

## Chapter Nine

*Boooooommm.*

I sit up in bed. Even Gerry's got his eyes open, and he's not a man easily roused.

"What the hell was that?" He yanks open the front of the tent and sticks his head out.

I clamber round him so that I can see outside too. The sun is not quite risen but there's enough light to see other members of our company emerging from their tents. William Lewis is nearest.

"William," Gerry shouts.

"Happy Fourth of July." He walks over to our tent.

"Oh, of course. Happy Ind—"

*Boooooommm.*

"Is that a cannon?" Gerry says.

"I reckon so. Imagine someone still carrying something that heavy with them. Shall we go and see it?"

Gerry looks at me.

"Why not?" I say.

Soon the three of us are strolling through the wagons encamped alongside the Bear River.

"It doesn't look like anyone's planning to move out anytime soon," I say.

"There must be two hundred wagons here."

"I reckon most companies will stay put today to celebrate Independence Day," William says.

## Golddigger by Hilary McCollum

"It'll do the animals good to have a day of rest. That last hill yesterday was hard on them. Nearly too hard," Gerry says.

"That was nothing to what's ahead," William says. "I heard the Sierra Nevadas are so steep, you can barely go ten yards without having to get out ropes and chains to haul the wagons up and down."

"It's a tough journey, right enough," Gerry says. "I've lost count of the number of carcasses I've seen, oxen especially. I sometimes wonder would we have been better off with mules."

"They're struggling too," I say. "Back at the Green River I saw a company whipping their mules across, rather than waiting for the ferry. One of the poor creatures stopped swimming, let its head go under and was swept away. I think it gave up."

"Some of these people don't know the first thing about looking after livestock," William says. "I take my hat off to our guide. Our animals look as well as any I've seen along the whole trail."

"Long may they stay that way," Gerry says.

We carry on among groups of men, sitting around campfires or standing talking, many of them already drinking. We can hardly walk five steps without hearing someone discharging a rifle or a pistol, and the notes of the "Star-Spangled Banner" and "Hail Columbia" are all around us.

"Independence Day reminds me a bit of Saint Patrick's Day, but with a lot more shooting," I say to Gerry.

"I suppose so. But can you imagine Saint Patrick's Day if we had independence to celebrate? What a day that would be."

Golddigger by Hilary McCollum

“I was in Boston a few years ago on Saint Patrick’s Day,” William says. “Lots of marching bands and people celebrating in the streets. I don’t mind telling you I was impressed. I guess you had parades in Ireland?”

“Well, not so much parades, but it was quite a holiday,” I say. “Church in the morning. Everyone would be there, the whole village. And after church the celebrations would start—eating and drinking, music and dancing till long into the night.”

“Skibbereen was the same,” Gerry says. “Not anymore, I don’t suppose.”

I hear the sadness in his voice but William doesn’t seem to notice. “We should have a parade today,” he says. “And then a party. I’ll get Sarah to bake a cake. Soon as we’ve seen this gun.”