

Goldtown Adventures #2

Tunnel of Gold



~Story excerpt~

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Chapter One

DELIVERY DAY

GOLDTOWN, CALIFORNIA, 1864

“Are you coming or not?” Twelve-year-old Jem Coulter hollered toward the ramshackle ranch house he called home.

There was no answer.

What’s taking Nathan so long? Jem frowned at the delay and looked up. The sun was high overhead, the very worst time of day to bounce around in an old wagon, making firewood deliveries. If it were up to Jem, his customers would already have their cooking fuel, and he’d be panning for gold in Cripple Creek with his prospector friend, Strike-it-rich Sam. The sun would still blister his head, but at least his feet would stay cool.

Sweat trickled under Jem’s collar, making him itchy. He climbed up on the high wagon seat, unwrapped the reins from around the brake handle, and yelled, “Nathan! Get out here or I’m leaving you behind!”

A faint, “Wait for me!” from inside the house was the only thing that kept Jem from slapping the two horses and taking off without his cousin. He’d promised Nathan a cut of the profits if he helped split, stack, and deliver stove wood this week, but if he didn’t hurry up . . .

The screen door creaked open, then slammed shut. A tall, slim boy hurried across the porch, down the steps, and joined Jem at the wagon. “Give me a hand up, would you?”

Jem gaped at him. “Roasted rattlesnakes, Nathan! Did you get your days mixed up? It’s not Sunday. Where are you going in that getup?”

He couldn’t help but stare. His cousin was dressed in knee-length britches, thick, black stockings, and polished shoes. A white shirt and black tie peeked out from inside his dark suit coat. On his blond head perched a cap with a narrow brim. Jem knew that under the cap, Nathan had slicked his hair down with Dr. Lyman’s Hair Tonic. Jem could smell it from clear up on the wagon seat. He wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Nathan reached inside his suit coat and pulled out a piece of paper and a pencil stub. “I’m a businessman now, so I figured I ought to look like one and make an impression on our customers. I brought along paper to record the dollar amounts we take in. It’s important to keep records if we’re going into business together.”

“Oh, you’re gonna make an impression, all right.” Jem clasped Nathan’s outstretched hand and helped him up. “They’ll take one look at you and scream, ‘Greenhorn! City boy!’” He shook his head and released the brake. “And just when I thought you were starting to adjust to life in Goldtown. What are you trying to do? Turn everything you’ve learned the past three months upside down?”

Nathan didn’t answer. His face fell, and Jem immediately felt sorry for his quick tongue. But hang it all! A boy couldn’t walk around a dusty, rowdy gold camp all slicked up on a weekday and not end up the worse for it. *After all, Jem thought, now that Pa’s the sheriff, I can’t have the town laughing at his nephew.*

Jem and his sister, Ellie, had not known what to expect when Aunt Rose and Nathan invaded their lives last spring. Pa had seemed thrilled to welcome his older sister into their humble ranch home, but his children had not been happy. Their pale, skinny cousin knew nothing about mining gold, ranching, or any useful chores.

However, to Jem’s surprise, Nathan turned out to be a determined—if a bit slow—learner. He’d even proved himself last month, when he was forced to make his way

alone through the wild and unfamiliar foothills to fetch help for an injured Strike-it-rich Sam.

But that would all be undone if Nathan paraded through town, delivering firewood in his Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes. *I reckon it's up to me to protect both our reputations,* Jem decided with a sigh. *But it's best if I do it after we leave the ranch. Otherwise, Aunt Rose might—*

“Jeremiah!” His aunt’s high, demanding voice sliced into Jem’s mental plans.

“Don’t worry about it for now,” he whispered to Nathan, then turned to his aunt. “Yes, ma’am?” He set the wagon brake and waited, although he was itching to be on his way. Aunt Rose was never quick when she had something to say, and she expected Jem’s undivided attention when she did speak.

