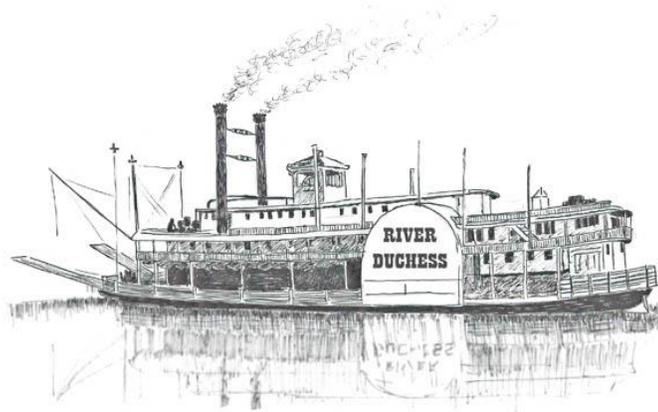


Goldtown Adventures #4

**RIVER
OF
PERIL**



~Story excerpt~

SUSAN K. MARLOW

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Chapter One

THE SECRET

CENTRAL VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, 1864

Something's not right.

Jem Coulter could feel it clear to his toes, and he shivered — which was ridiculous. He shouldn't be shivering, not when a hot, late-summer breeze was whipping through the stagecoach. Not when, in less than a day, he'd be in Sacramento, the capital of California. Tall buildings, paddle-wheel boats along the wharf, and more people than Jem had seen in all his twelve years awaited him. He should be tingly with excitement, not shivering in uncertainty.

Jem rested his arms against the window ledge, watched the flat, brown landscape rush by, and tried to push his uneasiness to a little-used corner of his mind.

There was plenty else to occupy his thoughts. The end of September was coming fast, and Jem would soon be trapped in a stuffy schoolroom. His freedom ended, chores and school would take all his time, and summer's heat would give way to rain and mud.

But that didn't make Jem shiver. He was used to school . . . and to chores . . . and to muddy streets and rain. *If we're lucky, Goldtown might even see snow this winter.* It happened occasionally, transforming the mucky streets and shoddy building fronts into the likeness of a sparkly winter scene from Aunt Rose's calendar.

Jem shivered again and poked his head out the square opening. A cloud of dust from the horses' beating hooves blasted him in the face. He coughed, then squinted and looked up toward the high seat on top of the coach. *Pa's all in a tangle about something*, he told himself. *Something more than just a trip to Sacramento. He won't say, but I can tell he's—*

"Jeremiah Isaiah, get back inside the coach this instant. The very idea!"

Jem jerked around just as one of the wheels hit a hole in the road. *Thud!* Pain shot through his head. He crumpled to his seat and rubbed behind his ears, wishing he were anyplace but inside this rocking rattletrap. Panning for gold in the last, muddy dribbles of Cripple Creek was better than being churned like butter for two days.

"Why can't I ride up with Pa and Walt?" he burst out. The back of his head throbbed. "It's so hot in here I'm frying. At least up top, I—" Jem broke off in sudden realization that he'd overstepped his bounds. But it was too late to take back his words.

Aunt Rose pressed her lips together, and her face scrunched up in a familiar *mind-your-tongue* expression. He'd seen the look often enough during the five months his aunt and his cousin, Nathan, had lived with the Coulter family. He also knew he'd have received more than Auntie's look if three other passengers had not been along for the ride.

Sitting stiff and formal on the seat across from him, Mr. Watson, Mrs. Graham, and Mrs. Fields were also giving Jem "the look." He knew just what they were thinking: *Jeremiah Coulter, sheriff's son, you had better be a proper example every waking minute of every livelong day.*

One of the hardships of having a sheriff for a father.

He saw Ellie and Nathan hunch back into their seats, trying to avoid the trouble. All four grown-ups in the cramped coach seemed to be circling Jem like hungry hawks, waiting for him to speak. And it had better be the right words, *or else*.

Jem reddened, straightened his shoulders, and swallowed. "I'm sorry, Aunt Rose, for the way I spoke to you." He really *was* sorry, but he hated having to tell her so in front of these other prune-faced busybodies.

With proper conduct restored, the grown-ups went back to chatting about topics of no interest to Jem. He went back to staring out the window — and saw the dried-up stream bed only seconds before the stage plunged over it.

The coach lurched violently forward, then with a sharp jerk pitched backward. Wheels bounced over rocks and ruts. Most of the passengers were lifted out of their seats and fell into each other's laps.

