

**B A D G E**  
**OF**  
**H O N O R**

**Goldtown Adventures**

*Badge of Honor*

*Tunnel of Gold*

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**GOLDTOWN ADVENTURES #1**  
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**B A D G E**  
————— **OF** —————  
**H O N O R**

**SUSAN K. MARLOW**

 **Kregel**  
*Publications*

*Badge of Honor*

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## ✦ CHAPTER 1 ✦

# Spring Rush

GOLDTOWN, CALIFORNIA, 1864

**S**tanding 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—

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“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, ya 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 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 pigtails. “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.”

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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 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 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

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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. Strike knew the diggings around Goldtown like the back of his hand.

"If it wasn't for him, Pa and Ma would never have learned a thing about how to work a gold claim," Jem reminded Ellie. "They would've 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 once-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 smile split his dirt-encrusted beard. "Nope, no color yet. But the coffee's boilin'. Biscuits are hot. Help yerself."

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 pecked into the pot. A dark, thick liquid bubbled.

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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 for color, 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 easygoing animal in the gold fields.

Jem did not share Ellie’s love for the stubborn critter. “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 let Ellie have the final bite and watched her take the core to Canary. 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 sludge he called coffee. He reached into a pack on the ground, pulled out a spare gold pan, and tossed it to Jem.

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“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 three 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

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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.