

# RED GOLD

Sandy Nadeau

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## **RED GOLD**

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## Dedication

I want to thank Jesus, who gave me a desire to share stories long ago and provides more adventures in my life. Without His guidance, this dream of mine would not be as fulfilling. To my daughter Trisha, who helped me so much in the beginning creation of this story, who cheers me on endlessly, and relentlessly. You are my Sunshine. To my loving husband, Ron. For all the years of putting up with my dream and drying the tears. It's official honey! I love you. And my parents, Norb and Dorothy, for always encouraging me to persevere.

A special thanks to Nicola for giving me a chance three different times, then accepting this story. For the wonderful edits from Nicola and Jamie. I learned so much through this process. Thank you both!

May all who travel the back country of Colorado, love it as much as I do.

And Jesus said to him, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father, but by Me."  
(John 14:6)



# 1

The stench of burning brush assaulted her.

*No!* Mandy ran for the porch, grabbed the wand of the triangle suspended from the roof, and clanged the warning. Dread and panic crept up. Her heart raced.

Smoke billowed over the ridge. She knew flames inched towards the dry brush that lay between them and the guest ranch.

"Jon!" Mandy screamed for her husband as she clanged the triangle, and then dashed into the house.

The screen door slammed shut.

"Jon!" She grabbed the phone and ran back outside to the triangle. Visions of losing everything rose in her mind.

Barney, their black and brown Australian Shepherd, stood outside the door flinging himself into the air and barking frantically.

"What's going on?" Jon's thundering steps came from the house.

She dialed 911 and clanged the triangle while waiting for the operator to answer. "Fire!" she yelled to Jon. "There's smoke coming up from over the ridge to the south." Beads of sweat ran down her forehead.

"What's your emergency?" The dispatcher's voice came over the phone.

Mandy stopped clanging. "Fire to the south of High Country Safaris off County Road Five. Hurry!"

Jon sailed past her, not even touching the porch

steps.

Ranch hands ran from the barn and the bunkhouse, some men still pulling on boots.

Mandy pointed to the smoke rising over the ridge.

"I see it, Miss Mandy," Mike hollered. His boots stirred up a cloud of dust as he changed direction. "I'll get the water truck." He ran towards the garage with George, another ranch hand, on his heels.

Mike and George hopped in the passenger seat. They tore up the service road towards the rising smoke.

The others grabbed shovels, picks, and axes.

Mandy threw the phone onto the porch chair and headed to her old Willy's Jeep.

Barney jumped off the porch ahead of her and ran in circles.

She pointed a warning finger at his spot under a tree near the porch. "Go lay down, Barney. You stay! I mean it."

Barney whined, sat back down, but his front paws bounced side to side. He obeyed, but panted heavily and watched after the crew going into the smoke. The dog let out an occasional bark as she left.

"Lord, please, stop this fire... please."

A blaze could take off, especially after such a dry winter and all the dead trees from the beetle infestation. Spring rains had been sparse in the mountains of Colorado, and the sun was hot at their 7,900 foot elevation.

The vehicle bounced off every rock and pothole in the old dirt road, but she didn't care about the jarring her body endured. Her knuckles grew white as she gripped the steering wheel.

Over the ridge, Jon and the hands were flanking

the fire.

A deep chill ran up her spine, and her palms went cold.

Shovels and pick axes flew up and down with rhythmic movement as the men worked to throw dirt onto the crawling flames.

She scanned the potential route of the fire. It wasn't that large, maybe over an acre, but as the wind picked up, it would only get worse. If the fire made it into the trees, there would be no way to stop the flames before they finished off the forest. And their ranch.

Mandy pulled to a stop next to the other vehicles.

Mike had parked the water truck close and was hauling the hose towards the flames.

She got out, found a shovel and ran. "Where do you want me?" She screamed over the motor on the water truck. Smoke drifted into her nostrils. Her eyes watered. The acrid smell caused her nose to scrunch up.

"Right flank," Jon yelled back.

Mandy went to the end of the line and began to shovel away pine needles and other debris to get to the dirt to throw on the flames.

