, let me help you carry—"

Cory tugged on her sleeve. "I'm getting outta here," he whispered in her ear. "He's not hurt, and he sure doesn't want our help." He edged closer to his horse, pulling Andi along. "We'd best give him a chance to simmer down."

Andi was too frightened to stay behind by herself. Trembling, she mounted Taffy and nudged her mare into a jolting trot.

"Wait! Don't you kids run off!" the stranger bellowed. "We're going to see the sheriff."

Andi watched Cory gallop down the street to safety. Then she pulled Taffy to a stop. Her fingers gripped the reins in indecision. *What should I do? Follow Cory? Try to apologize again and ask the man to leave Sheriff Tate out of this?*

Fear won.

Andi urged Taffy back toward the center of town. She glanced over her shoulder in time to see the man snatch up his satchels, hurry across the street, and disappear inside the schoolhouse. The door slammed shut.

"We're in a heap of trouble," Andi told Cory when she caught up. "We shouldn't have run away. When Sheriff Tate finds out and tells our folks . . ." Her voice trailed away in misery.

Cory slowed his horse to a walk. "He doesn't know who we are. Besides, it was an accident. Give him a day or two and he'll forget all about it."

"You didn't see where he went," Andi said. "I did. He walked into the schoolhouse like he owned it." She gulped. "You don't suppose—"

"Don't even think it." Cory cut her off. "He can't be the new schoolmaster. Your brother wouldn't agree to hire such a bad-tempered man . . . would he?"

Andi didn't know, nor did she care to guess what Justin and the school board had been up to this summer. "But what if he is?"

Cory sighed. "If he is, then you're right. We are in a *heap* of trouble."