

CIRCLE C MILESTONES • 5

Yosemite at Last
AND OTHER TALES FROM
MEMORY CREEK RANCH

AN ANDREA CARTER BOOK

Susan K. Marlow



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Yosemite at Last: And Other Tales from Memory Creek Ranch

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Love

THE MUTUAL SHARING OF COMFORT,
ACCEPTANCE, AND WARMTH, WITHOUT
EXPECTING ANYTHING IN RETURN.

*Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that
loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.*

—1 John 4:7



The first story in this book opens the same day
Courageous Love (book 4) ends.



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CAN YOU COOK? OR DANCE?

Memory Creek Ranch, late June 1886

*It's hopeless. I'm not sure I will ever learn
how to cook a meal.*

CHAPTER 1

Instead of staying a few extra days to make up for their lost honeymoon, Andi wanted to go home. Riley didn't argue. He looked eager to show Andi their pretty little cottage near Memory Creek.

It's about time! Andi had already waited nearly a year to see what Riley had prepared for their new life together. No one in the Carter family gave in during those long months and let Andi peek at the project. Now, the couple's four-day wanderings in the treacherous Yosemite wilderness served only to turn Andi's heart even more toward home.

The first time Riley took her on his tour of their hand-crafted cottage made Andi gape in surprise and pleasure. Even the luxurious Wawona Hotel could not compare to her new home on her own ranch. The majestic beauty of the Sierra wilderness was forgotten when she looked around Memory Creek ranch. She never dreamed everything would be so clean, so bright, and so full of things to make her married life pleasant in every way.

At least, in every way but one . . .

"How could I have made such a complete wreck of my new kitchen?" Andi sank into the nearest chair and looked dismally around the room. They had moved in less than a week ago, and already the summer dust

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coated the counters, the windows needed washing, and Riley's ranch clothes overflowed the wicker laundry basket.

Worst of all, the succulent beef roast Andi had carefully placed in the oven just an hour ago was overdone. Actually, the roast was more than overdone. It was charred black. She hadn't yet learned the knack of managing her new cookstove. Too much wood meant a too-hot fire. Again.

Andi propped her elbows on the kitchen table, rested her chin in her hands, and glared at today's other cooking failure. "I forgot the salt," she confessed to the two sorry-looking lumps of what should have been crusty loaves of bread. They mocked her from the counter. She'd kneaded and pounded the dough until her hands ached this morning, but it was all for naught.

"Without salt, there is nothing to control the yeast." Mother's bread-baking lesson echoed too late in Andi's mind. "The dough won't hold its shape. When you bake it, the loaves turn out bland and tasteless."

Mother was right about that. Even the chickens would probably reject this evening's bucket of bread scraps. Andi sighed. *And it had smelled so good too.*

She shook her head and rose from the table. Perhaps she could clean the kitchen and still find a few minutes to scrape something together for Riley's supper. He'd be hungry when he returned home after riding miles of fence all day on the Circle C. Like a good wife, she should be ready with a hot meal.

Her gaze fell on the blackened roast and she grimaced. A hot meal, not a burnt one.

Just then, the back door flew open. "Good afternoon, my princess," Riley greeted her cheerfully. "Chad let me off early, so I thought I'd . . ." His words trailed away as he took in the kitchen.

A hot flush worked its way up Andi's neck when she saw his eyes widen. "Not a word," she managed between clenched teeth. "Not . . . one . . . word."

"I wouldn't think of it," Riley said quickly. Before he could hide it, Andi saw his lips twitching.

She fell back into the chair. “You should have stayed on the Circle C for a decent meal today. Cook’s known for the best grub west of the Sierras.”

Riley swallowed and kept quiet. He looked hungry.

Andi’s spirits drooped. Being a wife was a lot harder than Melinda or Mother made it sound. But then—she sighed inwardly—Mother and Melinda were excellent cooks.

Riley looked around once more at the devastation in their small kitchen. He winced when he saw the black chunk of what had started out as prime Circle C beef. Then he plunked down in a chair across from Andi and took her hand. “I’d rather starve and be here with you,” he said, giving her a cheerful smile, “than have a belly full of Cook’s chuck.”

His words warmed Andi clear through. She smiled. “Thanks, Riley. You’re always so patient.” Her smile vanished at a horrifying thought. “But what if I never figure out how to cook or bake something without ruining it? True, I can bake a jim-dandy pie, but not much else. You need something more filling when you work so hard.”

Riley leaned back in his chair. “Pie for supper every night sounds good to me. Nobody can beat your flaky pie crust.” A thoughtful expression replaced his grin. “I once had the same problem, you know.”

“Learning how to cook without bungling it?” Andi asked, astonished.

“No, my princess. Learning how to *dance* without bungling it.” He paused and held her gaze. “Don’t you remember?”