The fire had crawled its way through the dry winter remains at a steady rate. They had to get a line cut around the front.

Mike sprayed water as a couple guys dug into the earth, revealing more embers, trying to get a handle on the battle.

"How could this have started?" Mandy's words huffed out with shortened breaths.

Sirens blared in the distance. Minutes later the first of the fire department's grass-fire trucks made their way to the scene. Three men jumped out, grabbed their

portable water tanks, and started spraying the edges of the fire. Smoke thickened and grew whiter as the water collided with the flames.

Mandy backed away as firefighters with two more vehicles arrived, her muscles screaming from the sudden exertion and fear.

The crew got the fire surrounded and continued to work the hot spots until they were sure it would finish dying out.

All the ranch hands who manned the shovels and picks took a step back, leaning heavily against their tools and gasping in the smoke-filled air.

Blackened earth smoldered below the tall ponderosa pines.

Mandy joined Jon as he walked over to Chief Radner.

“Glad you got here so fast, Pete,” Jon said.

“Good thing you guys got after it so quickly. It’s real lucky this didn’t take off any further than it did. We’ll take care of the mop up. I’ll post a couple of the guys to watch for any hot spots for a couple of hours. We can’t trust anything with as dry as we’ve been.”

“It’s not been a good spring, that’s for sure. Thanks, Pete.” Jon wiped his forearm across his forehead.

“That was close.” Mandy looked at her watch. “Jon, oh no...we’re going to be late for the meeting with the county.”

He checked his own watch. “We’ve got to go.” He thanked the crew with a wave as he and Mandy ran for the vehicle.

They would still have to stop at the house for his briefcase. They had to have the paperwork.

Her heart rate ramped up in the panic of missing



this vital appointment. Sweat ran down her spine. "We're never going to make it in time, Jon, and look at us. We're a mess. Shonee will get the upper hand if we miss this meeting. He'll say anything without us there."

"Let's not assume the worst about him. We just have to get there and explain what happened." His reassurance did nothing for her.

They raced on the back roads into town.

Mandy grabbed the cleansing wipes in the glove box and tended to the smudges they both wore on their faces, hands, and arms. If she didn't do something, her anxiety would get the best of her. "Lord, get us there in time, please." Her foot tapped out the words and her angst.

They arrived at the county courthouse.

Twelve minutes after ten. "Oh, Jon, we're so late." She slammed the door.

Jon grabbed her hand, and they ran up the granite steps of the courthouse. They rushed down the hall and rounded the corner only to bump into Mr. Shonee.

"Well, look who finally showed up." Mr. Shonee's face held a gruff but satisfied sneer. The short, white-haired man leaned against his cane. "You can quit yer runnin'. I let the court know that you obviously don't trouble yourselves enough to follow up on the cares and concerns of your neighbors. Your project is dead. You won't be building up near the mine, and I won't have to listen to it or watch all those rotten brats play near my property. You might as well sell that side back to me." He stared at them.

"There was a fire. You should be glad we stopped it. If we hadn't seen it, it could have spread to your property." Mandy panted out the words. She bent

over, placing her hands on her knees to catch her breath.

“A fire. That’s a handy excuse.” Mr. Shonee growled, and then hobbled towards the door dependent on his cane.

Mandy straightened and turned.

Jon grabbed her arm to prevent her from going after the man. “Don’t say anything that will make this worse than it is. Let’s go see if we can talk to the judge.”

Mandy growled under her breath and followed her husband. There were some very un-Christian things she wanted to say.

They found the right office and requested a moment of the judge’s time from the receptionist seated at a desk.

“I’m sorry Mr. and Mrs. Phillips. Judge Markum is in court now.”

“We had a fire on the property. There was no way to make it in time. Surely we can have a minute to talk to him,” Mandy blurted.

“The judge has ordered a stop on your project. I’m really sorry. He needed to hear your side of this for you to continue.”

Jon’s jaw tightened as he stared at the woman. “The fire was circumstances beyond our control. We need to see him.”

“I’ll let him know what happened, but we will have to call you and set up another time. Our schedule is tight, so it may take a few weeks before we have an opening. For now, you just have to keep your project on hold. I’m very sorry.”

