



Heart of Gold

Women of Faith Fiction

Chapter One

May 1864

Shannon Adair leaned close to the door as the stagecoach slowed, trying to catch her first glimpse of Grand Coeur, wanting it to be more than she had any right to hope it would be. She'd said good-bye to everything and everyone she loved in order to come with her father to the Idaho Territory. She was both scared and excited now that the dirty, bone-jarring, difficult, and sometimes treacherous journey was at an end.

The coach jerked to a stop, and the driver called down, "Grand Coeur, folks."

Shannon glanced toward her father, seated across from her.

The good reverend gave her a weary smile. "We are here at last."

"So it would seem."

The door opened, and the driver offered his hand. "Let me help you down, miss."

"Thank you." Shannon placed her gloved fingers in the palm of his hand. "You are ever so kind."

The driver bent the brim of his dust-covered hat with his free hand, acknowledging her comment.

Once out of the coach, she turned a slow circle, taking in her surroundings. Her stomach plummeted. This was Grand Coeur? Merciful heavens! It was not better than she'd hoped. It was worse than she'd feared.

The street they were on was lined on both sides by unpainted wooden buildings of various shapes and sizes. The boardwalks in front of the buildings were uneven, sometimes nonexistent. And the hillsides that surrounded the valley had been stripped clean of trees, undoubtedly for the wood used to throw up this ugly, sprawling gold-mining town of more than five thousand souls.

“Oh, Father,” she whispered. “Whatever shall we do here?”

“Don’t look so despairing, Shannon.”

She turned to find her father had disembarked from the coach and now stood nearby.

“We knew it would be different from home,” he said. “And we are needed here.”

More than they’d been needed in the war-torn South, where he’d ministered to his flock and she’d been able to help nurse the injured?

As if he’d heard her unspoken question, he said, “I have always tried to answer God’s call, even when I don’t understand it completely. Would you have me do differently now?”

“No, Father.”

The lie tasted bitter on her tongue. She would have him do differently. She would have him decide to go back to Virginia, to recognize that God wanted him to be there to help rebuild when the war was over. When the South no longer had to fight for its existence, the Confederacy would need men like her father. He was a natural leader with a head for governing and a heart for the kingdom of heaven. He was strong in his faith and able to forgive and show others the grace of God.

What on earth made him believe the Lord wanted him in such a place as this?

“Reverend Adair?” a voice called.

Shannon and her father turned in unison to see a rotund man in a black suit hastening toward them.

“Are you Delaney Adair?”

“Yes, sir. I am.”

The man stopped in front of them and thrust out his hand. When her father took it, the man gave it a hearty shake. “We’ve been watching for you on every stage for the past week. Welcome. Welcome. We’re glad you’ve come. I’m Henry Rutherford.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rutherford. May I introduce my daughter, Miss Shannon Adair.”

“How do you do, miss?” Henry bowed in her direction.

She decided a simple smile and nod of her head would need to suffice. If she opened her mouth, she was certain she would say something disparaging about Grand Coeur.

“My wife’s got the parsonage all ready for you. ’Course, it probably isn’t what you’re used to. Kinda small and plain. But we hope you’ll be comfortable there, you and your daughter.”

“I’m sure we will be,” her father replied.

Shannon wasn’t at all sure.

“I’ve got some men with me to help with your luggage.” Henry turned and waved his helpers forward. The three men were a rough-looking bunch, with scruffy beards and weathered faces. Their trousers, held up by suspenders, were well worn, as were the dirt-encrusted boots on their feet. The sleeves of their loose-fitting shirts had been rolled up to their elbows, revealing dark skin on their arms. Miners, she supposed, who spent every hour of daylight panning for gold in the streams and rivers somewhere nearby. At least that’s how she’d been told it was done.

Shannon’s father identified their trunks and one small crate, then he took hold of her arm at the elbow and the two of them followed Henry Rutherford down a narrow side street.

She saw the church first. Built on the hillside, its steeple piercing the blue sky, the house of worship had white clapboard siding, giving it an air of elegance in comparison to the mostly unpainted buildings in the town. There was even a round stained-glass window over the entrance.

Perhaps Grand Coeur was not completely uncivilized if the citizens had taken the time to build such a church.

Her moment of hope crumbled the instant Mr. Rutherford pointed out the parsonage. It was little more than a shack. Crude, cramped, and completely unsuitable.

Oh, Father. You cannot mean for us to live here.

