

CIRCLE C MILESTONES • 6

Stranger in the Glade
AND MORE TALES FROM
MEMORY CREEK RANCH

AN ANDREA CARTER BOOK

Susan K. Marlow



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Stranger in the Glade: And More Tales from Memory Creek Ranch

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Gratitude

RECOGNIZING GOD'S UNMERITED FAVOR
AND EXPRESSING THANKFULNESS FOR HIS
GOOD GIFTS.

*In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in
Christ Jesus concerning you.
—1 Thessalonians 5:18*



The first story in this book opens three months after the final story in
Yosemite at Last: And Other Tales from Memory Creek Ranch (book 5).



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AULD LANG SYNE

Memory Creek Ranch, California, October 1887

I'm stumped. I don't know what to do about this situation, but I must make a decision soon.

CHAPTER 1

"I've got something for you," Riley called, stomping the dust from his boots. Smiling, he pushed open the backdoor screen, slipped through, and clicked it shut before the lazy fall flies could sneak in. "It's a letter."

Andi wiped her hands on her apron and shoved back a stubborn lock of dark, sweaty hair. Late summer heat had continued into October, settling over Memory Creek in a stifling cloud. "Who on earth would send me a letter?"

Riley shrugged. "I have no idea. Your name is scrawled across the envelope, but nothing else. I was on my way out of town when Toby Wright waved me down. He was getting ready to ride out to our ranch and seemed happy to save himself a trip in this blistering heat."

"I don't blame him," Andi said. "What does the letter say?"

"Andi!" Riley looked hurt. "I wouldn't open your private correspondence. All I know is that it has no stamp, so it's more like a message than a true letter." He held it out.

"I thought Toby worked for Sam Blake," Andi said, accepting the envelope. She jammed it into her apron pocket. "I didn't know he ran errands too."

Riley chuckled. "Anything for a dime."

“Did you pay Toby?” Andi asked, aghast. “He didn’t carry that message far enough to earn a penny, much less a whole dime.”

“We would’ve given him a much larger tip if he’d ridden all the way out here,” Riley countered. He pointed at her apron pocket. “Aren’t you going to read it?”

“I will when I get a chance to sit down.” She swiped a dish towel across a plate and stacked it with the others. “I’m still wiping the noon dishes, and I have no idea what to prepare for supper.”

Like always.

Andi’s housekeeping and cooking skills had taken a nosedive when baby Jared entered their lives three months ago. Since her skills were already hovering near rock bottom, this new low was indeed dark.

A high, insistent wail broke through Andi’s distressing thoughts about supper. The baby was awake and hungry.

“I’ll tackle these dishes, sweetheart,” Riley offered. “You take care of our precious son.”

“Thanks.” Andi gave her husband a grateful smile and vanished out of the kitchen as fast as her legs could carry her. *At last! I can rock Jared and read.* Her fingers brushed against the envelope in her apron pocket.

By the time she’d changed Jared, fed him, and settled him on her lap to rock back to sleep, Andi’s curiosity had risen sky high. She pulled out the envelope and studied the handwriting.

Mrs. Andrea Prescott

Odd, she mused. It was a man’s bold script, and it looked familiar. She couldn’t place it, though. Anyway, what man would be writing to *her*?

Only one way to find out, I reckon. She tore the envelope open and unfolded a single sheet of thick, creamy stationery.

Andi,

If you and Riley could make time during the next few

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days to come to town, I would very much like to see you. I am in Fresno visiting my folks for two weeks, and then I will be gone again.

*I remain, as always, your friend,
Cory*

Andi caught her breath. *Cory Blake!*

She had not seen Cory for over two years, not since she and Lucy had been rescued from Procopio's outlaw camp. Cory had wanted to see Andi then too. Their meeting had been awkward, and then he vanished.

"Where has he been all this time?" she wondered.

Jared squirmed, yanking Andi from her musings. She set aside the letter and lifted the baby over her shoulder to pat his back.

"Where has *who* been?" Riley asked, joining her. He held out his arms, and Andi gratefully handed over the baby.

"Cory. He's back in town." Puzzled by this unusual request, she looked up into Riley's face. "He wants to see us." She crumpled the letter into a wad and let it fall from her fingers. "Oh, Riley! What should we do?"

CHAPTER 2

Two years earlier

Fresno, California, May 1885

Seventeen-year-old Andi Carter swung out of her saddle and dropped to the dusty ground beside her chocolate palomino. "Whatever is the matter with you?" She still had half a mile to go before she reached town, and Shasta was not cooperating.

