

Thick as Thieves

Also by Susan K. Marlow

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Andrea Carter's Tales from the Circle C Ranch

CIRCLE C MILESTONES • 1

Thick as Thieves
AN ANDREA CARTER BOOK

Susan K. Marlow

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Friendship

UNSELFISHLY GIVING SUPPORT AND
EXPRESSING COMPASSION TO ANOTHER

*Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another,
love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous.*

1 Peter 3:8



CHAPTER 1

San Joaquin Valley, California, Winter 1882

Mother says a proper young lady regards her feelings as a petticoat—she never lets it show. If that's true, then I might as well give up on ever becoming a proper young lady. I'd burst if I tried to keep everything inside when something unexpected happens.

Taffy's in trouble. I know it.

Andrea Carter didn't say those frightening words aloud, but she couldn't help thinking them. Each time her golden palomino shook her flaxen mane and let out a sharp whinny, Andi wanted to jump out of her skin. "You're not supposed to drop your foal for another two weeks," she reminded Taffy. "Don't get ahead of yourself." She tried to keep her voice steady, but an invisible hand squeezed her heart.

Taffy's response was a jerky switch of her tail. Her hind foot went up and aimed a kick at her belly. She laid her ears back and paced the stall, exactly like she'd done yesterday. And the day before. When she passed the feedbox, she nosed the grain then tossed her head and kept moving.

"Something's not right," Andi finally admitted. When she'd seen other mares birth their foals, it usually happened so fast she missed the show.

She expected a strong, healthy horse like Taffy to do the same, even if it *was* her first time.

Andi reached into her pocket and drew out a handful of sugar. “How about a treat, since you turned your nose up at your oats?”

Taffy paused in her pacing to sniff the lumps but moved away. The next moment, she pawed at the ground and went down.

“Taffy!” Andi fell to the straw beside her mare. She ran her hand along Taffy’s swollen flank and tried to stay calm. Nobody else in the family seemed to think Taffy’s restlessness the past few days was anything out of the ordinary, but Andi felt it deep in her gut. Something was wrong. “Hang on, girl,” she pleaded. “I know it’s early, but everything’s going to be all right.”

She shot to her feet. “As soon as I find Chad, that is.”

Andi didn’t want to leave her mare alone, but if Taffy was dropping her first foal before her time, she might need help. Nobody in the San Joaquin Valley knew horses better than Andi’s big brother Chad. “He’ll see you through this,” she called over her shoulder and raced out of the barn.

Low, distant thunder rumbled over the Sierra foothills as Andi sped across the yard. She looked up. The full moon glowed from behind gathering clouds. *Not another storm!* A heavy rainfall would probably be followed later in the week by the typical winter ground fog—a thick, drizzly mess that made going anywhere outdoors a challenge.

Andi clattered up the back porch steps, dashed through the kitchen and dining room, and burst into the library of her family’s sprawling, two-story ranch house. “Mother! Where’s Chad? I need him *right now*.”

“Mother’s not here,” Melinda told her from a low table in front of a crackling fire. “She had a headache and went up to bed.” She fiddled with bits of velvet, lace, and dark-blue taffeta then looked up. “You better not disturb her.”

Andi had no intention of waking their mother. She tossed aside a thick, dark braid and took a deep breath to quiet her racing heart. It didn’t help. “It’s Taffy. She’s—”

“Not *again*.” Melinda rolled her eyes. She picked up a half-finished bonnet and sighed. “You’ve gone on about your horse morning, noon, and night for the past week.”

Andi turned a withering look on her eighteen-year-old sister. “If *your* horse was foaling and acting strange, you’d be worried too.”

“Maybe I would,” Melinda threw back, “but I wouldn’t race into the house every ten minutes to yell about it.”

Andi opened her mouth to snap out a heated reply then paused. Arguing with Melinda was a waste of time. And time was something Andi didn’t have right now. She wanted to get back to Taffy. “Where’s Chad?”

Melinda frowned her impatience. “I declare, Andi! Didn’t you listen to *anything* at supper tonight? Chad and Mitch went into town to attend the first-of-the-year Cattlemen’s Association meeting. They won’t be back until later.”

Andi groaned. She had been too wrapped up fretting over Taffy to remember what she ate for supper, much less pay attention to a dull conversation about a cattlemen’s meeting. The minute she had been excused from the table, she’d rushed out to the barn.

Rotten cattlemen’s meeting. What good were big brothers if they weren’t around? “Why did Chad and Mitch both have to go to the same dumb meeting?”

Melinda didn’t answer.

“If you like, I’ll come out and take a look at Taffy.”

Andi glanced across the room. Her oldest brother sat behind a large oak desk, occupied with a pile of paperwork. Ever since Father had been killed in that terrible roundup accident eight years ago, Justin had quietly taken over as Andi’s substitute father. He was especially good at helping her, but he was a lawyer, not a rancher. She didn’t think he could solve Taffy’s problem.

Still, with Chad and Mitch away, it was worth a try. “Sure, Justin. But hurry.”

Justin put down his pen and regarded her with a look that read *hold*

your horses. “I have a few things to finish first. I’ll come out when I can. I’m sure Taffy is fine.”

“She’s *not* fine,” Andi insisted, leaning over the desk. “She’s pacing and breathing hard, and not eating, and then she went down.”

A slight frown creased Justin’s forehead. “That sounds perfectly normal for a mare nearing her time. She’s been restless off and on all week.” He shuffled his papers. “Of course, if you don’t want to wait for me you can always ask Sid or Diego to lend a hand. They’re—”

“No!” Andi shook her head. No mere cowhand would go near her precious mare.

