

GOLDTOWN ADVENTURES

Badge of Honor



Story excerpt

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Chapter One

SPRING RUSH

GOLDTOWN, CALIFORNIA, 1864

Standing knee-deep in an icy mountain creek was *not* the way twelve-year-old Jem Coulter planned to welcome spring this year. But when the clouds parted and the sun came out just in time for the noon recess, he had no choice. His legs took off, and his body was obliged to follow.

Jem didn't bother to run back to the ranch for his gold pan. He ducked around the corner of the crumbling, red-brick schoolhouse and headed for his gold claim at a fast trot.

Gold claim, ha! Jem thought with a laugh. A "claim" maybe, but he had never found enough gold in the small strip of land along Cripple Creek to do justice to the word "gold."

Dirt claim, he quickly amended. The Coulter Family dirt claim. *If I had a nickel for every bucket of dirt I've washed from that claim, I'd be rich! So would Pa.* Jem lost his grin. *Then maybe Pa could have afforded a doctor for Mama, and maybe she would still be alive.*

Jem sighed. Had it really been four whole years since she'd died? If only —

"Hey, Jem, wait for me!" a familiar voice sliced into Jem's daydreaming. The *clomp, clomp, clomp* of his ten-year-old sister's high-top shoes brought her alongside him. She snatched at his shirt sleeve and panted. "Slow down, will ya?"

Jem stopped. He shook free of her grasp and groaned. "Roasted rattlesnakes, Ellie! Where do you think *you're* going?"

Ellie's hazel eyes opened wide. "Why, I'm coming with you, of course." She gave

him a sly grin. "I know just where you're off to. And if you think you can get first claim to any gold washing down from the spring run-off, well"—she brushed aside a short, auburn braid—"think again."

"Swell," Jem grunted. "Now, instead of Pa skinning me for playing hooky, he'll give me double for dragging you along. You get back to school, y'hear?"

Ellie folded her arms across her chest and scowled. She made no move to obey her big brother.

Jem scowled back. *Sisters! What a bothersome lot!*

It wouldn't be so bad if Ellie acted like other little girls her age in Goldtown. Why couldn't she content herself with dressing paper dolls, going to tea parties, and jumping rope? But no, Ellie was always in the thick of things. If Jem climbed a tree, Ellie climbed a taller tree. If he found three flakes of gold, Ellie shivered in the creek until her gold pan held four flakes.

It's downright . . . Jem stopped this train of thought. If truth be told, his sister was more dependable and loyal than any of Jem's friends. And she never, *ever* tattled on him.

"Oh, all right," Jem growled and yanked one of Ellie's scraggly pigtailed. "You can come."

Even without his say-so, Ellie would have tagged along, but it made Jem feel in charge when he gave his brotherly permission. "You can catch frogs. I've got a big order to deliver to the café. Mr. Sims is counting on me. He wants to advertise the first frog legs of the season."

Jem turned and took off running again.

Ellie easily kept up. She jogged alongside her brother for a minute then asked,

“At what rate of payment?”

“Huh?” Jem slowed just a hint. He squinted his brown eyes at her in confusion.

“At what rate of payment?” Ellie repeated. “I heard some fella from back East say that the other day. It’s city talk for ‘How much are you gonna pay me for the frogs?’”

Jem didn’t answer. They had reached Cripple Creek and were picking their way through dozens of old, staked-out gold claims. Most of the claims lay abandoned, pock-marked with holes of all sizes, where prospectors had dug into the ground and the hillsides, hoping to find a rich vein of gold.

To Jem’s knowledge, nobody ever had. Found a rich vein of gold, that is.

Most of the gold that had given the town its name and brought it to life fifteen years ago came out of the creek. The placer gold washed down from the Mother Lode somewhere deep in the heart of the Sierra Nevada, mixed in with the dirt and snow.

The mountains rose sharply in the east, snowcapped and glistening in the spring sunshine. Jem pointed, the frogs momentarily forgotten. “Look, Ellie. There’s enough gold up there to make every man, woman, and child in Goldtown rich as King Midas.” He sighed. If only more of it would wash downstream and into his gold pan!

Ellie shaded her eyes and looked up.

“At least, that’s what Strike says,” Jem added.

“Maybelle Sterling says that old man is crazy as a loon,” Ellie remarked. She jumped over a large hole in the ground and scrambled across a pile of old diggings.

“For all his talk about how to find gold, Strike’s the poorest miner I know. He never

even changes his clothes.”

“He likes those clothes,” Jem said, rushing to his friend’s defense. “And don’t let that little snip Maybelle tease you. Strike’s not crazy, just a little . . . well . . . peculiar.”