It took Andi less than five minutes to determine the problem. She let her colt's left front foot drop to the ground and slumped against his neck. "Well, isn't this swell."

Shasta had thrown a shoe somewhere along the road to town, and Andi

had not even noticed until he started acting unhappy. “Some rider *I* am,” she muttered, rubbing his neck. “I’m sorry for pushing you back there.”

Shasta nuzzled her as if to say, *No hard feelings*, then blew a hot, horsey breath into her face.

Andi laughed. “I deserved that.” She gathered up her colt’s reins and began dogtrotting the last five hundred yards into town.

As she jogged, Andi wondered how she would keep this news from Chad. He’d reminded her half a dozen times this week to check Shasta’s feet to see if he needed new shoes. She’d put off her brother’s warnings until yesterday, when she finally brought Shasta to the ranch farrier. But Jake had quit for the day and was nowhere in sight. She’d missed him.

“Chad’s gonna have my hide.” Then a new idea perked Andi up. “Unless I solve this problem before I head home.” She couldn’t ride Shasta back to the ranch with a missing shoe, and she’d rather not go home until her colt had all four feet adequately protected.

She hurried down Inyo Street and turned onto J Street to pick up the items on Mother’s shopping list. Afterward, she would cross to K Street and sweet-talk Sam Blake into shoeing Shasta at the livery pronto. Mr. Blake knew Andi was good for the payment.

“And big brother need never know.” Andi put a spring into her step, entered the mercantile, and turned Mother’s list over to Mr. Goodwin.

“It’s good to see you, Andi,” the shopkeeper greeted her from behind the counter. He grinned. “And congratulations.”

Andi looked at him blankly.

“On your and Riley’s courtship.”

Heat exploded in Andi’s cheeks. “Thank you, sir.”

Where would Mr. Goodwin have heard about that? Only a handful of rescuers were with them last month up near Kings Canyon when Riley made his intentions known. Which one had blabbed to the shopkeeper?

Mr. Goodwin tied up several brown packages and tucked them into a large burlap sack. “I read about your courtship in the *Expositor* yesterday morning,” he said cheerfully.

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The newspaper? Andi managed a weak smile. “The paper must be mighty shy on news these days to include such a small item of interest.”

The entire town would now know that she and Riley were courting. Tongues would wag, and advice would flow from one old biddy’s lips to the other, all intended to reach Elizabeth Carter’s ears in no time.

“That’s our *Expositor*.” Mr. Goodwin chuckled. “Might as well enjoy the attention.”

Andi thanked the shopkeeper with a stiff nod, heaved the sack over her shoulder, and left the mercantile in a huff. Was nothing private?

Andi tied the sack around the saddle horn and headed for Blake’s Livery. It was one block over, but she could not escape the sly looks and smiling faces. It appeared that anything a Carter did quickly became the talk of the town.

“How perfectly splendid to hear about your courtship,” Mrs. Evans gushed, patting Andi on the arm. “Wedding bells are just around the corner. It’s about time you grew up and—”

“Thank you, but I really must be on my way.” Andi cut the woman off with a polite smile, gripped Shasta’s reins, and walked faster.

Mrs. King waved to Andi halfway down K Street. She echoed Mrs. Evans’s sentiments. “Growing up, are we?”

Groaning inwardly, Andi managed another smile and a quick nod. “Yes, ma’am.” She ducked into Blake’s Livery the minute the coast was clear. Then she peeked around the corner of the darkened livery out into the bright sunshine. “Safe at last.” She sighed her relief.

“Safe from what?”

Andi whirled. Shasta blew out and shook his mane. “Ho, boy,” she crooned. “You’re fine. It’s just Cory.” She smiled at her friend. “Gossips.”

“Ah,” Cory replied. He took two steps toward her. “Is that why you’re hiding in our livery?” He studied her with somber blue-gray eyes, as if he wasn’t sure what to say.

No wonder. Today was the first time she had seen Cory since Chad and Ellie’s engagement party back in April. When Cory had finally admitted

that Justin was right—that Cory and Andi were not meant for each other—he accepted it with a crooked grin. He'd even thanked her for her honesty, and for her willingness to lay everything out in the open and not spare his feelings.

Cory didn't look thankful now. He looked positively grim.

"I'm wondering if you or your pa would be willing to replace a shoe," Andi blurted, hoping to ease the despondent look from her friend's face. He had assured her they would always be friends, but right now she felt like Judas, the betrayer.

"Sure," Cory nodded, suddenly all business. "I can do that for you. Bring Shasta on over."

