

Jem Strikes Gold

Goldtown Beginnings Series

Jem Strikes Gold

Jem's Frog Fiasco

Jem and the Mystery Thief

Jem Digs Up Trouble

Jem and the Golden Reward

Jem's Wild Winter



Jem Strikes Gold



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New Words

canvas—strong cloth used for tents and sails

claim—a piece of land belonging to a miner

contraption—an odd-looking machine

critter—creature; animal

hit color—to find gold

jerky—meat that has been salted, cut into strips, and dried

molasses—a thick, dark syrup that comes from raw sugar

peddler—someone who goes from place to place selling goods

pester—to bother or nag someone

pouch—a small bag or sack

prospector—a person who looks for gold and other minerals



CHAPTER 1

Gold Camp Rules

“Hey, Jem!”

Jem did not answer his little sister. He was too busy.

A piece of gold was mixed up with the black sand in his round, flat pan.

A teensy piece of gold. Smaller even than the onion seeds he and Mama had planted in the garden yesterday.

But it was real gold.

“Don’t bother me, Ellie,” Jem said. “I have to get this gold flake.”

He scooped a little water into his pan and swished the sand around. He was going to add this speck of gold to his pouch.

Even if it took all morning.

It might take longer than that. Jem's fingers were too big to grab the sparkly gold.

"Can I help?"

"Roasted rattlesnakes, Ellie!" Jem looked up. "You know panning for gold is a one-man job."

Ellie knew the rules. She was almost six years old.

Rule one. Stay on your own gold claim.

Rule two. Pan your own gold.

Pa had a big gold claim along Cripple Creek. Jem and Ellie had two small claims next to Pa's.

"There's your spot." Jem pointed to where the creek splashed over five big rocks. "Go get your gold pan."

Ellie plopped down beside him. "I can't."

Jem sighed. He was nearly eight years old. Mama said he was the big brother. Big brothers must always be patient with little sisters.

Even when little sisters wanted to help every minute of every day.

"Why can't you?" he asked.

"Mama needs my pan to bake an extra pie for the miners."

Jem laughed. “You’ve been using Mama’s pie tins again to pan for gold?”

Ellie crossed her arms over her chest. “They’re just the right size for me.”

Jem was glad his own gold pan was the real thing. Much too big for baking pies.

He went back to work. More water. More swishing. More sand dribbling over the edge of the pan.

Jem wished he had a pair of tweezers. Tweezers worked great for picking up teensy bits of gold.

Sometimes his prospector friend Strike-it-rich Sam let Jem use his rusty tweezers. Rusty or not, they worked just right.

But Strike was not here today. The old man had left three weeks ago on a prospecting trip.

Nobody in Goldtown knew where Strike went. Nobody ever learned what he found.

A new gold claim? A river where gold nuggets were everywhere, just waiting to be picked up?

Nobody ever asked.

Rule three. Mind your own business in a gold camp.

Miners never told anybody when they found a good spot. If they did, a hundred other miners would trample the claim and grab the gold.

More like a thousand other miners, Jem thought.

There were more than a thousand people in Goldtown. Most of them were men. Maybe only a hundred were women.

Mama was one of the women.

“So, Mama’s baking an extra pie today?”
Jem’s heart gave a happy thump.

Another pie meant another customer.

Ellie nodded, arms still crossed. She looked grumpy.

Jem knew why. She wanted to help him.

After his third try at picking up the gold flake, Jem let out a big breath. “Wish I had a tweezers.”

Ellie’s eyes lit up. She dropped her arms and scooted closer. “My fingers are tiny. Tinier than yours. About as tiny as tweezers.”

She waited.

Jem gave in. “Oh, all right. See if you can—”



“I can!” Ellie poked her head in front of Jem. She reached into the pan of wet dirt and sand.

Her thumb and finger pinched the gold flake. “Where’s your pouch?”

Jem dug into his back pocket. Out came his wrinkled gold pouch. It held all the gold he had panned in his whole life.

The pouch was not even half full.

“Be careful,” Jem said. “Don’t drop it.”

“I won’t.” Ellie squeezed her fingers tighter.

Jem held the pouch open. “Now, Ellie. Drop it in.”

The gold flake made no sound when it fell inside the pouch.

No *plunk*. No *thud*. Not like the sound a big gold nugget would make.

Jem didn’t care. Each tiny flake added up.

He pulled the strings tight and stuffed the pouch back in his pocket. “Thanks.”

“Maybe next Saturday you’ll pan a really big nugget,” Ellie said with a smile.

Jem grinned. “Maybe.”

There was always next Saturday.

Right now, though, Jem couldn’t wait to tell Pa about his newest gold flake.