

The Map

San Joaquin Valley, California, Early Summer 1881

A blast of hot summer air struck thirteen-year-old Andi Carter as she led her palomino mare, Taffy, from the barn. She'd been looking forward to the ride into Fresno this afternoon, but now the thought of climbing on a horse and galloping around in this heat made her reconsider. Already she felt rivulets of sweat trickling down the back of her neck.

"Is it always this hot around here?" Jenny Grant's voice sounded pained.

Andi stopped in her tracks and turned to face her friend, who was leading a pinto pony a few steps behind Taffy. The girl's face was nearly as red as her fiery hair, which was pulled back into a long, tight braid. In the two weeks since Jenny came to the Circle C, dozens of new freckles had popped out and covered not only her nose and cheeks, but also her forehead and chin. The California sun did not suit Jenny at all.

Andi grinned at her friend's flushed appearance. "It's barely June. You should be here for August. Then you'd know what hot *really* feels like." She pulled her wide-brimmed hat forward to shade her eyes. It offered some protection from the glaring sun but none from the heat. "Don't you have summer where you're from?"

Jenny squinted up at the sun. "Not like this. During those rare days when the sun does start blistering me, I run down to the dock and jump in the bay. There's nothing like a ducking to cool a body off good and proper. And we have trees so tall and cool just a stone's throw away." She gave Andi a weak smile. "Not many places to cool off around here, are there?"

"Nope," Andi confessed, "I'm afraid not." She looked around the yard and tried to imagine the tall fir trees of Washington Territory standing in place of the scattered valley oaks around her ranch house and outbuildings. "You get used to it, I reckon." In spite of the heat, she shivered at

the thought of cooling off in any body of water larger than a creek.

Jenny raked a sleeve across her forehead, jammed the black felt hat Andi had lent her onto her head, and sighed. “Well, I don’t want to stand around jawing all day. Let’s go.”

“It’s a long, hot ride to town,” Andi said. “Are you sure you want to go? Maybe we should stick close to the ranch and wait for Mitch to take us up in the hills. It’ll be cooler there, and you’ll feel at home. Lots of mountains and pine trees up at that logging camp.”

Jenny wrinkled her forehead. “I’ve seen my share of logging camps.” She clambered into the saddle on Patches’ back and secured the reins. “If I don’t see the town this week, then I’ll miss it completely. Soon as we get back from our little trek into the hills, it’ll be time for me to pack up and head home.” She took a deep breath and set her jaw. “If this heat ain’t gonna bother you, then it ain’t gonna bother me, neither.” Jenny lapsed into speech Andi recognized as her friend’s I’m-getting-impatient talk. No matter how hard Jenny Grant tried to walk and talk like a lady, she couldn’t seem to shake her thirteen years of living in the company of loggers in the middle of nowhere. Not even a year at a fancy San Francisco girls’ school had done much to curb Jenny’s wild ways.

Andi was glad it hadn’t. She liked Jenny’s carefree and sometimes reckless view of life. Why, next to Jenny Grant, Andi appeared almost a lady! She muffled a giggle and mounted Taffy. “All right, let’s go see the town.”

The two horses were in no mood to hurry in the heat, so Andi let Taffy have her head, and Jenny followed suit. The ride to town—normally an hour’s trip—took longer than Andi liked. By the time they plodded down the dusty street and dismounted in front of Goodwin’s Mercantile, Andi and Jenny were drenched in sweat and their canteens were empty. Andi knew the horses must be thirsty too.

They had no sooner led Taffy and Patches to the watering trough, when Andi heard a familiar shout.

“Andi!” Cory Blake skidded to a stop beside the girls. He was waving a yellowed piece of paper in his hand. “You won’t believe what Ollie traded me. Look here. It’s a . . .” He paused at

the look on Andi's face and frowned. "What's wrong?"

Andi let Taffy finish her drink then wrapped her mare's reins around the hitching rail a few yards away. She hadn't seen Cory since last February, when the town had been overrun by three flooding creeks. Instead of a holiday, Andi had been shipped off to school in San Francisco to finish out the winter term. She'd also decided to stay for the spring term. She was home at last, and here Cory was, waving a dirty old paper in her face and acting like he'd seen her only yesterday.

"No 'Howdy-Andi-glad-you're-back-how-was-the-city'?" she said when she returned to the trough.

Cory pulled off his hat and gave her a cocky smile. "Howdy, Andi. Glad you're back. How was the city? Hope you didn't pick up any snooty ways at that fancy school you went to." He shoved his hat back on his blond head and turned his attention to the paper clutched in his hand. "Now take a look at—"

"You must be Cory." Jenny grasped Cory's hand and pumped it. Her words tumbled out. "I'm Jenny. Jenny Grant. I'm staying with Andi for a few weeks. We were roommates at school. I heard lots about you. Sounds like you have fine times around these parts—fishing and racing your horses and playing ball. Nice to meet you."

Cory threw Andi a helpless look.

