



ANDREA CARTER AND THE
San Francisco
Smugglers

Chapter One excerpt

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Chapter One

THE FLOOD

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, WINTER 1881

"Flood's a comin'!"

Andi Carter jerked her head up from where she slumped, chin in hands, daydreaming. *A flood? Now? In the middle of church?* She straightened in her seat and watched a man wearing a rain slicker pound his way to the front of the sanctuary and steady himself against the pulpit.

Andi's brother Chad leaped to his feet. "Where, Fred?"

"From the east. We need every man to lend a hand with the levees, or the water will take most of the town."

"What about teams with plows to cut ditches?" Sam Blake shouted. "My livery was hit pretty hard a couple years back. I aim to make sure the water passes me by this time around."

Fred pushed away from the pulpit and headed back down the aisle. "The Bentley brothers are working on it; Wheeler's passin' out shovels." He paused and waved a hand in the air. "We gotta go!"

As one, the worshippers rose and began gathering up their outerwear.

Andi jumped up with the rest of her family. Her heart leaped. What luck! A flood was much better than listening to one of Reverend Harris's long, dull sermons. She'd never seen a real flood. The Circle C ranch lay more than an hour's drive from Fresno, on high ground. The yearly risk of flooding from Fancher, Red, and Big Dry creeks never threatened the Carter spread. Andi had to content herself with hearing stories of folks working together to channel the water away from their beloved town. Her friend Cory's secondhand tales were always laced with thrills and narrow escapes.

Scrambling along behind her three brothers, Andi paused at the door of the church and looked east. Nothing. No water. No flooding. No *nothing*. If it weren't for Fred Woodworth's warning, she'd think it was just another dreary, rainy February day. The downpour of a few hours ago had turned to a light drizzle. Disappointed, she watched the men hurry away.

"I gotta get my things outta the cellar," she heard a man cry from the middle of the street. "She's comin', I tell ya!" He disappeared around the corner of the church.

Andi knew that if she didn't disappear pretty quick, she'd lose her chance to see something interesting. She glanced over her shoulder. Her mother and her older sister Melinda were busy helping the women collect their children. Melinda held a sobbing little girl, while Elizabeth Carter had her arms around a young mother. "I can't go home," Andi heard the frightened lady confess. "I couldn't stand seein' our furniture floatin' away."

Elizabeth murmured something Andi couldn't hear and led the woman toward a pew. She seemed to have forgotten about her youngest daughter.

Andi clattered down the steps and into the street. She would take a quick peek and come right back to help.

"Andi!" Cory Blake ran up beside her. His blue eyes and disheveled hair reflected his excitement. "Water's rising fast a few blocks over. If you want to see it, come with me." He grabbed her sleeve again.

Without a backward glance, Andi allowed Cory to pull her along.

When they reached Tulare Street, they could go no farther. As far as Andi could see, a torrent of water was pouring down the street. She gasped. "How can a few levees and ditches control *this*?"

"You'll see. Everybody pitches in. You've never seen such shovelin' and plowin' and shoutin' and" – he grinned – "high spirits, even. No pesky flood's gonna get *us* down."

Careful to avoid the worst of the muddy stream, Cory and Andi picked their way along the raised wooden sidewalk. The water rose steadily.

One block over, men with plows and teams of horses frantically worked to channel the flood away from the business district. Cory grabbed Andi's arm and pointed toward a house surrounded by water up to its porch. "Look at Mr. Fuller."

The old man was fishing his stove wood out of the "ocean" swirling around his doorway. "Need some help?" Cory called. He waded through the churning, muddy stream and went after the floating logs. Laughing and sloshing, he steered them toward Mr. Fuller's front porch. Andi stayed put and watched.

"Thanks, young fella," Mr. Fuller said. He stashed the wood safely above water.

"You look like you're enjoying this," Andi remarked when Cory sloshed his way back to higher ground. "What if the water gets deeper?"