“But...” Mandy knew it wouldn’t do any good to discuss it with the woman.

Jon thanked the receptionist and put his arm around his wife as they turned to leave.

Mandy squeezed her now aching forehead.

"Let's get back to the ranch." Jon turned to the woman. "Please let us know as soon as possible when we can meet with Judge Markum."

"Of all the worst timing. Why a fire this morning...why a fire at all?" She slapped at the soot and dust on her jeans as if she could erase the fire scene.

"Let's just be thankful we caught it before it did any real damage. We'll just have to deal with this another time. We've got to get ready for the guests coming in on Sunday afternoon."

Fifteen minutes later, they turned into the driveway of High Country Safaris.

Chief Radner sat in his truck with the door open scratching Barney's ears.

Barney's whole backside wiggled as he waited for them. The dog's antics barely brought a smile to Mandy's lips.

"Surprised you're still here Pete. Is everything all right up there?" Jon asked.

Barney circled them and sat, leaning against Mandy's leg.

The chief showed little emotion. "Jon, Mandy...looks like the fire was deliberate. We definitely found traces of an accelerant and tracks in the dirt. We are listing this as suspicious while we investigate further."

"Deliberate? Well, we can sure guess who's behind that. Shonee made sure we couldn't show up this morning."

"Mandy, let's not rush into accusations." Jon put

his arm around her.

She pulled away, arms flailing, which caused Barney to lose his footing. "Jon, you know as well as I that Shonee would do anything to make life miserable for us. He always has and always will." Mandy paced in a tight pattern slapping her hand against her thigh

"I thought about him, too," Chief Radner said. "I know he tends to be a pain for you guys. We'll be talking to him. Don't worry about that. For now, at least the fire is out. We'll take care of the rest." Pete shook hands with Jon, gave Mandy a hug, got in his truck and drove away.

"Well." Jon blew out a breath. "Not much we can do now. We might as well put our energy into getting ready for the guests. How many do we have coming in this week?"

"We have six cabins reserved. I'll go see if the cleaning crew is here. I have to get busy right now or I'll lose it."

"I'll check on the cars and make sure the tune-ups have been done." Jon turned and headed to the lined up four-wheel drive vehicles.

"Jon?"

"Yeah, hon?"

"Will this work out? We've had such exciting plans this winter. I really wanted to get the town site built this summer for the kids." She leaned against the porch post and kicked at the gravel of the parking area.

Jon walked back and pulled her into his arms. "We just have to be patient, Mandy. We have to trust Him and wait for His timing. I'm disappointed too, but I believe our plans will happen. In His time. I still believe the ideas came from up above, so we'll be faithful. Our guests will get to enjoy our plan.

Eventually.”

“You know it’s not my strong suit. Waiting, and the dreaded ‘P’ word. I’m not a patient woman.”

“You’re not?” Jon hugged her a moment longer. He stepped back, put his hand on her cheek. “I love you, Mandy.”

“I love you, too.”

## 2

Mandy paused at the door of the cafeteria as Allie, the head of housekeeping for High Country Safaris, gave instructions to the teens they'd hired from church for the season.

Mandy feigned a cheery face as she entered. "Hi everyone. How are you all?"

A collective "Hi, Miss Mandy," resounded. About ten teens were on staff this summer. Many of them were able to get credit at school for starting a job early. It always turned out to be a blessing for everyone.

Mandy loved building relationships with these teenagers. She missed when her kids were that age, so it helped to have the teens every summer. Her and Jon's own grown children attended college, their daughter in California, their son in Chicago. She didn't like being so far away from them, but she knew God wanted them there, and now she could fill her life with even more young people.

Allie looked back at the teens. "OK, you've got your assignments. Get to work."

Chairs scraped against the floor. The animated, collective voices soon over-powered all other noise.

Allie pulled out a chair and pointed for Mandy to sit. "I talked to Pete when I got in this morning. Is everything all right? You don't look good."

"Thanks a bunch."

"You know what I mean. Sit, spill it."

