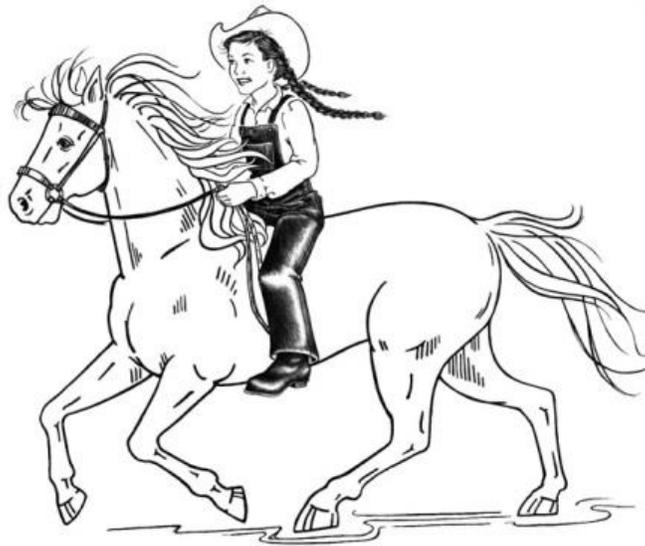


*Andrea Carter's  
Tales from the  
Circle C Ranch*



• *Story Excerpt* •

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## *Britches Are Not for Little Girls*

September 1873

*This story takes place the autumn before Andi's Pony Trouble.*

"Little girls do *not* wear britches."

Mother didn't raise her voice, but she sounded firm. Like always.

I peeked around my ten-year-old sister, Melinda, and looked down the long table. Father sat at the head of the table, sipping a cup of after-supper coffee.

He didn't say anything right away. He put down his coffee cup and scooped up a piping hot forkful of apple pie, fresh from the oven.

"First of the season, *Señor Carter*," Luisa told him as she cleared away the dirty dishes.

"It's delicious," Father said.

Luisa beamed. "*Muchas gracias, señor.*"

To me, Father was the tallest and strongest man in the whole world. Dressed in his fancy dinner clothes, he was also the most handsome.

Our family always dressed for the evening meal. It was *The Rule*. Even my two oldest brothers, who were grown up, didn't come to the table in work clothes.

Chad tried to once. He burst into the house with a story about the cattle herd that Mother and Father listened to with interest. Before we knew it, the supper bell was ringing. Father led Mother toward the dining room.

“I assume, Chad, that you will be dining with us this evening?” Mother said over her shoulder.

You never saw a twenty-year-old race so fast upstairs to change!

I didn't like dressing up for dinner . . . or for anything else. Play dresses with aprons were good enough for me. Most days I ran out of the house barefoot. I'd be off playing with the ranch hands' children before Mother could catch me.

Right now, I was watching Father eat his pie. Would he answer Mother?

I sighed. The “britches” subject was my own fault, and my new friend Riley's idea. He had just come to live on our ranch with his Uncle Sid, the ranch foreman. Chad told me Riley's mother was sick, and his father was an army captain often away on patrol. Riley would be staying on the ranch until his mother was well.

We took to each other right away.

When I had trouble getting up on his big, black horse, Riley said, “You can't do it in a dress, Andi. Even if you make it, your skirt will get all scrunched up. Your bloomers will get dirty, and your bare legs will show. I bet your mama wouldn't like that.”

Riley was right. Mother would not like that at all.

I followed Riley into the room he shared with his Uncle Sid just behind the bunkhouse. He dug around in an orange crate and pulled out a pair of overalls.

"I'm a cowboy now," he said, "so I'm gonna dress like one, in britches and a shirt. You can have my overalls."

I squealed my joy. "Thank you, Riley!"

Overalls were the answer to all my riding problems, if only Mother and Father would agree.

Every day while Melinda was away at school, Father tossed me up on Caesar, his big, bay horse. Father let me go everywhere with him, sitting on his lap in the saddle. He rode out to the herd, gave orders to the cowhands, and taught Chad and Mitch how to run the ranch. Sometimes I asked questions, but most of the time I just watched everything from high up on Caesar's broad back.

The only dark cloud rose when the town ladies showed up on the ranch to visit Mother. They clucked their tongues and said it was not proper for a little girl to ride astride, with her skirts flying and her knees showing.

"It's downright shameful, Elizabeth," Mrs. Peterson told Mother. "You ought to put a stop to it."

Father disagreed. "The child loves to ride, and she's a born horsewoman. Only the livestock, her brothers, and a few old cowhands see Andrea's skirts flying." When the ladies left, he frowned. "I see no reason to pay any attention to busybodies."

"Busbodies are folks who mind everybody's business but their own," Chad said when I asked him what the word meant.

Father and Mother did not pay busybodies any mind . . . except for one.

Aunt Rebecca, the busiest busybody of all, nearly fainted when she saw Father and me on Caesar one day during a surprise visit. She scolded Father something fierce, but he just laughed.

“This is a serious matter, James,” Aunt Rebecca said, frowning.

Father stopped laughing. “If it bothers you that much, dear sister, all right.” Then he handed me down to Aunt Rebecca and put Caesar away. I didn’t go riding again with Father until Aunt Rebecca went home to San Francisco.