The small, grizzled prospector was forever wandering up and down the gold fields, scraping together a meager living. His donkey, Canary, carried his provisions and the most important tools of all: gold pans, picks, and shovels. He knew the diggings around Goldtown like the back of his hand.

“If it wasn’t for Strike, Pa and Ma would never have learned a thing about how to work a gold claim,” Jem reminded Ellie. “They would have starved to death without him. Why, Strike’s closer to us than kinfolk!” He paused. “I betcha he strikes it rich some day. That’ll show everybody, and—”

“Yoo-hoo, Strike! Found any color?”

Ellie’s shout brought Jem around. Had she even been listening to him? As usual, probably not.

Strike-it-rich Sam squatted in the creek next to the Coulter claim, peering into a beat-up gold pan. Water swirled around the ankles of his knee-high boots. One suspender hung off the shoulder of his red flannel shirt. Long, gray-streaked hair blew around his face, barely held in place by a battered slouch hat.

At Ellie’s shout, he shook the gravel out of his pan and lifted it in greeting. His other hand held a steaming cup of the prospector’s special brew.

“Howdy, young’uns,” Strike hollered. A wide smile split his dirt-encrusted beard. “Nope, no color yet. But the coffee’s boilin’. Biscuits are hot. Help yourself.”

He nodded toward a small fire on the creek bank nearby. A tin bucket sat over

the flames, simmering. Three rock-hard, black-bottomed lumps of cooked dough rested in a shallow frying pan next to the fire.

Jem walked over and gave the biscuits a passing glance. Then he peeked into the pot. A dark, thick liquid bubbled. He cringed. "Thanks, Strike, but we brought our own dinner." He held up his tin lunch pail to prove it.

"I want coffee," Ellie said, taking a step forward.

Jem yanked her back and whispered, "It's terrible coffee, and you're not having any."

Strike might call his concoction coffee, but after one scorching, bitter taste two years ago, Jem knew better than to call it coffee. Tree-bark brew maybe, with a bit of creek mud thrown in, but definitely not coffee.

Ellie let it go. She wandered over to a scruffy burro that *hee-hawed* at her approach. She scratched him on his head, just between his long ears. "Howdy, Canary."

The donkey closed his eyes in sleepy pleasure, but he could just as easily have reached out and nipped Ellie. Canary was not the most reliable or easy-going animal in the gold fields.

Jem did not share Ellie's love for the stubborn old jackass. "Get away from him before he kicks you," he told her. "Come get some dinner." When she sat down beside Jem on a pile of rocks, he tore a chunk of bread in half and handed it to her. "You didn't think to bring along *your* lunch pail, did you? We're gonna be mighty hungry by suppertime."

Ellie shrugged. "I didn't want to go back for it. Miss Cheney might've caught me sneaking off."

A wrinkled, over-wintered apple completed their scanty meal. Jem took a final bite and tossed the core behind his shoulder. Then he stood up and looked around. Four or five hardy souls were hunkered down along both sides of the stream a little distance away, washing their diggings. "Looks like we've pretty much got this place to ourselves today," he said.

Strike had left the creek and was pouring himself another cup of the coffee sludge. He reached into a pack on the ground, pulled out a spare gold pan, and tossed it to Jem. "You'll find out in a hurry why that's so. Wade in and see how long you last." He chuckled.

Jem caught the pan and stepped into the creek. Even through his boots he felt the icy chill of melted snow coming down from the high country. He clamped his jaw shut against the shock.

Freezing near to death will be worth it if I can strike it rich this afternoon. I'd be happy to pan even an ounce—just a thumb-sized gold nugget—please! Jem realized with a sharp pang that his thoughts had slid effortlessly into a prayer. *We need the money, God. An ounce or two of gold would go a long way toward getting ourselves a decent bull for the herd.*

Jem knew why his father had bought the run-down ranch two years ago—if owning a couple dozen head of cattle could even be *called* ranching. It was Matt Coulter's desperate attempt to make a living in a town that no longer lived up to its name, Goldtown. The family had managed to wash enough gold to scrape by in the early years. But their claim had never been a rich strike, not like other miners in the area.

Now the gold was gone—most of it, anyway. The new Midas mine was making an attempt at hard-rock mining underground, but the easy-to-find placer gold

above ground was pretty much played out.

“Maybe this spring will be different,” Jem told himself between chattering teeth. He scraped a double handful of creek gravel into his pan. “All that melting snow might carry a bit of color mixed in with the dirt.”

Jem’s excitement rose a notch at the possibility. It was no secret Pa thought their claim was nothing more than a worthless piece of dirt. Jem and Ellie were allowed to fool

around out here during their free time, but Pa no longer took it seriously.

