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THE GOLD RUSH

SHIFTING SANDS
AND DREAMS OF GOLD



by Jilanne Hoffmann

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The Gold Rush

Shifting Sands and Dreams of Gold

by

Jilanne Hoffmann

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1

Golden Dreams

San Francisco, California

December 16, 1849

After months of tossing and tilting and wind and water and sky, the three remaining members of the Kelly family peered over the ship's rail. The bustling young city of San Francisco lay before them. El Dorado, city of gold.

Delia, Liam, and Papa Kelly, dressed in their finest, stood silent and separate from the cheering crowd on the deck of the schooner that had left Boston six months ago. Bitten by the California forty-niner gold bug, the Kellys had sold their successful general store and sailed to San Francisco. They didn't intend to pan for gold. They were bringing provisions for a new general store, where they planned to make their fortune by selling goods to the miners. But on the last leg of their journey, their hope-filled hearts had broken when Mam died of cholera.

schooner: a sailing ship with two or more masts

pan: to wash earthen materials, such as mud, in a pan in order to separate out any heavier materials, such as metal

cholera: a bacterial infection that causes severe vomiting and diarrhea

THE GOLD RUSH



Without her spirited presence, they felt as empty as the bobbing ships around them.

Hundreds of ships jammed the harbor, some missing masts. Some were beached in sand with raised plank sidewalks running along their buried sides. On shore, a hodgepodge of buildings and tents huddled along muddy streets.

“It’s not what your mam and I had pictured,” Papa sighed, stroking his dark mustache and fingering the pocket watch in his waistcoat.

Delia’s and Liam’s eyes were bright with both sadness and excitement. Prospectors on board their ship had spun so many tales of gold, the two had thought the city would be filled with magnificent shining buildings. Instead, tents and ramshackle wooden structures lay coated in dirt.

“Not even a park like Boston Common,” Liam muttered. “I don’t want to sketch this awful mess.”

“You’ll find something,” Delia reassured her older brother, not sounding sure at all. She watched men swarm like angry hornets along the shore. Despite her sadness, Delia was more excited than she’d felt in all her eleven years—and a little scared.

The ship rose and fell, straining against its anchor

lines, and a stiff breeze whipped Delia's hair up into the air. Passengers surged toward the rope ladders leading down to the lighters, the small boats that would take them and their luggage ashore. But the ship's sailors had beaten everyone to the first lighter. The captain struggled through the crowd, yelling, "Stop them!" But he was too late. The sailors were already rowing toward shore.

"Everyone has gold fever!" Papa exclaimed. "No wonder all of these ships are stuck here."

More passengers elbowed past the Kellys with their luggage.

"Papa! Let's go!" Delia tugged his hand.

"Be careful with the trunks," Papa warned. "Let's not fall overboard."

On shore by the wharf, a bearded man in dirty, ragged clothes and muddy boots stopped the Kellys. "Where you folks lodging?" he asked.

Liam whispered to Delia, "He looks like he's been wrestling pigs."

She giggled.

Papa, always a proper gentleman, tipped his top hat and said, "How do you do, sir. We're heading to the Harbor House."

wharf: a place near a shore where ships can load and unload passengers and cargo

“Two dollars a trunk.”

Papa’s jaw dropped. “Why, that’s—” His face flushed red from his chin to his dark hairline.

“No better offer here. This is San Francisco.”

Papa coughed and scanned the crowd. Other passengers had already accepted other porters’ offers. “Very well. I’ll pay you half now and half when the trunks are delivered. The name’s Kelly, Mr. Sean Kelly.”

The pair shook hands, and the man began wrangling their four trunks onto a small flatbed wagon with mud-caked wooden wheels.

Delia pulled Papa away from the bustling shoreline. “Let’s go see some gold!”

Liam scrambled ahead, dodging men, trunks, crates and barrels of goods, and stacks of lumber.

Delia adjusted her greasy wind-swept hair. “Mam said our hotel would have bathtubs! I want to soak for days!”

Slowly, they picked their way along the tents where men sold goods. Everything, from toothpicks to shovels and boots, was for sale at sky-high prices. One man sold months-old newspapers from New York and Boston for a dollar each. Men eagerly paid the price for any news from the cities they’d left behind.

Delia was the only girl as far as she could see. A handful of women had been on their ship, but they'd already vanished.

Sploosh! Delia's foot sank ankle-deep in mud. "I'm stuck!" she cried, holding the hem of her silk dress above the muck.

"The city is too new for sidewalks, my dear." Papa pulled her out. "Or even proper streets. We'll find a laundress and get our things cleaned later."

Splintered boards, brushwood and tree branches, clothing, boxes of ruined tobacco and other unwanted goods, and cartons of spoiled food had been thrown into the mud to form sidewalks. Delia and Liam hopped from pile to pile. The waterfront reeked of manure, rotten garbage, and spoiled meat. Horses and mules strained to pull wagons through the muck.

"Even pigs don't smell this bad." Delia held her hand over her nose.

"Portsmouth Square!" announced Papa. "The hotel recommended by the captain is on Dupont Street, just around the corner."

Delia and Liam eyed the large, muddy square scattered with garbage and crowds of carts and men. Loud music streamed out of gambling halls. When they reached their hotel, it was as grimy as the rest of the city.

Papa grimaced at the shabby entrance and ushered the pair inside. The lobby held wood-crate tables topped with oil lamps. Liam eyed the clumps of mud tracked across the plank floor. The scent of sweat and tobacco smoke wafting from the gambling rooms made Delia's nose wrinkle.

A stuffed upright grizzly bear, its mouth open to roar, towered above a man behind a desk next to the stairs that led up to the second floor. "Yes?" the man said.

Papa tipped his hat. "How do you do, sir. Sean Kelly and family. I'd like a room."

"You're lucky I just kicked out a cheat. You can have his. That'll be \$150 for the week, room and board."

"Why, that's—" Papa scoffed.

"Rain's flushed the miners out of the hills like fleas. So you can have that room or try your luck somewhere else."

Papa snorted.

"Take it or leave it," the man said.

"I can't drag my children all over town, sir. I'll take it—and find a better establishment for next week."

"Suit yourself. The gong announces meals. Best be quick, or you'll find nothing left but gristle and bone."

gristle: tough, chewy parts found in meat, such as cartilage

They clomped up the stairs and down a dark hall. Papa opened the door to their room, revealing four wooden cots pushed against the walls. A washstand and chamber pot sat in a corner under a dull mirror.

“Papa! There’s no bathtub!” Delia pressed her hand against the canvas wall. It bowed. Voices of other lodgers leaked through.

“We won’t stay long,” Papa said.

Someone knocked. “Delivery!”

Papa opened the door. “At least this worked out.”

The four trunks filled most of the floor space, so the three huddled together on a cot.

“Let’s take a moment to remember your mam,” Papa said.

The sounds of hammering and shouting leaked through the window.

Papa patted a trunk. “We’ve finally reached El Dorado, Molly, for better or worse.”

Delia hugged Papa hard. A vision of Mam’s wrapped body, weighted with coal for burial at sea, haunted the room.

Liam patted the trunk. “I miss you, Mam.”

chamber pot: a container kept in the bedroom that people can relieve themselves in and empty out later

Papa cleared the sadness from his throat. “Now to find a warehouse for the goods we brought. I’ll go ask around the wharf. Then we’ll eat dinner—and not in this wretched place, even if the meals *are* included. They’re probably as dreadful as this room. Liam, be responsible and watch over your sister while I’m out.”

Liam heard the familiar words *be responsible* and pulled himself up to his just-turned-thirteen-year-old height, trying to look much taller than his sister—and failing.

Delia crossed her arms. “I can watch over myself, Papa!”

“You have your mother’s spark.” Papa cupped her chin and gave her a sad smile, then left.

Delia hummed, trying to give the stark room some life.

“I know!” Liam pulled a recorder from his trunk. “It’s almost Christmas, Delia. Let’s sing.” He played a note.

Delia matched the pitch and sang, “*God rest ye, merry gentlemen—*”

Liam joined in. “*Let nothing you dismay . . .*”

While they sang, they kept their eyes on the door, waiting for their father’s return. They sang song after song.

recorder: a musical instrument shaped like a tube, played by blowing into one end and moving the fingers over eight holes down the side

2

Alone

December 16–17, 1849

The light leaking through the window into their hotel room was nearly gone, and Papa Kelly had not returned. Delia and Liam slumped on their cots, their dried-mud-caked shoes lying in forlorn piles on the floor. They had sung every song they knew.

Liam recalled Papa's parting words: *Be responsible*. As if he wasn't! Just because he was like Mam, always looking out for things to draw in his sketchbook. And Papa always saying, "You'll never be a businessman if you don't get your head out of the clouds!" Liam felt the sting every time.

"I'm hungry," whispered Delia in the half-darkness.

"Me, too."

As if in response to Delia, a gong clanged from the floor below. Shouts and laughter and stomping boots shook the building's frame.

Liam would be responsible. “We’d better eat,” he said.

They put on their muddy shoes and headed downstairs.

Bearded men in need of a good scrubbing swarmed a table where platters of food had been set out for the taking.

Liam elbowed his way to the table, pulling Delia with him. They scooped the remains of what looked like beef stew and slices of tough sourdough bread onto their plates. The molasses the men had slathered over everything was already gone.

Most of the men used the flat side of their knives to shovel food into their mouths. Delia and Liam sat on stools by a small wooden crate. They wiped their greasy knives on their sleeves and spread stew on the bread, softening it enough to chew.

“This is worse than the ship,” Liam whispered.

Delia nodded, her mouth full of stale bread.

The miners ate like wolves, finishing in minutes before heading back out to the street. Liam and Delia were left alone, still chewing their sourdough.

molasses: a thick, dark syrup formed in the process of making sugar

After dinner, they used a reeking outhouse behind the hotel, then carried a glowing oil lamp to their room. Their shadows stretched against the canvas walls.