Aunt Rose stepped outside on the porch. She was a small woman, hardly up to Pa’s shoulder, but she had plenty of energy to manage her brother’s small ranch. Aunt Rose was pretty good at managing Jem’s and Ellie’s lives too. “How long are you boys going to be gone?” she asked, lifting a hand to shade her eyes from the glaring sun. “The garden needs watering. The beans are wilting on the poles.”

Jem groaned and slumped in his seat. His small pouch of gold flakes and nuggets hadn’t grown much lately. He could only pan Cripple Creek in snatches. That ol’ garden was thirsty morning, noon, and night.

“None of that, Jeremiah Isaiah,” Aunt Rose scolded. “I want you two back here in plenty of time to water. Afterward, you are free to hobnob with that filthy old miner out on your claim. But not before.”

Jem was about to agree—just so he could get going—when a small figure flung open the screen door. “I got the dishes wiped, Auntie,” Ellie burst out. “Can I go now? Please?” Without waiting for a reply, she scurried down the steps and hauled herself over the side and into the wagon bed. Then she climbed across the firewood and squeezed in next to Nathan on the wagon seat.

Aunt Rose frowned. “Ellianna, it would be best if . . .” Then she let out a long, resigned sigh. “Oh, go along with you.” She clucked her tongue, gave a careless wave, and went back inside the house. Jem knew that behind his aunt’s hard, outer shell of fussing and scolding, she was as soft as warm butter—especially with Ellie.

Jem wished his sister would stay home, but now he was stuck with her. *If I don’t get going soon, the dog might want to tag along too!* A quick glance showed Nugget sprawled out on the shady porch, fast asleep.

Jem released the brake and urged the horses forward. “Listen here, Ellie,” he said. “You can come, but since we’re not delivering frog legs, you’ve got no say in things. It’s *firewood* today.”

Ellie didn’t answer. Jem peeked around Nathan and scowled at her. “Did you hear me?”

“I don’t care a whit about your firewood business,” she told him, brushing a short auburn braid away from her shoulder. “I’m hitchin’ a ride to Maybelle’s to play.”

“Sure you are,” Jem muttered, too low for Ellie to hear. Maybelle Sterling, just like her brother Will, never had much to do with the Coulter kids. The mine owner’s family lived in a fancy house up on Belle Hill. The Coulters barely scraped by on a rundown ranch a couple miles out of town. If Ellie was going to Maybelle’s to play, Jem was pretty sure Maybelle knew nothing about it.

But the Sterlings are my best firewood customers, he reminded himself. They paid top dollar for stove wood, and their cook always slipped Jem a little extra in the way of baked goods. It was worth putting up with Will if it meant keeping the Sterlings’ business.

Halfway to town, Jem pulled the horses to a stop under the wide, spreading branches of an oak tree. “You really don’t want to deliver firewood in those clothes,” he told Nathan.

“That’s the gospel truth,” Ellie added.

Nathan looked ready to give in. He nodded and removed his cap. "What do you suggest?"

"The coat and tie have to go," Jem said. "It's too hot to wear them, anyway."

Nathan shed his coat and yanked off the tie. "Better?"

"Roll your sleeves up," Ellie suggested. Then she reached up and mussed his hair. "Ugh! Your hair's stiff as a fence post. Now my hands stink like greasy ol' hair tonic." She rubbed them along the sides of her dress.

"That's better," Jem said with a satisfied nod. "Much, much better. At least none of the other fellas will poke fun at you . . . or me."

"I don't feel much like a businessman now," Nathan complained. He propped his elbows on his knees and rested his chin in his hands. "More like a dirty, poor, no-account kid peddling firewood."

Jem slapped the reins, and the wagon lurched forward. He laughed. "That's what we are, Cousin." *But we won't always be!* Jem promised himself.

Even though the Coulter gold claim was pretty much played out, Jem hoped for another strike somewhere, some day. Right now, he wished he were swirling his gold pan . . . or rocking a cradle . . . or pouring dirt, gravel, and water through a sluice box. Instead, he was hauling firewood for folks who could afford to pay somebody else to chop it up for them.

