Crimson Gold

By Traci Hall

Chapter One

“Dad-blame it.” The expletive snuck past Candice’s gritted teeth as the coach wheel caught a deep rut. Seated next to the driver, she clutched the wooden bench seat and braced for the next jolt. The paved brick streets of Boston seemed a fond memory. *What if I’m making a mistake?*

There was no going back. She could almost hear her beloved Papa saying she’d laid all her cards on the table, and she’d better ante up. An educated risk taker, he’d made a fortune or two. Now it was her turn to gamble everything on a chance – not for riches, but survival.

“Miss Crimson?” The grizzled stage coach driver wore the pervasive dust like another layer of clothing. His scratchy voice reminded her she was thirsty, but she’d given Mary the last of their water an hour ago. “You say somethin’?”

He pushed the brim of his felt hat from his brow, his brown eyes curious though he hadn’t said a word about her excessive baggage or opinionated maid. But cursing?

“Not a thing worth repeating,” she said primly.

With a conspiratorial wink, he clamped down on the stem of his unlit pipe and coaxed the horses around a divot the size of a gravel pond. Long, hot hours passed since they’d left the comparative comfort of the Northern Pacific railroad which had, quite literally, run out of rail in the middle of nowhere. Laborers quit work when the day was done, and started up where they left off in the morning. The iron track headed toward Spokan Falls remained a month away from completion. Was it any wonder fear nipped at her heels? She’d left a proper city for untamed wilderness.

“You’re certain there will be a place for us at River House?” Candice clapped her hand to her hat as the stagecoach dipped.

“Yup. Spoke to Mrs. Gray just this morning to make sure. Three rooms for rent.”

“We’ll just need the one.”

The old man gave her a sideways glance, taking in her delicate leather boots and matching gloves, and possibly the catch in her voice. “Cleaner than most boarding houses, and fair priced, if it matters.”

It mattered far more than Candice’s Parisian traveling gown let on. Green with white stripes, she wore a matching bonnet designed to keep her nose from freckling. Fashionable did not mean sturdy, and her limp bow drooped beneath her chin. Dried mud crusted along the hem of her dress, and her gloves were slightly damp with perspiration. What she wanted was a good long soak, but those days of luxury were gone. She’d fled Boston without looking back, her only possessions pinned to her corset, safely hidden beneath whalebone stays.

“I can’t thank you enough for the ride.” The coach from Spokan Falls only picked up passengers once a day, and by the time she’d made arrangements for the drill, the interior seats were taken.

“If you don’t mind sitting up here with me, then I’m happy to take yer money. Full price ticket. For both of ya.” He took the pipe out of his mouth, gesturing between them for emphasis.

Money. It greased the cogs of every machine. “That’s just fine.” Candice turned on the bench and waved up at Mary, who perched precariously on a stack of trunks tied to the roof of the coach. Her maid refused to let their baggage out of her sight, certain they’d be robbed blind.

“We are almost there,” Candice called out encouragingly. “Are you sure you won’t come down? I can scoot over.”

Mary’s once white mobcap slipped to the side of her red curls. “No, Miss,” she answered with a dramatic sigh. “I’ll stay right here and do me job.”

Candice turned back to the road, determined to help her maid adjust to their new life. Out of spite, her mother had fired Mary the minute Candice made a bid for freedom. What choice did Candice have but to hire her on and hope for the best?

They crested a hill and the driver paused, pointing down into a green valley miles below. “There she is, Spokan Falls.”

“Oh!” Candice lifted the brim of her hat to better take it all in. The town was a verdant jewel in contrast to the barren prairie behind them. The sharp scent of cut Pine came from a working saw mill next to a long, noisy river. Brownish-green water barreled over a ridge to form a foamy froth on the rocks below. “How beautiful.”

“Named after the Spokan Indians. You’ll see ‘em around the river, trading fish for supplies.”

“Indians?” Mary had a fear of them after reading sensation novels, certain they’d want her red hair. She peered behind her to see if Mary had heard the driver, but her maid seemed entranced by the spectacular view of the raging water. “Are they dangerous?”

