

RIVER
OF
PERIL

Goldtown Adventures Series

Badge of Honor

Tunnel of Gold

Canyon of Danger

River of Peril

.....
GOLDTOWN ADVENTURES #4
.....

R I V E R
————— **OF** —————
P E R I L

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River of Peril

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✠ CHAPTER 1 ✠

The Secret

CENTRAL VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, 1864

S*omething'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

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. . . 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*

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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 others' 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

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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!”

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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—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

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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

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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.