Jem gripped the window rim with all his might. He'd had plenty of practice holding on during the past two days. He had no desire to fly into Mr. Watson, his skinny Sunday school teacher, or break the man's spectacles.

His ten-year-old sister didn't fare so well. Plump Mrs. Graham groaned when Ellie fell headlong into her lap. One of Ellie's auburn braids slapped the woman across the mouth. Mrs. Graham gasped and flung her fleshy arms over her head.

A few seconds later, the stage was over the creek bed and back on smoother ground. Jem grabbed Ellie and plopped her down safely beside him.

"At least she's nice and squishy," Ellie whispered when everyone's arms and legs had been sorted out.

“It’s better that *you* landed in *her* lap than if *she* had landed on *you*,” Jem replied softly in Ellie’s ear. *Very* softly. He kept his face stone sober.

Ellie’s high-pitched giggles filled the stagecoach. They echoed above the rattling coach and over the women’s voices. Mrs. Fields frowned, and Ellie choked back her laughter before Aunt Rose could silence her.

The road stayed mostly level after that. The rocking and swaying of the stagecoach began to lull Jem into a quiet-but-queasy state. He yawned, but he didn’t relax completely. Any minute an unexpected hole might reach out and grab the coach. It was best to stay alert, no matter how sleepy he felt.

He glanced down. Ellie had fallen asleep in the afternoon heat. Her tousled head lay limply in his aunt’s lap. Aunt Rose sat straight-backed, her hands draped across Ellie to keep her from slipping. Sitting on her far side, Cousin Nathan stared listlessly out the window. It was clear that traveling by stagecoach was neither one’s fondest activity.

Now Jem knew why. He’d traveled by stage more than once in his life. It had always been an exciting adventure, mostly because the driver let Jem sit up top. *Not* stuffed in a coach for hours and days on end. Jem’s stage trips had also been short—no more than an hour or so.

But two days? Twenty hours in a stagecoach was about eighteen hours too long in Jem’s mind. Nathan and Aunt Rose had traveled by stage at least that long when they’d come to Goldtown last spring. No wonder they looked like they wanted off. *I want off too.*

Jem shivered again—the same eerie shiver that had pestered him ever since Pa had announced they were going to Sacramento for a week. Jem had never been

farther than Mariposa in his life, so the news should have sent him running to pack. Ellie had certainly celebrated. Nathan too. Even Aunt Rose clasped her hands together and exclaimed, “Oh, Matthew, it’s been so long since I’ve been to the city!”

But something in his father’s eyes kept Jem from jumping for joy. His worry grew when Pa insisted that Jem ride in the coach with the others, even though there was plenty of room with the driver.

“Why, Pa?” he asked. “I always ride up top.”

“Just do it, Son. Bring along a book, or maybe that new dime novel I saw you slip under your shirt after services last Sunday.” Pa had grinned and ruffled Jem’s hair, but Jem didn’t smile back.

Now he looked around the coach and muttered, “Pa expects me to *read*? When I’m rattling around worse than gravel in Strike’s rocker?”

The thought of the Coulter family’s prospector-friend, Strike-it-rich Sam, made Jem feel around in his trouser pocket for his ever-present gold pouch. Last spring, standing knee-deep in icy, snow-melted Cripple Creek, Jem had heard Strike boast that 1864 would be a good gold-panning year. Jem didn’t agree at the time. His pan came up empty more times than it showed color.

But in the end, the old miner had been right.

Jem fingered his pouch. *I haven’t done too badly this year.* He’d managed to coax more flakes, dust, and pea-sized nuggets out of the creek than he had in past years. Best of all, Jem had panned a thumb-sized chunk just a few weeks ago. Mr. Watson—the assayer sitting across from him—assured Jem it was indeed an ounce.

A whole ounce! Sixteen dollars' worth. A fortune to Jem. He kept his prize hidden away in his attic bedroom. Every few days he took the nugget out, just to admire it and imagine all the things he could buy with that one little hunk of gold.

"And what can I buy in the city with *this*?" Jem whispered to himself, squeezing his pouch. A few months ago, he'd have spent it all to help Pa run their broken-down ranch. But now, with Pa accepting the sheriff job and Aunt Rose running the house, it wasn't as hard to make ends meet. "It's not enough for a rifle, but I betcha I can buy a new knife."