"I betcha Will has never split a piece of firewood in his entire life," Jem grumbled, losing his laughter from a minute ago. He turned the corner onto Main Street, his thoughts miles away in the gold fields. *A ten-pound gold nugget would be a mighty fine strike. I could tell Will to go chop his own—*

"Jem! Look out!"

Ellie's shriek shattered Jem's daydreaming. A small figure had darted into the street, pushing a large, rickety cart for all he was worth. Behind him, four or five older boys gave chase.

Jem jammed his feet against the floorboard and hauled back on the reins. The wagon jerked to a standstill. The horses snorted and tossed their heads against the restraints, and Jem tightened his grip. "Easy, Copper. Settle down, Silver."

Ellie looked at her brother with wide, hazel eyes. "That was close."

Jem nodded, but he couldn't keep his hands from shaking. If Pa ever found out he'd been woolgathering while driving the team, his days of using the wagon would be over. Worse, what if he'd injured or killed someone? *Thank you, God, for Ellie's quick wits!*

With his heart still hammering, Jem hopped down from the seat and stepped in front of the horses to face his mistake. He breathed a sigh of relief. *God is surely with me today.* None of the boys were injured. They stood in a clump, gaping at the restless horses a hair's breadth away.

One boy found his voice. "You tryin' to trample us, Jem?"

"Hey, Tom, I'm sorry. I . . ." His voice trailed off when he recognized the object of the boys' chase. Jem's friend Wu Shen stood a few feet away, trembling. His cart had tipped over onto its side; a pile of once-snow-white laundry lay scattered at his feet.

No wonder Wu Shen had fled into the street. Jem turned on his schoolmates. "You leave Shen alone or I *will* trample you."

Tom sneered. "Or squeal to your sheriff daddy on account of one dirty China boy?"

Jem clutched Copper's bridle to keep his fist out of Tom's face. Before he could think of a good retort, the bullies whooped and took off running. Jem ignored their mocking laughter and joined the Chinese boy near his overturned cart. "I'm sorry, Shen. I wasn't paying attention. I'm glad you're not hurt."

Wu Shen gave Jem a weak smile. "You and your wagon kept boys away. I fine." Slowly, matter-of-factly, he bent over and began picking up the linens.

Jem rushed to help. He righted the cart and helped his friend refill it with the now-soiled laundry. He tried to apologize again.

Wu Shen shrugged. "No problem. I do over." He lifted the handles of the pushcart and patiently set off the way he'd come, back toward his uncle's Chinese laundry.

Jem watched Shen go. He didn't understand it. Those boys were meaner than a nest of rattlesnakes, yet Wu Shen didn't yell at them or curse them or even fight back. Jem felt himself redden. *I was sure ready to go after them. Wu Shen turns the other cheek better than I do, and I'm a Christian.*

His conscience stirred. *I grumble about having no time to play around panning for gold, but Shen works hard all the time. When he's not washing laundry, he's carting supplies to his family's gold diggings.*

Suddenly, even school looked better to Jem than being in Wu Shen's shoes.

Jem climbed back on the wagon to join Ellie and Nathan, who quietly waited for his return. He flicked a sideways glance at Nathan. Ellie would keep this mishap to herself, but Jem wasn't sure about his cousin. Maybe it was time to find out if Nathan could keep his mouth shut.

"Nathan," he began, "about what just happened. I—"

"Shhh!" Ellie ordered.

Jem rounded on his sister. "Don't tell me to—"

"Listen!" she interrupted again.

All three sat still, listening. Then Jem shrugged. "I don't hear anything." He heard nothing out of the ordinary, anyway—just harnesses jingling, a stray gunshot, horses neighing, and the occasional shouts of fights and arguing in the street.

"I know," Ellie said. "That's what I mean. It's *so quiet.*"

Then Jem heard it too. The sound of silence—an eerie silence that could turn Goldtown into a ghost town.

