

Heartbreak Trail

Also by Susan K. Marlow

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CIRCLE C MILESTONES • 2

Heartbreak Trail

AN ANDREA CARTER BOOK

Susan K. Marlow

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Publications

Heartbreak Trail: An Andrea Carter Book

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Endurance

THE INWARD STRENGTH TO WITHSTAND
HARDSHIP WITHOUT GIVING UP

I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

Philippians 4:13



California
1883



San Joaquin R.

Circle C Ranch

Fresno

Kings R.

Visalia

Tule R.

Tulare Lake

Kern R.

Bakersfield

Buena Vista Lake

Ft. Tejon

Tehachapi Mts.

Pacific Ocean

Los Angeles



Trail Drive Route:



CHAPTER 1

San Joaquin Valley, California, Spring 1883

I thought I was well on my way to outgrowing my penchant for finding trouble. Not so. Ever since Levi showed up at the ranch a month ago, I've discovered that keeping him out of trouble usually backfires and plunges us both smack dab into the middle of a muddle.

Fourteen-year-old Andrea Carter scanned the miles of gullies and scrub-dotted rifts cutting the Sierra foothills and grunted. “Where’s that boy got to *now*?” Not for the first time this month, Andi was glad she had older brothers. Younger ones were too much trouble. Levi wasn’t her brother, but her sister Kate’s son was close enough in age to pester Andi like a little brother might.

Or to get lost?

Her heart skipped at the thought. “Levi!” she hollered for the third time, shading her eyes against the sunshine. “What’s taking you so long? Are you lost back there?”

Surely not. The valley was only a mile long and maybe a quarter mile wide, with only one way in or out. Andi sat on Taffy, her palomino mare, near the main trail. The April sun blazed hot and bright, and the brushy thickets lining the creek bottom offered little in the way of shade. The

gully did, however, abound with countless hidey-holes for cows and their new calves.

It also held a boy who didn't know as much about being a cowboy as he thought he did.

Anxious to be included in the spring roundup, Andi had offered to help out on Saturdays, promising she'd do anything her brothers asked. Chad had snapped up her offer quicker than a frog after a fly. "Sure, little sister. You and Levi can scout around the draws and root out stragglers. I want to get the last of the calves branded before the drive."

The cattle drive. Andi chewed her lower lip and slumped in the saddle. She had always wanted to go along on a real dust-in-your-face, gone-for-weeks, eat-on-the-trail cattle drive. With at least two thousand cattle. But no matter how often Andi begged, cajoled, and pleaded, the answer was always no.

This year will be different, she vowed. *I'm not a little girl anymore. I don't have to be looked after.* Andi would convince her family she was well able to take care of herself, and also help take care of her family's interests.

She set her jaw in a stubborn line. Mother might as well get used to the fact that Andi was not like her sister Melinda. Ladies' Aid Society meetings and helping out at the orphanage—or finding a beau—were not what Andi wanted to do when she finished school. She wanted to help run the ranch.

Andi shook herself free of her musings. "I better get my head out of the clouds and back to business." She hiked up in her stirrups and hollered, "Levi!"

Levi yahooped his reply from deep inside the canyon, and Andi rolled her eyes. He must have found a cow and her calf. Now, if he would only remember to take it slow and easy, to drive the cow gently and not chase her like he was going after a wild mustang. "Then maybe we can bring them in before sundown," Andi muttered.

She glanced over her shoulder, where a couple dozen shorthorns and their unbranded calves rested in the shade of an oak grove a hundred

yards away. They chewed their cud and swished their tails, while their babies frolicked or napped. Andi had cleared the last of them from their hiding places twenty minutes ago without her horse breaking a sweat. The mamas had plodded ahead of Taffy and settled right down with the rest of Andi's little herd.

Too bad Chad and Mitch can't see me in action. Andi smirked. They'd have to admit she and Taffy were easier on Circle C cattle than some of the rough cowhands. And she always knew where the cows with new calves were hiding.

The thought of her brothers turned Andi's gaze toward the rest of the rounded-up herd. Half a mile away, a wisp of smoke from the branding fire rose into the afternoon sky. Hundreds of cattle milled around in temporary corrals, a dark, lowing smudge against the pale-green foothills.