One side of Andi’s mouth curved up in a smile. She nodded. “Oh, yes. All too well.”

CHAPTER 2

Two months earlier

Circle C Ranch, April 1886

Andi Carter knew it would take some fancy sweet-talking, but she was bound and determined to teach Riley how to dance for their wedding in

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June. Justin would claim a waltz in Father's place, but she intended that Riley join her for their very first dance as husband and wife.

When the sun shone down bright and hot on the second Saturday in April, Andi asked Chad to give Riley the afternoon off. Early roundup was over, the calves were branded, and the hectic spring rush had quieted.

Chad agreed without asking questions. "Sure, little sister. Why not? He's worked hard these past several weeks." He waved at his wrangler. "Hey, Riley!" Like always, the entire ranch could hear Chad's hollering. "I'm giving you the afternoon off. Spend time with your fiancée."

From across the yard, Riley blinked his surprise. "Whatever you say, boss," he called back.

When the ranch boss spoke, the hired hands jumped. Today, it looked like Riley jumped faster than usual. He steered clear of the catcalls and whistles from the other hands and joined Andi at the hitching post, where she was cinching up Shasta.

"Let me finish that," he offered.

"By all means." Andi never refused help saddling her horse.

Riley whipped through the process and swung into his saddle at the same time Andi mounted Shasta. "Where to?" he asked. "Shall I teach you a new riding trick?"

Andi shook her head. As much as she would rather trick ride than dance, she knew time was running out. Only two short months remained before the big day.

On a sudden whim, she brought Shasta close to her fiancé and whispered, "What if we ride up to my special spot? Nobody needs to know we went. Just one quick peek?"

Riley's eyes opened wide. "Never! Your family would skin me alive if I gave in and ruined the surprise."

Andi's special spot plus 1,000 acres had been deeded over to the soon-to-be-wed couple. Plank by plank, Riley, the Carter family, and their loyal cowhands were building a house and barn near the recently renamed

Memory Creek. At least once a week, someone winked and told Andi what a beautiful place it was shaping up to be.

“Please, Riley?” She didn’t understand why she couldn’t lend a hand. “One little peek?”

“Nope.” Riley turned Chad Carter—stubborn. “You’ll see it when we get back from our honeymoon in Yosemite.”

Andi pouted a moment before giving in. She didn’t really want to ruin the surprise. If she went behind her family’s backs, even Mother would be disappointed. “Oh, all right. I know another spot farther downstream. It will be perfect for what I have in mind for this afternoon.”

Riley gave her a puzzled look. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

“Follow me.” Andi dug her heels into Shasta’s flank and took off.

Grinning, Riley yee-hawed and took off after her.

Half an hour later, Andi slowed Shasta near a stretch of creek bottomland. She turned her colt before he stepped into the swampy part and trotted onto a section of nearby high ground. The lush, ankle-deep grass was bright green. Blue and yellow flowers sprinkled the grass; orange poppies fluttered in the breeze.

Best of all, this small parcel spread out flat and even. Not one gopher hole or hummock marred this perfect dance floor.

Riley didn’t say anything, but his expression remained perplexed.

He would find out soon enough. Andi swung down from Shasta. “Look what I brought.”

Riley dismounted and accepted two sugar cookies she unwrapped from a small, cloth bundle that held even more. “Delicious,” he mumbled through the sugary crumbs.

“I baked them,” Andi boasted. She didn’t add *with Luisa’s help*. Things always turned out better when the Circle C housekeeper lent a hand to Andi’s baking ventures.

After the fourth cookie, Riley looked relaxed enough to learn the reason she’d brought him to this pretty little spot. *Might as well tell him all at once*, she decided. “Isn’t this a lovely spot?”

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“Uh-huh,” he agreed, reaching for a fifth cookie.

“It’s flat and hardpacked.” Andi stomped her foot to show him it wouldn’t sink under their weight. “Exactly like the spot Mother has picked out for the dancing area during the barbeque. You’ll feel right at home after I teach you to dance on this nice—”

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Riley put up his hands and backed away. The cookie fell to the ground. “I’d rather break both legs and hobble down the aisle on crutches than trip over your feet and end up looking like a fool.”

Andi crossed her arms. She wasn’t about to back down. “It’s easy as pie to learn one simple waltz.”

“No.” Riley sounded resolute.

Andi wondered if he’d rather be mucking out stalls than having this conversation. *Probably.*

“I won’t dance with just my brothers on my wedding day,” she shot back, “or with that rascally Johnny Wilson.” She jammed her hands on her hips and glared at Riley.

He jammed his hands on his hips and scowled back at her.

Now what? Getting stubborn and yelling had never worked well for Andi in the past. Besides, Mitch always said a fella—or a gal—could catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

“It’s expected.” Andi softened her tone and let her arms go limp at her sides. “Please? We’re not getting married in a tiny church in town, with a bit of cake and coffee afterward. It’s going to be a Circle C extravaganza.”