The awkwardness of meeting after two months of silence dissolved like a vapor. Cory gathered his tools.

"I can run down to Justin's and visit so I'm not in your way," Andi offered. "It might take a while to stoke the forge and bend a shoe." The more she thought about it, the better this plan sounded. She didn't want her presence to cause her friend any more discomfort.

Cory shook his head. "Actually, I'd like to talk to you, so I'm glad I caught you in town."

Andi felt herself pale. He sounded serious. "What about?" She forced a chuckle. "Shasta is not for sale."

Cory didn't laugh. "It concerns the announcement I came across in the paper." He tied Shasta to a sturdy railing and lifted the colt's foot, avoiding Andi's gaze. "I thought everything would be fine after the party," he said softly. "I meant what I said when I told you God knows best."

He lowered Shasta's foot and looked at Andi. "The trouble is my heart is not in agreement with my decision. When I read about you and Riley officially courting, the reality of it hit me. I realized I care for you more than I ought to at this point." He took a deep breath then let it out. "I can't stay."

"What are you talking about?"

Cory dropped all pretense of shoeing Shasta. "I'm leaving Fresno. My

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folks think it's a good idea, and frankly, I'd like to see something of the world. I've never even been to San Francisco."

Andi wanted to interrupt this lunacy, but her tongue was tied in a knot. A lump found its way into her throat. How could Cory leave Fresno? How could he leave his father's livery business? Worse, it sounded like he was leaving because of *her*, because he still cared for her.

Cory caught the anguish in her eyes. "This is none of your doing, Andi. You were honest with me. Your brother was honest. I thought I was all right and could move on, but I can't. Not here. Not now. This is *my* problem to solve." He smiled. "You and Riley will do well together. Honest. But I need to find my own way."

"Where will you go?" Andi whispered through her tight throat.

Cory leaned against the thick, rough post holding up this section of the livery. "The Hawaiian Islands."

Andi stumbled backward in surprise. Cory leaped forward and caught her just before she fell over a barrel. "Take it easy." He steadied her against Shasta.

"The Hawaiian Islands?" She shook her head. "They're in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. You're not a sailor. What will you do?"

Cory laughed, and his eyes sparkled for the first time since Andi had walked into the livery. "I'm not going as a sailor. I'm traveling as a paid passenger. I've saved a lot of money. It will be fun."

He turned serious. "I have to do this, Andi. I'll probably be gone for at least six months, maybe longer. By then I hope to have my head and my heart speaking to each other again. I may or may not come back to Fresno, though. The summer heat in the valley sometimes gets to me."

"When are you leaving?"

"The end of the week."

Andi winced. "So soon?"

"Yes." Cory said no more. He turned around and gave his attention to replacing Shasta's missing shoe.

Andi sat on the barrel, frozen in thought. Cory was leaving. He had

been such a big part of her life these past seventeen years. She wanted to say something to ease his departure, but she couldn't think of a thing.

Say nothing, a still, small voice whispered in her head. *Simply wish him well, go back to the ranch, and marry Riley.*

Sound advice from God's Spirit.

By the time Cory pounded the last nail into Shasta's new shoe, Andi was ready to leave. She took the colt's reins. "I'll pay your father the next time I come to town."

"You don't owe us anything," Cory said. "Consider it an early wedding gift."

"Thank you." Andi took a deep breath. "I wish you all the happiness in the world. The Hawaiian Islands sound exciting. Take care of yourself."

"I will." Cory held out his hand. "Good-bye, Andi."

Andi ignored his outstretched hand and brushed a kiss against his cheek. "Good-bye, Cory."

Then she turned and fled.

CHAPTER 3

Present day

Memory Creek Ranch, October 1887

Riley's hand on her shoulder brought Andi out of her mental brooding. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

Andi didn't know how long Riley stayed beside her while her thoughts replayed her last meeting with Cory, but he was there when she returned to her present surroundings. The baby slept on, a picture of perfect contentment on his daddy's shoulder.

"What should we do?" she repeated her earlier question.

Riley smiled. "I say that you, Jared, and I go into town and see Cory, like he asked."

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You, Jared, and I. A thrill shot through Andi at his words. She smiled back at her husband, glad to know she wouldn't have to endure a potentially awkward meeting without Riley and her baby along. "When shall we go?"

"I'm happy to rearrange any day to pay a visit to town," Riley answered cheerfully. "What about tomorrow morning? That way you won't have to agonize over what in the world the long-lost Cory Blake has been up to these past two years."

Andi nodded eagerly and relaxed . . . at least a little bit.