“But if I find gold this spring, all that will change!” Jem said. Ideas rushed through his head. “It would prove our claim *isn’t* played out. Then Pa wouldn’t have to work so hard on the ranch. Ellie could have a new dress. I could quit my frog and firewood businesses. All I need is one big nugget and—”

Strike’s sudden whoop made Jem jump a foot. A yell like that from the old miner could mean only one thing—Strike-it-rich Sam had struck it rich.

Chapter Two

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

Jem dropped his gold pan, snatched it up again before it could float away, and sloshed his way over to Strike. By the time he crowded around the prospector, Ellie was there too, eyes popping and mouth wide open.

“What’d’ja find, Strike?” she asked, tugging on his shirt sleeve. “How big? Lemme see!”

Jem’s heart raced. If Strike had washed a large nugget out of the creek bed already, then there was a chance Jem could do the same. A big strike meant school would close early. Miners would line up along the creek bank again, laughing and swapping stories of Goldtown’s boom days.

Jem leaned forward. Surely that *whoop* meant his friend had pulled a fist-sized chunk of pure gold from Cripple Creek. It might weigh a pound! Maybe even two pounds. Or perhaps Strike had washed something smaller. Even a thumb-sized nugget was worthy of a hearty yell.

He looked down. Fine sand, small pieces of gravel, and a glint of gold greeted Jem’s curious gaze, but no chunks. *Where’s the big strike?* He bent closer.

“Get yer shaggy brown head out of my pan,” Strike growled with rough affection. “I can’t see a blamed thing.”

“Doesn’t look like there’s much *to see*,” Jem grouched. *Another hope dashed.* He shivered in the early afternoon sun. “Hang it all, Strike! Why are you whooping over three pieces of gold the size of radish seeds?”

"You'd holler plenty loud if that gold was in *your* pan," Ellie shot back. "I don't see you finding any color."

"That's 'cause I was interrupted by false, strike-it-rich claims!"

"There ain't nothin' false about it, boy," Strike said. Carefully, he dug into his back pocket and pulled out a small leather pouch. It was limp—worn-out from much handling—and empty. "Gold is gold, whether it's gold dust, radish-seed nuggets, or a hunk big enough for a doorstep."

He handed the pouch to Ellie, who quickly pulled the mouth of the small sack open. Using tweezers from another pocket, Strike fished the tiny bits of gold from his pan and dropped them in his pouch.

He smiled. "First gold of 1864. I 'spect this will be a good year for me." He took the now-closed leather bag from Ellie and stuffed it back in his pocket.

"You say that every year," Jem muttered, too low for his friend to hear. Strike-it-rich Sam had never, *ever* struck it rich. His small pouch was never more than half full. *Why did I think it would be different this year?*

He splashed back to his claim with a sigh. "I guess I better not quit my other jobs just yet." Turning to Ellie, he shouted, "Get the lunch pail and go after those frogs!"

Ellie grinned at him from the creek bank. "At what rate of payment, Jem?"

Jem let out a frustrated breath. *Sisters! What a bothersome lot!*

It took a bit of haggling, but Ellie finally agreed to catch frogs for a penny apiece. Jem shook her hand to seal the bargain and watched her skip off toward the boggy swamp a hundred yards up the creek. A warm spring fed the marsh, and Jem had high hopes that some of the hoppers had come out of hibernation early. Mr. Sims would buy as many as Jem could deliver.

“Ellie will probably have better luck catching frogs than I’ll have panning gold,” Jem told Strike. “Too bad gold nuggets don’t multiply like frogs do.”

Strike burst out laughing, as if Jem had told a funny joke.

Jem scowled. He didn’t think it was all that funny. His feet were numb inside his boots from crouching in the creek, and his hands shook with cold. He struggled to fill his gold pan with creek mud and gravel.

“I d-don’t see how you do it,” Jem said, teeth chattering. “You’re n-not even shivering. You look as warm as a lizard sunning itself on a rock. Aren’t you c-cold?”

“We-lll . . .” Strike dragged the word out while he peered into his pan. “I reckon not. I don’t pay no never-mind to heat or cold. My hide’s pert-near as tough as a little ol’ lizard’s.”

He took out his tweezers and poked around in his pan. “We-lll, lookee here. What’d’ya know? Another one of them radish-seed gold specks. I reckon a pouch full of ‘em would make a good-sized stake.” He dropped the tiny piece of gold in with the others. Then he winked at Jem.

