

Chapter One

UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, FALL 1880

When twelve-year-old Andrea Carter brought her palomino mare to a stop next to her favorite fishing spot, she expected to find a creek full of trout.

Instead, she found a dead man.

He lay sprawled facedown in the middle of the creek bed. Thick, dark mud plastered his clothes and head. One hand dangled limply in a pool of dirty water. The creek, which Andi was sure would be filled after two rare downpours this week, trickled past the lifeless stranger in shallow, muddy channels.

Andi swallowed her shock and fought to calm her racing heart. She knew she should dismount and see if the man was really dead, but her feet stayed frozen in the stirrups.

Gripping Taffy's reins, Andi glanced behind her shoulder at the two riders galloping toward her. *This is what I get for always coming in first. Next time we race, Cory can win. Let him find the surprises.*

"I'm not going near any dead man. Uh-uh. Not by myself." Her voice shook. "You hear me, Taffy? We stay put until Cory and Rosa catch up."

A moment later, Cory reined his chestnut gelding alongside Andi. "You beat me, but it wasn't a fair race. I didn't see that little gully until . . ." His voice trailed off. "What's wrong, Andi?"

She pointed toward the creek bed. "Him."

Cory's mouth dropped open. "What in the world?"

Rosa pulled up on her horse. When she saw the body, she gasped.

“¿Quién es? ¿Qué pasó?” She crossed herself and mumbled a quick prayer.

Andi shook her head. “I don’t know who he is, and I don’t know what happened. I didn’t want to do anything until you two got here.”

“We’re here now. Let’s go see.” Cory dismounted and tossed his reins around a scraggly branch of an oak tree. “Maybe he’s not as dead as he looks. We should at least get him out of the mud.”

“I reckon you’re right,” Andi said, but she made no move to leave her saddle.

Cory chuckled. “It’s a good thing the creek isn’t as full as you promised, or he’d have drowned for sure—I mean, if he isn’t dead already.” He squinted up at Andi. “Come on.”

Andi slid off Taffy and dropped the reins to ground-tie her horse. She didn’t find anything funny about a dead man half-buried in the creek bottom. She looked up at Rosa, still astride her mount. “Aren’t you coming?”

Rosa shook her head. “I will stay with the horses.”

For once, Andi agreed with her cautious Mexican friend. This wasn’t the kind of scrape Andi usually stumbled into. Knocking down the schoolmaster during a spur-of-the-moment horse race or breaking a window playing baseball was more her style; or maybe a close call with an unbroken horse; or barging into her brother’s law office during an important meeting with a client.

But not this. Not finding a *dead* man.

She shivered, in spite of the blistering California heat.

“Andi! You coming?” Cory hollered and clambered down the steep creek bank. “Hurry.”

Andi sighed. “I better help him,” she told Rosa, and scurried after her friend.

She grimaced all the way down the embankment. Each step sank her deeper into the muck. By the time she reached Cory’s side, her overalls were splattered with mud. She bent over the man and drew

a sharp breath. Up close he looked *very* dead. His face was ashen between the streaks of dirt.

“Is he”—she swallowed—“is he dead?”

Cory shook his head. “Nope. I shook him, and he moaned.”

Andi let out her breath. “That’s good.”

“But he’s in bad shape,” Cory said. “There’s no telling how long he’s been here. We need to get him out of the sun and into some shade.” He reached under the man’s shoulders and yanked. Nothing happened. “He’s stuck.”

Andi jumped up to help, but no amount of grunting and groaning and heaving moved the man so much as an inch. She let the man’s arms drop to the ground. “What’re we going to do? Even with Rosa’s help, we’ll never get him out on our own. We’re not strong enough.”

“One of us could ride to your place and bring back some of the ranch hands to help,” Cory suggested.

“That would take too long.” Andi glanced up. Rosa had dismounted and was sitting in the shade of an oak. “I’ve got an idea. I’ll be right back.” She squished her way up the embankment and hurried to Taffy.

“Is the *hombre* dead?” Rosa asked.

“Not yet.” Andi grabbed a coil of rope from her saddle horn and ran back to Cory. She thrust it into his hands. “Here. Put his arms and shoulders through the loop. Then cinch it up.”

Cory went to work.

Andi put two fingers to her mouth and whistled. Reins dangling, Taffy stepped to the edge of the creek bank.

“Rosa!” Andi called. When her friend appeared, Andi tossed the rest of the rope up the incline. “Tie it around the saddle horn. Then slowly back Taffy up when we say so.”

Rosa caught the rope and nodded.