Chapter Two

AN EERIE SILENCE

For a full minute, Jem sat still, not believing what he could no longer hear. The huge stamp mill on the hill outside town *never* rested, not even on Sunday. Ore from the Midas mine was constantly being brought to the surface and crushed under the heavy, metal weights. There was no other way to begin the process of separating the tiny gold particles from the quartz rock.

The machine's banging clamor could be heard for miles—day and night—overshadowing all other sounds. When the mill first started up, Jem had hated the constant *clang, clang, clang*. He couldn't escape the noise. It followed him to school, to church, to the creek, and back to the ranch. Now, nearly a year later, he'd grown used to the background "music" of the mill and paid it no mind. It was the heartbeat of Goldtown. It meant the mine was producing gold, and lots of it.

But what if Goldtown's heart stopped beating?

Nathan broke the silence with a loud sigh. "It's about time. I am *so* tired of hearing that racket. It's enough to chase a body out of the gold fields and back to the States. Maybe we can have some peace now."

Jem wanted to agree with his cousin, but he knew better. The Midas mine provided the jobs so many people in Goldtown depended on. No mine, no miners; no miners, no need for shopkeepers, blacksmiths, teachers, barkeepers, or . . . sheriffs. Jem swallowed. "The stamp mill shutting down can't mean anything good."

As much as Jem wished the town could return to the way it was during the “boom days” of the Gold Rush, the mining of easy placer gold from the creeks and hillsides was over. Pa often reminded Jem that the future of Goldtown lay in hard-rock, underground mining. That meant the Midas mine.

Jem shaded his eyes and glanced up at Belle Hill, which rose just beyond the town. He couldn't see the mine or the stamp mill, but he knew they were there. Not far away, halfway up the hill, lay one of Jem's destinations this afternoon—the Sterling mansion. It was a fancy place, but Jem couldn't figure out why Will's family lived so close to all that noise. *If I were that rich, I would've moved the minute the mill went up.*

“Maybe something broke,” Ellie said. “They'll fix it, and tomorrow it'll bang like always.” She grinned. “Then we'll gripe about the noise all over again.”

Jem hoped so. Either way, there was nothing *he* could do about it. He had firewood to deliver—and fast—if he wanted time for himself this afternoon. “I think we'll deliver Mr. Morrison's load first,” he decided.

“Why?” Ellie wrinkled her forehead. “The Wilsons live just a few blocks over. Mr. Morrison's place is way—”

“You've got no say in how I manage my firewood business,” Jem reminded her. “If you're gonna interfere, I'll leave you here, and you can walk back to the ranch.”

Ellie clamped her jaw shut and glared at Jem. He waited. The tiny nod she gave him a minute later told him she'd keep her opinions to herself, at least for the rest of the deliveries.

Jem chirruped to the horses and turned the wagon toward the road that led out of town and up Belle Hill. “It might not be a bad idea to head up there and see what's going on,” he said. “Mr. Morrison will know if the stamp mill is closed down for repairs or for a more serious reason. After all, he's the mine superintendent.”

“As if he'd tell *you*,” Ellie muttered. She still looked mad about being bossed.

“He might,” Jem said. “Maybe I’ll ask him when I make my delivery.” He’d unload Mr. Morrison’s firewood, stack it neat as a pin, and politely ask for his money. Then, just before he turned to go, he’d ask—real casual-like—why things were so quiet. *Yes sirree, that’ll work!*

It didn’t take long to climb the narrow, winding road up to the Midas mine, the stamp mill, and Mr. Morrison’s residence. As they climbed, a few tall, straight pines shaded their route. But most of the trees had been cut down and used to shore up the mine. The deeper they cut a tunnel of gold into the earth, the more supporting beams were needed. Blasting their way inch by inch, the miners followed the elusive vein of gold until it disappeared altogether.

Surely the gold in the Midas hasn’t played out yet, Jem thought as he urged the horses around an especially steep turn.