“Nothin’ to be afraid of.” He nodded once in her direction. “Not that you seem ta be the sort to run from yer own shadow. Got common sense, I wager.”

Her papa would say she’d just been awarded the highest compliment. Her mother – Candice couldn’t think about Julia Crimson without a sharp stabbing pain to her belly. “I hope you’re right.”

“Don’t know what brings ya here, don’t matter, really. You got grit beneath that fancy hat. Don’t forget it, and nobody else will either.” He urged the horses down the hill.

Candice mulled over the driver’s words and used them to squelch the rumblings of self-doubt. She wasn’t the kind to sit back and cry over spilt milk or lost fortunes – no, she was her father’s daughter, and as such, would greet each obstacle in her life as a call to adventure. She straightened her posture, and allowed a smile as the driver turned toward Front Street.

A wide expanse of cut grass dotted with canvas tents separated the water and the road like a manicured park. Surely Spokan Falls wasn’t refined enough for that?

What if it wasn’t? It soon would be, with the railroad coming. The rough town would soften with the influx of people. Candice barely controlled the urge to stand up and toss her hat in the air, her weariness disappearing like a puff of smoke. “Another few blocks, Mary. Aren’t you happy?” Hope tickled her fingertips, independence finally within reach.

“Happy is a stretch, Miss. It would have been better if the railroad went all the way into town. The coach hit every hole in the road, and me legs are numb. Not that I want to complain, Miss, but ye asked, ye did.”

Candice bit back a retort; she had asked.

The driver whistled. “Can’t blame me fer the roads. Full price.”

She understood that not every woman wanted to stretch her wings and soar. Others longed for the routine of hearth and home. Mary had suffered, with a lot of praying to her sainted mother, through the uncomfortable train rides, crumpled dresses, and finally, the stage coach.

“It will all be worth it.” Candice took a deep, fortifying breath. It had to be.

“Couldn’t help but notice the big boxes you hired the cart for,” the driver said. “Going into business?”

Did she dare tell him what was in the wooden crates? She knew the chances of her partner’s approval were slim to none. Fully aware of being female and deemed unsuitable for just about everything, she’d trade the tool for Mr. Dimitio’s cooperation. An older man with salt and pepper fringe, perhaps a squint from being underground so much of the time, her new partner would be a willing mentor, once she explained her circumstances. Dead father, forced marriage, escape before financial ruin.

Would he be overjoyed to see his deceased partner’s daughter? She wrinkled her nose. To be honest, the answer was a resounding no.

Candice shook her head, opting for discretion until she met with Mr. Dimitio. “Just the rest of my possessions.” Apprehension at being separated from the equipment reared its head like a poisonous snake. “Will it, they, be safe?”

“Hmph.” The driver sniffed but didn’t pry further. “The cart is slower than the coach. And they gotta find a sober driver. Should be here tomorrow or the next day. Don’t think the natives care about a box of frilly dresses.”

In actuality, she’d left most of her wardrobe in Boston, in favor of traveling light. Her main concern was the drill her partner wanted. The expensive machine was her ace in the hole. Candice, determined to change Mr. Dimitio’s initial opinion of her with hard work in Crimson Gold Mine, clasped her hands together. The suffragettes insisted that women had the strength to be equal. Candice would prove them right. Even the driver said she had grit.

“Hotel’s coming up, right around this corner.”

“Did you hear that, Mary?”

Candice politely ignored her maid’s derisive snort, eyeing the shops on either side of the packed dirt road. Dry goods, a saloon. There was even a milliner’s. She patted her wide bonnet, glad to know she could buy replacement trims for her hats.

As they lumbered down Front Street they garnered attention from the locals. Candice glanced back at Mary, her white mobcap askew, her curls a riotous mess around her flushed face, sitting atop a tower of trunks, while she was a tad overdressed in the latest Parisian fashions. The few women she saw wore shapeless gingham print gowns.

Dusty, thirsty, and sore, she found she didn’t give a hoot that people stared as if she were the Queen of England. Let them! She’d arrived. Candice reached into her small purse for some hard candies, tossing them to the scampering children. No matter what else happened, she was free. A smile lit her face, joy bubbling from the center of her being. She let go a laugh that staked her claim.