Andi gritted her teeth. Spring roundup was nearly over, and she'd only helped for three Saturdays. Chad had told her she could brand the calves she brought in today, but now the afternoon was slipping away. She sat astride Taffy waiting for slowpoke Levi, who acted like he didn't know one end of a cow from—

"Levi!" she shouted. "I'm taking my cows to the fire. You can come along when you've a mind to."

Levi didn't answer. He'd either lost his catch and was backtracking up the draw to try again, or he was out of earshot. "It's not like I haven't taught him how to flush strays," she told Taffy. "You'd think he'd—"

A yell loud enough to be heard clear back at the ranch house erupted from the narrow canyon. A large brindle cow burst into view. She splashed across the creek with a days-old calf tight at her flank. Bawling, she threw her head. And no wonder. A rope was looped around one horn.

Levi gripped the other end. "Help!"

Andi jabbed her heels into Taffy's sides and raced toward her nephew. "Let go!" she screamed.

No response. The cow barreled past, dragging Levi along the ground. He was soaking wet, his face set in a look of grim determination mixed

with terror. Each time the cow tossed her head, Levi left the ground then landed hard, to be towed farther along.

Horror slammed into Andi, making her gasp. Levi was clutching the rope with both hands, but a good portion of it had somehow entangled itself around one arm. He couldn't free himself, and he dared not loosen his grip. His arm could be torn from its socket.

Just then the spooked cow turned and headed straight for the small herd Andi had spent the last three hours rounding up. They rose and scattered, bellowing their fright. Calves bawled. In no time, most of the cattle had vanished right back into the little canyon. The brindle cow whirled and followed.

Levi shrieked his fear and pain. "Andi! Help!"

In a heartbeat, Andi swiveled her horse and snagged her catch rope. Taffy knew what to do. She edged close to the runaway while Andi circled her lasso. *Please, God*, she prayed as she twirled, *I've got to get her on the first throw. No time for second tries.* If the cow made it back into the draw, Levi might be dragged a full mile through the underbrush and rocky creek bed.

The rope settled neatly over the cow's head, and Andi yanked. The loop tightened. She dallied the rope around the saddle horn, dropped the reins, and clutched the roped horn with both hands.

Taffy stepped back and planted her feet. The catch rope went taut, and mama cow jerked to a bone-jarring stop. Her weight wrenched Andi's rope harder than expected, throwing the mare off balance.

Andi lost her grip on the saddle horn and flipped over Taffy's rump. *Oof!* She landed hard on the ground with the wind knocked out of her. Her heart thudded. She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe.

The world spun. Andi lay still, gasping for breath. Except for the roaring in her ears and the distant mooing of distraught cows scurrying back up the draw, all was still.

Andi lifted her head a minute later when she could finally take a deep breath. Less than twenty feet away, the big brindle cow stood quietly near

Taffy, who kept the catch rope taut and waited for instructions. The calf was nursing.

Mama cow turned her head and looked at Andi as if to say, *Now what?* Levi's rope hung down from one horn and trailed a little way along the ground, ending where a crumpled bulge of brown and blue lay sprawled in the grass.

"Levi!" Andi pushed herself to her hands and knees and crawled over to her nephew. Anger flared. She shook his shoulder. "What were you doing? I've told you a dozen times! You're supposed to find the cows then let Patches take over. *Slow and easy*. Your horse knows what to do." She looked around. "Where is he, anyway?"

Levi sniffled and sat up. The rope, now limp, unwrapped easily from his arm. He tossed it aside, and Andi noticed rope burns on his hands. She winced. They probably burned like fire. Where were his gloves?

"I left Patches in the draw," he confessed. "That dumb ol' cow"—he jerked his chin toward the brindle—"was far back in a thicket. I couldn't get her to budge, no matter what. So I got the rope from Patches and figured I'd—"

"You figured wrong," Andi snapped. She looked around at the empty spot under the oak trees, and her heart sank clear to her dusty boots. "All my hard work today is *gone*." She whirled, ready to give Levi another piece of her mind. He had it coming.

Levi hung his head. "I'm sorry."

Andi's temper cooled. A few years ago, her unruly nephew would have responded by lighting into her with both fists. He'd clearly grown up some. Right now, he looked beat up. A gash ran across his forehead, dripping blood. His cheeks were grass-stained and crusted with mud. One eye had begun to swell. Andi marveled that he was still in one piece.

"Are you all right?" she asked in a kinder tone. "Anything broken?"