Matthew Dubois opened the door of the Wells, Fargo & Company express office and stepped inside. At the far end of the spacious room, William Washburn looked up from the open ledger on the desk. The instant he recognized Matthew, he grinned.

“Well, I’ll be hanged. Is that you, Matt?”

“It’s me, Bill.”

“You’re not the new agent they sent?”

“I am.”

William rose and came to meet him in the center of the office, giving his hand a hearty shake. “You tellin’ me you’re givin’ up drivin’ for the company?”

“Only temporarily.”

William cocked an eyebrow.

“My sister’s ailing and needs a place to stay—Alice and her son—until she’s back on her feet. They don’t have any family but me. She lost her husband in the first year of the war.”

“Sorry to hear that. Right sorry.”

Matthew acknowledged William’s sympathy with a nod.

“Can’t say Grand Coeur is the best place to bring a woman and young boy, but I reckon you already knew that.”

Matthew nodded a second time. Over the years, he’d seen the ugly underbelly of more than one mining town between San Francisco and the Canadian border. He’d known Grand Coeur would be no better. But this was where his employer had sent him, so this was where he and his sister and nephew would live.

“Alice with you?”

“No. I don’t expect her and the boy until the end of the week.”

“The company told me they wanted a house for the new agent. Couldn’t figure out why the spare room upstairs wouldn’t do, but I guess it’s ’cause of the family.”

The comment needed no response from Matthew.

“Might as well show you the place.” William turned toward the door leading into a back room. “Ray.”

A few moments later, a young clerk appeared in the doorway. “Yessir?”

“Mind things. I’ll be back directly.”

“Yessir.”

“Come on, Matt. I’ll show you where you’ll be living.”

The two men went outside. The Wells, Fargo coach was no longer in sight. Matthew’s replacement driver had already taken it to the station to harness fresh horses for the journey back down to Boise City.

William motioned toward the east. “We’ll go thisaway.”

Matthew fell into step beside him.

“You’re sister and nephew ought to be comfortable. The house is away from the center of the town. Up there on the hillside.” He pointed as they turned a corner. “Bit quieter in the evenings, if you know what I mean.”

He knew. The saloons did great business at night in a place like Grand Coeur, and the center of town could get rowdy. Better to keep his sister—an attractive widow in ill health—away from the eyes of men starved for female attention.

The street they were on carried them up a steep hillside. Up ahead and to his left, he saw a white church complete with steeple. Off to the right were a half dozen two-story homes. Doubtless the residences of the town’s more prosperous citizens. And, surprisingly, it was to one of these houses that William took him.

“Bill, you don’t mean this for us.”

“I do, indeed.” He took a key from his pocket.

“I won’t be able to afford the rent.”

“Yes, you will. The fellow who built it was killed ’fore he could move in. Company got the house, furnishings and all, for next to nothin’. Not sure how or why. Only know they’re rentin’ it to you for a song. Now I know who they sent, I reckon I know why they’re doin’ it. They don’t want to lose you when the time comes for you to start drivin’ again.”

Matthew took pride in the job he did. He was one of the top drivers in the country. Maybe the top driver. If a freight company wanted their stage to get where it was going and get there on time with the cargo safe and secure, Matthew Dubois was their man. He could only hope he wouldn’t be gone from the job so long Wells, Fargo forgot they felt that way about him.

William opened the door and the two men entered the house. It wasn’t unusually large. Nothing like the palatial homes of many of those who’d made their fortunes in gold and silver around the West. But it was more spacious than any place he’d lived before.

The downstairs had a front parlor, a small dining room, and a kitchen with cupboards, a butler’s pantry, and a large stove. Upstairs there were three bedrooms and an honest-to-goodness plunger closet. He’d heard about such things. Just never thought he’d live to see one.

It ought to please Alice.

It would be nice to please his sister. He hadn’t done much of that when they were younger. He’d been too stubborn and selfish back then, too determined to have a life of his own that didn’t include watching after his baby sister.

If their mother was looking down from heaven, she had to be mighty disappointed by the choices he’d made in the years since her death. Maybe looking after Alice and her son, Todd, would make up for some of those poor choices.

Besides, he supposed a few months living in this house and working in the Wells, Fargo office wouldn't be too bad. He wasn't much for being in one place for long. He preferred wide-open spaces to towns with people packed in like cookies in a tin. But Alice would be strong and healthy before long. Then he'd be back on a coach, holding the reins of a team of horses racing along a narrow road, dust flying up behind him in a cloud.

© 2012 Robin Lee Hatcher
— All rights reserved