“What do we do if Papa doesn’t come back?” Delia asked.

“He will. I’m sure the minute we shut our eyes, he’ll come in.” Liam turned down the lamp’s wick and blew out the flame.

They lay on top of the hard cots, still dressed in their clothes. After months of living aboard a rolling ship, the darkness rocked around them. Shouts and raucous music and the sounds of heavy boots trudging up and down the stairs invaded their dreams. But their door never creaked open.

The morning breakfast gong jarred them awake.

“Papa?” Delia rubbed her eyes.

“No,” was all Liam said.

At breakfast, they raced for food but were too late for the boiled beef and cabbage. They scooped up beans and rice and a hard biscuit.

“Good thing we don’t have to pay extra for this,”

raucous: loud and harsh or disorderly

Liam muttered. Beans fell from his knife as it made its way to his mouth.

“Papa has money,” Delia reminded him.

“He’s not here!” Liam snapped.

Delia eyed him sharply.

“Sorry.”

“We have to look for him, Liam. We can’t just wait.”

Liam swallowed a lump of dry biscuit. “After breakfast.”

The pair stood against the front of their hotel as men rushed by. Men with their heads stuck through enormous, colorful squares of cloth that Papa had called *sarapes*. Men wearing fur hats; a few dressed in fashionable East Coast finery like Papa. Some wore *buckskin*, and some *breeches*. Delia and Liam recognized languages they’d overheard on their voyage, but others were a mystery.

Hammering, sawing, and shouting filled the air. The city was rising around them by the minute. A partially framed building stood tall across the street, where there had been nothing but bare ground the day before.

sarapes: colorful woolen shawls worn over the shoulders

buckskin: the skin of a male deer

breeches: short pants

Liam and Delia retraced their steps, hopping and slipping through the mud back to the harbor.

“Trousers!” yelled a man. He pulled two pairs out of a bag. Another man yelled, “Cigars! Finest from Havana!” Another: “Nails! Rope! Socks!” And another: “Playing cards! Brushes! Pans!”

A single ship, its sails billowing, was leaving the harbor, but many more were arriving or at anchor waiting to dock. Men bustled along the harbor front, stopping at the sellers’ makeshift stalls, eager to spend money on provisions because they planned to strike it rich with gold.



The Kellys' schooner bobbed at anchor.

"Do you think Papa's on the ship?" Delia asked.

"No, I'm sure he found a warehouse." Liam scanned the churning crowd, almost bumping into a man on the street as he did so.

"Are you with this young lady?" The man, who was wearing a fine wool coat and rainbow-plaid silk waistcoat, inquired.

"Yes, sir." Liam nodded.

"This is no place for children alone. You'd best go home."

"Yes, sir, we will, sir, as soon as—"

Delia kicked Liam's ankle.

"Ouch!"

"We're heading home right now," Delia said, pulling Liam away.

"Why did you kick me?" Liam bristled.

"If you tell people we've lost Papa, think what might happen. That awful man at the hotel might sell our room to someone else. Throw our trunks on the street. We can't trust anyone in this place."

Liam frowned. Delia was right. They couldn't trust anyone in this town that was far from golden.

3

A Fair Price

December 19, 1849

A afraid they'd miss Papa's return, Liam and Delia stuck close to the hotel for three days. Liam spent the time sketching. Delia read aloud from the few books she'd been able to bring. When they grew restless, they sang. The few times they ventured out, they discovered how costly the city was. It wasn't just their hotel—it was *everything*. A slice of bread was a dollar—two if you wanted the slice buttered! A single egg was another dollar. They needed money. *Now!*

In desperation, Liam and Delia dug through Papa's trunk and found a leather money pouch and large leather satchel. No money, but Liam set both aside for safekeeping.

"Time's running out, Delia." Liam closed Papa's trunk. "If we want to stay in this hotel, we need to come up with 150 dollars in four days."

Delia's jaw dropped. "How are we going to do that!?"

Their eyes came to rest on Mam's trunk.

"She's not coming back, Delia," Liam whispered, holding back tears. "We'll have to sell Mam's things." He gently opened her trunk.

A wave of lavender scent washed over Delia, caressing her cheek like Mam's hand. She couldn't stand the thought of losing any more of Mam. But she could think of no other option.

"Let's each save one thing," Liam said. "So she will always be with us."

Delia nodded. She didn't want to cry, so she buried her face in a shawl like a bee nestling into the heart of a flower. The fine wool gently cradled her loneliness. "I want this. It will keep me warm, always."

Liam pulled out a fine mesh net with a long handle. "I'll keep this. We can catch butterflies, like Mam did, and draw them. Remember our picnics on Boston Common? And sketching the State House and the new fountain at the Frog Pond—"

"And pressing flowers in books!" Delia added. Memories of Mam flooded the room. For a time, they were transported back home.

CRASH!

A thundering sound from outside sent them running to the window. Sections of an iron building had fallen off a wagon, sending men scurrying in all directions. The flurry of activity reminded them that they had little time to waste.

“We need to get going,” Delia said. “We need to sell Mam’s things. But we should keep her sewing box so we can mend our clothes. And her drawstring bag.” She felt greedy for wanting to keep so much.

They lugged Mam’s trunk down to Portsmouth Square and past the entrances to hotels and gambling halls, scanning the passersby for potential buyers.

Suddenly, a horse pulling a wagon reared. A runaway bull charged through the street and crashed into the wagon.

Liam and Delia dropped the trunk and pressed themselves against the front of a building to stay out of the way.

Two men on horseback galloped by, twirling lariats. The first man lassoed the bull’s horns, and his horse pulled up to tighten the rope, yanking the bull off its feet.

lariats: long ropes with loops at the end, used for catching or tying up animals

lassoed: caught with the loop end of a lariat

The other man lassoed one of the bull's hind legs. It bellowed as they dragged it back toward the slaughterhouse.

Just then, in a swirl of skirts, a woman emerged from a door, nearly tripping over them and their trunk.

"Pardonez-moi, mes amis!" The woman wore a bright blue silk dress draped in layers and a feathered hat. An outfit their mam would have called extravagant or frivolous. That usually meant too expensive. Mam didn't waste money.

"What?" Liam said. He stared as if the woman were a rare bird.

"Oui! Of course you don't speak French. Hello. And what are you doing with that lovely trunk?"

The woman's accent was like music, different from their own Irish lilt.

"We're selling it and everything in it," Delia said. "It was our mam's, and Papa asked us to sell it since she died."

"What?" Liam gave Delia a confused look.

Delia glared at him.

"I see, my young Irish waifs. I'll give you fifty dollars

frivolous: silly or unimportant

for it all if you carry it to my room." She waved them toward the door she'd just exited, a door to a surprisingly grand hotel: the Parker House.

"Sold!" Delia said.

"But can we trust—"

Delia glared at Liam again.

He sighed and picked up his end of the trunk. They followed the woman through the hotel's lobby, gawking at the oil lamp chandeliers and furniture carved out of fine wood instead of planks. Liam pressed his hand against the wall. Still canvas! "San Francisco should be called the flimsy city, not the city of gold," he whispered.

Delia snickered.

The woman's room was much finer than theirs. A shiny mirror and washstand stood in the corner, nearly hidden by a silk screen in shimmering peacock colors. Her bed's thick mattress held a colorful quilt, a violin and bow, and a photograph of a handsome man. Delia's eyes lingered on the photo. "Who's he?"

"Ah yes, I, too, have lost a dear one. My beloved husband." She held her hand to her heart, then shook her head and sighed. "Do you children have something to hold gold dust?"

“Gold dust!?” Liam exclaimed.

“Bien sûr! Of course you don’t. There’s more gold than coins in this city. I’m usually paid in gold for playing concerts. Here’s an old dipper.” She grabbed a tin cup off her washstand, then pulled a heavy bag from a metal box on the floor. “Now, a pinch of dust is worth twenty-five cents. Do you children know arithmetic?”

“Yes!”

The woman smiled. “I knew you looked well educated. So how many pinches is fifty dollars?”



bien sûr: French for “of course” or “certainly”

arithmetic: math that involves adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing real numbers

“Four pinches to a dollar,” Delia said.

“Four times fifty is two hundred pinches,” Liam calculated.

The woman clapped her hands. “Parfait! Now you count while I pinch.”

They counted as the cup filled with a drift of shimmering dust. Real gold!

“My name is Mrs. Benoit.” She held out the cup. “And yours?”

“Liam, ma’am, and this is my sister, Delia.”

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you.” She gave each her hand as they left.

Her skin was soft and warm, like Mam’s. Neither wanted to let go, but they did and reluctantly headed back to their dingy hotel.

Liam placed the cup on the washstand in their room. “I thought she might cheat us. But this is real gold!”

“It’s so—so gold!” The dust sparkled on Delia’s finger. It felt much like fine sand. “I trust her. She reminds me of Mam.”

“Let’s keep this safe in Mam’s bag,” Liam said, opening the drawstring bag.

Delia’s delight faded. She swallowed her longing for Mam. “We need one hundred more dollars, Liam.” She opened Papa’s trunk, wanting to crawl inside, curl up under his clothes, and sleep. But then a frightening thought struck her. “You don’t think he got gold fever and ran off to the mines without us, do you?”

“No! Papa would never do that! But he might be hurt somewhere. Maybe something bad happened. Maybe—” Liam choked, then whispered, “Maybe he died.”

They sat with this thought for long minutes, tears trickling down their faces.

Liam shook the thought from his head. “He can’t be dead. We need to figure out how to make money while we find him. Our week is almost gone.”

“Should we write a letter to Uncle Ronan?” Delia asked.

“I think we should. But it will take months to get to Boston. We need to do something now.”