"I don't think so. Just banged up." Levi staggered to his feet with only a little help from Andi. "But I bet I really feel sore tomorrow." He brushed the dirt clods from his britches and looked at her with dark-brown, pleading eyes. "You won't tell Uncle Chad, will you?"

Andi shook her head. “No.” She didn’t add that Chad would have no trouble figuring it out for himself. It would be mighty hard to cover up this botched job. During each of the past two Saturdays, Andi and Levi had brought in a couple dozen cows and their calves for branding. There was hardly time left in the afternoon to make it up now. Chad probably already wondered where today’s quota was.

“Ranch work is harder than I thought,” Levi muttered. He kicked at the ground.

“It takes time,” Andi reassured him. She didn’t have to look down to talk to her nephew. Levi had shot up the past year and matched Andi in height. He probably outweighed her now too. Last month when Kate brought him to the ranch, Levi had been a tall, scraggly-thin scarecrow. A chronic winter cough due to the damp San Francisco air had robbed the twelve-year-old of his energy and appetite.

In no time, the dry, valley climate had cured Levi’s cough and restored his health. He followed his uncles everywhere, pestering them to teach him to be a cowhand. Levi worked hard, but apart from the fact he could ride like the wind, most other ranch skills eluded him.

He’s a hopeless greenhorn, Andi admitted with a sigh. It was probably the reason Chad saddled her with Levi whenever they weren’t in school. “Come on,” she said. “We’d best find Patches and round up those . . .” She paused and frowned.

Not far away, a rider on a large, black horse galloped toward them from the direction of the temporary pens and branding fire. Andi shaded her eyes. It wasn’t Chad—thank goodness. His horse, Sky, was a showy buckskin.

Andi wasn’t ready to face her brother with the news that her little herd had scattered. She’d rather work double time to salvage as many of the cows and calves as she could. They couldn’t have strayed far into the canyon. She saw a few drinking at the creek.

The rider drew closer, and Andi groaned. *Uh-oh.*

It was worse than Chad.

CHAPTER 2

Sometimes I think Sid forgets he's our foreman and not our father. We all love him dearly, but I get mighty tired of listening to his advice, even when he's right.

In less than a minute, the rider caught up. He reined his black gelding up so short it almost sat down. Then he glanced around and quickly assessed the situation.

“What in tarnation’s goin’ on here?” he demanded, narrowing his eyes at Levi’s rumpled appearance.

Andi felt heat creep into her cheeks. Of all the cowhands Chad could send, why did he choose Sid McCoy to check up on her? Old and grizzled but still spry as a colt, Sid had helped Chad run the ranch ever since Father passed away nine years ago. His advice and experience were invaluable, but Sid didn’t agree with Chad’s decision to let Andi help out, and he didn’t care who knew it. Lately, his disapproval had become even more vocal.

Today’s bungling would give Sid plenty of ammunition the next time he complained to Chad.

When Andi didn’t answer, the ranch foreman shoved his hat back off his forehead and nodded toward the area under the oak trees. “I recollect seeing cattle in that spot not more’n twenty minutes ago,” he growled. “Chad’s waitin’ on the stock you and the boy was s’posed to be fetchin’.”

I reckon he'll just have to wait a little longer, Andi thought, but she held her tongue.

Sid swung out of his saddle, walked over to the brindle cow, and loosened the ropes from around her neck and one horn. Taffy shook her mane and started grazing.

"It don't take much figurin' to guess what happened." Sid's gray eyes flashed. "You got no business bangin' up your horse's knees like that. She ain't no cow pony to go up against a full-grown cow. You're s'posed to be *drivin'* cows, not ropin' 'em."

"Taffy's fine." Andi squirmed under the barb. "She dug in with her back legs, just like Chad and I taught her." Did Sid think she couldn't manage her own horse? "Besides, what choice did I have? I couldn't let the cow drag Levi clear across the range." She brightened. "I caught her on my first throw."

Sid snorted his disbelief. "I told your brother it wasn't a good idea to let a gal handle—"

"I'll go after the cows," Andi cut in, peeved. She wished Sid would mind his own business.

"No need. I got it covered." Sid gave a sharp whistle then raised his hat and circled it above his head. Two small shapes broke off from the main crew and headed their way. When the cowhands drew near, Sid gestured toward the ravine. The men pivoted and took off.