Jem carefully withdrew his hand from his pocket. Not even Ellie or Nathan knew he'd brought along his gold stash—though Ellie could probably guess. She was always quick to figure out what he was thinking.

Careful to keep his head inside the coach, Jem peered through the window and wondered again what his father was up to. Some kind of secret sheriff business, Jem decided. It couldn't be a prisoner transfer, though, unless the desperado was tied to the luggage rack on top or stuffed in the rear boot.

Why, then, was Pa riding shotgun up with Walt? *What are we carrying? And if it's something dangerous, why would Pa bring us along?*

Another shiver.

Aunt Rose reached over Ellie and gave Jem a sharp poke. "Are you catching a chill, Jeremiah? Land sakes, just what we need is for you to come down with a fever. Tell me. Are you feeling poorly?"

"No, ma'am," Jem answered without turning around. His gaze stayed fixed on the wide, flat land, so different from the pine-and-oak-covered foothills around Goldtown. Trees and brush grew here aplenty, but Jem missed the mountains. He

shaded his eyes and caught a glimpse of a dark smudge in the distance—the Sierra Nevada.

“Three-thirty,” Mr. Watson announced some time later. “Another two hours, and we should arrive in the city.” He snapped his pocket watch shut and stuffed it in his vest pocket. Then he drew a handkerchief across his sweat-dotted forehead. “I forgot how hot it gets in this valley. It must be close to a hundred in the shade.”

Jem wondered who the assayer was talking to. Auntie’s eyes were closed. Nathan was leaning back against the seat with his mouth open, snoring. As usual, a hank of his white-blond hair hung over his eyes. The two other women appeared to be asleep as well.

It finally dawned on Jem that Mr. Watson was directing his remarks at *him*. “Are you sure your watch didn’t stop?” Jem answered. “It feels like we’ve been traveling hours longer than that.”

The assayer drew himself up and reached inside his pocket. “I wound that watch only last—”

Crack!

The sound of a gunshot cut through Mr. Watson’s words. Two more shots and the *twang* of a bullet across metal brought the coach to a sudden, lurching halt. Horses whinnied, harnesses jingled, and the women shrieked. From outside, Jem heard angry voices.

Ellie woke up with a yelp and clutched Jem’s arm. “What happened? Where’s Pa?”

Jem tightened his fingers on the window ledge, but he didn’t stick his head out to see what was going on. He already knew.

Somebody was holding up the stage.

Chapter Two

HOLDUP

Jem strained his ears to hear what was happening outside. He knew better than to burst through the coach door, even though every part of him itched to rush to Pa's aid. The sound of gunfire kept Jem glued to his seat better than any words from Aunt Rose.

Not that his aunt was saying much. She had her arms wrapped tightly around Ellie and was rocking back and forth. Her lips moved, clearly pleading with the Almighty, but no sound came out.

Jem couldn't have heard her even if she'd been shouting her prayer. He couldn't hear anything over the racket coming from inside the coach. Mrs. Graham and Mrs. Fields shrieked and waved their arms, demanding answers at the top of their lungs. Their pocketbooks and hankies went flying. They cackled worse than a flock of hens cornered by a coyote.

They look like hens too, Jem thought in disgust, flapping their wings and losing feathers everywhere. Hush! he wanted to holler.

Mr. Watson's face was pale but set in a look of resolve to see this through. He did his best to soothe the ladies, but Jem could see it wasn't working.

Jem scooted closer to the window and carefully pushed his head out a few inches. There was nothing to see. Only horses, brush and trees along the roadside, and in the distance an old wagon.

"Ladies, please!"

Jem whipped around at the loud, commanding voice. A man with a head full of curly black hair and a bandana covering half his face stood at the window near Nathan. He raised a Colt .44 pistol and pointed it through the opening. Nathan fell back against the seat with a gasp.

"I really must insist that you be quiet," the highwayman said in a polite-but-firm voice. "They can no doubt hear you all the way back in Jackson. Calm yourselves."

The women fell into shocked silence, and Jem let out a breath of relief. A raised pistol had accomplished what all of Mr. Watson's calm assurances could not—peace and quiet.

"My companions and I have no intention of bringing bodily harm to any of you fine folks," the bandit said. "I only ask that you step out of the coach and stay within sight. We will take what we came for and be on our way as quickly as possible. Then you are free to continue your journey to Sacramento." His eyes smiled, but his gun never wavered.

When no one moved, his eyes turned cold and he yanked open the door. "Get out!"