4

Free Advice

December 19, 1849

The hotel manager pointed Liam and Delia in the direction of the post office, and they set out with a letter to their uncle tucked safely in Liam's shirt pocket. The postmaster weighed it on his scale and jotted the cost on the front of the envelope for Uncle Ronan to pay when he received it. The postmaster tipped his hat, and just like that, their letter—and their hope—was headed east.

Liam and Delia ventured back out to the street. Recent arrivals swarmed from ships, adding to the chaos. At the far end of the street, a horse and wagon labored up a scrubby hill partially dotted with tents.

A man with a dark cap hugging his head and a long braid down his back stood at the nearby corner. Papa had explained that men from China wore their hair that way. The two Chinese men on their ship had been nice. When one gave Delia a spinning top, she and Liam

scrubby: covered with shrubs or small trees

thanked him with a song. He'd smiled and pressed his palms together like he was praying.

This Chinese man at the corner was not smiling. A group of shaggy miners surrounded him, jeering as he tried to cross the street. One of the men pulled the man's braid tight, sliced it off with a bowie knife, and tossed it in the street.

Delia pulled a bottle from the mud and hurled it, hitting one man's leg. The group turned toward the children, their laughter turning swiftly to anger. The Chinese man ran away.

"Get along out of here," one man yelled. "This ain't none of your business."

Liam and Delia turned and ran. The group tried to give chase, but they swayed and staggered in the mud. The children ran past a gambling hall with music streaming out of its doors. They turned down a path off the main street, hoping to disappear quickly, but immediately ran straight into another boy.

"Hey!" he shouted.

"Sorry," Liam said, panting.

jeering: laughing or speaking in an insulting way

bowie knife: a large hunting knife whose blade has one sharp edge and usually a curve in the blunt edge

“Who you runnin’ from?” The boy looked older than Liam and was dressed like the miners, with a knife peeking out from a back pocket.

“Stupid men,” Delia huffed.

The boy snickered. “Can’t swing a cat around here without hitting one.” He laughed harder.

Liam grinned. Someone near his age! “I’m Liam, and this is my sister, Delia.”

“Name’s Sully. What you doin’ on the streets without your folks? Especially the lass.”

Delia crossed her arms. “I can take care of myself.”

Sully laughed. “So you think. I was lucky to have a brother, until he went to the gold fields and died. Taught me how to take care of myself. You two greenhorns need your Ma and Da.”

“What if we don’t—”

Delia kicked him.

“Ouch! Stop it, Delia! —have any,” Liam finished.

“Now you’ve done it,” Delia huffed.

Sully whistled like a tea kettle. “You two fine birds are orphans! Fancy that!”

“Papa’s coming back,” Delia said.

“How long’s he been gone?”

“Too long,” Liam said. “Ouch!”

Sully laughed. “She’s a corker, this one. She always settle things with a kick?”

“Just lately,” Liam said, glaring at Delia. She glared back.

“Well, lass, what if he doesn’t? There’s nothing between you and the cold, dark ground. Except me. I’ll show you the ropes, like my brother did for me.”

“You’d help us?” Liam asked.

Delia kept quiet, her arms still crossed.

“First thing. The lass must look like a lad so she can work and be taken seriously. She’s tall as you, so she’ll wear your clothes.”

Delia uncrossed her arms and warmed to the idea.

“Cut her hair. Those red locks have got to go.”

Delia’s hands flew to her head. When her hair was clean, it rippled in red-gold waves like Mam’s, setting off her green eyes. Papa loved their hair. He always laughed, saying that he and Liam were the dark Irish, and Delia and Mam the fire.

corker: an impressive or amusing person

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“Snip, snip!” Sully laughed, his fingers working like scissors. “When that’s done, you can make money working or selling things to miners. Forget gambling. Fools here lose gold faster than a jackrabbit makes tracks. Hotels and saloons count on it.”

Liam nodded.

Delia was still thinking about her hair.

“Sell her dresses and find work. How old are you?”

“Thirteen,” said Liam.

“No, you’re not.” Sully smirked. “You’re fifteen. Buildings are going up so fast, they need carpenters. Can you swing a hammer?”

Liam nodded.

Sully pointed at Delia. “You’ll do laundry for folks.”

“I’m a lad, remember,” Delia said. She hated washing clothes.

“Right,” Sully agreed. “Like I said, you’re a corker, but you don’t look nearly as old as your brother. Restaurants need food, especially the fancy ones. They’re partial to frog legs, so you could catch frogs.”

“Like the Frog Pond, Liam! I’ll use Mam’s net!” Delia grinned.

jackrabbit: a large hare with long back legs and very long ears

“Find a creek, and stay away from the waterfront,” Sully added. “You can get shanghaied and end up a cabin boy. Gone forever.”

“What’s *shanghaied* mean?” Liam asked.

“I’d bet a bag of gold that’s why your Da disappeared. Sailors jump ship when they get here, run to the gold fields—”

“That happened on our ship!” Delia said.

“Right, there’s captains who’ll pay a bounty for each man brought to them so they’ve got a crew to sail to their next port. Bet your Papa was tricked, knocked out, and taken to a ship. Woke up after he was outside the Golden Gate.”

A flash of hope coursed between Liam and Delia. Papa could still be alive! He could come back to San Francisco on that ship! They just needed to be here when he returned—maybe months from now, maybe a year or two.

“Meet me here tomorrow. Let’s say sundown,” Sully said. “You can thank me then for saving your lives.”

“Deal.” Liam shook Sully’s hand.

“And you, Red. Shake like a man.”

Delia smiled sweetly, then squeezed his hand as hard as she could.

“That’ll do,” Sully said, and swaggered out to the street.

“Papa will come back. I know it.” Delia jumped up and down in the mud. “But now we need to snip, snip. Glad we kept Mam’s sewing box.”

5

Fitting In

December 19, 1849

Delia's hair lay in clumps and wisps on the floor. The mirror reflected her teary-eyed face beneath a fresh crop of hair. "I'm sorry, Mam. It will grow back."

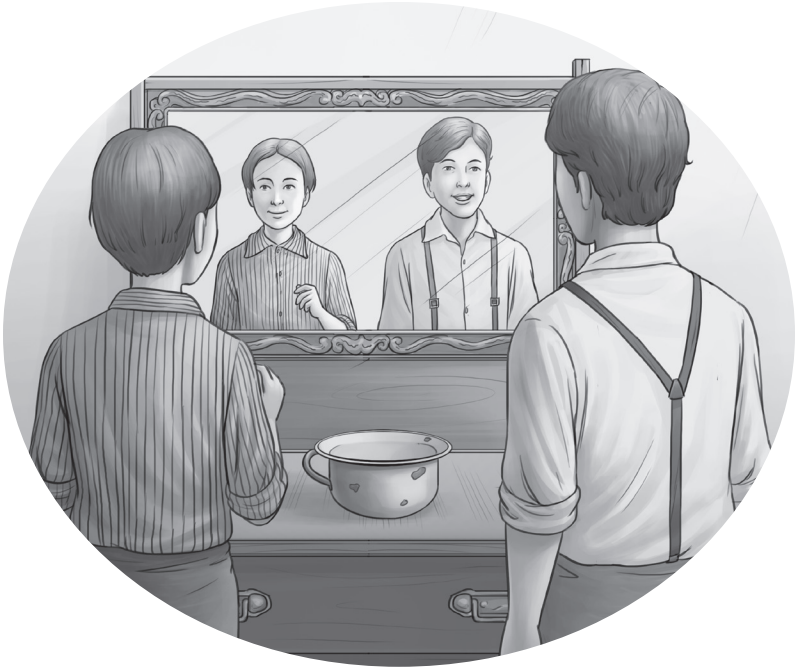
"You look good." Liam patted her on the head. "Pick out what you want to wear. I'll wait in the hall."

Delia sniffled. She dug through Liam's trunk, choosing old clothes. She didn't want to look like a "fine bird." She wanted to look rough and streetwise like Sully.

She changed, and the mirror now reflected a boy that no one would think twice about. One who could do what needed to be done to survive. She felt tough, freed from skirts. Ready to be taken seriously.

"Come in!" she called.

Liam whistled. Delia's trousers hid her mud-caked shoes. The gray-striped wool shirt was buttoned to her throat, and she'd rolled the sleeves a turn.



“Hello, little brother,” Liam said, his grinning face appearing in the mirror beside hers.

“Call me Del,” Delia giggled. The freedom of being seen as a boy was exciting.

The morning now gone, they split up, Liam to look for work and Delia to catch frogs. Liam watched Delia hop down the street, Mam’s net in hand. She picked a flour sack out of the mud, then disappeared into the dunes.

Hammering turned Liam’s attention back to his own task. A man across the street worked fast, sawing and nailing planks to a frame structure. The pile of lumber

looked like it had been part of a ship. It wasn't like the brick and stone used to build the fine buildings of Boston that Liam had loved to sketch. To be a real city, San Francisco needed real buildings. This slapdash mess would need replacing one day.

Liam crossed the street and interrupted the man's hammering. "Looking for work, sir," he said loudly and with confidence, like Papa would have done.

The man sized him up. "A mite bit young, ain't you?"

"Fifteen, sir." Liam stood tall and filled his chest with air.

"See the man in back. Fella named Terry in a red shirt. Irish like you and me."

Liam went around back and called to a man on a ladder, "Looking for work, sir! Man said you were the boss."

"How old are you, son?" Terry squinted.

"Fifteen, sir," Liam said, then added, "and a half," to sound more convincing.

The man chuckled. "Where's your Da?"

What to say? "He's already got work, sir."

“Right. I’ll pay you a dollar an hour. Cut planks from that pile out front. Ian will show you the length he needs.”

For an hour, Liam cut planks, and Ian nailed them to the frame. A blister on Liam’s thumb grew, popped, burned, and bled. His plank-holding hand cramped.

“You’re done here for now. Terry will need you,” Ian said. “I’ll frame the door.”