"That's what happens when you're in such an all-fired hurry to blab about your latest scheme instead of showing my guest some manners," Andi said with a smirk.

Cory slid his hand free from Jenny's sweaty grasp and wiped it on his britches. "Pleased t' meet you, Jenny," he said with a red face. Some of his enthusiasm had drained away.

Andi dipped her hand in the horse trough and swirled the tepid water around. "So, what did Ollie trade you?"

Cory's face broke into a wide smile, and he settled himself on the edge of the trough. "Well, Ollie's pa works at the land office, you know. They got some new survey maps in to replace the old, outdated ones, and"—he smoothed the paper across his knees—"I traded Ollie five aggie

marbles, the largest toad in Fresno County, and two genuine arrowheads for this old map.” He held it out for Andi to see.

Jenny peered over Andi’s shoulder. “What do you want with an outdated map? Looks to me like the waste of a good toad.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Andi said with a giggle.

“Look here,” Cory persisted. “It’s an old survey map of the area up around Fresno Flats. See all these symbols? They show gold diggings and claims that folks don’t bother about any longer. I suppose there’s a working mine or two up on Potter’s Ridge, but most folks around those parts are ranching or logging now. The little diggings are likely all played out and no good to anybody.” He craned his head to catch the sudden interest in Andi’s blue eyes.

“You thinking of prospecting for gold?” she asked.

“Maybe.” Cory tapped the map with his finger. “This shows places along creeks where gold was found years and years ago. Seems to me a fella could nose around, dig a shovel into the creek bed, slosh it around a bit, and see what he could find.” He gave Andi a sly grin.

“Remember that fella who found the forty-ounce gold nugget in Coarse Gold Gulch? He was purely lucky, that’s all. Why not take a couple of weeks and see what kind of treasure *I* can find?”

Andi snatched the map from Cory’s hand and peered at it. It was faded and partially smeared, but words like “Willow Creek,” “Grub Gulch,” “Potter Ridge Mine,” and “McFarland’s Ranch” filled the spaces, along with tiny drawings of pickaxes scattered here and there along the curved and twisted contour lines. A dotted line with the word “flume” snaked its way across the page.

Jenny traced the flume symbol with her finger. “I know what *this* is. Loggers send timber down from the mountains in a flume. Saves a heap of time, instead of using horses and wagons.” She squinted at the tiny print. “Looks like this one goes clear up to the . . . the Sugar Pine logging camp.” She looked at Andi. “Say, isn’t that the name of the camp your brother’s taking us up to see?”

Andi nodded and handed the map back to Cory. “Tell you what, Cory. Mitch is heading up to

that very logging camp next week, and he's taking Jenny and me along. I had to do some mighty fine sweet-talking, but he agreed that Jenny should see all of California that she can before she goes home. If we happen to stumble across any gold on the way, I'll tell you about it." She grinned at the look on her friend's face. "What's the matter?"

"You're going *here*?" He thumped the paper. "Right past all those swell gold diggings? You taking the stage or packing in on horses?"

"Packing in, of course. It's going to be fun. Just Mitch, Jenny, and me for two whole weeks on the trail. I can't wait."

Cory wagged his head. He carefully folded the map, secured it in his trouser pocket, and said, "Do you suppose Mitch would like another fella along on that trip to keep him company?"

Andi considered. She looked from Jenny to Cory and then at the sliver of paper peeking out from Cory's pocket. "I'll ask Mitch," she finally said, "and you ask your folks. But"—she pointed at Cory's pocket—"any gold you find with that map we split three ways: you, me, and Jenny. Deal?" She reached out her hand.

Cory's eyes gleamed as he took her hand. "It's a deal," he said in a low voice, "but we've got to keep this to ourselves. No telling what would happen if word leaked out about our treasure hunt."

"Why are you whispering?" Andi asked. "There's nobody around but us and the horses."

"You can't be too careful," he replied with a shrug.

"You can't be too careful about what?" a new voice echoed from the mercantile doorway. Jack Goodwin strolled out from his father's store, sucking on an ice chip. The screen door slammed shut behind him as he joined Andi and her friends around the watering trough. Smacking his lips, he sat next to Cory, brushed his unruly dark hair from his eyes, and repeated, "You can't be too careful about what?"

"Treasure," Andi said, swallowing hard. That ice chip sure looked good! "Cory thinks he's found another get-rich-quick scheme. Want to hear about it?" She knew what Jack's answer would be. A few years ago, Cory had talked Jack into helping him with an idea to swipe ice from

the Goodwin's ice house and sell it door to door. Trouble was, by the time they reached the fourth house, the ice had melted into a puddle in the bucket. When Mr. Goodwin found out, both boys got their backsides warmed. More than likely, Jack wouldn't want to join Cory in another fool notion to get rich.

She was right.

Jack snorted. "A treasure hunt? Not me, Cory. I'm not fool enough to follow a phony map some shyster sold you." He finished his ice chip and ran the back of his hand across his wet lips.

