

Goldtown Adventures #3

**CANYON
OF
DANGER**



~Story excerpt~

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Historical Note

Chapter One

MAN OF THE FAMILY

GOLDTOWN, CALIFORNIA, 1864

Jem Coulter took the back porch steps in a flying leap and nearly tore the screen door off its hinges in his eagerness to get inside the ranch house. He didn't bother to remove his hat. No time for such niceties. Not today. Not when life and death hung in the balance.

Gotta hurry! Jem clomped through the kitchen, where Aunt Rose stood at the huge, black cook stove. She was stirring a pot of something sweet-smelling, and Jem's mouth watered. Applesauce! Nobody could make applesauce—or anything else—like Aunt Rose. Jem figured he'd grown two inches and gained ten pounds since spring, when his aunt and cousin Nathan had moved in.

Jem had no time to beg a taste of applesauce today. He hurried into the front room and crossed over to the fireplace. The ashes lay cold and dead, just as they had all summer. No need for a fire when the unrelenting California sun beat down on the small ranch house. It kept Jem's attic loft as hot as a blacksmith's forge.

Jem reached for his father's Henry rifle, which rested on the rack above the fireplace.

"Jeremiah Isaiah!"

Aunt Rose's voice stopped Jem in his tracks. Roasted rattlesnakes! *She sure likes to hear the sound of my name.*



Jem had heard his full name more times in the past four months than in all of his twelve years put together. Mama had never called him Jeremiah unless she was really aggravated at him. Jem winced. He still missed his mother, even though she had been gone these past four years. Aunt Rose did a good job managing her brother's family, but it wasn't the same as when Mama was alive.

Jem turned around empty-handed. He hoped Aunt Rose would be quick. He had to get back to the herd. "Yes, ma'am?"

"What do you mean by tearing through the house like a wild Indian?" Aunt Rose stood in the doorway, a wooden spoon in one hand and her other hand planted on her hip. She was a small woman—barely up to Pa's shoulders—but Jem knew better than to cross her.

She waved the applesauce spoon at him. "Take that hat off, young man. This is a respectable home, not a saloon or a miner's shack."

Jem whipped off his hat and tossed it on the sagging couch to his left.

"Well?" his aunt demanded. "Why are you running around in this heat? Did you water the chickens and the garden? Is the wood split for tomorrow? What about that loose section of fence around the garden? Rabbits have been chewing my produce."

Jem didn't know which question to answer first. His heart hammered. There was no time to listen to Aunt Rose's scolding. He had to grab the rifle and get going.

Aunt Rose gave Jem a weak smile and let her wooden spoon drop to her side. She sighed. "Forgive me for fussing at you, Jeremiah. I'm a little anxious about keeping the place up right now."

Jem relaxed. Aunt Rose wasn't sore at him. She was only fussing because Pa was gone, like Miss Cluck ruffling her feathers when something upset her. The likeness between Aunt Rose and his sister Ellie's favorite setting hen made Jem smile. "Ellie took care of the chickens hours ago," he said. "Nathan's splitting wood. I'll check the fence as soon as I can."

Aunt Rose might be uneasy about Pa leaving town on sheriff business, but Jem could hardly contain his excitement. *Pa left me in charge of the ranch!*

"I've got no choice but to escort this particular prisoner to Sacramento," Pa had explained at supper three nights ago. "I'm afraid this is the downside of being a sheriff. I hate leaving you all, but Jem's old enough to be the man of the family for a couple of weeks."

Jem felt ten feet tall at Pa's words.

"And with Nathan and Ellie to help out," Pa finished, "I've no worries. If you get in a bind, you can ask Strike to lend a hand."

Aunt Rose had made a face and clucked her tongue at the mention of Strike-it-rich Sam. "I'm sure no one will be able to drag him away from his gold claim," she'd sniffed. Her expression gave away the fact that she did not want the old prospector anywhere near the Coulter ranch.

Pa had laughed. The whole family knew Aunt Rose's low opinion of the miner. But Strike-it-rich Sam was the Coulters' best friend. If the need arose, Jem knew he could count on Strike.