The reality of being robbed suddenly slammed into Jem. He'd heard plenty of tales of highwaymen robbing stages up and down gold country. But Goldtown lay

so far south of the main routes and the richer mines—like Grass Valley and Nevada City—that nobody paid much attention to their little town.

Until today.

What do we have that they want? Jem wondered. Then his hand went to his pocket. They might steal his gold! He gritted his teeth. *Not if I can help it.*

Jem hung back while the semi-polite stagecoach robber offered his hand to the women. Quickly, he pulled the pouch from his pocket, opened it, and sprinkled his precious gold inside his right boot. Stamping down hard, the pebbles, dust, and flakes settled around his ankle and under his foot. The nuggets bit into Jem’s sole. He winced.

Hurry, hurry! There was no time to worry about comfort. Ellie and Aunt Rose were stepping down from the coach. Only he and Mr. Watson remained. Jem crumpled his empty pouch and stuffed it along the inside of his left boot. Then he slid his trouser legs back in place. Looking up, he caught Mr. Watson giving him a nod of approval.

Jem grinned and hurried out behind Aunt Rose. Instead of jumping off the edge of the coach, he used the narrow, iron rung that passed as a step to carefully lower himself to the ground. Then he straightened up and looked around.

Besides the man who had ordered them out of the coach, three other bandana-masked highwaymen stood around with pistols. They shouted orders at each other and to Pa and the driver sitting up on top. Now that the women had closed their mouths, Jem could clearly hear what the men were saying.

“I won’t ask you again, Sheriff,” said a tall man dressed in shiny black, knee-high boots and a brown overcoat. “Get down from there or somebody is going to

get hurt." He waved his pistol at the seven passengers huddled together a few yards away and sighed. "And we don't want that. We only want the gold."

Jem gasped. *Gold? What gold?* The Midas mine shipped gold and the miners' payroll back and forth, but since when did Mr. Sterling, the mine owner, announce which stage was carrying it?

"You shot the driver," Pa said. "I can't leave him up here to bake in the sun. I need help lowering him to the ground." He looked angry and frustrated. And helpless. His Henry rifle and his sidearm lay in the dust next to the wheel.

The curly-haired robber nudged Mr. Watson. "Help the sheriff." Then he called up to Pa, "We surely didn't mean no harm to the driver, Sheriff. Just wanted him to stop the stage, but he didn't seem willing. Can I help it if he got in the way of a stray bullet?"

Jem couldn't see the man's mouth, but he heard a chuckle and knew the bandit was grinning behind his makeshift mask. He gave Mr. Watson a poke with his gun to hurry him along. "Get moving. We haven't got all day."

With Mr. Watson's help, Pa lowered the injured driver to the ground and laid him carefully in the shade of the coach, out of the worst of the sun's rays. "Walt," Pa urged, slapping the man's cheeks with a gentle hand. "Wake up. You're winged. It's just a graze. Let's not sleep on the job, my friend."

Pa didn't look or sound too worried over the driver's injury. It appeared he'd already tied up Walt's arm with a bandana to stop the bleeding, and that was that. Why then was Walt unconscious? Was it from fear? Heat stroke? Jem could believe either explanation. His heart thudded from looking at all the guns, and the sun was scorching him and everyone else.

Pa glanced up from Walt and looked over at the passengers. "Is everyone all right?"

Ellie burst into tears. Before Jem or Aunt Rose could stop her, she broke away from the group and ran to Pa. Halfway there, Black Boots caught her arm and yanked her around. "Get back with the others, missy."

Pa jumped to his feet. "Let her go," he ordered in a low voice. "Rob us, cut the horses loose if you must, but leave her be."

"Pa!" Ellie squealed. She landed a vicious kick to her captor's leg, then twisted free. Before anyone could blink, she slammed into Pa. He caught her up in his arms and hugged her tight.

Jem covered his mouth to keep his laughter inside. *Good for you, Ellie!*

But Pa wasn't smiling. Neither was Black Boots. He rubbed his shin and pierced Pa with a steely gray look. "That kid's slipperier than a greased pig," he muttered, keeping his pistol steady. "Get over there with the others and stay put."

"Whatever you say," Pa said.

Black Boots—clearly the bandits' leader—motioned to his comrades. "Hurry up. Get the strongbox. But have a care," he warned. "It'll be heavier than it looks, on account of this special shipment."

Special shipment? Jem glanced up. "Pa?" he whispered. "What's going on? What kind of special gold are we carrying?"