Andi had no idea why Cory wanted to see her and Riley. Her fingers fumbled as she dressed the baby in a cool cotton gown. She made sure her hair was neatly braided and wound around her head like a grown-up lady.

Riley donned his new plaid shirt with the pearl buttons, his birthday gift from Andi last January. His trousers were clean and pressed, and their buggy was in tiptop shape. He even gave his appaloosa a thorough grooming before hitching him up.

Andi raised an eyebrow at all these fancy doings.

"I won't meet Cory full of dust and dirt, and looking like a poor rancher," Riley explained, giving Dakota a final swipe with the brush.

Andi stepped off the porch with the baby in her arms. "But we *are* poor ranchers."

"Ah," Riley shot back, taking Jared from her, "but Cory doesn't know that." He helped Andi into the buggy, handing up the baby. She tucked her sweet little one safely in her arms to protect him from the rough road ahead.

Riley chattered nonstop during the hour and a half buggy ride into Fresno. Andi knew he was doing his best to keep her from thinking about the upcoming meeting. Listening to Riley and answering his questions about which colt they should train next or how many setting hens she'd discovered kept her mind where it should stay—on ranch matters.

Before Andi knew it, the horse was clip-clopping down Inyo Street. Riley turned onto K Street and reined Dakota to a smooth stop in front of the Blake residence, which butted up against the livery.

Riley took the baby, helped Andi down, and handed Jared back. She smiled and held the baby close. Riley's returning smile assured Andi that he knew holding her baby would keep her calm and ready for anything.

Riley didn't dillydally. He led Andi along the walk, past the two rows of blooming roses, which nearly every lady in the valley grew, and up the three wooden steps to the Blakes' front door. Raising his fist, Riley rapped on the door. "Here goes nothing," he whispered.

Andi didn't reply. Her throat felt too dry.

Cory's mother opened the door. "Oh, Andrea! I am so glad you accepted Cory's invitation to come for a visit while he's in town."

Andi relaxed. So much for Cory's cryptic letter about wanting to "see" her. He could have worded it in a way that would not have plunged Andi into a shaky past. Maybe something like, "My mother has invited you and Riley for a visit. It would be fun to see you again."

Andi shooed her thoughts away. "It's nice to see you, Mrs. Blake," she replied politely and took off her hat. It was close to falling off anyway. Jamming it over her thick braid never did the wide-brimmed hat any good.

Riley surrendered his hat as well.

Mrs. Blake gushed over Jared then ushered Andi and Riley into a small but homey sitting room. Sam Blake sat in an overstuffed chair reading the morning edition of the *Expositor*. He rose, greeted the visitors, then headed out back to his livery.

Just then, a tall, muscular young man tore around the corner from the kitchen. When he saw Andi, his eyes lit up. "Andi! It's so good to see you." He crossed the room and extended his hand. "I was hoping that you and Riley would accept my invite."

Andi took Cory's hand. "How are you?"

"Fine. Actually, better than fine." He looked at Jared then stuck out his hand to Riley. "Congratulations, old man. Boy or girl?"

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The men shook hands. “A boy.”

“Good for you!”

Andi stared at Cory. She barely recognized him. His straw-colored hair had darkened, and a neat beard covered the lower half of his face. His eyes were just as blue-gray as they had ever been, but sun wrinkles and laughter lines were everywhere. He showed no trace of the despondency he’d exhibited at their last meeting.

Cory had found peace.

Andi unlocked her tongue to ask the question burning in her mind. “Where have you been all these—”

“I know, I know.” Cory sat down and motioned Andi and Riley to take the settee across from him. “You’re full of questions. Where have I been? What have I been doing? Did I make it to the Hawaiian Islands?”

He winked at Andi. Somehow, his gesture didn’t bother her at all. “Yes, I’ve seen the Islands. They are as beautiful as they say.” He laughed. “But I didn’t stay long. Too many bugs. And the heat? Sometimes worse than the valley. Too humid.”

“Then what . . .” Andi’s voice trailed off when Cory held up his hand.

“Hold your horses. I know you like to know everything all at once, but let me tell it in my own way.”

Riley laughed and squeezed Andi’s hand. “So true.”

Andi ducked her head to hide her grin. These two knew her too well.

For the next twenty minutes, Cory wove a story of sailing, exploring, and adventuring during the summer of 1885. While it might have lasted for several years, Cory decided the sea and the Hawaiian Islands were not for him. Neither was the heat of California, so he made his way up the West coast to the state of Oregon.