Jem turned his attention back to the rifle, the rest of his aunt's questions forgotten. He carefully lifted the heavy weapon down from the rack and checked the loading tube. There were only three cartridges. He'd have to find more

ammunition and maybe a small grub sack to take with him. It might be a long afternoon and evening.

Aunt Rose sucked in her breath. "Land sakes, Jeremiah! Put that thing away. You've no call to be toting around a firearm." She took a step back and regarded the long-barreled rifle as if it were a striking rattlesnake. "You heard me. Put it up."

Jem clenched his jaw to keep from talking back, but he did not return the rifle to the rack. He couldn't. Pa had left him in charge, and Jem had a job to do. Aunt Rose had lived in Goldtown for months now, but she still hadn't adjusted to the rough and wild country. *You can take Aunt Rose out of Boston*, he mused, *but I reckon you can't take Boston out of Aunt Rose.*

"I've been shooting a rifle since I was nine," Jem explained. "And Pa's been teaching me his fast draw with the pistol. Didn't Uncle Frederick teach Nathan to shoot? After all, he was a captain in the army and probably shot a gun lots of times."

Aunt Rose caught her breath and turned pale.

Too late Jem realized he had brought up a sore subject. His uncle had been killed in the Battle of Gettysburg only a year ago. It probably hurt Auntie to be reminded of such a tragedy.

"No, he did not teach Nathan to shoot," Aunt Rose said before Jem could apologize. "A gun was necessary in your uncle's profession, but he found no need for such things in the city."

Jem gripped Pa's rifle tighter. "You're probably right, but there *is* need for a rifle here." He dropped his voice, just in case ten-year-old Ellie came barreling into the house right then. "I was out checking on the cattle and I found"—he swallowed—"a dead calf."

Aunt Rose gasped.

"Please don't tell Ellie," Jem hurried on. "She puts a lot of stock in our animals. Each of those calves out there has a name. I think this was Pepper, at least from what I can tell by what's left of him. He's one of the younger calves. That's probably why a wolf could take him down."

"Wolf?" Her voice rose in a squeak.

Jem nodded. "I'm pretty sure. They usually stick to the hills and leave the ranchers alone, but once in a while a lone wolf gets real pesky." He paused.

"And . . . ?" Aunt Rose prompted.

"He'll come back for the rest of his meal," Jem said. "I intend to be there when he does."

"That is your father's job," Aunt Rose said in a shaky voice. "You should wait until he returns."

Jem felt a flush race up his neck and burst in his cheeks. Aunt Rose didn't understand. "No, ma'am, I can't. We only have a couple dozen head of cattle. I've gotta get that wolf. Not because he killed one of Ellie's pet calves, but because those cattle are our living. Now that we've got the new bull, Pa's working hard to increase the herd. He can't afford to lose even one calf."

For a full minute, Aunt Rose didn't say anything. She chewed on her lip while her gaze flicked from the repeating rifle in her young nephew's hands to a faraway spot out the front window, then back to the gun.

Jem held his breath. Disobeying Aunt Rose would make her angry. She was a grown-up and the closest thing he now had to a mother. He needed her support if he was going to keep the herd safe from predators. He did not want to go against her.

Please, God, make her back off. But if she insists I wait for Pa, don't let her get too riled when I go after that wolf anyway.

“Well, Jeremiah,” she finally said, “I suppose your mind’s made up. Short of wresting that rifle away from you, I see no way of keeping you from protecting the Coulter cattle.”

Jem let out the breath he’d been holding.

She frowned. “I don’t like it. Not one bit. But seeing as you seem to have some experience with firearms, I won’t stand in your way. After all, Matthew did give you charge of the ranch during his absence.”

Jem carefully laid the rifle down and threw his arms around Aunt Rose. Up until today, he’d only let his aunt kiss him on the cheek or lay a friendly hand on his shoulder. He’d never felt like engulfing her in a grateful hug. But he did so now and was rewarded with a hug in return. “Thank you, Auntie. I’ll do my best to get that wolf.”