Jem knew it took a lot of money to start up a mine. It took even more money to build a stamp mill later on to process the ore into pure gold. Mr. Sterling was rich, but he wasn’t *that* rich. It was rumored he’d found a wealthy rancher down south to invest in the Midas mine with him.

Jem didn’t know if the rumor was true or not. The way Will made it sound, it was *his* family’s mine. His father was the owner, and that was that.

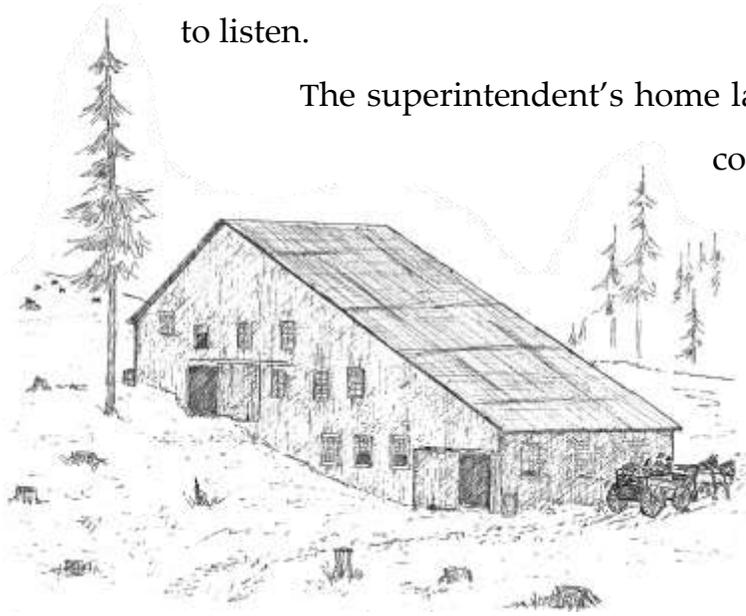
Ellie’s sigh brought Jem around. “What’s wrong?”

He didn’t need to ask. Through the scattered trees, Jem saw Will’s house in the distance. It poked out of the hill, pure-white and surrounded by plenty of greenery. The trees might shield the house from the barren site of the mine and stamp mill, but nothing could shield it from the noise.

“Sure is pretty,” Ellie said.

Jem frowned. “I like our place better. It’s not so stiff and formal-looking.” He hurried the team past the buildings clumped around the mine. The towering stamp mill rose three stories to their left, taking up most of the view. It looked deserted, but the

murmur of angry voices coming from inside told Jem otherwise. He didn't slow down to listen.



The superintendent's home lay a couple hundred yards past the mine complex, nestled in a clump of oaks and young pines. Jem pulled the wagon up to the kitchen entrance and jumped down. "I'll start unloading, and you take care of business," he ordered.

When Nathan gave him a puzzled look, Jem sighed. "Knock on the door and tell Mrs. Morrison—or whoever

answers the door—that we're delivering their wood. Then help me get it stacked."

Nathan nodded. A minute later, a plump, friendly woman opened the door. She took one look at the delivery boy and said, "What happened to Jem? I thought he—"

"Right here, ma'am," Jem called from the woodpile under the eaves. "He's my cousin, Nathan. I'm breaking him in."

Mrs. Morrison smiled. "Yes, I can see that." With his greased hair sticking up and his good shirtsleeves rolled up, Nathan did indeed look "broke in."

Twenty minutes later, hot and sweaty from stacking a week's worth of cooking fuel, Jem and Nathan gladly accepted lemonade from Mrs. Morrison. Ellie hopped down to grab her share of the generous gift.

However, lemonade was all Mrs. Morrison could offer them.

"I'm sorry, boys," she said when Nathan whipped out his paper and pencil to settle accounts. "Mr. Morrison forgot to set aside your money before he left this morning. He hasn't come home for the noon meal, either." She shrugged, a little nervously it seemed to Jem. "And I've no cash in my jar today."

Jem's heart sank. He'd delivered wood to the Morrisons every week for the past year, and he'd never been put off like this before. He didn't know how to respond. "I reckon I could come by tomorrow," he offered.