Mandy plopped into the chair, leaned her elbow

on the table, and rested her chin in the palm of her hand. "The fire made us late for the meeting with the county. Shonee sabotaged us with the judge. We missed him by minutes before he headed into court. His secretary has to set up a new appointment, but since we were late, I don't imagine they'll be in too much of a hurry. I'm so frustrated. Did Pete tell you he found signs of an accelerant? Someone was up there. Someone set it. Shonee has to be involved. He's fought all our efforts to improve the ranch. There's no other person who would want to hurt us. I don't know why that man has to cause us so many problems." She slammed her fist on the table. "I know it isn't very Christian of me, but I can't stand him. I wish he'd move away."

"Calm down. I know. It's hard to be gracious to someone who causes endless trouble and heartache. We just have to keep doing what we do. If the Lord wants the ranch to have the old west mini-town site, it will happen. We have a mission here to provide a great adventure to our guests and minister the love of God to them as well. Come on. Let's help Sue with the registrations and finish planning the trips. You'll feel better being busy."

"You sound like Jon. But you're right. I need to get to work and forget about what happened this morning. I can't do anything about it right now, anyway." Mandy shook her head at her own attitude towards the man. A heavy sigh escaped as she asked for forgiveness in her heart.

The women headed to the office located in the corner of the building. The knotty pine paneling offered warmth to the room. Sunlight poured through the large window that faced south where Sue sat at her

desk already hard at work. She had run the office for two years now, freeing Mandy up to do other things.

"Hey, Sue. We thought we'd give you a hand on guest preps."

"Hi, ladies. Great. I can always use the help. I heard about the trouble this morning."

"We missed the meeting with the judge because of the fire."

"Oh, no. Interesting it would happen when you had an appointment concerning the area. Makes you wonder. I'm just going over the registrations. We still need to match the Jeeps to the type of outing the guests signed up for."

Since one side of their property backed up to the National Forest, the four-wheeling trails were endless. With it being springtime, the high country would have a lot of waterfalls. Not as dramatic as when it followed a heavy winter, but none the less beautiful. The wildflowers would just be starting to bloom.

"I'll set up the route options for those taking the Jeeps out on their own. Looks like only a few will be taking the guided tours."

Allie took note of the cabins reserved for the week so she could keep fresh linens available.

Sue's eyebrows went up. "Only two groups requested the ghost town routes this week. I guess people are still getting over cabin fever and want to see the open spaces instead of focusing on the hidden treasures in the back country."

"I can't blame them. I'm ready for some vista views myself. It may have been a drier winter this year, but it lasted too long." Mandy answered. "I miss it when Jon and I can't get into the back country and explore."



"OK, so we have two groups for ghost towns." Allie said. "Hand me the history booklets for those locations. Do we have the welcome packets ready?"

Sue pointed. "The bags are over on the shelf. The kids did a good job."

Allie turned towards the shelf. "I checked the storeroom earlier. We do need to order more energy bars soon. But we have enough for another month of guests."

"Oh Mandy, Tommy was in earlier. One of the Jeeps was having some kind of problem. I sent Jon over to talk to him about it."

"I'm heading over there in a bit. Thanks."



After lunch, Mandy went to the garages to check in with Jon. She would also check on the horses. There were only two vehicles left in the six bay garage. Tommy's legs stuck out from under one of them.

Jon squatted next to him with a wrench in his hand.

Mandy put her hands on Jon's shoulders giving him a little neck rub. He leaned into her.

"How's it going, Tommy?" Mandy shouted over the blaring Country-Western tune on the radio and the clanking of wrenches.

"Hey, Miss Mandy." Tommy rolled out from under the vehicle sitting up as his head cleared the undercarriage. He grabbed the rag stuffed in his pocket and wiped his hands. "It's goin' good. Found a leak in one of the lines. Don't quite get that. There's never leaks in my vehicles. Runnin' good now, but I'm not braggin'." He flashed his toothy grin.

Mandy chuckled.

Jon winked at her.

Tommy's pride in vehicle care ranked higher than any of the mechanics.