“I discovered that I love the climate of the Pacific Northwest. Mild summers. Mild but rainy winters. They sure know how to grow trees in that country.”

His gaze focused on Andi’s startled reaction.

“Yes,” he said, answering her unspoken question. “In September, I

decided to visit that town your friend Jenny Grant hailed from all those years ago. Tacoma, up in Washington Territory.”

Andi’s heart leaped hearing Jenny’s name. What good times they’d had together as young girls! “I’ve missed Jenny. Is her family still in Tacoma?”

“Oh, yes,” Cory nodded. “By then, God had washed me clean of all my despair and *Why, God?* questions, so when I showed up in Tacoma, it was like meeting old friends. Jenny invited me to stay with her family while I was there.”

“Oh, my!” Andi could hardly contain her excitement at where this story might be headed. “What did you—”

“Andi,” Riley warned quietly.

“Sorry,” she whispered. But honestly! Cory was dragging this story out. She waited on tenterhooks for him to continue.

“Long story short, just for you,” Cory finished, grinning at Andi. “Jenny and I tied the knot a few months later on New Year’s Day, 1886.”

Riley whistled. “A whirlwind courtship.”

Cory looked sheepish. “What do you do when you feel God is telling you exactly what He has in mind? Jenny felt the same way, and her folks agreed, so why wait?”

Andi and Riley exchanged rueful glances. Mother and Justin had put the brakes on their own plans to be married too soon. They had waited over a year before tying their own knot.

“Jenny’s pa helped me start up a livery business,” Cory went on.

“In Tacoma?” Andi asked, now that she could talk without stammering.

“Yep.” Cory’s eyes glowed. “I love Puget Sound. Fishing for salmon. Crabbing off the dock. Not long ago, I snagged the strangest sea creature I’ve ever seen. Eight legs and—”

“They’re called arms, not legs,” a mock-scolding voice interrupted with a laugh. “An octopus has eight *arms*.”

“Jenny!” Andi leaped up.

Jared wailed his surprise and waved his small fists. She laid the crying

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baby on Riley's lap and sprinted across the room into her red-haired friend's open arms.

Well, almost open arms. One arm supported a chubby, auburn-haired baby girl less than a year old. She sat perched on Jenny's hip.

Jenny bounced up and down on her toes. The baby added her outraged howls to Jared's wailing. Andi and Jenny shrieked their joy at seeing each other. The room exploded into an uproar.

Finally, Cory stepped in. "Come to Papa, Cissy." The child went readily into her father's arms. He turned to Riley and yelled over the din, "Let's take the babies outside and let them wail to their hearts' content. That way Andi and Jenny can catch up in peace."

Andi ignored the commotion. She gave Riley and the baby only a passing glance before hugging Jenny again. He was already on his way out the door. Cory was only footsteps behind him.

The door slammed shut.

"Jenny!" Andi grabbed her friend's shoulders and shook her. "Was it *your* idea to keep me in the dark about you and Cory until you decided to jump out and surprise me?"

Jenny doubled over in laughter. "You bet it was. I thought it would be the best surprise ever." She straightened and met Andi's gaze. "Was it?" Her wide, brown eyes turned serious. "Was it the best surprise ever?"

Andi didn't hesitate even a moment. "Oh, yes! I am *so* happy for you and Cory." Her heart overflowed with joy and thanksgiving. "My only sorrow is realizing that you and Cory and that perfectly adorable baby girl won't be living here in Fresno."

Jenny grabbed Andi's arm and led her over to the settee. No one else was in the room. Cory's mother had ducked into the kitchen. Coffee and cakes could be served later.

"The good news is that Cory, Celia, and I are here for two whole weeks." Jenny pulled Andi down beside her. "Oh, Andi! It's been ages. I want to see the Circle C again. I want to see where you and Riley live.

I want to cuddle your baby and let you bounce my baby on your knee. I don't want to waste even one minute of our stay here in the valley. I want it to feel just like old times before I return to Tacoma and have to be a grown-up, married lady again."

A smile spread across Andi's face. She couldn't wait to show off her house, the ranch, and Shasta. A bold thought made her catch her breath. She would challenge Cory to a horse race, for old time's sake. Right where they used to race time and time again, on the stretch of rangeland that was now Memory Creek ranch.

Andi released her breath in a long, happy sigh. "Oh, yes, Jenny. We'll have so much fun reliving old times."



As Riley, Andi, and baby Jared bumped their way back to Memory Creek ranch that evening, Andi's joy sang out softly:

Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And days of auld lang syne?
For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne,
We'll take a cup of kindness yet
For days of auld lang syne.