"Get us some ice, Jack," Andi pleaded. If she didn't get something cool inside pretty quick, she was going to melt. "My guest isn't used to this kind of heat."

For the first time, Jack looked at Jenny. Andi made a quick introduction and repeated her request. "Your pa won't mind. I'm sure he won't."

"I've got a better way to cool off," Jack said. He shot a glance at Jenny, who looked like she was sweltering. Then he twisted around, leaned over the horse trough, and plunged his head in.

Andi gasped. "Jack!"

"He's plumb crazy," Jenny said, laughing.

Jack pulled his head from the trough. Dark hair plastered his forehead and over his ears. Water streamed down his face. "That's what I call cooling off."

Andi wasn't convinced. "That's disgusting—that dirty old horse water. Taffy used it ten minutes ago."

Jack wiped his face and laughed. "Well, I'm not *drinking* it, Andi. Besides, I watched them fill it not more than an hour ago. Your horses were the first ones to drink from it. It's as clean as the water from our kitchen pump." He reached into the trough and tossed a handful of water in Andi's face.

Andi sputtered and leaped up. "That's not funny, Jack!"

"But you gotta admit it felt good—near as good as an ol' ice chip, I bet."

Andi bit back the rest of her reply. Yes, it *had* felt good. She looked at Jenny. Her friend was gazing longingly at the cool water. Andi turned back to Jack. "You sure it's clean?"

At Jack's nod, Andi leaned over and splashed the cool water against her face. Jenny joined her and let out a sigh as the water dribbled down her cheeks. "This is pure heaven." Then she leaned close to Andi and whispered, "I'm hot enough to pull that trick your friend did. My head's burning up."

Jack whooped. "I heard that, Jenny, and I got an idea. How 'bout a head-ducking contest? See who can keep his head under the longest." He didn't wait for Jenny's answer, but turned to Cory. "You game?"

Cory's blue-gray eyes glinted in fun. "I'm game. How 'bout you, Andi?"

Andi bit her lip in indecision. Last summer she would have joined in without hesitation. But she was thirteen years old now—too old to be playing foolish games with the town boys, even if they were good friends she'd known for years. Wading in the creek, yes. Splashing in the town's fountain, maybe. But ducking her head in a horse trough in the middle of the street? For once, she decided to think before she acted. She shook her head. "No, I'd better not."

"Well," Jenny said, "I'm game." She tossed her hat aside.

"You don't have to live here," Andi said. "Nobody knows you. But me? Everybody around these parts knows my family. I don't want to give the town gossips an excuse to wag their tongues." She sighed. "I reckon I'll sit this one out."

Cory shrugged. "Suit yourself. I guess you can judge who wins."

"I can do that. Then Jenny and I will be on our way. I'm showing her the town." She stared at the still water and said, "You ready?"

Jenny, Cory, and Jack leaned over the horse trough as one. "We're ready," Jenny said.

At Andi's shout of "Go!" the three contestants plunged their heads deep into the water. She counted slowly and waited for the first head to pop up. "Thirty, thirty-one . . ." she continued counting. Would they never come up for air? Andi was suddenly glad she'd refused to participate. She liked to win, but she'd have had no chance in this contest. She couldn't hold her breath so long.

With a gasp, Cory's blond head flew from the trough. His heaving chest and soaking wet

shirt threw water droplets everywhere. He coughed and sputtered. A second later, Jack was coughing and sucking in air. Then Jenny emerged, tossing her long braid—wet from its dunking—back and forth. She straightened up, gulping air.

“That was mighty fine!” she said when she caught her breath.

“You won,” Andi said, “but not by much. You three cooler now?” She settled herself on the edge of the trough and gazed at the cool water. She splashed a handful on her face. It helped a little, but she wished . . .

“You look mighty hot, Andi.”

She turned in time to hear Cory shout, “No, Jack!” Then she felt a push and tumbled backwards into the trough.

The shock of the cool water didn’t douse Andi’s fury. She sat up, sputtering her anger and dismay. She was soaked now—from head to toe. Sitting in the watering trough, she would soon become the laughing stock of the town. It was time to mount Taffy and head for home before any of the town biddies saw her. Jenny would have to set aside her sightseeing of Fresno.

She gripped the edges of the trough and struggled to stand up. Cory reached out a helping hand, but Andi slapped it aside. “Some friend *you* are. Why didn’t you keep Jack from dunking me?”

Jenny rushed to Cory’s defense. “It happened too fast.” She glared at Jack. “You remind me of my brother Eli—playing no-good jokes on folks.”

Jack didn’t flinch at Jenny’s rebuke. “Sorry, Andi. I didn’t mean no harm. You got wet. So what? Climb out, and I’ll ask Pa for some licorice.”

Andi ignored Jack’s half-baked apology and clambered over the side of the trough. She didn’t want any licorice. Getting out of town unseen was the only thing on her mind right now. “Come on, Jenny.”

Too late. A man’s voice stopped her cold.

“What in blazes is going on here?”