The woman nodded. "That might be best. Mr. Morrison's had a lot on his mind this past week." She smiled and began to close the door. "Good day."

"Mrs. Morrison," Jem said quickly. "Why is the mill shut down? Did something break?"

A worried look passed over her face. "I'm not sure, Jem. There's been some unrest at the mine, but I don't know anything about it."

"Yes, ma'am. Good-bye," Jem said, touching the brim of his hat. He didn't believe Mrs. Morrison for a second. Her husband ran the mine. She must know plenty, but it looked like her lips were sealed tight.

Jem stepped off the porch, snagged Nathan and Ellie, and headed back to the wagon.

"That's it?" Nathan hissed in Jem's ear as they climbed aboard. "All that work and we have to come back tomorrow for our pay? That's not right."

"Oh, stop bellyaching," Jem said. He picked up the reins and set the horses in motion. "What am I supposed to do, have her arrested for not paying us this minute? Can you see Pa agreeing to *that*?"

Ellie giggled. "Pa would make you give her the whole load for free. It's best to just ride out tomorrow and collect the money."

Jem nodded his agreement. "Don't worry, Nathan. The Morrisons are good for it. Besides"—he smiled—"I have an idea how to get paid today *and* find out what's going on." Jem couldn't help it. He was burning up with curiosity to know why the stamp mill had gone silent.

"How?" Ellie and Nathan asked together.

"I'm going to stop by the mining office and ask Mr. Morrison for my pay. He'll be so sorry he forgot to leave it that he'll apologize all over the place. Then I'll ask him about the stamp mill." Jem laughed. "They call that 'killing two birds with one stone.'" He urged the team back the way they'd come.

"I think we should go up the road and make the Sterlings' delivery first," Ellie said. "You can stop by the office on the way back."

Jem gave Ellie his what-did-I-tell-you-about-interfering look and kept driving.

By the time they pulled up to the mining office, the angry sounds Jem had heard from the stamp mill earlier had increased in volume. *Somebody's spittin' mad about something*, Jem thought, slowing the team to a halt. He set the brake, wrapped the reins around the handle, and hopped down. "Stay put. I'll be right back."

The mining office looked empty. Jem hoped Mr. Morrison was inside, working on the day's accounts or setting up mining schedules, or whatever it was a mining superintendent did all day. Jem knew what Mr. Sterling, the mine *owner* did—all the clean, behind-the-scenes work, which earned him a lot of money.

The superintendent did all the hard work, like keeping the miners working and contented. It couldn't be an easy job. Who wanted to crawl around in dank, dimly lit passages? Who wanted to run like mad and hope you didn't get blown up when setting off the blasting powder to enlarge the mine? Jem shivered. *Not me!* He was glad Pa had traded his gold pan for a ranch and a sheriff's badge, although two months ago Jem would not have admitted it.

Jem sprinted to the office and turned the knob. "It's locked!" he said in surprise. Why would the office be locked and empty? It was the middle of a workday. He peeked through a window next to the door and saw nothing that might explain the closure.

"Mr. Morrison!" he called, rapping on the window. "Are you in there? I've come for my firewood money."

No one answered.

Before Jem could decide what to do next, a sudden roar erupted from the nearby stamp mill. A stream of nearly a hundred dirty, shouting miners burst from the building. “We want our pay! We want our pay!” they chanted.

The men surged across the compound carrying clubs, hammers, and pickaxes. They looked ready to break into the mining office and find their wages for themselves.

Oh, please, God, no! Jem prayed in horror. *Not a riot! Not here!*

Jem had seen his share of saloon fights, where rowdy drunks went after each other. He’d seen for himself a few weeks ago what lawless claim jumpers like Frenchy DuBois would do to keep their stolen gold diggings. But it was nothing compared to what he saw now. The size of this crowd turned Jem’s blood to ice and set his feet flying.

It was time to leave—and fast.