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Exhausted, Braxton Dimitio stretched his aching back the best he could inside the cramped space. “Damn it,” he said as the lantern continued to splutter. Turned out he had a claustrophobic streak – something he’d learned when a tunnel had partially collapsed with him in it, taking out his only source of light.

With a slightly shaking hand, he dug his watch out of his jeans and wiped the inch thick layer of grime from the crystal. Noon. Time for a few hard biscuits and some sun. He’d never known it could be so cold. He grabbed his gear and made his way to the edge of the tunnel. Taking a deep breath, he wondered if he’d died and gone to steak-scented heaven. “Barney?”

“Hey, Boss.” His one and only hired man, gray-haired and lean, lifted an arthritic hand in greeting. “Figured ye might be hungry.”

“I’m glad you’re back. You know I can’t cook.” He’d come a far distance since arriving in Spokan Falls a year ago, half ownership of a claim his only wealth. Green as a sapling, he’d met Barney outside the saloon next to the dry goods store, tossed in the street for trying to pay his bill in gold flakes instead of coin. They’d been together ever since.

The tangy aroma of baked beans and charred beef filled the air. Braxton’s rumbling belly clenched as he noticed two strangers unloading pack horses. Braxton nodded his head at the men, speaking to Barney in a less welcoming voice. “I was down to my last packet of dried venison.”

“Got held up with an aching tooth and weren’t nothing fer it, but to get the derned thing pulled.” Barney opened his mouth, and pointed to an empty space in his gums. “Good news is I came upon two pals of mine, from back in the day. They was lookin’ fer work, and know a pick axe from a pan.”

College educated, it had taken Braxton his first winter in Spokan Falls to understand the local vernacular. While he didn’t speak old coot, he now understood it fluently. “Oh?”

“Pete and Jonas both worked in Californee, in the rush of ‘52.” Barney seemed to realize that his boss might not be enamored of having two new hires, and he stepped closer to Braxton, his back to the men. “They’re good fellas. It’s time, Boss.”

Braxton rubbed the back of his neck. “I know. I know. We need the help.” It’d been months since he’d heard from his mining partner. Each delay meant Braxton had no cash but the gold shake from the stream.

“You can trust ‘em,” Barney said. “You’re gonna kill yerself tryin’ to work like ten men instead of jest the one.”

Braxton turned to the strangers, accepting that Barney was right, but not liking it. “Where did you two come from again?”

The man with the silver beard answered. “Just lately it were Nevada, the Comstock.”

“I know the place.” It was where he’d met up with Andrew Crimson, and swapped his mother’s emeralds for his stake in their joint mining venture. “I spent a few weeks there. What’s your name?”

“Sorry,” Silver Beard said, dropping his haversack to the ground before wiping his palm on his pants and holding it out to shake. “I’m Jonas Swift, that there’s Pete Johnson.”

Braxton shook Jonas’ calloused hand while nodding at Pete. Holy Mother of God – they’d been mining for decades with nothing to show for their efforts?

“I see what yer thinkin’. Why ain’t we rich?” Jonas chuckled. “Makes a man a mite crazy, bein’ bit by the gold bug. Bad claims, drinkin’, women.” He shrugged.

Old as dirt and admittedly loony, Braxton figured they were harmless enough. Their expertise would be a help if the drill never came. “Welcome to camp.”

Barney set a metal plate of beans, a thick steak and steaming biscuits on a stump that served as a table. Braxton sat on the shorter stump next to it, putting his soaking feet by the fire. He kept them there until the soles started to smoke, then pulled them back an inch.

His toes were beginning to burn, a good sign they were still attached to the rest of his feet. He bit his lip and tackled the wet knots in his boots.

“Should let ‘em dry a bit, Boss.”

Nodding, Braxton resisted the urge to slice his sharp knife through the laces. They hadn’t covered this kind of material at college. How to blast open a mine, how to exist on canned beans and trapped squirrel meat. How to untie wet laces and keep all of your original body parts intact in the cold. Here he sat, an educated man, cramming beans into his mouth with a bent fork. A clean shaven face was a luxury. On the other hand, his thick beard and mustache added a layer of warmth in the damp tunnels.