Andi slumped. No calf branding for her today.

"It's not Andi's fault." Levi eyed the foreman with distrust. "I bungled things and scattered the herd. Andi only tried to—"

"I don't doubt it." Sid chuckled. He looked Levi up and down then clapped him on the shoulder. "Sometimes it takes a tumble or two to learn your business. If you ain't too beat up you can go along with Diego and Flint and help find the cows that got away."

"I'm not too beat up, but Uncle Chad made Andi my boss today." Levi glared at the foreman out of his good eye. "*She* tells me what to do."

Andi wanted to hug her nephew for his support. It took pluck to

stand up to Sid these days. The usually jovial foreman had turned prickly and short-tempered the past year. Maybe his age was catching up with him.

Sid brushed off Levi's backtalk with a grin. "Suit yourself, boy." He tousled Levi's hair and thumbed toward the old cow now grazing quietly next to Taffy. "That's a lot o' cow to rope."

"Yes, sir," Levi mumbled.

Sid turned to Andi and crossed his arms. His smile vanished. "As for *you*, missy. You're gettin' too old to be playin' at cowboy. It mighta been all right when you was a little gal, but it ain't fittin'—"

"I'm *not* playing," Andi said between clenched teeth. "I'm working." Sid laughed off Levi's botched job but dressed her down for saving her nephew's life? *No fair!* "Besides, Chad's the boss." This last came out as a whisper. Talking back to Sid made her stomach turn over. It felt a little like talking back to Father if he were alive.

Happily for Andi, Sid's hearing wasn't what it used to be. "What's that?"

Andi shrugged. "Nothing."

Sid took Andi by the shoulders and forced her to look at him. His wrinkled, weather-beaten expression softened. "I ain't riled at you, Miss Andi," he said. "It ain't your fault your ma don't stick to her guns. I expect you just plumb wore her down with wantin' to ride and rope and brand critters all the time."

Andi raised her eyebrows. Is *that* what he thought? If so, Sid McCoy did not know Elizabeth Carter very well. Andi hadn't yet been able to talk her way around Mother once she made up her mind. If she hadn't given her say-so, Andi would not be out on roundup with Levi today, or any day.

Andi forced her attention back to Sid's gravelly voice. He'd loosened his grip on her shoulders and was now embroiled in the past. "Your family's been good to me, Miss Andi. Your pa hired me long before you was born. Me, a widower with a little, three-year-old girl to raise."

Andi listened with one ear. She'd heard this story too many times. Beside her, Levi heaved a sigh. *Bet he's wishing he'd gone after the cows.*

"I've worked for your family nigh onto twenty years. I mourned when your pa lost his life in that terrible accident. I've watched your brothers grow up into fine young men. Justin's a first-rate lawyer, and Chad and Mitch have turned this ranch into one of the finest spreads in California. Your ma's the most respected woman around these parts . . ."

. . . *And Melinda's the sweetest young lady in the valley,* Andi added silently. She swallowed her laughter when Sid said those very words, but a giggle sneaked out.

Sid wagged his finger in Andi's face. "Don't you go laughing at me, Miss Andi. I'm downright serious. Been meanin' to pull you aside lately and have a word with you, now that Justin's married and not around to advise you as much as he used to." He paused. "I hear tell your family's throwin' you a fancy *quinceañera* when you turn fifteen next month. Ain't that some sorta milestone 'tween childhood and becoming a growed-up woman?"

Andi nodded. Sid's words rang true, at least for the Mexicans and the Spanish *Californios*. It made Andi's head spin to think how fast Rosa had grown up over the past several months. Her best friend had no sooner celebrated her *quinceañera* when Hector from the neighboring Bent Pine ranch came calling. Now, a year later, Rosa was promised in marriage. She'd leave the Circle C for good in the fall.

Rosa's loco. She's only sixteen.

Andi roused herself. *Quinceañeras* and birthdays aside, it was not Sid's duty to point any of this out to her. He wasn't Father. Or Justin. She shifted impatiently from one foot to the other and glanced toward the canyon. Diego emerged with a cow and calf. Flint followed right behind with another pair.

"I could've rounded up half those cows by now," she said. "Instead, you're filling my ears with all kinds of nonsense about—"

"You gotta get this silly notion 'bout ranchin' outta your head," Sid interrupted. "Your family's got a reputation to uphold. Carter young ladies don't flush strays or challenge the cowhands to lassoing contests."

