

Jem's Frog Fiasco

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's Frog Fiasco



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Contents

<i>New Words</i>	7
1. The Best Dog	9
2. A Job for Jem	15
3. Froggin'	23
4. Cold and Wet	31
5. Try, Try Again	37
6. Frogs and More Frogs	45
7. Missing	53
8. Hide-and-Seek	59
9. Coyote Holes	65
10. Lost and Found	73
 <i>A Peek into the Past: Coyote Holes</i> ...	79



New Words

butcher—someone who cuts up and sells
meat in a shop

cattails—tall plants with dark-brown velvety
heads that grow in ponds

coop—a fenced area for chickens; a pen

coyote hole—a hole a miner digs in the
ground or in a hillside to find gold

fiasco—something that turns out all
wrong

froggin'—catching frogs

hoarse—when a person's voice sounds
scratchy or croaky

lantern—a lamp with a handle for carrying

scraps—leftover food

stump—the bottom part of a tree left in the
ground after the tree has been cut down

tuckered out—very tired

wilderness—a place where few people live;
wild, rough country



CHAPTER 1

The Best Dog

A cold, wet nose jerked Jem Coulter awake.

Jem sat up and threw back his covers.
“Nugget! How did you sneak in here?”

He looked around. Mama did not want their new dog inside the tent.

Not even if Nugget stayed clean. Not even if Jem’s little sister, Ellie, asked a hundred times.

No sirree! Mama always shooed the dog outside.

Jem got dressed in a hurry. “Come on,” he said. “Before Mama sees you.”

Nugget’s golden tail swished back and forth. He followed Jem through the tent flap and into the April sunshine.

Mama was sliding a pie into her big,

black cookstove. Smoke puffed out of the stovepipe. Bowls of dried blueberries sat on the work table.

Mama baked pies every Saturday. All the miners loved her pies.

So did the café owners, and everybody else in Goldtown.

Mama slipped two more pies in the oven. She shut the heavy iron door.

Then she turned around and put her hands on her hips. “How many times have I told you to keep that dog out of the tent?”

Jem’s eyebrows went up. How did she know Nugget had sneaked inside?

“He woke me up,” Jem explained. “He must have pushed open the tent flap.”

“I think he had help.” Mama smiled. “I saw your sister run off to the creek a minute ago.”

Jem laughed. Leave it to Ellie to think of a way to wake him up.

He hugged Nugget. “You are the best dog. Even if Mama doesn’t like to feed you.”

Every day, Mama watched to make sure Jem didn’t share his food with the fast-growing dog. She frowned when Nugget ate supper leftovers.

“The chickens should get those,” she always said when Pa scraped the plates.

“They don’t need Nugget’s scraps,” Pa told her. “They can eat grain and leftover mush.”

Hurrah for Pa!

But even after three weeks of eating table scraps, Jem could still feel Nugget’s sharp ribs.

After breakfast, Jem dumped a scoop of grain in the chicken coop. The rooster and five hens squawked and jumped out of the way.

Then they scratched the dirt to find every bit of food.

Jem grabbed his gold-mining pan and headed for his very own gold claim next to Cripple Creek.

He waved to Pa, who stood with their miner friend Strike-it-rich Sam.

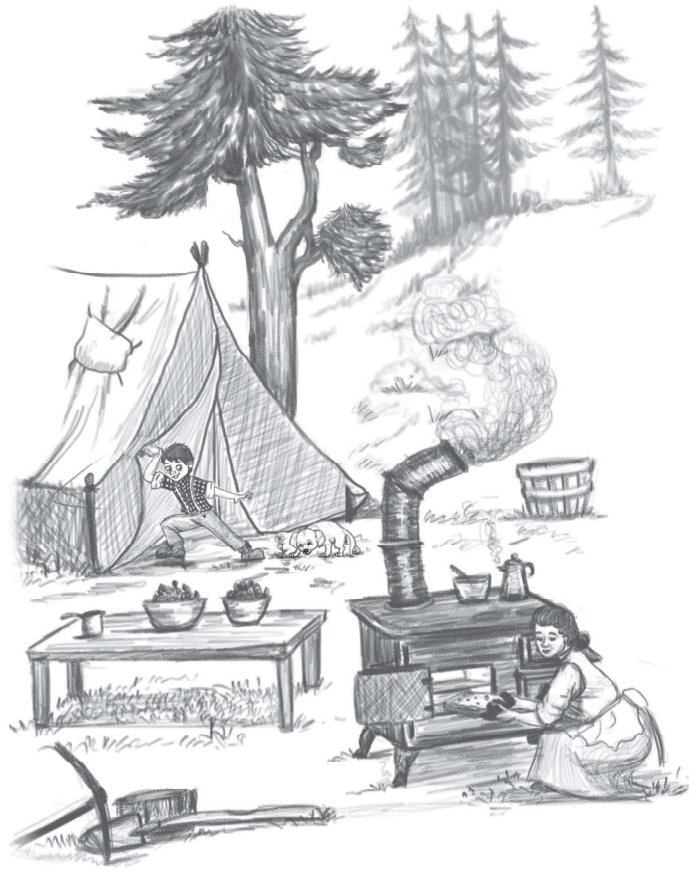
Pa waved back. Then he grabbed the handle of a long wooden box and rocked it back and forth.

Strike dumped a bucket of dirt, water, and gravel into a big square hole on top.

The rocker box was supposed to make it easier to find gold.

So far, it hadn’t worked very well.

Jem squatted next to the creek.



He scooped three handfuls of sand and dirt into his pan. “I have to wash some gold today. I just have to!”

He wanted to buy meat scraps for Nugget. A young dog needed meat to grow.

Ellie sat down next to Jem. “Who are you talking to?” She held a beat-up pie pan in her lap—her gold pan.

“Just thinking out loud,” Jem said.

“What about?”

Jem let out a big breath. A little sister could sure be a bother.

Especially when she asked questions all the time.

“Can’t a miner pan for gold in peace?” he said.

Ellie didn’t answer.

Instead, she watched Jem swirl his pan. She didn’t pick up even one speck of dirt from her brother’s gold claim.

Ellie knew the gold-camp rules.

Rule one and *rule two* went together. Stay on your own gold claim. Pan your own gold.

But there was no rule about keeping quiet.

“You didn’t hit color last Saturday,” Ellie said. “Or the Saturday before that.”

“So what?”

“Maybe the gold’s all gone.”

“Roasted rattlesnakes, Ellie! Don’t say that!”

Jem’s heart thumped. No gold? Nugget would starve.

So would the Coulter family.

The miners would move away to look for

new diggings. Nobody would buy Mama's pies.

"You're good at panning gold," Ellie said. "Why else can't you find any?"

Good question.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just unlucky, like No-luck Casey."

Casey couldn't find gold, no matter how hard he tried.

If he dug a coyote hole, he fell in and broke his leg. If the miner went prospecting, he got lost for days.

"That's me, No-luck Jem." He sighed.

"You can't use Casey's nickname," Ellie said. "He had it first."

Jem rolled his eyes. *Be quiet, Ellie*, he thought.

But he didn't say those words aloud. Mama would not like it if he snapped at his sister.

"If I can't find any gold," Jem said, "I'll think of a different way to buy meat scraps for Nugget."

Ellie wrinkled her eyebrows. "How?"

Jem shrugged. Then he got an idea.

An excellent idea.

"I'm going to find a job."