Jem flushed. As much as he hated to admit it, Strike and Ellie were right: gold was gold, no matter how big or small the strike. “I guess I’d whoop plenty loud if I found gold in my pan this afternoon,” he admitted. “I’d probably forget how cold I am too.”

Too chilled to swirl his pan without losing the entire load—possible gold and all—Jem stepped out of the creek and hovered over the fire. He was tempted to take a swallow of Strike’s coffee to warm his insides but thought better of it.

When his hands had thawed, Jem picked up a shovel and returned to the creek. He stood alongside the swirling water and scooped a little of the creek bank into his

pan. Sometimes, gold flecks became lodged in the dirt between plant roots.

Jem squatted on the bank and added water. He worked his load of dirt and tried to enjoy the sounds of the creek splashing past him and the swishing of rocks and water against his pan. Unfortunately, the constant *clang, clang, clang* of the Midas mine's new stamp mill overshadowed the creek noises. The clamor of the ore-crushing machine could be heard miles away.



Jem wished there was another way to separate gold from rock besides smashing it. But the underground veins of quartz did not give up their gold easily. Crushing the rocks into coarse sand was the first step in separating the precious treasure. "Give me a gold pan and a quiet stream any day," he muttered.

Jem ignored the banging the best he could and concentrated on the task at hand. It was long, boring work that required a good deal of patience. Jem could muster up a decent share of patience, at least when it paid off.

And it paid off today.

The *whoop* Jem let out sounded identical to Strike's whoop from an hour before. "I hit color! It's no radish seed either. It's an honest-to-goodness real gold nugget!"

The prospector sloshed over to Jem and clapped him on the back. "Show me, partner."

The thrill of finding color sent a warm rush through Jem, as did the sound of Strike calling him "partner." Now that Pa couldn't be bothered teaming up with the old miner, Jem was happy to take his place.

He fished around in his pan then held up a gold nugget the size of a large corn

kernel.

Strike whistled, long and low. "Nice work, young fella. Didn't I say this was gonna be a good year?"

Jem nodded. "This was worth playing hooky from school for. Betcha there's more where that came from."

Before Jem could try his luck a second time, he spotted a small figure running alongside the bank on the opposite side of the creek. It was Ellie. "I heard you hollering," she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Did you strike it rich?"

"Come and see."

In a flash, Ellie pulled off her shoes and stockings, stuffed everything under her arm, and picked up the pail of frogs. She slammed the lid firmly in place then stepped into the icy creek. It was slippery going over the sharp rocks, but Ellie managed to make it across without getting dunked.

"It's cold!" she exclaimed.

"How did you get across the first time?" Jem wanted to know.

"I found a place to cross upstream, where I didn't have to take off my shoes." She dropped her stockings, shoes, and the pail on the ground. "Let me see your gold."

Jem opened his hand and let Ellie admire his gold nugget. When her eyes opened to twice their normal size, he knew she was properly impressed.

"Do you reckon there's more?" she asked.

Jem grinned. "I plan to find out. Betcha there's" —his eyebrows shot up— "hey, where are you going?"

Ellie had snatched up the gold pan and was stepping back into the creek. "Where do you think?"

"It's too cold to wade barefoot," Jem told her, slipping his precious nugget in his pocket. It would be safe there until he put it in his gold pouch at home. "Get out of that water and put your shoes back on."

Ellie paid no attention. Like the experienced little miner she was, she scooped up a load of dirt and gravel and began the long, slow process of panning for gold. "If you found a nugget, betcha I can too."

Jem slapped a hand against his forehead. "Why don't you ever do what I tell you, Ellie? Get outta there or I'll drag you out. The creek's nothin' but melted snow."

"Not until I find myself a nugget," Ellie insisted.

Jem took a step toward the creek. The last thing he wanted was a wrestling match with his spunky little sister. But he couldn't let her catch a chill and get sick. He turned to Strike in desperation. "Strike, can you give me a hand pulling Ellie out—"

"Ellianna, get out of the creek."

Jem froze.

Ellie froze too, but only for a second. She scrambled out of the water and over the bank like a startled jackrabbit. Her gold pan clattered to the ground. She skidded to a stop next to Jem, breathing hard and shaking with cold—or fear. Jem didn't know which. Probably a little of both.

Jem slowly turned and faced the tall, dark-haired man standing on a pile of old diggings a stone's throw away. His vest and pants were covered with dirt; his shirt was dark with sweat. It looked like he'd been working hard before . . .

Before coming out here, Jem thought in dismay. Suddenly, all his plans of striking

it rich flew from Jem's head. He forgot how cold he was or how irritated he was at Ellie. Only one thought went 'round and 'round in his mind.

Pa's gonna skin me alive for playing hooky!