"Then I'll get me a rowboat. It'd be fun to row around town and rescue folks. And if I couldn't find any people to rescue, I'd save chickens or cats or any poor critter caught in a fix." He tugged on her sleeve. "If we climb to the roof of the Grand Central, we'll see everything." He didn't seem to care that he was soaked to the skin.

"No, I've seen enough. I better get back to the church. Mother doesn't know I left."

Cory shook his head. "Too late, Andi. Look."

Andi's heart sank. The flooded street had cut off the two explorers from the rest of town. She followed her friend the last couple of blocks to the railroad depot. Everywhere she looked men were building levees and cutting channels to divert the water. The clanging of shovels could hardly be heard over the rushing water, the boisterous laughter, and the shouting of orders. Andi could tell by the way the townsfolk were working together that they'd done this before. It was surely only a matter of time before Fresno returned to normal.

Suddenly she heard a yell above the clamor. "The levee broke! Water's comin' through!"

The muddy current rushed down the street and alongside the railroad embankment like a young Mississippi River. With a yelp, Cory snatched Andi's hand and yanked. "Hurry!"

They scrambled up the sloping mound of dirt and gravel, where the train tracks sat above the valley floor. With a final jerk, Cory pulled Andi to her feet. She stumbled and crashed into a cluster of Chinese residents. "Sorry," she said, righting herself.

The Chinese men ignored her. They stood silently, watching the rising floodwaters. So far, the high railroad bed had kept the flood away from the Chinatown side of the tracks—a perfect dam. But the embankment was now throwing the water back against Fresno in fresh waves.

"I think we're stuck here," Andi said.

"Stuck is right," Cory agreed. "Who knows how long it'll take before the water finally runs off?" He lowered himself to the tracks and settled down to wait.

Andi didn't feel like joining him on the soggy ground. "If it gets much higher, we're going to get soaked."

Cory cocked his head to look at her. "Andi, we already *are* soaked."

Andi shrugged. The rain had stopped for the moment, but it was damp and chilly. From the top of the roadbed, she could see the sheet of water spreading north. If the townsfolk didn't do something pretty soon, the entire town would be immersed in waist-high water, and every building filled with squishy mud.

Standing in the cold, watching the water drown her town, Andi lost her enthusiasm. Her brothers were no doubt building levees. Her mother and sister were busy helping others. But here *she* was, slogging around in the mud and trapped on the railroad bed until the water receded. *A flood's no fun, she decided. It's just a lot of hard work. I wish I was back at the church, warm and dry, helping Mother.*

Thinking about her mother made Andi glance down at her clothes. Her skirt peeked out from under her coat and clung to her legs in limp, soggy folds. Mud caked her Sunday slippers. "Mother's going to have a conniption fit. What was I thinking?" It was one thing to wade in the creek on a summer's day wearing overalls, but another thing entirely to tramp around in a February flood, dressed in her best.

“Did you say something?” Cory asked. He looked perfectly content sitting on the tracks, watching. His straw-colored hair was plastered to his head in long, dirty hanks. Mud speckled his face.

Andi didn’t answer. She turned her gaze toward Chinatown. She almost envied the Chinese. Their section of town was dry. Dozens of residents, however, held shovels in their hands and wore bleak expressions. *Why?* She became more confused when a handful of shy Chinese women, with small children clinging to their blue cotton trousers, made their way to the top of the embankment. They stood off by themselves in a small, tight group.

Andi stared at them. She knew it was rude, but she couldn’t help it. She had never seen a Chinese woman or girl before. There were plenty of Chinese men in Fresno, and she knew the laundryman’s son, Chen Lu, by name. But the few Chinese women in town kept themselves hidden away.

A few years ago, Andi had asked her lawyer-brother, Justin, why she never saw Chen Lu in school. Justin had explained that the law in California did not allow Chinese children to attend. Andi had thought this horribly unfair. She wished there was a law forbidding *her* to go to school. Justin had laughed and sent her on her way.

