

Jem and the Mystery Thief

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 and the Mystery Thief



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Jem and the Mystery Thief
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New Words

aggie—a marble made from a stone called
agate

aisle—a walkway

arithmetic—math

chum—friend

copybook—a book of blank or lined paper

gulch—a small valley

knucklebones—the game of jacks; played
with a rubber ball and ten small
objects

manzanita—a small evergreen tree with red
bark, twisty branches, and berries that
can be eaten

mischief—trouble

privy—a small outdoor bathroom; an outhouse

tart—a very small pie

thou—an old-fashioned word for “you”



CHAPTER 1

Countdown

Jem took a bite of his morning mush and made a face.

Not even pouring molasses on his hot cereal made it taste better.

He peeked under the table. His golden dog lay at his feet.

When Nugget saw Jem looking at him, his tail thumped.

“Good dog,” Jem said.

Nugget could lick a bowl of mush clean in a hurry. Mama would never know.

But Jem’s belly would know. It grumbled.

Jem was too hungry this morning to give Nugget his mush. He took another bite and made another face.

“Whatcha doing?” Jem’s little sister, Ellie, asked as she climbed up next to him on the split-log bench.

“Eating breakfast,” he said between mouthfuls.

Ellie pointed to a beat-up book. “No. What are you doing with *that*?”

“Nothing.” Jem slammed the book shut.

Paper was hard to come by in a gold camp. His school copybook cost five whole cents.

If Mama or Miss Cheney, the teacher, saw Jem wasting paper, there would be trouble.

Big trouble.

Ellie slumped. “Is it a secret?”

Jem shook his head. He looked around.

Mama was hanging clothes. They hung on a clothesline that was tied between two pine trees near the family’s big canvas tent.

Not far away, a pot of beans boiled on the outdoor cookstove.

“Hurry, Jem,” Mama called from her clothesline. “You don’t want to be late for school.”

Jem ate another spoonful of mush.

“If it’s not a secret, then tell me.” Ellie scooted closer. “Please?”

Jem put down his spoon. He might as well tell her. She’d pester him until he did.

“Oh, all right.”

He opened his copybook to the last page. Five rows of crooked boxes took up the whole space.



Jem had written “May” at the top of the page.

“What is it?” Ellie asked.

“A calendar.”

Ellie touched the first row with her finger.

“Why are all those big Xs in the boxes?”

“Every morning, I cross out one more box.”

“Why?”

Jem rolled his eyes. “Roasted rattlesnakes, Ellie! You ask too many questions.”

Just then, Mama’s words popped into Jem’s head. “*Be patient with your sister.*”

He let out a long breath. It was not easy being the big brother.

“I’m counting down the days until school is out.” He slid his finger to the last day of May. “This box shows the last day of school.”

“Yippee!” Ellie clapped her hands. “Then we play every day. Not just on Saturdays.”

“Yep.”

Jem liked playing with Ellie. Even if she talked too much.

Even if she tagged along behind him and asked questions all day long.

There was nobody else to play with. Not many children lived in Goldtown.

Only miners. A *lot* of miners. Maybe a thousand, or even more.

Some women lived in the gold camp too. Like Mama.

Jem sometimes wished he could play with his school chum Perry. But Perry's pa panned gold clear over in Two Bit Gulch.

The gulch was too far away to go visit a friend.

If he wanted to, Jem could go into town and play with Will Sterling.

He made a face. *Nope. Not mean Will.*

That rich boy always made fun of Jem and Ellie. He liked getting Jem into trouble, too.

Will's father owned the new gold mine up on Belle Hill. A lot of miners had stopped panning for gold in Cripple Creek. They worked for Mr. Sterling now.

The miners dug deep underground to find gold.

Pa said it was dark down there. And damp. And dangerous.

A shiver went down Jem's neck.

He hoped Pa never went to work for Mr. Sterling. He didn't want Pa to go down inside that deep, dark mine.

Ellie sighed. "I wish I could go to school."
Jem jerked his thoughts back to the breakfast table. "Huh?"

"I said I wish I could go to school."

"You want to sit in school all day?" Jem asked. "When you could be panning gold? Or catching frogs? Or playing with Nugget?"

"Mama won't let me go to the pond by myself," Ellie said.

Ellie was right about that.

"Panning for gold is hard work," she went on. "And the water is cold."

Right again.

"And Nugget likes you best." Ellie sighed again. "He even follows you to school."

Nugget's head popped up at his name. He crawled out from under the table. His tail wagged.

Jem didn't say anything.

"If I went to school, I wouldn't be so lonely all day," Ellie said in a small voice.

"Lonely?" Jem's eyebrows went up. "With Pa and Mama right here? And Strike-it-rich Sam and—"

"They're busy."

Ellie had a point.

Maybe school wasn't that bad. At least there was recess. And twenty kids to play with.

Jem looked at Ellie. Then he looked at Nugget.

Nugget was a good dog. He was friendly, and everybody liked him.

Everybody but mean Will.

It was also true that Nugget liked Jem best. The dog followed him everywhere.

Jem liked keeping Nugget nearby, but maybe . . .

He pushed away from the table. "I'll find a rope and tie Nugget up. That way he can't follow me to school. You can play with him all day."

"Really?" Ellie's eyes lit up.

"Yes, really!"