Liam trudged to the back, his right hand a mess, his left an aching claw.

Terry pointed at a stack of planks. “Those need cutting.”

When Liam hesitated, Terry said, “Show me your hands.”

Liam held them out.

“You’re soft.”

“My hands might be, but the rest of me isn’t.” Anger and desperation edged Liam’s voice.

“Wrap it up.” Terry handed him a rag. “Irishmen stick to it, don’t we? Start sawing.”

Proud of being seen as a man, Liam did as he was told.

Delia walked over the scrubby dunes, wondering where she'd find frogs. Walking here was easier than slogging through streets. The undisturbed scrub held the soil firm. The wind whirled around her, sending bits of sand and fog drifting through gullies. Delia shivered. The fog crept through in silent, spooky shadows.

Splloosh! Delia's foot sank in water. She backed up, crouched, and parted the rushes before spying a stream coursing its way downhill. Frog country! Mam always said you had to be quiet and still to see butterflies and birds, so she sat motionless. Then she heard it: a deep-throated croak, followed by shorter, quick chirps. A bubble of water popped above the creek's surface, and then the head of a frog emerged.

Delia brought her net down. *Swoosh!* Victory was hers! She dumped the frog in the flour sack. Money! Money! Money! She followed the water, looking for more telltale signs, then sat back on her heels and waited. This time, frogs called and answered, chatting. She scanned the rushes and spied a head.

Delia lunged, bringing her net and knees down on nothing but water. *Splash!*

gullies: trenches worn into the ground by running water
rushes: grasslike plants that grow in wet soil

“Deuces, you’re fast!” Delia wrung the water out of her trousers. She shivered. Next time, she’d wear her oilskin.

She crept down the creek and waited. For the next couple of hours, Delia hunted in the fog. Missing a frog. Netting a frog. Missing. Netting. Netting. Netting, faster each time.

At the end of the day, they each made their way back to their hotel room—Delia wet and shivering, with a bag full of frogs, and Liam dirt-and-sweat-streaked, with hands so sore he couldn’t make a fist. He fingered the six hard-earned silver dollars in Papa’s leather pouch around his neck. Real money! But the thought of working so hard for even longer tomorrow left him miserable.

The dinner gong rang.

“I’m starving, Liam! Let’s go! We can sell the frogs to a restaurant afterward.”

“Ugh.” Liam flopped onto his cot. “I’m tired.”

“The food will be gone!”

In the dining hall, they were now as dirty as the men. They elbowed their way to the platters and shoveled down stew with their knives. This time, they didn’t bother to wipe off the grease.

oilskin: cloth that has been treated with oil to make it waterproof

6

Gains and Losses

December 19–20, 1849

Delia and Liam stopped at the first restaurant they found that advertised frog legs on the sign out front, La Maison. A glimpse of white tablecloths through the front window confirmed it was fancy. The frogs, as if knowing they were about to be added to the menu, squirmed in the bag.

The pair went around back to the kitchen door, knocked, then pulled the door open.

“Wrong door!” a Black woman yelled, stirring an enormous pot on top of a cast iron stove.

“We’re here to sell frogs!”

“Maybe you shouldn’t yell,” Liam whispered.

“Frogs!?” The woman wiped her hands on her apron.

“She yelled first,” Delia whispered.

“You have frogs?” The woman sounded French, like

Mrs. Benoit. "How many?"

"Twenty," said Delia.

"Fresh?"

"Caught today."

"I'll give you fifty cents each."

"Sold!" Delia grinned.

The woman pulled coins from a drawer. "Let me see them."

Delia opened the bag. A frog shot out and hopped behind a sack of sweet potatoes.

"I've got him!" Delia's net *swooshed* to capture the runaway.

The potatoes went rolling, but Liam corralled them while Delia danced a little jig.

"They're all as spry as this one," she gloated.

The woman laughed and handed over ten silver dollars.

"But we need the bag. It's the only one we have."

The woman dumped the frogs into a pot with a lid.

THE GOLD RUSH



“I’m Del. Pleasure doing business with you.” Delia held out her hand.

“Enchanté! Such a polite young man.” The woman’s handshake was strong. “And I’m Miss Robicheaux from New Orleans. I’ll buy your frogs anytime.” She picked up two biscuits from a pile on the counter. “You two need more meat on your bones.”

Delia and Liam stuffed the biscuits in their mouths as soon as the door closed behind them. They were crunchy on the outside and soft and buttery on the inside.

“Like Mam used to make,” Liam said, and stifled a sob.

“Please don’t cry.” Delia was almost crying, too. “Mam wouldn’t want us to be sad.”

They walked past a man on the street yelling, “Foreigners will rob you blind! Shouldn’t be allowed to stake a claim! I say we kick ‘em all out!” He stumbled into a saloon.

In the foggy darkness, lights shone through the canvas of buildings and tents from the inside, turning the city into a patch of giant, glowing mushrooms.

enchanté: French for “delighted” or “pleased to meet you”

It was magical and terrifying.

Tomorrow, they'd get started earlier. They were in a race to make more money—like everyone else in San Francisco.

In the morning, they went to work, Delia frog-hunting, Liam building.

Terry and Ian greeted him with a nod.

A flooded-out miner, a spindly chicken of a man, had joined them. "Name's Duncan," he said, and went back to nailing canvas to the bottom of the frame structure.

"Help Duncan," Terry said, pointing to enormous rolls of canvas lying on the ground and then to a ladder leaning against the frame. "Ian and me have work in the back."

The rolls were the color of light tanned leather and appeared to be sails taken from abandoned ships. Large metal rings edged the old sails. The rings once held rigging, or ropes. This added to their weight. Duncan waited as Liam struggled to grip the canvas.

"Unroll'er just a bit each time," Duncan said, matching Liam's slow pace.

They pulled the canvas tight between them before hammering in nails, then stepped up to the next rung on their ladders. When they reached the top of the frame, Duncan swayed as he leaned to pull the canvas tight.

With a crack, his ladder broke. The hammer he'd been holding went flying, following him down and whacking him above his ear. He hit the ground with a thump.

Liam scrambled down his ladder, ran over, and shook the man's shoulder. "Are you OK?"

Duncan's eyes fluttered open, then closed.

"Terry! Ian! Come quick!"

The men ran from the back.

"Lean him here against the front," Terry said.

They propped him against the frame on a mound of brush.

Duncan groaned. "Let me be."

Terry gave Ian a look. "It's always something. Ian, help Liam with the canvas. I'll go buy another ladder."

Duncan groaned again.

"We can't just leave him there," Liam said.

Ian shrugged. "Can't do much else. He's not a rich man who can pay a doctor. Unlucky fella."

Liam nodded, wondering if Papa had been knocked senseless and left sitting somewhere in the city. Surely they would have seen his suit and known he could afford a doctor.

"Hoist 'er up, Liam!" Ian said, pointing to the end of another canvas roll. "On yer shoulder, now. One—two—three!"

Liam hoisted the roll and staggered a few yards.

"Drop it here."

Liam let the roll fall.

Duncan still lay like a pile of rags, eyes closed.

"We'll nail what we can reach before Terry gets back," Ian said. "Never sit around if something can be done."

Liam had no idea how to help Duncan, so he kept working. He picked up the man's hammer, pulled a handful of nails from a bin, and began nailing the canvas up the side of the frame. Ian did the same twice as fast along another post.

"Speed it up, Liam."

Liam hammered faster.

“Faster,” Ian said.

Liam hammered faster.

“Aghhh!” Liam cried. “My thumb!”

“Crikey! It’s the crow’s curse today!”

Liam squeezed his left hand under his armpit. “I’m fine,” he gasped. He had to keep going. He had to make money.

“Good on you,” Ian said. “Let’s go.”

Liam’s thumbnail turned purple. He resisted the urge to put the injured finger in his mouth. The pain of the bleeding blister on his hammering hand was small in comparison.

Ian slowed down. Liam fumbled. Every few minutes, Ian said, “Good on you,” like he was encouraging his own son.

“Ladder!” shouted Terry, rounding the street corner with a ladder on his shoulder. “Cost me twice the usual. Too few sellers, too many buyers.”

Duncan lay slumped and still. Terry set the ladder down and shook the man’s shoulder. “Maybe a little water

will wake him up.”

Liam swallowed. *This could be Papa.*

“It’s always something,” Terry said. “I’ll get a bucket of water. You two get back to work.”

Liam and Ian climbed their ladders, each holding a corner of canvas. Liam struggled. With each step upward, the canvas got heavier. When it began to slip, he stuck his wrapped thumb through the metal ring at the corner and pulled.

But the sail was too heavy, and his thumb twisted back to his wrist.

“Aghhh!” Liam cried. The canvas fell.

“Crikey, lad!”

Liam climbed down with his left hand, holding his right tight to his chest. “I think it’s broken!” He held it up for Ian to inspect.

“Had a thumb like that once. Pushed it back in and was good as new.” Ian snapped the bone back into place.

“Owwww!” Liam cried, nearly blacking out from the pain. He wiped away tears with his sleeve.

Terry returned with a bucket of water sloshing against

his leg. "What's this?"

Liam cringed, now with his right hand throbbing in his armpit.

"Hurt his thumb," Ian said.

"Nothing but eejits!" Terry threw up his hands.

"Sir, I can't work more today. I'll come back tomorrow."

"You aren't much good, anyway. I'll pay you for three hours, but don't come back until you're a man."

Liam hung his head. "Thank you, sir."

Terry threw water on Duncan, who groaned.

"He's alive!" Terry said. "Time's wasting, Ian. We'll deal with him later."

Liam stood for a moment, watching Duncan breathe. The man's eyelids twitched. Maybe he was dreaming of gold. Liam plodded back across the street to the hotel, dodging carts and their hollering drivers. He just wanted to lie down.