“All right, then,” Justin said with a smile. “I guess I’m your stockman tonight.”

With a sinking feeling, Andi realized this might be one of the last times Justin would be around to help her out of a scrape or give her immediate advice. He hadn’t come right out and said it yet, but the whole family knew he planned to ask a certain Lucinda Hawkins to be his wife. *I should accept his help while I can still get it, before he marries Lucy and moves to town.*

She didn’t want to think about that. “All right,” she said, forcing her voice not to crack. “Just please come out to the barn as soon as you can.”

“I promise,” he said and picked up his pen.

Without a word to Melinda, Andi ran back to the foaling stall. Breathless, she unlatched the half door and swung it open. Her jaw dropped. Across the stall, her golden horse was standing and munching a mouthful of hay. She turned her head in greeting. *What’s all the fuss about?* her dark, alert eyes seemed to be saying.

Andi stepped into the stall, speechless with surprise. A few minutes later Justin joined her. “It appears I rushed out here for nothing,” he remarked with a chuckle. “Taffy looks fine, just like I figured. I think you’d better come inside and quit fretting over this mare. It’s getting late.”

Leave it to Taffy to make me look like a fool, Andi thought. But a finger

of worry scratched at the back of her mind. "I want to stay out here a little longer."

"It's chilly and likely to get colder," Justin said. A rumble of thunder made him frown. "Sounds like a storm's coming up." He beckoned her to follow.

"Please, Justin?" Andi pleaded. "I'm all jumpy inside. The rain doesn't bother me. I want to keep an eye on Taffy."

Justin looked from Andi to Taffy then back at his sister. "Far be it from me to come between you and Taffy." He found two horse blankets and dropped them in the stall. "If you want to stay out here and shiver with cold, I suppose that's your affair."

Andi grinned. "Thanks, big brother." She might shiver, but she wasn't likely to freeze. The Circle C ranch lay in the valley near the foothills, not up in the snowy Sierras. She spread the blankets over the sweet-smelling straw and reached up to where a kerosene lantern hung from a large nail. With a flick of her wrist she turned down the flame.

"Keep a sharp eye on the lamp," Justin warned. "You don't want to burn down the barn."

"I'm always careful about that," Andi replied, stung. No one needed to remind her about the dangers of an unattended lantern. "It's safe up there."

Justin closed the stall door and leaned over it. "You're fretting over nothing, honey. Taffy's just restless. Let her get a good night's sleep."

Andi sat in the corner and didn't answer. Something was wrong. She didn't know what, but it ate at her stomach like a bitter medicine. Justin's cheerful words sailed right over her head.

"Chad and Mitch should be home before too long," Justin said. "When they put their horses away, you can ask Chad to take a look at Taffy. He'll tell you she's fine, then maybe you'll feel better and will go up to bed."

Andi nodded. "I hope that cattlemen's meeting ends soon."

"You and me both." Justin waved and disappeared into the shadows.

For the next few minutes, Andi watched her mare. "Thanks for making me look stupid," she said.

Taffy whickered. It sounded like a laugh.

Andi rose and brushed a light hand over her horse's back. An idea to pass the time popped into her mind. She reached past Taffy, into the space between the feedbox and the stall wall, and withdrew a felt-wrapped bundle. Returning to her spot on the blanket, Andi removed the covering and let a small, gold-gilded book and a pencil fall into her lap.

She sighed. If this were a dime novel, she would have read the whole thing by now. But it wasn't an adventure story. Actually, there was *no* story. The pages were blank. "It's customary for young ladies to record their thoughts in a journal," Melinda had said when she presented the book to Andi on Christmas Day.

Not this young lady, Andi silently retorted. All the same, she'd smiled and thanked her sister for the lovely gift.

"You should find a special place to keep it, so nobody"—Melinda had eyed their brothers with a teasing grin—"can peek at it."

That was easy. Stashed behind Taffy's feedbox, even Andi might forget where it was.

With nothing else to do right now, she picked up the pencil, cracked open her journal to the first page, and wrote: *January 2, 1882. I am sitting in the foaling stall with Taffy . . .*

Half an hour later, Andi slumped against the wall. She dropped the journal and pulled the blanket around her shoulders. Outside, the thunder grew louder. A flash of lightning lit up the stall. Rain splattered the barn roof. She yawned.

Andi was sure she was only resting her eyes when a high-pitched whinny jerked her awake. She sat up with a cry of alarm; her journal and pencil went flying. Overhead, the lamp glowed softly. Rain fell in a steady stream, but the thunder had passed on.

Andi sprang to her feet. She turned up the lamp and glanced at her mare. Taffy looked dark and slick with sweat. She pawed the ground, turned toward her tail, then whinnied again. A gush of water poured out from behind her. There was no doubt the foal was on its way this time.

Andi caught her breath. Shivers raced up and down her arms. *Taffy is having her foal!* Andi felt torn. She wanted to run for help like she'd done earlier, but if she left she might miss the birth.

When Taffy lay down and strained, the sense that something was wrong flooded Andi all over again. She saw the mare's muscles contract, but nothing happened. No little hoof peeked out. Taffy staggered to her feet and paced, as though trying to get away from the pain. Another contraction rippled across her flank. When it was over, her head drooped and she stood trembling. Her sides heaved.

And there was still no sign of a foal.

Taffy's in trouble, and I don't know what to do. But she knew who did. She snatched the lantern and prayed with all her heart that her brothers had come home.