“Whose idea was *that?*” Riley growled.

Andi winced. “Not mine.” Neither she nor Riley envisioned a fancy wedding. She would rather ride off to Yosemite with her betrothed and find a willing parson to help them “tie the knot” along the way.

Mother, however, had set her heart on sending her youngest daughter to the altar in a fine way, and the Carter brothers and sisters agreed.

Outnumbered! Andi was stuck.

So was Riley.

“You only need to learn one dance,” Andi promised. “Just one waltz. It’s easy. Learn to waltz to the ‘Blue Danube’ or another piece, and I promise you needn’t learn anything else.” She gave him a saucy look. “After that, your bride will dance with all the envious young bachelors. You can drink lemonade or coffee and talk to the old ladies.”

Riley looked at her darkly, but it didn’t take much to see that the wheels were spinning around inside his head. Andi smothered a smile. He didn’t appear to like where those wheels might be headed—his bride dancing with all the other young men at *his* wedding. “It’s really expected?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Sadly, this was all too true. Andrea Carter could not cook very well, but she knew every dance step ever invented: the waltz, polka, quadrille, the Virginia reel, as well as any number of steps with unfamiliar names. When the Carter family attended the governor’s Christmas ball each year in Sacramento, Andi was expected to know how to dance well.

Riley scrunched up his face, pondering. Finally, he let out a long, slow breath. “All right, then. Let’s get it over with.”

Andi suppressed a squeal of joy and calmly answered, “Excellent. This won’t take long at all. Maybe ten minutes.” She hummed “On the Beautiful Blue Danube” and showed her fiancé the steps. “You can do that, can’t you?”

Riley looked doubtful but stumbled his way through the one-two-three motions.

After a dozen practice attempts, Andi held out her hands. “It’s time we dance together.”

“I dunno, Andi.” He backed away.

Andi refused to take no for an answer. She showed Riley where to put his hands and took a breath. “One, two, three and . . .” She hummed “The Blue Danube” even louder and stepped back with her right foot.

Riley missed the second step and hurried to catch up to Andi’s graceful steps.

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She sighed, stopped, and started over. Three steps later, she started over again . . . and again.

The fourth time around, when Andi stepped forward with her left foot, Riley stumbled backward, taking Andi with him. Down they went.

Andi landed on top of Riley with an *oof* that knocked the breath out of her. “What kind of dance step was *that?*” she demanded, staggering to her feet. How hard was a box-step waltz, for pity’s sake?

Riley apologized, and they started over.

“ONE-two-three, ONE-two-three. ONE—”

On “one,” Riley stomped on Andi’s right foot. It didn’t hurt as much as the time Taffy stepped on her foot when she was eleven, but she yelped all the same. Good thing she was wearing her riding boots. Otherwise, her sweet fiancé might have broken her toe. “Good grief, Riley! Are you trying to cripple me?”

“I’m hopeless.” He sighed loudly. “I’m never going to figure this out.”

Andi set her jaw. “Oh, yes, you are.”

“Can we quit for now and take it up again next Saturday?” Riley pleaded.

“Promise?” Andi was only too happy to put the dance lesson off another week. Her foot throbbed. Her head hurt. She glanced up at the sun. An hour had passed, although it felt more like two.

“I promise,” Riley replied.

Three Saturdays and several journal entries later, Andi finally admitted defeat. Riley was never going to figure out a simple waltz. He was too afraid of hurting her.

“He should be,” Andi muttered as she reread her previous entries. “My right foot has uncountable bruises. He’s tripped and fallen more times than I can count.”

She sighed her disappointment. Riley was a clever young man. He could teach a colt to bow and count and maybe even dance, but he couldn’t teach himself.

On the first day of May, Andi penned one final entry before she closed the chapter on Riley's dance lessons.

Our last lesson ended in a big argument. I guess I won't be dancing with my husband on our wedding day.

CHAPTER 3

Andi's birthday, May 26, dawned bright and hot. She sprang from her bed. "Eighteen years old!" Tingles raced up and down her arms. In less than a month she would become Mrs. Riley Prescott.

Her joy faded as the upcoming celebration played in her mind. She would not be dancing with her new husband at her wedding. A mixture of sorrow, anger, and frustration at Riley's ineptitude had hung over her like a dark cloud all month long.

No, she admonished herself during her birthday breakfast. *I will not let this eat me up and ruin my joy.* She would accept the fact that Riley Prescott was not perfect. The dark cloud dissolved, and Andi looked forward to enjoying her birthday to the fullest.

Later that day, Riley grabbed Andi's hand.

"What?" she asked, startled.

He led her across the yard, straight for the barn. "Your birthday gift is inside."