“Yer boots on fire, Boss.”

Braxton yanked his boot back before the sole was ruined, smacking the small flames with his hands. “Thanks. Uh, Barney, did you happen to stop by the post office to see if there was a letter for me?”

Barney rubbed a knuckle beneath the tip of his nose. “Went by Mr. Jenkins’s office too, but he didn’t have nothin’.” He finished his food and pulled out a flask. “Want a nip?”

“Last I drank with you I saw ghosts,” Braxton reminisced. “And wished I was dead.”

Laughing, Jonas and Pete took seats, pulling out their own poison. Braxton decided to make the most of a full crew. “I’m heading into town.”

“Now? Kinda late,” Barney said, packing his corn cob pipe.

“I’ll be there by dusk. Stay out of the tunnels. There’s plenty of shake to keep you busy until I get back. Barney, you’re in charge.”

The old man grinned, humming a ditty. Without any “fancy schoolin’”, Barney had kept Braxton from getting foot fungus, chilblains, pneumonia, or eaten by a grizzly bear. He owed the man his life. He’d like to make him rich.

Five hours later, Braxton dropped Nellie off at the livery stable and crossed the road to River House. The hotel was run by a money-minded widow who cooked a pot roast to make the angels weep. Heaven. A steaming hot bath, a soft bed, and a real sit-down meal that he didn’t have to eat with a broken fork.

He scratched his hairy chin, feeling good enough to shave before visiting his lawyer. Braxton could use a conversation about something besides sluicing. He and David Jenkins had become friends as well as business associates over the long winter. Dining out, playing cards, and commiserating over the vagaries of fate that had led them to Spokan Falls. He climbed the steps to the hotel.

The siren’s song of unabashed feminine laughter pulled him backward and he lifted his head, his senses alert. He quickly retraced his steps to the street. What looked like the Spokan Falls Stage Coach rolled toward the River House, piled high with trunks and a stiff necked redhead. His whole body tightened with awareness as he focused on the slender woman next to the driver, her face hidden beneath a monstrously wide green and white striped hat and a wilted feather. *Trouble.*

Braxton dropped his knapsack on the front porch, crossing his arms over his chest. The green-bonneted woman tossed something to the kiddies clamoring around the slow moving coach. She laughed again, the joyous chords resounding in his chest. He hadn’t heard anyone so damn happy in a long time. Fascinated, he waited on the lower step of the hotel as the wagon came to a halt.

“Is it the circus?” Braxton looked down at the child who whispered the question in a voice filled with awe.

Spokan Falls had a small, very small, theater that so far hadn’t attracted anyone with skill. “No such luck kiddo. Just a lady with a lot of money.” Instilled manners, and a potent curiosity, made Braxton step forward to offer aid. He came around the front of the coach to her side of the bench as the driver jumped down off the other.

The lady gave direction to the redhead and didn’t see him. Her outrageous bonnet shielded her face, though he caught a glimpse of her chin. Her quality clothing seemed something his sisters might like. Not that they could afford such things now.

He’d bet the mine she’d been born a true lady. With the way she’d laughed, so uninhibited, she probably wasn’t one anymore. If not an actress, perhaps a fallen angel, looking for work in a new town that didn’t know her name.

He cleared his throat and she turned toward him, snaring him in the web of her direct, golden gaze. Her face flushed, the tip of her nose pink despite the broad brim of her hat. He held out his hand, his mouth dry, his gut tight. He blamed his immediate attraction on the lack of feminine company in the past few months.

“I beg your pardon,” she said in husky, cultured tones. “I didn’t see you there.”

It occurred to him that he wore muddy denims and dirty boots, that his fingernails needed cleaned and his face a shave. Not the gentleman he’d once been where by contrast, no matter her future vocation, she was a lady to her satin bow.

He probably frightened her. Braxton pulled his hand back, just as she leaned forward to accept his assistance. Off balance, she stumbled, her boot catching on the uneven wood of the coach’s stair before pitching forward. He heard her mutter something beneath her breath as he cursed, leaping forward to catch her before she hit the dirt road.