Andi scowled. "Why not?" Just last week she'd beat Flint in one such contest. He'd been a good sport about it, so what was the harm? "Chad says I can ride and rope just as well as—"

"I respect your brother like I respected your pa," Sid broke in again. "Chad's a good rancher—one of the best around—but he gives in too easy when it comes to *you*, Miss Andi."

Andi laughed out loud. Was Sid joking? Chad, give in to *her*? No, Chad never played favorites when it came to running the ranch. She'd earned her right to help out fair and square. "If I couldn't do the job, Chad would make sure I didn't get the chance."

Sid didn't look convinced. "I've told Chad over an' over, but he don't listen to me. If the hands treat you like one of their own, you'll eventually get hurt. And if they remember you're not only a girl but one of the family, they'll get hurt trying to keep you out of danger."

Andi looked around. She and Levi worked alone. Chad never let her work with the rest of the outfit unless he or Mitch was right there. She started to say as much, but Sid drew his bushy, gray eyebrows together in warning. Andi clamped her mouth shut and silently stewed.

"Another thing." Sid waved his hand at her attire. "You're too pretty to go around lookin' like a poor no-account. Look at you. Sloppy braids, a raggedy shirt, and those dusty, unnatural britches."

"They're not britches. It's a split skirt and perfectly acceptable."

Sid grunted. "It ain't fittin'."

So you say. Andi pressed her lips together.

The foreman took a deep breath. "You're like my own daughter, Miss Andi, and I'm tellin' you: Girls goin' on fifteen gotta start lookin' and behavin' like young ladies. They need to brush and comb their hair all purty to catch a beau—"

"I'm not interested in catching a beau," Andi blurted, face burning. Up

till now, Sid had been rambling. Now he was meddling. Two more cows and calves plodded past.

Levi tittered. Andi elbowed him into silence. He grunted and rubbed his side.

“Maybe you ain’t interested right now,” Sid went on. “But it don’t hurt none to practice now and then. You could take a lesson from Miss Melinda—”

“You talk worse than Aunt Rebecca.” Andi’d had it up to her eyebrows. “Did she put you up to this? Did she pay you to badger me?”

Levi burst out laughing. Their Aunt Rebecca’s reputation for propriety was well known in both her San Francisco mansion and on the Circle C. “He does sound like Auntie, doesn’t he?” Levi doubled over in mirth then groaned. “It hurts too much to laugh.”

Sid did not laugh. He whipped off his hat and slapped it against his leg. Dust flew everywhere. “Doggone it, you two. That does it! Don’t you insult me by comparing me to that ol’ peahen—”

Levi gasped.

In a heartbeat, the old foreman’s demeanor changed. He stood stock-still. Slowly, he replaced his hat, took out his bandana, and wiped his red, sweaty face. Then he cleared his throat. “You gone and done it now. You riled me up so much I forgot myself and spoke my mind without thinkin’.”

Andi knew Sid meant well. But honestly! “I only wanted to—”

“I apologize, Miss Andi.” Sid backed up stiffly. “I was outta line. I reckon it ain’t my place to tell you these things. That’s your ma’s job, or maybe Justin’s the next time he comes around.” Without another word, he stalked to his horse and climbed into the saddle.

Andi watched him. All anger at Sid’s attempt to send her home for a pretty frock dissolved when she saw how worn out he looked. The foreman might mount as fast as any youngster, but the long workdays of this year’s roundup were clearly taking their toll. He pulled his horse around and shouted at Diego and Flint.

Andi followed his hollering and cringed. No wonder Sid was yelling. Flint couldn't seem to handle cattle any better than Levi. She shook her head. "C'mon, Levi. Let's find Patches and the last of the cows. I bet I know right where they're hiding."

Sid whirled and flung one last remark at Andi about keeping out of his way. Then he slammed his heels into his mount and galloped back toward the branding fire and the rest of the herd.

Levi found his hat, scooped up the loose rope, and followed Andi to Taffy. When he'd mounted up behind her he gave a loud sigh. "I guess this wouldn't be a very good time to ask if you can go on the cattle drive."

Andi swallowed the boulder-sized lump that had settled in her throat. "You're right, Levi," she said. "Not a good time at *all*."