7

Dogs and Snakes

December 20, 1849

Delia skulked along the creek, her oilcloth keeping her dry despite the fog. She'd bagged thirty frogs, but she wasn't excited. She was lonely. She missed Mam and Papa. Missed being with Liam. They'd been smushed together for so long on the ship that being alone now felt like being the last person alive. Scary. She thought of Sully and how the only thing between them and the cold, hard ground was money.

When the fog lifted slightly, Delia removed her oilskin, crouched by the creek, and waited. The rushes by the water quivered. A small brown head peeked out, eagerly lapping water. Not a frog—a dog!



Delia clicked her tongue, and the head retreated. She pulled the cheese she'd squirreled away at breakfast from her pocket and held out a chunk. The head popped out, nose twitching. The tiny, scraggly terrier paddled wildly through the water. When it reached Delia, it licked the morsel from between her fingers. Delia giggled. Suddenly the dog pounced into the rushes, crunching a mouthful of grasshopper in its jaws.

"You're a hunter, too! Would you like more cheese for dessert?"

The dog gulped down the morsel, then snuggled in Delia's lap. She scratched its ears. The frog bag squirmed, and the dog leapt. "Wait! Those are mine!" Delia yanked the bag away, then offered more cheese. "I'm going to name you Cheese. Let's go home."

Cheese licked her face. Delia no longer felt alone.

They plodded through the dunes until the wind picked up, pelting them with sand. When it began to rain, Delia put her oilskin on, then ran the rest of the way back to the hotel with Cheese by her side.

At the door to the hotel, Delia picked Cheese up and hid her inside her oilskin. "I don't want anyone but Liam to know about you."

squirreled away: hidden somewhere for later use

Liam was asleep on his cot when Delia opened the door.

“Liam! Look what I found!”

He rolled on his side, wincing with pain.

Cheese scampered across the room and jumped onto Liam’s cot.

“Meet Cheese!” Delia said.

Tears rolled down Liam’s cheeks, and Cheese quickly licked them off.

“What’s wrong?”

He held up his hands.

“Oh, Liam, you’re hurt!” Delia rushed to look, but Liam pulled back.

“Ow! I lost my job.”

“Good! You shouldn’t go back. It’s clearly too dangerous!”

“I only earned three dollars today.”

“But I caught thirty frogs!—And a dog!” Delia giggled. “You’ll find better work.”

The gong rang.

“We need to go!”

Liam gingerly stood up and followed Delia out the door. They left Cheese curled up on Liam’s cot.

Delia fixed plates for them both and pocketed more cheese. Liam held his swollen, purple hand against his stomach. The pain made him nauseous, but he had to eat.

“We need to meet Sully tonight,” Liam said through a mouthful of stew.

“First we have to sell the frogs.” The bag squirmed against Delia’s leg.

They returned to Miss Robicheaux’s kitchen and left fifteen dollars richer—and with buttery biscuits stuffed in their cheeks.

As they walked in the drizzle to Sully’s meeting place, two men burst out through the doors of a saloon and rolled in the mud. Men spilled outside to watch the brawl.

Delia and Liam ducked into Sully’s alley.

“There you two are!” Sully hooted. “Thought I might have to go looking for you.”

“We’ve already made thirty-four dollars!” Delia crowed.

Liam nodded, trying to ignore the pain in his hands.

“So what are you going to thank me with?” Sully demanded.

“What do you mean?” Liam asked.

“My cut—for helping you.”

“You were being nice like your brother was to you!” Delia’s eyes grew wide.

“He was blood. You’re nobody.”

“I’ll gladly give you a dollar for your advice,” Liam said.

“A dollar!” Sully snickered. “I’ll take half of what you’ve earned. Show me the money.”

“You snake! Liam, don’t!” Delia cried.

“Hey little corker, you’re lucky I don’t want it all.” Sully pushed her shoulder.

Delia’s eyes flashed fire. “Don’t push me.”

“Hand it over, Liam.”

“Don’t touch my sister.” Liam knew his sore hands were useless in a fight. He counted his blessings knowing Mam’s bag with the gold dust was safe in their room.

He pulled out Papa's leather pouch.

"Smart man," Sully said, and snapped his fingers.

Liam fumbled to open the pouch with his swollen thumbs.

Sully laughed. "Pity the man who can't work with his hands."

Liam gave Sully seventeen silver dollars. Nothing, not even advice, was free in San Francisco.

"Pleasure doing business with you." Sully pocketed the coins and disappeared into the drizzling fog.

"I was wrong to trust that snake," Liam hissed.

Delia fumed. "We both were."

They stomped out of the alley.

"We're never going to make enough money to stay at our hotel," Delia said. "Never."

The sky opened, crying cold crocodile tears. Maybe the rain was on Sully's side, trying to wash away what was left of their hope.

Cheese welcomed them back with little hops, then gulped down the cheese Delia had saved from dinner before nestling in her lap. Rain drummed on the canvas ceiling. Light from the oil lamp offered little comfort

while music and shouting drifted inside. Liam pulled out his sketch pad to look at old drawings and think.

“I’ll look for store work tomorrow, Delia.”

“That would make Papa proud.” Delia stroked Cheese’s ears.

Liam sighed. Papa. Why didn’t drawing buildings make Papa proud? He closed his sketchbook and stretched on his cot. They had three days left. “Maybe Mrs. Benoit will buy Papa’s things. Let’s ask her tomorrow.”

“But I need to catch frogs.”

“I can’t carry Papa’s trunk by myself!” Liam’s voice wavered.

“I know.” The fear in Liam’s voice was scary. Delia opened Papa’s trunk. The scent of pipe smoke wafted up, and she ached to crawl inside. “Oh, Papa,” Delia murmured. She sniffled, then sobbed.

Liam wrapped his arms around her. “We’ll be here waiting for him when he returns.”

“You think so?”

“Yes.” Papa had to be alive—somewhere. He *must* be. “We’ll sell our things too. For more money.”

Delia nodded and began to sort through their possessions.

They'd keep Papa's big leather satchel to hold their belongings. Delia's ribboned dresses and petticoats would go. She'd keep two pairs of socks and undergarments and one red ribbon to make a leash for Cheese. She'd also keep the spinning top she got from the man on the boat.

Liam would keep one change of work clothes for him and one for Delia. His suits and vests would go. He clung to his recorder, drawing paper, and charcoal. They were priceless.

When they closed their trunks, they said goodbye to their old selves. Their new selves were ready for the morning and whatever it might bring.

8

A Change of Plans

December 21–22, 1849

After breakfast, Delia and Liam carried Papa's trunk to Mrs. Benoit's hotel, thankful the rain had stopped. They stood outside the door to her room, listening to a violin playing the melody of "Ode to Joy." Tempted to sing along, they knocked instead.

"Bonjour, mes amis!" Mrs. Benoit's dress, draped with layers of purple and gold silk, rustled. She eyed Delia. "I see you are now in disguise."

"We have more to sell. Men's things." Delia couldn't say *Papa's things*.

"Did you steal this?"

"No!" they both exclaimed.

Mrs. Benoit viewed the trunk's contents. "What do you think I do with these things after I buy them?"

"Sell them?" Liam guessed.

mes amis: French for "my friends"

“Yes, I sell them to someone who will sell them for an even higher price. So I must give you less. You’ll get more at the waterfront.”

“We don’t have time,” Delia pleaded.

“And the waterfront isn’t safe,” Liam added.

“These are your father’s things.” It wasn’t a question.

Delia and Liam nodded.

“This is a rough place for children—”

Liam cleared his throat.

“For a young man and lady alone, I mean.” Mrs. Benoit pulled out her box of gold dust. “I admire your spirit.”

Two hundred pinches of dust later, they agreed to bring the other two trunks the next morning. Then they went to work.

Delia planned to catch more frogs. Liam hoped to find a job as a clerk—like he might be in Papa’s store if it ever opened.

He saw a sign for Hammond’s General Store and went in. Clothing, umbrellas, home furnishings, preserved meats, pickles, card games, and more lay stacked on tables and the floor.

“May I help you?” a man asked from behind the counter.

“Looking for work, sir.”

The man’s eyebrows arched. “Experience?”

“I clerked in my father’s store before we moved here,” Liam lied. Papa had thought his head was too far in the clouds.

“Why aren’t you working for him now?”

Liam offered Sully’s explanation, the one that he hoped was true. “He got shanghaied, sir. Disappeared.”

The man frowned. “Dreadful! I’m so sorry. I take it you know arithmetic?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Labor’s hard to come by these days. Everyone has gold dust in their eyes. I’ll pay you fifty cents an hour.”

“I was making two dollars an hour, sir, at my last job,” Liam lied.

“This job’s not as dangerous.” The man nodded at Liam’s hands. “But I’ll give you a dollar an hour. You can start now, after you wash up. There’s water and soap in

clerked: worked as a salesperson in a store

the back. Toss the water behind the store when you're done. And don't use much. I buy it by the barrel."

"Yes, sir!" Liam had never been so excited to wash his hands and face.

Over the dunes past the end of Washington Street, Delia and Cheese played in a spring. She threw a stick, and Cheese brought it back, tail wagging so hard it was in danger of flying off. Finally Delia said, "I've got to get busy, Cheese. Time to catch frogs."

But it was hard with Cheese scampering around. Within minutes of Delia's focused attention on catching frogs, Cheese froze, head cocked, then pounced on a frog. Cheese downed it with a few quick chomps.

"You're eating my wages!" Delia laughed. Cheese lay down next to her in the sand, panting. "Good. Stay quiet."

Over the next several hours, Cheese napped and Delia hunted. She bagged twenty-four frogs before the sky began spitting. Glad to have her oilskin with her, Delia lay on her belly, washed her face, and drank from the stream, then headed back.

Liam was already sprawled on his cot, sketching imaginary buildings. Cheese planted soggy dogginess



across his chest. Liam laughed, then winced as he stroked the dog's head.

