

❖ CHAPTER 1 ❖

# Indian Camp

*Spring 1878*

“**H**urry, hurry!” Andi Carter bounced up and down on the wagon seat, where she sat between Mother and her big brother Mitch. “Can’t we go any faster?”

“Only if we want to lose our load,” Mitch said. “This isn’t the smoothest road on the Circle C.”

It sure wasn’t. More like a cattle trail.

A sudden jolt sent Andi flying. She grabbed Mother’s arm. “How much farther is it?”

“Not far,” Mother answered.

Each spring Andi’s family made a trip into the hills to visit the small Indian band that lived on their ranch. The Yokuts traded Andi’s family for blankets and coffee and other goods. In exchange, the Carters

## Andi Far from Home

took home baskets of nuts, smoked fish, and dried berries.

This year Andi had brought something special to trade. “Do you really think Choo-nook will swap one of her baskets for a doll?” she asked Mother.

A little bug of worry pinched Andi’s thoughts. Choo-nook probably worked hours and hours on her finely woven, watertight baskets. Would she trade one for something Andi had simply bought?

Andi hadn’t even earned her own money to buy the doll. She had used one of the gold nuggets she and Cory “found” at Looney Lou’s a few weeks before. Andi’s eyes had popped wide open when the shopkeeper dropped gold and silver coins in her hand as change.

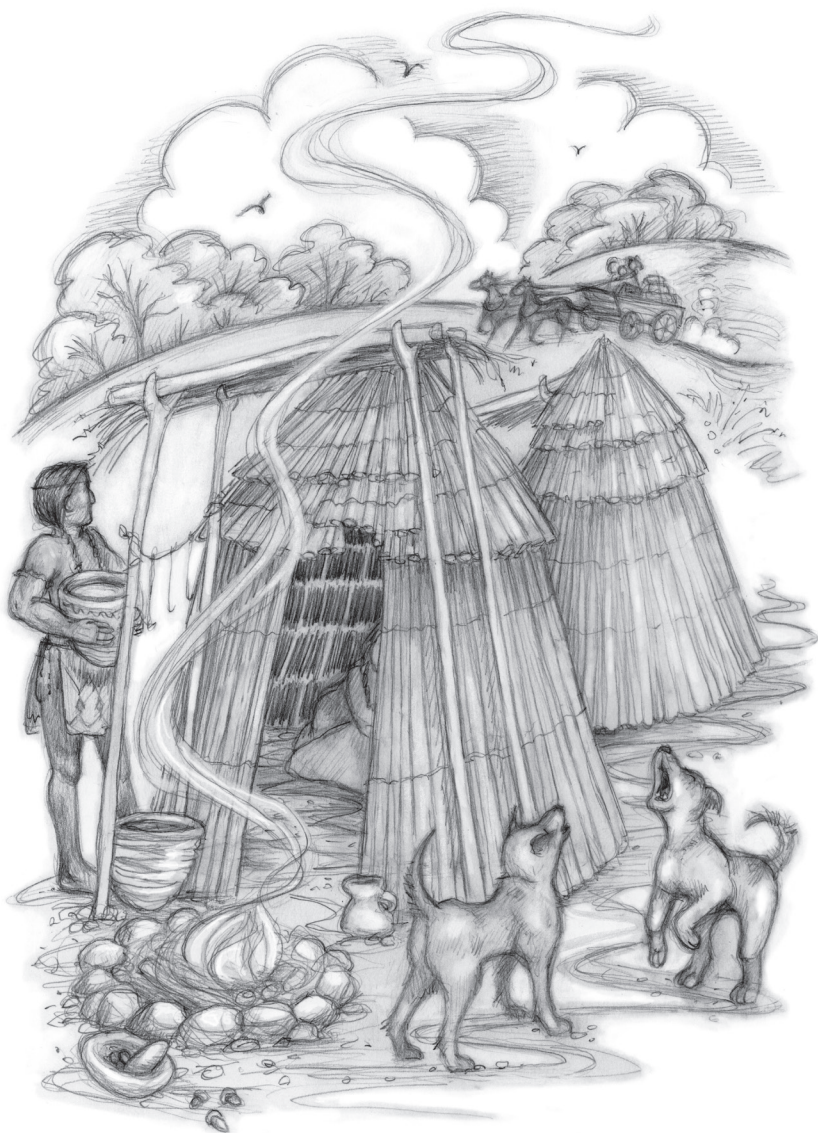
*That gold nugget was sure worth a lot of money!*

Mother patted Andi’s arm. “Of course Choo-nook will trade. She’ll love the special clothes you made for the doll.”

Andi brightened. She had spent hours sewing a little Yokut outfit. The stitches weren’t perfect, but Melinda wasn’t here to make fun of them. Her big sister was at school in far-off San Francisco.

*Sitting still to sew is the same thing as sitting still to weave a basket,* Andi thought with a smile.

Before long, she spotted smoke rising from a campfire. “There it is, Mitch.” She pointed off in the distance.



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Mitch clucked to Barney and Jingo. The matched pair of bay horses picked up their pace.

Andi held on to her seat with both hands. The wagon rattled over the bumpy ground. "I wish I was riding Taffy," she muttered.

Mother and Mitch looked like they wished they were riding horseback too.