“I’m ready,” Cory said from his place next to the unconscious man. “I hope this doesn’t kill him.”

Andi signaled to Rosa, who began to lead the palomino away from the creek.

Andi and Cory placed their hands on the man's limp form to steady him. The rope went taut, and the man moaned. Then with a loud sucking sound, the mud gave way and he slid quickly toward the bank.

"Hold up!" Cory shouted. The rope went slack. "Now pull him along real careful, Rosa." Slipping and sliding, they guided the stranger up and over the creek bank and into the shade.

"I don't think that did him any good." Andi crouched beside the body. "He looks terrible. Do you reckon he's still alive?"

Cory dropped down beside her. "Let's roll him over and see."

As soon as they turned him over, Andi shook him. "Mister, are you all right? Wake up." She waited for a reply, but none came. The stranger lay still as death.

"Go get your canteen," she told Cory. "A little water might do the trick. I caught Mitch napping under a tree last Sunday and poured a pitcher of water over his head. I never saw anybody wake up so fast."

"Bet he was hoppin' mad," Cory said. He sprang to his feet and retrieved the canteen. "Did he get after you for soaking him?"

"Yep. I ran, but not fast enough. Mitch caught me and tossed me in the horse trough." She grinned. "It was so hot that I didn't mind. We both ended up having a good laugh." She unscrewed the canteen lid. "Here goes."

A stream of lukewarm water spilled onto the man's face.

It was a miracle the way the man yelped and tried to sit up. He slapped his hands against his face and sputtered, "You tryin' to drown me?" Then he gasped and collapsed with a groan.

Andi's fear faded. "It worked. Even on a half-dead fella." She sat back on her heels, pleased. "Thank you, God," she whispered.

"That's for sure," Cory agreed. He brought his face close to the stranger's. "You know how close you came to never waking up? We

pulled you out of the creek, and none too soon. Another day or two in this heat and you'd have been buzzard bait."

"Cory!"

"He's right." The stranger rubbed his face, took a deep breath, and sat up. "Reckon I owe you kids some thanks." He studied Andi through bloodshot eyes and pointed at the canteen. "Mind if I put some of that on the inside?"

She handed it over.

The man bent his head back and took gulp after gulp of water before emptying the rest of it over his head. He tossed the canteen aside and ran his fingers through his dripping hair. "Much obliged." He scooted back until he was leaning against the tree trunk. His hands shook. "I feel like a herd of cattle ran right over the top of me."

"Who are you?" Andi asked. "And how did you end up in the middle of the creek?"

The stranger closed his eyes and let out a long, deep breath. "Name's TJ Silver. I have no idea how I got here. I don't even know where I am." He opened his eyes. "This California?"

"Yes."

Mr. Silver nodded. "Good. Last thing I remember was finishing up a very unfriendly game of cards with the worst poker players I ever laid eyes on." He settled himself more comfortably against the tree. "I cleaned 'em out pretty good, but I guess they were sore losers and wanted their money back. I don't recall exactly how they did it, but I think they got it back."

He winced and clutched his stomach with both arms. "Something doesn't feel right."

Andi and Cory carefully pushed the man's arms aside. A bright red streak showed through his muddy shirt. Cory tugged open the fabric and gave a low whistle. "Boy, oh boy, mister. Looks like somebody sliced you up good. All your moving around must've broke it open."

Mr. Silver dropped his gaze to his stomach. "Don't remember how that happened."

“How long has it been since that card game?” Andi stared at the gash. It was seeping blood slowly but steadily.

“Wednesday night.”

“Today’s Saturday.” Andi frowned. “With a wound like that it’s no wonder you passed out. You should see a doctor. Fresno’s not far, not more than a couple of hours.”

Cory handed TJ the bandana from around his neck.

“I don’t need a doctor.” Mr. Silver took the kerchief with a curt nod of thanks. “I’ve lasted this long. I’ll go on living.”

“Are you sure?” Andi asked.

“Yeah.” He stuffed the fabric inside his shirt and pressed his hand against his belly. “I just need a few days of rest and some grub, and I’ll be on my way.” He closed his eyes and leaned back. “If you’ll hobble my gelding, I’d appreciate it.”

Andi frowned. “We didn’t see any horse.”

“He’s around here somewhere. Could you do a fella a favor and see if you can find him, Miss . . . ?” He paused and gave her a weak smile.

“Carter,” Andi responded. “Andi Carter.” She nodded to her friends. “This is Cory Blake and Rosa Garduño.”

“A pleasure,” came the man’s reply. “Now . . . about my horse?”