"I got a job, Delia. Clerking. Made eight dollars today."

"And I caught twenty-four frogs! Cheese caught one, too."

Cheese circled, then curled up on Delia's cot as the gong rang.

The next morning, they sold their remaining trunks and contents to Mrs. Benoit for 280 pinches of gold.

Thrilled that they now had more than the \$150 needed to pay for another week at the hotel, they bought chocolate at Ghirardelli's General Store. A scrumptious treat!

With the taste of chocolate lingering in their mouths, Liam headed off to his job at Hammond's, and Delia went back to the hotel to get Cheese.

The man at the front desk stopped Delia on her way in. "Young man. I've been waiting for your father to pass by. You're leaving tomorrow morning."

"We're staying another week, sir," Delia said. "We can pay."

"Your father planned to go elsewhere. The price has increased, and another gentleman has prepaid. Please inform your father."

"Yes, sir."

Delia ran to their room. "Cheese! We've got to tell Liam!" She stuffed the dog inside her oilskin, grabbed the net, and ran the two blocks to Hammond's General Store.

A bell rang on the door to the shop as Delia entered. Liam was helping a man at the counter, so Delia paced

scrumptious: delicious

among the piles of goods, remembering how orderly Papa's store had been in Boston. San Francisco was not only flimsy, as Liam had said, but also unorganized.

"What is it?" Liam asked.

"This your brother?" The shopkeeper appeared from behind a pile. "He needs work, too?"

"No, Mr. Hammond. I mean, yes, he's my brother, sir, but he's already got work."

"I see—ah, look now. Goods are arriving. We'll need to bring them in straight away." He hustled out the front door.

"Liam, we have to leave the hotel tomorrow!"

"Why? We have money."

"Papa told him we'd find another place, remember? Someone else has already paid for our room."

"Liam! I need you!" Mr. Hammond called.

"We'll talk later," Liam whispered.

Delia watched as he began counting crates of shirts and belts, then set off with Cheese to catch frogs.

That night, even Cheese seemed worried, whining at shadows and noises from the street.

“We’ll find a new place,” Liam said, trying to sound confident like Papa.

Delia blew out the lamp. They stared into the dark, each trying to remember what it was like to go to sleep without being scared.

9

All Is Lost

December 23–24, 1849

They left the hotel at dawn to search for new lodging before Liam had to go to work. Even the worst places, where men slept cheek to jowl across the floor, were full. One man along the wharf offered to sell them a small tent for twenty dollars.

“We’ve got the money, but—” Liam hesitated. He fingered the leather pouch string around his neck.

“Plenty of squatters in the dunes of Happy Valley. Half mile thataway, other side of Market Street. You’ll be happy as clams there.” The man pointed south, his laugh turning into a cough.

Delia poked Liam with her elbow. “It’s our only choice.”

He paid.

They lugged the rolled-up canvas and poles to Happy Valley, pitched the tent in a hollow, and crawled inside the narrow A-frame. Cheese squeezed in between them as they stretched out on their stomachs. Delia’s elbows

squatters: people who live somewhere without the owner’s permission

and knees chafed against the gritty, uneven ground.

“I have to get to work,” Liam said.

“Maybe Mr. Hammond could give you a deal on bedrolls and a lantern?”

Liam sagged at the idea of spending more money, but he said, “I’ll see,” and left.

Then the rain began. Not mist or drizzle. The sky intended to wash the city clean, sending garbage into the bay. Sheets of rain lashed the tent. The wind howled in bursts. Water trickled in one end of the A-frame and out the other.

Cheese whined.

“I don’t want to go out, either, but we can’t just sit here in water.” Delia pulled on her oilskin and dragged Cheese and Papa’s satchel, bulging with Mam’s drawstring bag of gold dust and the rest of their belongings, out of the tent.

She leaned into the wind, water coursing down her oilskin, and turned just as an enormous gust picked up the tent and sent it flying like a sheet of paper. It soared over the dunes and out of sight, taking its spindly poles with it.

“Nooooo!!!” Delia shouted. She started to give chase, but it was pointless.

chafed: rubbed in a painful or irritating way

Chilled by the cold and numb with knowing that the money they'd spent was lost, Delia stood silent. Rain and tears washed streaks of dirt down her face, inside her hood, and down her neck. A rush of water soaked her feet. This must be what it felt like to drown. To lose hope.

She slogged back through the rain to Hammond's General Store.

"It's gone." Delia stood in a sodden lump in front of Liam. Cheese's tail drooped and dripped.

The store crawled with men digging through goods.

"You, son." A man waved from the counter. "How much for this shovel?"

"Sit in that corner." Liam pointed. "I've got to work."

Delia and Cheese huddled in a damp pile until Mr. Hammond walked by. "Liam's brother, yes?"

Delia nodded.

"Go wash up. I'll put you to work. Leave the dog in the back."

For hours, Delia uncrated and stacked goods. Liam took payments. Mr. Hammond smiled at his smoothly running store.

A wagon stopped out front, and a man rolled a barrel inside. "Water!" he yelled. Mr. Hammond exchanged it for an empty one.

As the store grew dark, Mr. Hammond lit oil lamps for the few still shopping. Delia pulled Cheese from a stack of blankets and stood by Liam at the counter.

“Sir,” Liam said.

Mr. Hammond finished with the lamps. “Yes? Oh, right. Ten dollars for you and seven for your brother.”

“Thank you, sir.” Liam’s insides knotted. “Sir—we’ve lost our lodging, and we’ve nowhere to sleep.”

“I see.”

Rain pounded the roof.

“You can stay in the back. Go eat dinner. Leave the dog with me while you eat. I miss having one.”

“Thank you, sir!”

“The dog’s name is Cheese,” Delia said. “And is very well behaved!”

“A well-behaved dog named Cheese will keep the rats and mice away,” Mr. Hammond laughed.

Delia and Liam hopscotched through the rain past a Chinese restaurant. Delia recalled the man who’d given her the spinning top and the man being bullied on the street. “Let’s eat here,” she said.

They settled at a table and admired the clean forks. The hash of beef, rice, and vegetables was delicious, and it only cost them four dollars!

At the store that night, they spread blankets on the floor and marveled at the outhouse by the back door. True luxury! Cheese stretched out between them.

Liam laced his fingers behind his head. "Tomorrow is Christmas Eve."

"If only Mam and Papa were here," Delia said. "We'd be living in a house. Mam would have made a trifle for Christmas!" Delia could almost taste the cake, custard, and cream.

"And Christmas pudding!" Liam's mouth watered. "Covered in golden treacle."

Delia wanted to say, *This is too hard, Liam*, but she didn't.

Liam wanted to say, *I'm scared, Delia*, but he couldn't.

Instead, they softly sang, "*Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright . . .*" until their eyes closed.

In the murky morning, Cheese began to bark.

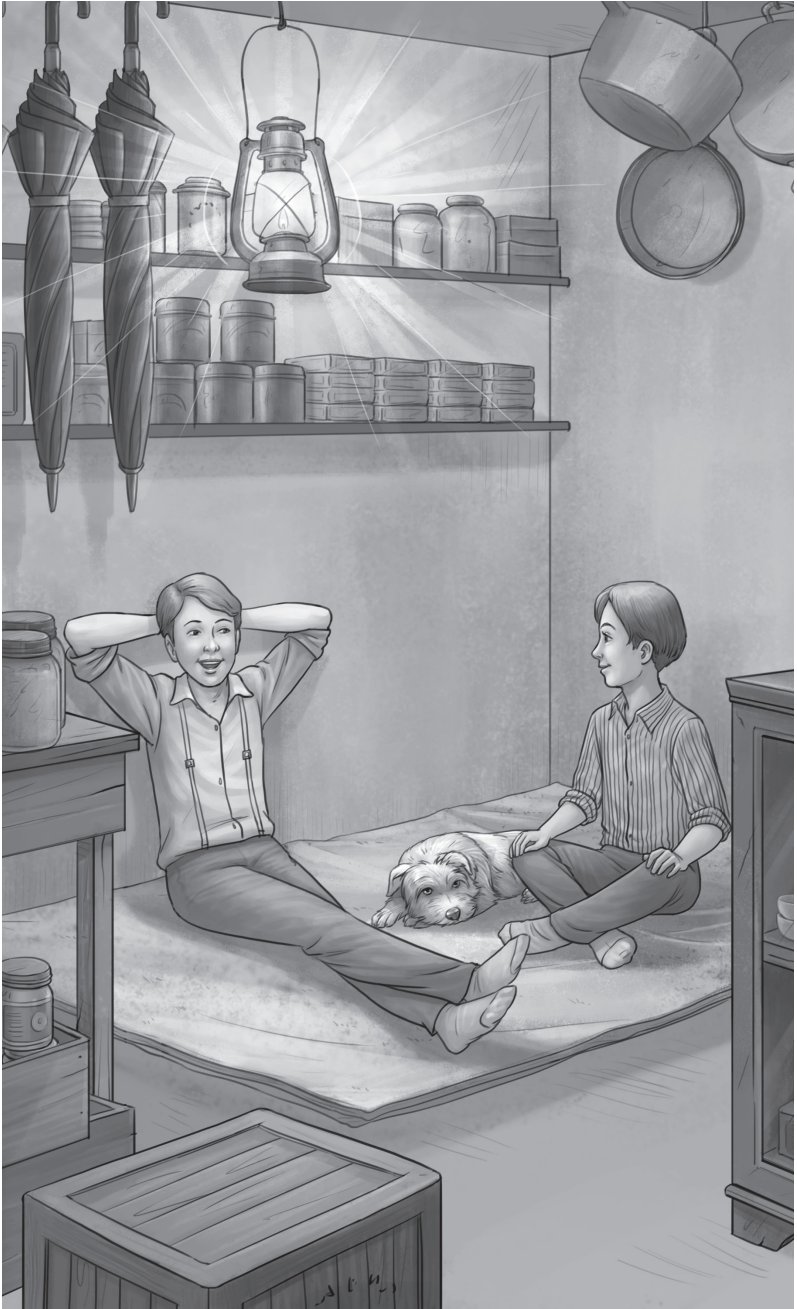
"Shhhh, Cheese, quiet." Delia rolled over, dreaming of trifles.