Mitch finally pulled the wagon to a stop a little ways from half a dozen grass dwellings. Two barking dogs ran toward them. Other than that, the camp was strangely silent.

"Choo-nook!" Andi shouted. She climbed over Mitch and hopped off the wagon.

Choo-nook didn't answer. Neither did anybody else.

Andi looked around. The Yokut children usually ran and played in the camp. The women tended the fire, made acorn mush, or worked on their baskets.

Not today.

"Choo-nook! Where are you?" Andi called, using the few Yokut words she knew.

Just then Choo-nook's mother, Wa-see-it, stepped through the opening of their small home. She put a finger to her lips. "Shh. Choo-nook not well," she said in broken English.

Andi stopped short. Not well? "What's wrong with her?" She took a step toward the grass hut. "May I see her?"

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Mother hurried over and grasped Andi's arm. "Not now, Andrea. It's best if you stay back until we learn more." She turned to Wa-see-it. "How long has your daughter been ill?"

Wa-see-it shook her head. She did not understand Mother's words.

Soon, other women appeared from their huts. One of the men came into camp from the direction of the river. He greeted Mother and Mitch but didn't smile. He handed Wa-see-it a basket of cool water.

The Yokut woman ducked back inside the hut.

"What's going on, Lum-pa?" Mother asked.

Lum-pa's English was excellent. "Choo-nook's throat burns like fire, and she is very hot. Her head hurts. Three other children are sick too." His dark eyes looked worried. "Can you help them?"

"We will do whatever we can," Mother said. "Mitch will fetch the doctor from town as soon as we return home."

She laid a hand on Lum-pa's arm. "It's not yet time to worry, but it would be good to pray. Let's hope this sickness is nothing serious."

Lum-pa nodded.

Without another word, Mother took Andi back to the wagon.

Andi let out a breath. They had come all this way, and now they had to turn back? On account of a fever and a sore throat?

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“Can’t I even say hello to Choo-nook?” she asked.

“Not today,” Mother said.

Mitch was busy unloading the wagon. “You might as well keep the supplies,” he told Lum-pa. “We can settle up later.”

Andi grabbed the doll from the top of the pile and gave it to Lum-pa. “This is for Choo-nook. Maybe it will help her feel better.”

Andi didn’t care about getting a basket in return. Not now. Like Mitch said, they could trade later. It was more important for Choo-nook and the other children to get well.

Lum-pa smiled. “Thank you, little one.”

Five minutes later, they were on their way home. Mitch kept the horses at a fast trot. The wagon lurched over rocks and past gopher hills. Mother bounced with the wagon but didn’t say a word.

Andi gritted her teeth and held on.

The ranch house came into view in half the time it had taken them to ride up to the Yokut camp. Andi felt shaky when Mitch helped her down.

“I’ll be back with Doc Weaver as soon as I can.” He hurried inside the barn for his horse.

It was a long wait before Mitch returned. Mother paced back and forth and kept looking at the tall grandfather clock. It bonged two times. Then it bonged three times.

*What’s all the fuss about?* Andi wondered.

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Andi had been sick with a fever and sore throat plenty of times. Last winter her scratchy throat kept her home from school. A day later, a stuffy nose and a cough put her to bed.

But Dr. Weaver never came by to see her. Why was Mother in such a hurry to fetch him this time?

Andi was up in the hayloft playing with Bella's new kittens when Mitch returned. By the time she climbed down the ladder and peeked out the barn doors, Mother had changed clothes and was mounting her horse.

She and the men galloped out of the yard without saying good-bye.

The rest of the afternoon dragged. Andi trotted Taffy around the yard. She didn't ride up to her special spot, though. What if Mother and Dr. Weaver returned while Andi was away?

She led Taffy into her stall and brushed her. She combed out her cream-colored mane. Then she combed out her tail. It took a long time. Her stomach rumbled. It was getting close to suppertime.

A few minutes later, Andi heard hoofbeats. Mother! She poked her head out the barn doors to see if the riders had returned.

She sighed. It was only the ranch hands returning to the cookhouse after a hard day's work. Chad came home too, and Justin returned from his lawyer job in town.

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Supper came and went.

Andi sat on the back steps with her chin propped in her hands. Just across the yard, the cowhands were relaxing on one of the bunkhouse porches. Diego strummed his guitar and sang a Spanish cowboy song.

At any other time, Andi would have joined the cowhands. This warm spring evening, though, she didn't feel like singing or listening to tall tales. Where was Mother? Where was Dr. Weaver?

With a lump in her throat, Andi said a prayer for Choo-nook.

The sun was setting when Mother and Mitch returned.

Andi jumped off the porch. "Where's Dr. Weaver? Is Choo-nook all right? What about the other children?"

"Give Mother a chance to breathe," Mitch broke in. He helped her down from the horse. "She's pretty tired. Doc Weaver headed back to town."

There were dark circles under Mother's eyes. She looked troubled.

Andi swallowed. "Is Choo-nook all right?"

"For now." Mother smiled and took Andi's hand. "Come along. It's getting late."

Chad and Justin met them inside.

"What's up?" Chad asked.

Mother took a deep breath and looked at her two oldest sons. "It's scarlet fever."