Yes, overalls were the answer to all my problems. I was sure of it.

\* \* \*

All those memories were swirling around inside my head while Father ate his pie and the boys talked about dull, grown-up things.

I looked at Justin, my oldest brother. He had been home only a couple of months since graduating from law school. I felt a little funny around him. He’d been away at college for four years. I didn’t know him very well. Holidays were too short to get to know somebody, even your own big brother.

Justin saw me looking at him and leaned across the table. “I’ll take you riding after supper if you like,” he whispered.

I nodded. Then I looked at Father. He was still eating his pie. It was a big piece.

He caught my gaze and winked.

Father’s wink made me feel warm and cozy all over. It meant he had everything under control—even a meal-time discussion about the proper dress for little girls on a ranch.

"A pair of overalls is the only practical solution, Elizabeth," Father said. "Andrea's little frocks would stay cleaner that way." He smiled.

I forgot about Justin's offer of an after-supper horseback ride. This was important. I put my fork down and sat perfectly still.

"Jim," Mother said, frowning. "It's unseemly. Little girls do not wear britches . . . or overalls."

I ducked my head. Maybe I shouldn't have come to lunch today in Riley's overalls. I should have taken them off and kept them in the orange crate—just Riley's and my secret.

"Who in the world makes these rules?" Father wanted to know. It was not a question he expected an answer to.

I answered anyway. "Aunt Rebecca."

Everyone burst out laughing. I grinned and laughed too, but I didn't know why. It really wasn't funny. Aunt Rebecca thought up all the rules that made me miserable.

Father winked at me again. "If it were only that simple, sweetheart." He turned to Mother. "Skirts and horses do not mix, dear. Did you take one of Melinda's frocks, split the front and back, and sew it up for leggings like I asked?"

Mother nodded.

"It works just dandy, Father," Melinda said. "My split skirt stays where I want it to when I go riding."

Father grunted and looked pleased.

"You could teach the girls to ride sidesaddle," Mother said.

*Sidesaddle? What's that?* I wondered.

Father frowned, and his eyes flashed blue fire. "My dear, I want *all* of our children to be safe, not just the boys. Riding sidesaddle is an outlandish, dangerous way for a young lady to ride a horse."

"Who made *that* rule?" I couldn't help asking. "That ladies have to ride that way?" I still didn't know what "sidesaddle" was.

Nobody got after me for speaking without being spoken to.

"Who knows?" Justin said. "It's not a law. Just one of those things society expects of ladies."

Father frowned. "We are three thousand miles away from the East. I won't let somebody's fool notion of what is or is not proper put my little girls in danger."

"San Francisco is only two hundred miles away," Justin put in.

"Let San Francisco take care of itself," Father said. "This is my ranch and my family. I think we can decide for ourselves how to live on it."

This sounded like good news to me. But I wasn't sure how the overalls came into it. I almost asked, but Father spoke again.

"I won't have a sidesaddle on this spread," he said. "The way Andrea rides, she'd break her neck riding that way." He shook his head. "No."

"All right, Jim," Mother said at last. "Shall I split Andrea's dresses? I might as well do them all. She'll go through them quickly enough."

I knew I was hard on clothes. *I would rather have overalls*, I pleaded silently. *Please, please, please!*

"Overalls are durable," Father said. "I see no harm in letting her wear them when she's with me, or when she rides Coco."

"She'll be in them every day then," Melinda piped up. "Just like a little tomboy." She looked at me and made a face. "*Tomboy*," she whispered in my ear.

"Melinda, that will do," Father said.

"Yes, sir." Melinda went back to her apple pie.

"So long as she understands they are only for riding here on the ranch," Mother said. "Andrea will not step a foot off this spread in overalls or britches. Is that understood?"

"Of course, dear," Father said. He smiled at me. "Andrea, you heard your mother. You may wear overalls to ride, but you will not complain when it's time to change for supper or for going to town."



"Yes, Father," I said. Inside, I was jumping up and down.

I leaped from my chair and ran around the table to hug Father tight. I hugged Mother too. She didn't look quite as happy as Father.

"Can I keep the overalls in my wardrobe instead of in Riley's orange crate?" I asked, nearly out of breath.

"*May* I," Mother reminded me, but she nodded.

"Yippee!" I tore out of the dining room. From behind I heard Father laughing his big, deep laugh.

\* \* \*

When Father was thrown from his horse and killed the following spring, I refused to take off my overalls. I cried and cried and kept them

on, no matter what anybody said. My overalls made me think of Father, and I did not want to forget him.

Every time I wore my overalls I smelled the slight odor of horses and sweet hay; I remembered Father's tickly beard on the back of my neck when I rode in front of him and he kissed the top of my head.

Those overalls—and Justin—helped me accept the fact that Father had gone to heaven and was not coming back.

Mother let me wear overalls for many years. When I outgrew the pair Riley gave me, I wore my brother Mitch's hand-me-downs. I think Mother knew it was one way I could keep Father close to my heart.

Britches might not be for little girls . . . but overalls are.

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