Cheese kept barking.

"Quiet, Cheese," Liam said. "Let's get up, Delia. It's dawn."

trifle: a dessert made with layers of cake, fruit, custard, and whipped cream

treacle: a light-colored syrup formed in the process of making sugar, similar to molasses but sweeter and less bitter



And then they heard shouts.

“Fire!”

They ran to the front, where smoke billowed past the door.

Gongs clanged. Wood crackled, hissed, and popped. Tongues of flame leapt toward the sky as gambling halls, hotels, and shops ignited.

“Delia! Our things!”

Delia grabbed their leather satchel. Liam slung Papa’s pouch around his neck. By the time they reached the street, the fire had eaten its way to the store next door. They ran outside, pulling a howling Cheese behind them.

Men shouted orders. Some threw buckets of water on the store. Then—

BOOM!

Further down the street, an explosion leveled buildings that weren’t even on fire.

“What’s going on?” Delia cried. Cheese cowered between her legs.

“Blowing up buildings to stop the fire!” a man yelled.

Men organized bucket brigades. They threw mud. Others stood watching, as if hypnotized by the fire.

brigades: groups of people organized to perform specific tasks

Shopkeepers pleaded for help. Some men wanted to be paid. Many eagerly grabbed buckets, though water was scarce.

Liam wanted to help, but men with wet blankets pushed him back. "Make way!"

Mr. Hammond broke through the crowd. "My gold!" he shouted. He ran toward the door of the store, although flames were already licking through the side.

"*Liam!*" Delia yelled. "Stop him!"

Liam dashed after Mr. Hammond, grabbing his shirt and pulling him back from the door just as the building roared into flames. They pitched backward into the mud.

"Liam!" Delia screamed. She pulled him up and away from the fire.

Mr. Hammond knelt in the mud, shouting at men with buckets and frantically throwing handfuls of mud on the flames.

Delia and Liam stumbled across the square.

"That was close." Liam doubled over, coughing.

The fire had already burned a block of buildings.

"Bonjour, mes amis," a voice said. Mrs. Benoit stood behind them, wearing a housedress and holding her violin

housedress: a simple, informal dress that is easy to wash

case and gold dust box. "We are now three homeless orphans, yes?"

"You, too?" Delia asked. How could someone like Mrs. Benoit be homeless like them?

"Oui. Fire goes where it pleases."

Delia picked up a trembling, whining Cheese.

An iron building became surrounded by fire. It glowed bright orange-red, then twisted, groaned, and folded in on itself.

Delia shuddered. The dreams they'd had about this golden city were just as ruined.

10

New Dreams

December 24, 1849

“**M**es amis, it is too awful to watch. Let’s go.” They trekked silently through the mud of Portsmouth Square toward calmer streets while Cheese pranced ahead, the only one not weighed down by their loss. Yes, they were alive and unhurt and grateful for that, but on the tail of their other losses, it was overwhelming.

“Let’s make Christmas Eve a little brighter,” Mrs. Benoit finally said. “I think a good meal is in order, one that will revive our spirits.”

She led them to a restaurant outfitted with real tablecloths and utensils. Mrs. Benoit ordered an expensive breakfast for them all: Hangtown fry, made with eggs, oysters, and bacon. Plus enormous slabs of fresh sourdough. And an orange for each of them for dessert!

“Keeps us from getting scurvy, mes amis.”

scurvy: a disease caused by lack of vitamin C

They had never tasted anything so juicy and sweet. Cheese gulped down two sausages, then snored under the table.

Mrs. Benoit paid the bill and said, "Now, there is the matter of lodging."

"The store where we were working and sleeping burned down," Liam said.

"I saw you save the owner." Mrs. Benoit nodded her head in appreciation. "You are a responsible, noble young man."

Liam didn't feel noble. He felt tired of being responsible. He bowed his head. "I didn't think it would be this hard."

Delia put on a brave face. "Uncle Ronan will get our letter. He'll know what to do. He'll send word from Boston. I'm sure of it. He has to."

"And what will you two do while you're waiting months to hear from him?" Mrs. Benoit asked.

"What we've been doing," Liam said, and shrugged.

Delia nodded.

"Mes amis, let me propose a plan. I have friends who have just built a boardinghouse. Come stay with me there, at least until you can find work."

Excited and grateful for this new plan, they didn't know how to thank Mrs. Benoit for her kindness. Then Delia got an idea, and she leaned over to whisper in Liam's ear. He pulled out his recorder and played a note, and Delia matched the pitch. They began to sing.

"We wish you a merry Christmas. We wish you a merry Christmas. We wish you a merry Christmas and a happy new year . . ."

As they sang the verses, diners near them listened. When they finished, applause filled the room, and a man cheered, "Bless you, lads! Bless you!"

Mrs. Benoit put her hand to her throat. "Your voices are quite lovely!"

"We wanted to thank you with a song."



“You have done much more than that, mes amis. You have given me an idea. Come, let us go meet my friends.”

At the boardinghouse, Mrs. Benoit’s friends had already heard about the fire and offered them two rooms that contained plank beds with mattresses and blankets. Cheese scampered about, sniffing every corner.

Mrs. Benoit disappeared shortly after they arrived, saying she needed to go shopping. Worn out from the events of the fire and full from breakfast, they lay down to close their eyes for just a minute . . . and awoke to knocking.

“Mes amis! Mes amis! May I come in?”

Cheese yipped and sniffed at the crack below the door. Mrs. Benoit popped in, her new shimmering green and red silk dress filling the doorway.

“Mes amis! I have news. Écoutez! Listen!” Mrs. Benoit perched next to Delia, all aflutter. “Do you know many songs?”

“We sang everything in Mam’s songbooks,” Delia said. “She played the piano.”

“I suspected that was the case. Would you perform with me? Your voices are exquisite, and people will pay a pretty penny to hear them. More families are arriving

aflutter: excited and anxious

in San Francisco now. And they're looking for civilized forms of entertainment, like concerts. Friends of mine are opening a theater."

"Yessss!" Delia and Liam cheered. Their minds bounced from one thought to another. Mam would have been thrilled! They would be spending their days doing what they loved. They would be earning money while they waited for Uncle Ronan's response. They would perform for Papa when he returned. And no matter what happened, they would have a chance at a real future in San Francisco.

"One more thing, mes amis. A young schoolteacher and his wife are opening a free public school here. They want me to provide private music instruction for families. Perhaps you two might want to attend that school? Be with other children?"

Delia and Liam exchanged a startled look. After all that had happened, it felt strange to think of themselves as children again.

"Can Cheese and I still hunt frogs sometimes for fun?"

Mrs. Benoit laughed. "Bien sûr! Of course you can be a singing frog catcher, but someday you might want to do something else. An education gives you many more choices in life."

She turned to Liam. “And you, young man?”

Liam’s eyes were closed, but he wasn’t dreaming. He heard the echo of Papa’s voice: *If he ever gets his head out of the clouds . . .* Liam had proven he was responsible, but he also knew he didn’t want to count and sell stacks of merchandise all day. And he knew for sure he had few skills as a carpenter. “I want to make beautiful buildings and parks. I want to draw their designs, not build them. I want to be an architect.”

Mrs. Benoit clapped her hands. “Magnifique! So you will be a singing architect! I will make arrangements for both of you to attend school. Très, très bon! Now, come to my room, and we will find the songs we know and ones we will learn together.”

In the silence Mrs. Benoit left behind, Delia said, “You really think Papa will come back?”

Liam sighed. “Nothing is for sure, Delia. But I have a lot more hope now than I did before. If he does come back, I want him to see how well we’ve done.”

“Me, too, Liam. Me, too.”

architect: someone who designs buildings
magnifique: French for “magnificent”
très, très bon: French for “very, very good”

Afterword

In January 1846, the city of San Francisco didn't exist, and the land it would be built on wasn't yet part of the United States. In its place sat a small trading port called Yerba Buena and a mostly abandoned Spanish missionary outpost two miles southwest called Mission Dolores. Fewer than two hundred people lived in the area, which was governed by Mexico. Most of the Native Americans who had lived near Yerba Buena for centuries had died from hardship or disease brought on by the Spanish missionaries. Others had been killed by early settlers.

A visitor approaching Yerba Buena from the harbor would see a handful of wood and adobe buildings, but mostly tents nestled among tall sand dunes along a shallow cove. A Mexican plaza near the waterfront was the heart of the village.

The next three years brought big changes. The town of Yerba Buena, along with the future state of California (and other western lands), became property of the United States. Yerba Buena was renamed San Francisco, and the central plaza was officially named Portsmouth Square. And San Francisco's population exploded. All because in May 1848, Samuel Brannan held a bottle of gold dust in his hand and proclaimed to a San Francisco crowd that he had struck gold. The rush was on!

The gold lay in California's Sierra Nevada foothills, and San Francisco became the transportation hub for gold miners heading there. The first gold seekers arrived mostly from Mexico, Chile, and Peru because they could more easily get there by ship.

American gold seekers came by three longer routes:

1. journeying across the plains and mountains of North America;
2. sailing to Panama, crossing the isthmus with their possessions on pack mules, and then taking another ship from Panama's western coast to San Francisco; or
3. sailing around the treacherous Cape Horn of South America and then north to San Francisco, stopping several times along the way for repairs and to replenish food and water.