A birthday gift from Riley? Riley and horses went together like bread and butter, so of course the gift must be—

Andi caught her breath in anticipation. A new saddle? The precious saddle she'd received years ago for her ninth birthday had burned up when Procopio and his band of cutthroats had torched the Carters' barn last year. Since then, Andi had contented herself with a cheap replacement.

She grinned. Yes, a new saddle would be most welcome.

Riley swung the barn doors open. "After you, my princess."

Andi stepped inside the dim interior and glanced around. The wide,

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open area had been swept clean. She peered into a corner. No saddle there. No saddle blanket. No new bridle or headstall. Not even a hoof pick. The barn looked the same as always, except for the clean floor.

“Umm, where’s my present?”

Riley smiled. “I’m presenting you with your birthday gift right now, soon-to-be wife.” He said it with a glint in his eye.

Andi clapped her hands. A surprise! “Shall I close my eyes?”

Riley shook his head. His smile grew wider. Then, before Andi knew what was happening, he bowed. “May I have this next waltz, m’lady?”

Andi bit her lip. “That’s not funny.” Just what she didn’t need on her birthday was a bruised foot. Or worse, a reminder of the special waltz she would *not* experience on her wedding day.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Riley took Andi’s right hand, placed his other hand on her waist, and waited for her response.

Andi gulped back her surprise. She wanted to run the other way, but she placed her hand on Riley’s shoulder and thought, *Here goes nothing*.

“One and two and three and . . .” Riley began humming the “Blue Danube” as if his life depended on it. Every step was rhythm perfect. He swirled her around the inside of the barn area, humming the song over and over.

A minute into the waltz, Andi relaxed. Their steps were so smooth together that Andi felt like she was floating over the rough barn floor. She imagined herself in a grand ballroom and glanced up to see Riley smiling softly at her. She melted and let him lead her around and around.

When he came to a natural break in the music, Riley released her, bowed, and straightened to his full height. “Thank you, m’lady.”

“But . . . but . . .” Andi caught her breath and returned to the reality of the Carter barn. “How did you learn to waltz so beautifully?”

Riley’s face reddened. “Well . . .” He rubbed the back of his neck and struggled for words. “Well . . . when I realized how much it meant for you to dance with me at our wedding, I decided I’d best get myself another dancing instructor. Someone whose toes I couldn’t bruise quite so easily.”

Andi gaped at him. “Who?”

Riley cleared his throat and looked away. “Chad.”

“Chad? And . . . and . . . *you?*”

He nodded.

Visions of those secret dancing lessons swirled around inside Andi’s head. Oh my goodness! She would give a strongbox full of gold to have been a fly on the barn wall during those sessions. A gush of laughter escaped her throat. “You and Chad waltzing. That is the most—”

Riley clapped his hand over Andi’s mouth. He leaned close to her ear and whispered, “If you *ever* let on to a single soul, especially to Chad, I’ll . . . I’ll—”

Andi tore his hand away. “I won’t. I promise,” she said between giggles. “Because not only would you come after me, but Chad would too. It will be our secret.”



Present day

Memory Creek Ranch, late June 1886

Andi doubled over in laughter as she and Riley relived the hilarious memory. “Oh, Riley, you’re . . . you’re . . .”

“A superb dancer,” he finished with a lopsided grin, “so long as it’s ‘The Blue Danube.’”

Tears of mirth and gratefulness poured down Andi’s cheeks. Who but Riley could help Andi laugh away her lack of cooking skills? The blackened beef roast lay cold and inedible on top of the cookstove. The bread would soon find its way to the chicken coop.

Riley didn’t seem to care in the least that supper lay in ruins.

“I love you,” she burst out.

He came around the table and gathered Andi into his arms. “Here’s what you need to do. I found one dance that I practiced so much that

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I finally excelled. What is one thing you can cook—besides pies, of course—that is burnproof and tastes good?”

Andi pondered. Then suddenly, like a match lighting up a dark room in an instant, she remembered something. “Oh, Riley! A few years ago, I helped Cook on a three-week cattle drive. I had no choice but to learn to cook trail food—beans, slapjacks, fried apples in bacon, beef stew, sour-dough biscuits, even doughnuts.” Her mouth watered at the memories.

Riley smacked his lips. “Sounds delicious.”

“I know how to cook trail grub.” She hugged Riley. “Thanks for helping me remember what I *can* do and not what I can’t.”

“There’s plenty of time to try new recipes, but for now, I’m happy to eat trail grub.” He winked.

Andi smiled up at him. “If there was hope for you to learn to dance, it’s possible I can improve my cooking, with practice of course.” She giggled. “Maybe I should ask Chad if he’s willing to give *me* lessons too.”

“Andi, no!” Riley’s face contorted into an expression of mock fury. He reached out to grab her, but Andi slipped out of his reach. She snatched the ruined loaves of bread from the counter and bolted outside, laughing all the way to the chicken coop.