Pa shook his head, and Jem took the hint. *Be quiet.*

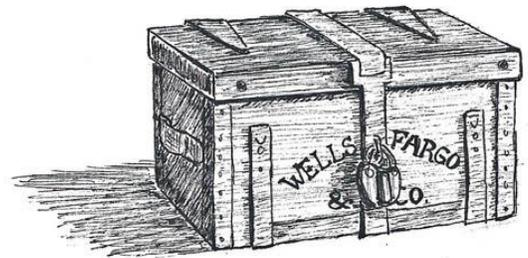
It took three men to jostle the strongbox from under the driver's seat and shove it over the edge. The metal box landed on the ground with a dull, heavy *thud*.

A few minutes later, one of the highwaymen brought a wagon around and pulled up next to the stagecoach.

Black Boots held his pistol on the coach passengers while the other three lugged the heavy load up and into the wagon. By the time they finished, they were breathing hard. Sweat poured down their foreheads, soaking their bandanas.

Jem knew why. Pa had shown him a gold bar once when he was Ellie's age. It wasn't very big—about the size of a narrow brick. When Pa grinned and told him to lift it, Jem couldn't. No wonder! Pa said that little gold brick weighed nearly twenty-eight pounds.

The strongbox most likely held eight or ten bars. Jem's heart skipped in astonishment. *Roasted rattlesnakes, that's a lot of gold!* And it was piled into a box no bigger than the small wooden chest that sat at the end of Jem's bed.



Where did all that gold come from? Surely not from the Midas mine, which had never been a rich producer.

"No sudden moves, Sheriff," Black Boots said, breaking into Jem's thoughts. He kept his pistol steady and pointed it at Pa, who was still holding Ellie. "We'll be out of your hair in no time."

The curly-haired bandit, recovered from hauling the gold, brought his leader a small pad of paper and a stubby pencil. "Here you go."

Black Boots holstered his gun and took the paper. Frowning, he scribbled rapidly then ripped the paper from the pad and strolled over to Pa. For the first

time, he looked apologetic. "Sheriff, I want you to give this letter to the Wells Fargo agent when you arrive in Sacramento." He held it out.

Pa lowered Ellie to the ground and took the paper. He glanced over the words then gave the man a startled look. "What in blazes is the meaning of *this*?" His dark-blue eyes flashed in anger. "Of all the outlandish, deceitful schemes I ever—" He broke off when Black Boots drew his pistol.

"Please, Sheriff," he said. "It is no scheme. We are utterly sincere. The letter you hold is a receipt for funds we are raising for the Confederate Army. My associates and I are not bandits—"

"In a pig's eye," Mr. Watson muttered, fists clenched.

Black Boots ignored him. "We belong to the Knights of the Golden Circle, a group of Southern sympathizers. We have just carried out a legitimate military operation in the Union state of California. It is no different from any other war-time engagement, were we on a battleground back in the Atlantic states."

Jem's mouth fell open. To him, the War Between the States was nothing more than a subject Miss Cheney mentioned when a weeks-old newspaper found its way into their classroom. "History is being made right now," she often said. "Future school children will one day read about this war. You pupils are *living* it."

Jem knew his cousin had lived the war. Nathan's father had been killed in the Battle of Gettysburg over a year ago. But California—and especially Goldtown—was so far removed from the action that it seemed like just another book lesson to Jem.

He swallowed. Not any longer.

Pa's sharp laugh made Jem jump. "That's absurd. None of this gold will ever see the South."

"I beg to differ with you," Black Boots said. He tapped the letter in Pa's hand. "Keep that receipt safe, Sheriff. When the war is over and the Confederacy emerges victorious, its debts will be graciously repaid."

Pa snorted his disbelief and stuffed the letter into his vest pocket. "I highly doubt that."

"To show our sincerity," the bandit continued as if Pa had not spoken, "we're leaving. We have no intention of robbing civilians. Truly, all we want is the gold." He bowed slightly. "We are, after all, Southern gentlemen."

The three women, who had been clutching their handbags close to their chests, sagged in relief. Jem wiggled his toes and looked forward to returning the hidden gold to his pouch.

The road agent saluted Pa with the tip of his pistol barrel, winked at Ellie, and climbed aboard the wagon's tailgate. "Let's go!" he called to the others. He kept his gun trained on the stage passengers.

The wagon—and Goldtown's gold—rolled away, leaving behind a thick cloud of dust . . . and a disbelieving group of travelers staring after it.