

❖ CHAPTER 1 ❖

# Gold Strike

*Spring 1878*

**A**ndi Carter slid into her seat and sighed. Mondays were not her best days. Another long week of school stretched out ahead of her.

There were five whole days until Saturday rolled around again. Five more days until Andi and her golden filly, Taffy, could ride in the hills. Five endless days before she could go fishing with her friend Sadie.

The school week seemed especially long this time of year. Spring had come early to the Circle C ranch. The hills blazed orange with wild poppies, and the days were warm and sunny.

New calves skipped on the rangeland. Shy, long-legged foals peeked out from behind their mothers.

## Andi Dreams of Gold

Just last Friday a dozen peeping chicks had greeted Andi after school.

She had missed their hatching—again.

Andi slumped. Everything exciting was happening out on the ranch. And here she was, stuck indoors.

A sudden thump made Andi turn around.

Her friend Cory plunked down in his seat behind her. His grin nearly split his face. “Howdy, Andi.”

*Uh-oh*, Andi thought.

A smile like that meant Cory was up to something. It usually meant he had slipped a critter—a bug or a spider or a snake—inside her desk.

Andi spun around and lifted the desk’s lid. She peeked inside. No snake slithered next to her books and slate. No cricket chirped.

She dropped the lid and turned back to Cory. “Why are you smiling like that?”

Cory smiled wider. “Haven’t you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“There’s a gold strike up at Coarse Gold Gulch.”

*Gold?* Andi sucked in her breath. “Where’s that?”

“Up in the hills, of course.”

Which meant Cory didn’t know where Coarse Gold Gulch was either. Was it a town? A gully? A mine?

Andi let out her breath. That gold strike might be a hundred miles away.

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“Pa heard it from Mr. Talbot,” Cory said. “Who heard it from Mr. Mason down at the post office.” His eyes gleamed. “Some lucky fellow brought in a big chunk of ore to the assay office. Sure enough, it was chock-full of gold.”

He leaned closer, and his voice dropped to a whisper. “Of course, that fella’s not telling anybody *exactly* where he found it.”

“Why not?”

“On account of he doesn’t want the whole town running out there to pick up all his gold, you goose.” He laughed.

Andi’s cheeks grew warm. Nobody would let such a big secret out. She knew that. But Cory shouldn’t have laughed at her!

Before she could think of a snappy reply, the bell rang. She glared at Cory then twisted around in her seat and sat up straight.

After daily Bible reading, prayer, and the usual “America” song, Miss Hall started right in on the day’s assignments.

Cory’s hand shot up.

Miss Hall sighed. “Yes, Cory?”

“May we have a geography lesson first thing this morning?”

The teacher gave Cory a patient look. “I suppose we could—”

“Where’s Coarse Gold Gulch?” he interrupted.

## Andi Dreams of Gold

Andi hid a smile behind her hand. Cory was not afraid to speak out of turn. He spent so much time in the corner for his antics during class that a scolding from Miss Hall never bothered him.

Cory wasn't bully-mean like Johnny Wilson. He just couldn't keep his mind on reading, writing, and arithmetic for more than a few minutes at a time. He'd rather tinker with buggy parts and horse harnesses in his pa's livery stable—just like Andi would rather ride Taffy than learn grammar.

School was a dreadful trial to them both.

Miss Hall did not scold Cory today. "It appears you've heard the town's latest news." She smiled. "How many others know about the gold strike up north?"

Most of the twenty-five hands went up, including Andi's, thanks to Cory.

"My pa says somebody panned a three-ounce nugget of pure gold," Thomas said.

"That ain't true," Ollie shot back. "It was *four* ounces."

Soon the whole class was buzzing about the gold strike.

"Children!" Miss Hall clapped her hands to quiet the class. "One at a time please."

"How far from town is Coarse Gold Gulch?" Johnny asked.

Miss Hall picked up a piece of chalk and drew

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a rough map of California on the blackboard. She marked Fresno with a circle. Then she marked Coarse Gold Gulch with a star. "It's a small town about forty miles north of here."

The class groaned.

"Aw, shucks!" Cory pounded a fist on the top of his desk. "That's too far to walk—or even ride—in a day."

"That's for sure," Johnny muttered.

Every pupil in Miss Hall's class knew forty miles was at least a two-day trip. Maybe longer if the mountain roads were steep and twisty.

Andi looked at the white outline of California on the board. Her spirits drooped. It was silly to get excited about such a faraway gold strike. It might as well be on the moon.

Miss Hall dropped the chalk in the tray and faced her class. "I lived in Coarse Gold Gulch during the gold rush. It was as crowded as a big city back then."

"More people than here in Fresno?" Mary Ellen asked.

Good question. To Andi, town seemed big and crowded. She preferred the ranch.

Miss Hall nodded. "A *lot* more. At one time as many as ten thousand people lived in Coarse Gold Gulch. That's ten times more folks than live in our town."

Andi's mouth dropped open. Ten thousand people? The hills and gullies around Coarse Gold Gulch

## Andi Dreams of Gold

must have been crawling with gold prospectors. She raised her hand.

“Yes, Andrea?”

“Do ten thousand people still live there?”

Miss Hall shook her head. “When the gold ran out, most of the people moved away. Once in a while—like right now—a new gold strike appears. But the gold rush has been over for twenty years.”

*Twenty years?* Tingles raced up and down her arms. Mitch had just turned twenty. And Chad and Justin were a lot older than Mitch.

She gasped. Her big brothers had grown up during the gold rush. They probably panned for gold all the time.

“During the gold rush,” Miss Hall was saying, “people could find gold in nearly every creek and river that flowed out of the mountains.”

*Every* creek that came down from the mountains? Did that mean there might be gold in the creek that ran by her special spot? Plenty of trout swam around in the creek, but Andi had never looked for gold.

Her heart thumped faster. Maybe flakes and nuggets had caught in the tree roots that poked into the water. Maybe gold lay piled up in heaps under the creek banks.

Another thought exploded in her head. Her breath caught. *Maybe I can reach into the creek and yank out all that gold!*

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“Andrea, are you all right?”

Miss Hall’s question brought Andi back to the classroom. “Yes, ma’am.”

“You seem short of breath,” the teacher said. “Do you feel ill?”

“No, ma’am,” Andi said quickly. She gave Miss Hall a bright smile and tried to pay attention during the rest of the lesson.

But one thought kept swirling around, no matter how hard she focused on her teacher’s words.

*As soon as I can, I’m going out to the creek and find some gold!*