“Got you!” He grunted, holding her awkwardly in his arms, his hands at her legs, arms and corseted waist. She squirmed more than a sack full of kittens, and his hand brushed the swell of her soft breast.

“Let go, sir!” She stiffened, proceeding to poke him in the eye with a feather from her bonnet. What started out as kindness turned into a fiasco, and Braxton had his arms full of unhappy female.

“Hold on now,” he ordered briskly. If he could find a place to hold her that wasn’t yards of satin, or barely covered feminine curves, he’d gain his balance instead of reeling like a drunkard. He released his grip just as she gave a strong push against his chest, sending them both tumbling to the ground.

Gracefully, considering the circumstances, she rose to her feet. He did the same, realizing she was quite tall. Her eyes flashed, her cheeks stained rose with obvious embarrassment. His glance strayed to her heaving bosom before he pulled it back to her face. “If you didn’t want to offer assistance, sir, why did you demand my attention? I am fully capable of getting down from a stage myself. Did you want me to look foolish?”

Her earnest questions made Braxton feel like a heel. He blurted the truth. “An accident, ma’am. I didn’t want to ruin your glove.”

The children squealed and some of the crowd laughed. She stared at him, studying him, before blinking once. What had she decided? “I see.” Retying the silk green ribbon beneath her chin, she gave him a wide berth and called up to the woman on top of the trunks. “Mary, please come down. Do you want me to climb up and help you?”

Braxton gritted his teeth. She’d dismissed him. Could he blame her?

The redhead peered down, her eyes wide and uncertain. “Me legs are all tingly, Miss…”

He stepped forward too, but the lady tilted her head to see beyond the brim of her hat. “Your assistance is unnecessary, sir. Please, excuse me.” Braxton was politely elbowed out of the way as the lady walked with determined strides to the rear of the coach.

Braxton took stock of the mystery woman, certain she was anything but a dance hall girl. He knew what curves she hid beneath her gown and now the image of those long legs in a ruffled, white, cancan skirt, possibly dancing at Fred’s Place, was enough to make his mouth water. A man could overlook a stubborn chin with a form like that.

He banked the continued interest from his groin and watched in amazement as she cajoled her servant down from the stack of trunks.

“Come on, Mary. We’ve given the people enough to gawk at. There you go, just step to the left…you’re very brave. Come, now.”

“Yes, Miss.” The redhead finally reached the ground without mishap.

The passengers from inside the coach cheered, and the redhead’s cheeks turned bright before she bobbed a curtsy. The driver unloaded the trunks, and the young man Mrs. Gray hired to do the heavy lifting around the hotel brought the luggage inside. Mary looked torn between following the bags and telling Braxton what she thought of him for putting his hands all over her Miss.

The lady paid the driver, then hooked her arm through her maid’s and climbed the steps to the hotel, never once looking back.

Braxton scratched his beard, stepping out of the way as the driver turned the coach down the street toward the depot. The onlookers dispersed until Braxton was left standing alone in the street, staring at the door to the River House.

What an irritating female. He couldn’t explain the grin that spread across his face, which grew impossibly larger as he followed her up the steps into the same hotel where he kept a room.

Too late for a proper introduction. Mrs. Gray led the figure in green and white up the stairs, to the right wing where the female boarders stayed. He caught a tantalizing glimpse of her puffed bustle bobbing merrily as she climbed, until she turned the corner. Braxton listened as Mrs. Gray explained about meal times, but then the widow’s voice trailed off and he heard no more. The lady’s trunks were already gone, so searching through them for a clue to her identity wasn’t an option.

He walked behind the check-in desk and saw his key dangling on a brass hook. He snagged it, noticing the mystery lady hadn’t had time to sign in. He scrawled his name on the ledger and left a note on the desk for Mrs. Gray to see when she came back down.

Braxton fisted the key to his room. There was no harm in an innocent flirtation, and he’d yet to see the day where he’d purposely miss out on Mrs. Gray’s pot roast, but business first. He had to track down his missing mining partner or risk losing what little he had left in the world.