No matter the route, many travelers died of diseases such as malaria, scurvy, cholera, or typhoid before they had a chance to pan for gold.

isthmus: a narrow strip of land that connects two larger land areas

pack mules: offspring of donkeys and horses that are used to carry large loads

malaria: a disease caused by a mosquito-borne parasite that leads to periodic attacks of fever and chills

typhoid: a disease caused by bacteria that leads to fever, headache, and diarrhea

Samuel Brannan hadn't found the gold himself. The discovery was made by carpenter James W. Marshall who was working at Sutter's Mill, near the Sacramento River. He spotted flakes of gold in a stream. However, Samuel Brannan made a fortune from his strategic announcement, as he owned two stores stocked to outfit prospectors with everything they would need.

The announcement created so much excitement that nearly every able-bodied man in San Francisco left for the gold fields. But thousands more soon flocked to San Francisco. Although some brought their families with them, most left them behind with the intention of either sending for them later or returning home once their fortunes had been made.

Ships began arriving, sometimes many in a single day, crowding San Francisco's harbor. Sailors often deserted and ran off to the gold fields, leaving their ships and captains stranded. Some desperate captains paid shady characters called *crimps* to supply their ships with new crew members. Crimps drugged men or knocked them unconscious before handing them over to captains.

Many of San Francisco's dunes were shoveled into the cove's shallow waters, turning abandoned ships into landlocked stores, warehouses, hotels, and even a jail.

deserted: left without permission

Some of these ships are now buried underneath the pavement of today's modern city.

No one knows for sure how many people arrived in 1849, but estimates of those who arrived by sea range from twenty thousand to more than forty-one thousand, and an even greater number—between thirty thousand and fifty thousand—made the journey across North America. Most of those new arrivals, around 75 percent, were Americans; the rest came from all over the world. Imagine welcoming all of these people to a place that had no running water, no sewers, and few places to eat or sleep.

The need for housing, restaurants, and entertainment was enormous. New business owners built stores, restaurants, hotels, saloons, and gambling houses. Carpenters were in great demand and commanded high wages. Lumber and bricks were expensive, so large canvas tents with wood frames were constructed quickly and cheaply. Recycled canvas sails and lumber from abandoned ships were also used for construction. Most of San Francisco's early buildings were built this way.

Some buildings arrived by ship in prefabricated wood or iron sections. The iron ones proved to be too hot in the sun and too cold at night. And though they were

prefabricated: made in parts before purchase so the buyer only has to put the finished parts together

touted as fireproof, they were not. Either they heated up so much that they cooked whatever was inside, or they buckled and folded in on themselves.

Few people owned homes where they could cook, so most ate at boardinghouses or restaurants or bought food from street vendors. Many restaurants, or “eating houses,” were set up in tents. San Francisco’s oldest restaurant, the Tadich Grill, began its days in a tent as a coffee stand on the harbor front. And one of San Francisco’s most famous chocolatiers, Ghirardelli, opened a general store along the harbor front in those early days as well, followed by a confectionery three years later.

Prices for goods fluctuated wildly depending on supply, but everything from food to lodging was often outrageously expensive. In the early years of the Gold Rush, foods such as eggs, fruit, and vegetables were scarce. Some paid up to a dollar for a single egg or orange, equal to more than forty-one dollars today.

When young miners discovered that prospecting was dangerous, too hard, or hit-and-miss, many gave up. Some sent for their families and remained in San Francisco. Others returned home. Some who were lucky enough to find gold would often leave the gold fields during the rainy winter months. Some invested in property or businesses prospecting: searching an area for valuable minerals, such as gold

in San Francisco, while many more squandered whatever gold they'd found on gambling, drinking, and other forms of entertainment. When their gold was spent, they'd head back to the hills in search of more. While some miners struck it rich, it was the merchants, entrepreneurs, hotel and gambling house owners, and land speculators who profited most from the Gold Rush.

The winter of 1849 was extremely wet, flooding some mining areas and making life miserable in the gold fields. Many miners returned to San Francisco to wait for drier weather, driving up the prices of lodging and food.

Some of the cheapest boardinghouses were nothing but flimsy, windowless buildings lined with rows of bare wooden shelves that served as bunks. Men slept in their clothes on the bunks or, when those were full, crowded the floors. Some of these places offered straw to sleep on; in others, guests had to supply their own bedding. And because few bathed due to the lack of water, the smell in crowded boardinghouses could be sickening. Some hotels double-booked their rooms—for example, one group of people would sleep in rooms during the day, and then a second group would sleep in those same rooms at night.

squandered: wasted

entrepreneurs: people who start their own businesses

speculators: people who make risky investments in hopes of large payoffs

Merchants and other professionals who didn't own their own homes often slept in the back of their shops.

The city had no paved streets or sidewalks. When it was dry, dust and sand swirled in the wind, and when it rained, the streets became a quagmire of mud and manure. Horse-drawn wagons got stuck. People piled whatever wasn't needed—spoiled foods or excess canned goods, splintered boards, old clothing, branches and brush—into the mud to form makeshift sidewalks.

San Francisco stank. The miners smelled bad. With no running water and high labor costs, taking a bath or having laundry done was often too expensive. It was cheaper for miners to wash in a hand basin and buy a new set of clothes when their old ones wore out. Outhouses dotted the city, and many threw the contents of their chamber pots and washbasins out the door and into the street to mix with the manure of horses and mules.

Slaughterhouses dumped animal entrails in the bay. Native rats and those that arrived on ships ran wild among dead animals and cast-off garbage. And the sulfurous smell of the harbor's mudflats at low tide was made worse by the stench of rotting garbage.

quagmire: soft, wet ground that is easy to get stuck in

manure: animal waste

entrails: internal organs

sulfurous: relating to sulfur, such as the smell of rotten eggs

mudflats: flat areas of land that are underwater at high tide and exposed at low tide

In 1849, white Americans far outnumbered nonwhite gold seekers. Prejudice and violence against Native Americans, Black Americans, and people from China, Mexico, and South America were common. Many nonwhite prospectors were stripped of their land and gold claims or faced physical and verbal abuse.

Women who arrived during the Gold Rush with their husbands and families worked hard. A few panned for gold, but they also tended to the needs of their families. Some became businesswomen who opened boardinghouses, shops, or restaurants or invested in land in the growing city.

San Francisco grew not only quickly but also dangerously. Its flimsy, slapdash buildings were a city of kindling, which was at constant risk of going up in flames. San Francisco's first big fire started near dawn on Christmas Eve 1849. It began at a saloon and gambling house called Dennison's Exchange in Portsmouth Square and soon spread next door to the town's biggest hotel and gambling hall, the Parker House. Before long, another big gambling house, the El Dorado, was consumed. With the fire growing and no fire department or running water, locals organized bucket brigades. They blew up buildings to try to stop the flames, and they threw mud and wet blankets on structures to keep the blaze from spreading.

Though the fire was kept within two city blocks, it destroyed dozens of buildings and caused an estimated \$1 million in damage. But San Franciscans were resilient. Within three days, they had cleaned up the debris and were rebuilding. One week after the fire, Dennison's Exchange and the El Dorado were almost ready for business. The Parker House took longer to rebuild because it was being made from brick. Over the next year and a half, San Francisco experienced five more major fires, the last of which nearly burned down the entire city. But each time, the city came back bigger, stronger, and more fire-resistant.

By the late 1850s, when the Gold Rush was played out, about 50,000 people called San Francisco home. But when silver was discovered in western Nevada in 1859, San Francisco's population exploded once again, growing to 234,000 over the next twenty years!

Today, San Francisco remains a world-renowned harbor and port where new immigrants and the descendants of immigrants from many nations live and work. Special maps show the locations of buried ships under the streets of the city, along with how the bay's shoreline has been filled in over time.

debris: the remains of something broken or destroyed

While the characters in this story are not real, the historical details mentioned throughout are. When I first learned about how hard, wild, and fast-paced life was in San Francisco and in the gold fields during the Gold Rush, I started imagining what it would be like for children to be orphaned in the city during that time. This story is the result.

Meet the Author



Jilanne Hoffmann is an engineer-turned-author, originally from the Midwest, who fell in love with San Francisco, “the City by the Bay,” and made it her home. She has sailed around the Bay (known for its blustery winds, strong tidal currents, and billowing fog), ridden her bike across the Golden Gate Bridge, explored the city’s waterfront, and tiptoed above the silent skeletons of at least forty wooden ships buried beneath San Francisco’s streets. These mysterious ships sparked Jilanne’s initial desire to write about the Gold Rush, and as she learned more, it became clear that the early boomtown would make the perfect setting for a tale of survival for a pair

of resourceful, orphaned children. Jilanne is the award-winning author of the picture books *A River of Dust: The Life-Giving Link Between North Africa and the Amazon* (2023), *The Ocean's Heart: The Tiny Creatures Essential to Life* (March 2026), and the middle grade novel in verse and prose, *HeartLand* (July 2026). Jilanne reviews picture books on her blog and offers mini recommendations for middle grade novels on Instagram, Facebook, and Bluesky. She lives in the Bay Area with her husband, son, and rescue dog (who loves cheese, but is not named Cheese). Find links to her books, blog, interviews, and social media handles here: linktr.ee/JilanneHoffmann.

Meet the Illustrator



Kailien Singson. A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in arts. Having explored several techniques in art through his education and professional years in publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.

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Core Knowledge® Adventures in History™

Thirteen-year-old Liam and eleven-year-old Delia are running out of time, money, and options. Their mother died onboard the ship that carried them from Boston to San Francisco, and now their father has disappeared.

San Francisco is not the city they imagined in their dreams. Instead, it is a ramshackle, chaotic place filled with dangers. But there are opportunities too . . . if they can find a way to survive. Amidst the beached ships, hodgepodge of buildings and tents, and scrubby dunes, Liam and Delia set out to prove that their journey to a new home was not in vain.

These books are suitable for readers aged 8 and up.

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