Now she wondered if one of these tiny, timid women was Chen Lu’s mother. She smiled tentatively at the group, but the women gathered their children closer and turned their eyes to the ground.

Suddenly, a string of high, agitated Chinese voices rose above the sound of the water. The men pointed and shouted, then began scurrying away. Andi turned to see what had upset them. A crowd of townsmen was gathering near the water tower.

Cory jumped up. “I wonder what they’re up to.”

“We’re cutting through the embankment just north of the tower,” a dirt-splattered young man told them in passing. “It’s the only way we can keep the town from washing away.”

Andi now realized why the Chinese men had rushed off in such a hurry. “But if they do

that, Chinatown will be flooded.”

The man slung his shovel over his shoulder and grinned. “Better them than us.” He hurried off to help.

Andi glanced back at the bedraggled group of Chinese women and children. Would their men be able to raise levees in time to save their small community? She hoped so. She had a sad, strange feeling that the citizens of Fresno would not go out of their way to lend a hand to their neighbors on the other side of the tracks.

“I’m wet and cold,” Andi said. “I want to go home.”

Cory laughed. “You gonna swim?”

“I don’t have to. Look.” She pointed to a small boat coming toward them.

An older man with an unkempt, graying beard and worn overalls cupped his hands to his mouth and called from the boat, “Howdy, kids.”

“Howdy, Mr. Henderson,” Cory yelled. “Howdy, Reed.”

Reed lifted an oar in greeting. “Give us a hand, would you?”

Cory and Andi snagged the prow as the rowboat scraped against the roadbed.

Mr. Henderson squinted at Andi. “Your ma’s a mite worried, Andi. She wants to get back to the ranch afore things get worse. She sent me to look for you. Climb aboard and I’ll row you to dry land.”

Andi didn’t hesitate. *A mite worried? More like a mite angry, I bet.* She reached for Reed’s outstretched hand.

“Careful, Andi,” he warned.

Too late. Andi stepped into the small rowboat with one foot, but her mud-caked slipper slid forward. With a splash, she toppled into the floodwaters.

“I’ve got you!” Reed hollered. He locked a hand around her wrist and held on.

The water wasn’t deep, but it was cold. Andi grabbed the edge of the boat with her free hand. Mr. Henderson dug the oars against the current, while Cory kept a firm grip on the bow.

Reed hauled Andi over the edge and dropped her into the boat. Then Cory jumped in. They drifted with the current along Front Street.

"That was close," Cory said. He'd lost his usual grin.

"Yep," Reed agreed. "The last lady we rescued fell overboard too. She swallowed so much water we had to fetch Doc Weaver." He turned to Andi. "You all right?"

Teeth chattering, Andi huddled in the bottom of the boat. "I'm fine." She wouldn't admit to the Hendersons—or to Cory—how scared she'd been when she hit the water. She hadn't been in any real danger, but she couldn't help remembering her plunge into an overflowing creek just a couple of months before. She'd almost drowned that day, and this dunking brought the terror back in full force. She closed her eyes and clenched her jaw. *I will not cry!*

Mr. Henderson's sympathetic voice brought her back to the present. "I'm right sorry, Andi. We'll have you to shore in no time."

Before long the rowboat scraped bottom. Andi and Cory climbed out onto a street away from the worst of the damage.

Mr. Henderson shook his head. "You two look like a couple of drowned rats, I'm sorry to say. Better hurry home, before you catch your death."

"Yes, s-sir. Thank you, s-sir," Andi said between chattering teeth.

"I'd best find my pa," Cory added.

Andi waved to her rescuer then turned and ran back the way she'd come. When she rounded the corner to the church, she saw her mother standing in the muddy street, near the family carriage. She was gazing toward the flooded parts of town. When she saw Andi, she shook her head.

Andi took a deep breath and hurried over. "I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't mean t—"

"Get in the carriage," Mother said.

Andi gulped and obeyed.

I am in a heap of trouble. Again.