It didn’t take long to find the gelding. He was grazing on the parched, brown grass not too far from where his rider had ended up in the creek. The horse lifted his head and gave a challenging whinny when the three young riders drew near.

Andi brought Taffy to a stop and dismounted.

“He doesn’t look friendly,” Cory warned. “Don’t get too close. Just grab the reins and lead him back.”

Andi yanked open her saddlebags. With a confident smile she brought out an apple and waved it at Cory. “I don’t know any horse

who'd turn down a treat like this." She approached the large bay gelding with cautious steps. "Easy, fella. Look what I've got for you."

The horse pricked up his ears but kept his distance.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Andi said. "Come here."

The gelding shook his mane, snorted, and took a few steps toward Andi. His neck and chest were covered with old, dried sweat.

"Be careful, Andi. Don't spook him."

Andi threw Cory a disgusted look. "Be quiet." She moved closer. "It's all right, fella. Come get the apple, and I'll take you to your rider. Then I'll get rid of that nasty saddle. What do you say?"

Ears pricked forward, the horse walked over and took a greedy bite. By the time he chomped the rest of the apple, Andi had snagged the reins. "I've got him. Let's go."

Cory shook his head. "One of these days you're gonna meet a horse that doesn't like you. Then what'll you do?"

"I haven't met one yet I couldn't sweet-talk into behaving." She gave the bay a friendly pat and mounted Taffy.

"Oh, no?" Cory teased. "What about that wild stallion of Chad's? I seem to remember hearing about a ruckus out at your place last spring. Let's see . . ." He snapped his fingers. "That's it! You didn't get along real well with that big black horse and you almost—"

"I don't want to talk about that." Andi scowled at him.

Cory chuckled. "I'm sure you don't."

Back at the oak, Andi loosened the cinch on the stranger's horse, and the heavy saddle tumbled to the ground. Freed at last from his burden, the horse lay down and rolled.

Andi grinned. "That feels a lot better, doesn't it?"

"You really gonna stay here," Cory was saying to the injured man, "when you're so bad off?"

Mr. Silver's lips twisted into a crooked smile. "I don't feel like bouncing around on a horse for a couple hours just to see a doc. I'm feeling much improved already."

He turned to Andi, who was at work hobbling the gelding. "Could

I stay up here on your ranch, Miss Carter? If you want to play Good Samaritan, you could rustle up some grub and bring it out here the next few days. It sure would help me out.”

Andi traded glances with her friends. It was her decision. After all, it was *her* family’s ranch this poor fellow had collapsed on. Cory lived in town, too far away to run errands back and forth. Rosa would go along with whatever Andi decided, even if she didn’t approve.

By the look she was giving Andi, Rosa clearly did *not* approve. “You should do nothing until you let your brothers know about this stranger,” she said in rapid Spanish. “*Señor* Chad will decide what is best to do.”

“Chad’s too busy haying to be bothered. Besides, it’s only for a few days,” Andi replied, her Spanish just as fluent as her friend’s. “The least we can do is bring him a few supplies.”

“I don’t mean to cause an argument between you and your friends,” Mr. Silver said. “All I’m asking for is a little something to hold me over. You can ride by on a fast horse and toss it to me if you’re uneasy. I’ll be off your ranch before you know it.”

He ducked his head. “I’d be much obliged if you didn’t mention my being up here, though. The rowdies who came after me the other night might still be hanging around the area, and eager to finish what they started.”

Poor Mr. Silver would be a sitting duck if word got around of a wounded stranger up in the high pasture. “Oh, I wouldn’t think of it,” Andi promised. “You can stay. I’ve got lunch in my saddlebags.” She jumped up.

A grateful smile cracked Mr. Silver’s dirt-streaked face. “That’s right neighborly of you,” he called after her. “Thanks.”

Andi brought the contents of her saddlebags and laid everything out under the tree—two roast beef sandwiches and half a dozen molasses cookies. “Sorry, but your horse ate my apple.”

Cory and Rosa exchanged a glance, and soon their lunches joined Andi’s.

Mr. Silver eyed the food with a hungry gleam and reached for a sandwich. “This’ll hold me. You three have done me a good turn. I won’t be forgetting it.” He bit into the sandwich.

“I’m glad we could help, Mr. Silver,” Andi said. “I hope you heal up real fast.”

“My friends call me TJ,” he said between mouthfuls.

Andi grabbed Taffy’s reins and swung up into the saddle. “All right, TJ. Take care of yourself. I don’t know when I can bring you more food, but I’ll try.”

“Can’t ask for more than that.” TJ waved. “Thanks again.”

Cory and Rosa joined Andi, and the three riders headed out.