While Jem found more cartridges for the rifle, Aunt Rose put together a small sack of food to take along. “Don’t stay out too long past dark,” she warned. “I’ll keep your supper warm.” Then she frowned. “What do I tell Ellianna and Nathan?”

Jem slung a canteen over one shoulder. “That I’m out watching the herd. That’s true enough.” He plopped his hat back on his head. “I think I’ll let Pa tell Ellie about Pepper getting eaten.”

Jem planned to leave behind any wolf he shot. If he dragged it home, Ellie would bombard him with questions. Before long, she’d figure out that a dead wolf probably meant that it had killed first.

Jem stopped by the outside pump to give Copper a quick drink. Thankfully, Ellie was nowhere in sight, and Nathan was asleep in the shade by the woodpile. Jem left his horse and hurried into the barn to find the scabbard to carry the rifle on horseback.

When he came out, he groaned. His golden dog romped and whined, circling Copper and wagging his tail. "You can't go along," Jem said. "You'll keep a wolf from coming anywhere near its kill."

It took another five minutes to drag Nugget to the porch and tie him up. He whined and barked until Aunt Rose found an old bone to keep him busy.

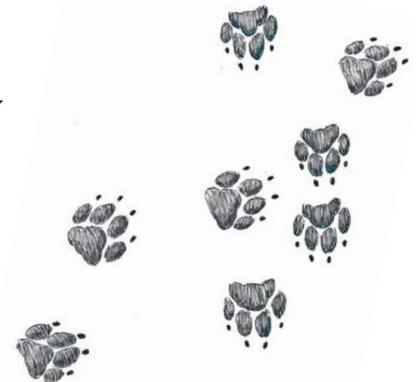
By the time Jem left the yard, it felt like hours had passed since he'd stumbled across the dead calf. What if the wolf had already returned and finished what it began the day before?

Jem nudged Copper into a lope and made a beeline to where he'd discovered the calf earlier that afternoon. He saw the brown hide and blinked back tears. Ellie wasn't the only Coulter who was fond of their livestock.

The remains of the calf lay in a clump of scrub brush and small oaks. Jem dismounted and searched the ground all the way around the kill. Sure enough, wolf tracks in the soft dirt circled the remains then headed for deeper woods.

Jem breathed a sigh of relief. He'd given the tracks only a passing glance the first time, before hightailing it home for the rifle and supplies. There was a chance something else had taken down the calf, like a cougar. The thought of a cougar made the hairs on Jem's neck stand on end. If the tracks had turned out to be a cat, he would have leaped on Copper and headed home—as fast as he could. He knew better than to tangle with a mountain lion.

Jem led Copper away from the calf and tied him up in the woods. Then he made his way back and settled down in a brushy thicket near enough to the recent kill to have a clear view. In the distance, a small herd of cattle grazed out in the open.



He took a drink from his canteen and bit into a biscuit. *It's going to be a long wait.* Wolves had sharp hearing and an excellent sense of smell. If the wolf even suspected an armed hunter hid nearby, it wouldn't come within howling distance.

Jem reached out and slapped at a pesky fly then kept still. Except for the sound of chattering chipmunks and the occasional cawing crow, all was quiet. There was no breeze, and the late afternoon sun baked Jem's hiding place. He propped the rifle across his knees and leaned his head back against a tree trunk.

His thoughts drifted to what Pa would say when he learned Jem had saved the herd from a predator. He imagined his father's proud grin and a friendly clap on the shoulder. "Why, Son, you need a rifle of your own." Jem grinned and settled himself more comfortably in the thicket . . . and drifted off to sleep.

When Jem jerked awake some hours later, he found dusk settling around him. The chattering had faded away; the crow was long gone. *Some hunter you are!* he scolded himself. How could he have fallen asleep? And what had awakened him?

Then he heard it—a rustling in the brush just beyond the calf's remains. Jem's senses came alive. A cold chill raced up his spine. Carefully, quietly, he gripped the rifle and rose to his knees.