"Good job, Tommy. Keep it up. If you two haven't eaten, you better head in there soon or they'll put the food away." She left to walk around the property and check on the appearance of the grounds. The wranglers had brought the horses in from the pasture last week. They were groomed and ready to ride.

Barney fell into step next to her.

"Hey, buddy. You staying out of trouble?" She scratched his ears and stared around. The property was cleaned of all the winter debris. Her gaze moved up in the direction of the fire. She stared at what she could not see.

The afternoon sun warmed everything it touched. She closed her eyes and turned her face upward to take in a good dose of vitamin D.

Barney leaned against her leg, panting.

After a couple of minutes, long, strong arms enveloped her.

She leaned her head back until it rested on Jon's shoulder, "Mmm. This is what I needed. Isn't it wonderful out today?"

"How do I never surprise you?" he whispered in her ear.

"Because you belong here. Your arms are supposed to be around me. At all times."

"I'll have a hard time getting my work done, then."

"Get someone else to do it."

Jon chuckled. "Yeah, right. I do need to talk to you. Can we go sit?"

Mandy turned and looked into his eyes. "I know that look. Do I want to know?"

"Just an update on the fire. I sent Nate and Mike back up to look around. There's something else, too."

"Well, let's go to the porch swing and talk. Want some lemonade?"

"Definitely."

Mandy went in and filled a couple glasses with the fresh lemonade she'd made last night. She backed out the squeaking screen door, and let it shut with a bang.

Jon reached out for the glass and smiled.

"What are you grinning about?"

"I just like lookin' at you."

Mandy sat next to him and slapped his leg. "Oh stop. Now what did Nate tell you?"

"I had them look around the area for any other clues. You know, the fire almost got up to the level area where we want to build the play town outside the mine entrance. If it had caught enough wind, it would have devastated the area. As it is, we'll have to do a lot of grooming to hide the damage. Some more plantings. I think an aspen grove would look good in there. Anyway, Nate realized something while up there."

"What?"

Jon took her hand. "There were footprints around the area. Even up by the mine opening. It looks like the tracks took off fast. Do you know if any of the staff had any reason to be up there?"

"Not that I know of. We don't allow anyone up there right now, anyway. For one thing, we're all too busy to be near the mine, but most important, it isn't safe until we can get someone in there to shore up the walls. Is the entrance still closed off?"

"It is, but not as well as it could be. We might have

to get a solid door welded against the opening instead of the fencing we have in place. It's too easy to slip past there if someone wanted to. I'll take some of the guys up there and check around some more. I want to look inside the cave just to be sure. "

"OK, but be careful. Until we get the inspectors in there, the mine will always make me nervous. I can't wait until we get it all taken care of. Was there something else?"

"Uh...yeah. Tommy didn't tell you exactly what he found." Jon looked off towards the garage.

Mandy set her glass on the side table. "Jon, what's going on?"

"There wasn't just a leak. Once Tommy got under there, the brake line had a clean cut in it. Not something that could just happen."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't know. It just bothers me. You know how well he takes care of things. It doesn't make sense."

"I don't understand what's going on around here."

### 3

"I'm so glad our church has an early service so none of us have to miss it." Mandy and Jon led the caravan of vehicles back to the ranch.

Excitement filled the air for the startup of the summer activities.

She smiled as she looked out the window at the perfect Colorado day of sunshine, blue skies, and a very comfortable seventy degrees.

After a quick lunch, everyone went into "last-minute-check" mode of their particular area. The cars started to arrive.

Jon and Mandy stood on the porch waiting for the guests.

"Ready to welcome everyone?" Jon smiled.

"Can't wait." Mandy grinned right back.

Barney sat at their feet.

The vehicle pulled up to the office. Three young boys bounded out of the car with their cowboy hats and sunglasses already in place. The youngest ran towards the corral screaming all the way. The other two boys ran after him.

Barney joined in the run to the corrals.

"Boys, don't go far," the man yelled in their direction.

"Welcome to High Country Safaris." Jon walked towards the man extending his hand.

"Come on in," Mandy added with a wave. "Don't worry about the boys. They'll be fine. Our wrangler is