

# Claiming Coral

*The Red Petticoat Saloon*

By

Maddie Taylor

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# Chapter One

Holding her breath, what little she had left, she strained to hear. What she thought had been footsteps in the hallway, was mistakenly the pounding of her heart in her ears. Near panic, she called out again.

“Help!”

Intended as a deafening cry that would resonate and carry great distances, bringing all manner of assistance, it came out as a weak, wheezing whimper that barely reached the door. That was all the breath she could muster, however. Still, no one came.

Feeling like weeping, or worse, giving up, Carissa focused all of her waning energy on one last attempt at trying to shove aside the immense weight crushing her chest. Although it was futile, she attempted to wiggle enough to slip out from under the bulky mass pinning her to the soft mattress, but he was nearly twice her size and wouldn't shift or move an inch.

How long had it been? A quarter hour? Perhaps more? It didn't really matter, for she felt sure if someone didn't come to help her soon, when they eventually did, she'd be dead.

Sucking in as much breath as she could, she tried yet again. “Help me, please!” Still, her call was feeble and gasping.

A knock sounded at the door, at long last, and she sent up a silent prayer of thanks.

“Hello? It's the chambermaid, ma'am. May I be of help?” a soft feminine voice called.

Her hopes were instantly dashed. One lone woman wouldn't be enough. She could go for help, though. With no other options, she'd have to make the most of it.

“I'm here. Please, help me. I'm stuck!” Though reedy thin, her voice was loud enough because the next instant the door creaked open.

“Oh, excuse me,” came the embarrassed response.

“No! Don't go. I'm trapped under here.”

“You mean...” There was a quiver of disbelief in her voice, clearly shocked at what she'd walked in on. “But...”

“I know,” Carissa replied with a gulp. “Please, get help. I can't breathe.”

She couldn't see the maid, although she could picture her in vivid detail. Hair tucked up under a mob cap, starched white apron tied precisely at her waist in front, her flushed face draining of color as she realized what she thought she'd interrupted wasn't an intimate scene as one would expect in a bedroom in the Grand Hotel, but was actually something quite morbid and horrifying. Then, Carissa imagined her mouth rounding as she screamed.

As if scripted, a shrill, ear-piercing shriek rent the air, followed by thuds as the maid's feet struck the carpet runner in rapid retreat down the corridor. At first she wanted to cry in disappointment, then she heaved a shallow sigh of relief, knowing the alarm raised by the frantic woman would bring help. At last, the most horrendous event in her life was drawing near an end.

Waiting patiently—for what else could she do—Carissa silently tallied the seconds that passed until aid came. Alerted by more footsteps and several male voices in the hall, she twisted her head on the pillow and tried to see the door. The muffled noises started softly, growing louder and in what sounded to be sufficient number—much to her relief—as they came closer. A few moments later, there were many voices in her room.

Appalled indrawn breaths and a few “good God's!” preceded a male stating baldly, “Well, if you gotta go, what better way than to die in the saddle.”

“Jerome!” A second man reprimanded the first. Still another chuckled low, and quite inappropriately considering her predicament.

“Please... I'm trapped. And, I don't have much air left,” Carissa gasped.

There was a brief pause, then came a shuffle of footsteps, and a few argued words on how to approach the dilemma. A wonderful rush of cool air washed over her bare skin the next second as the group of faceless, nameless, countless men, heaved as one and rolled poor George—husband number three, her groom of only eight hours, who in the throes of his passion had succumbed not to that climax, but to death in the final thrust—off from on top of her.

As his heavy form lurched stiffly, then sank into the mattress beside her, she was left entirely exposed except for the nightgown bunched up beneath her arms. Carissa shot upright, her hand at her throat, while she struggled to fill her lungs. Heedless of her nudity before the group of strangers in that moment, her focus was more on gulping in life-sustaining air and expanding her chest fully for the first time in at least an hour.

Someone, perhaps the maid, or a kind man who took pity on her dilemma, tossed a blanket over her and covered her shame.

\* \* \*

Huddled in embarrassment behind the dressing screen in the corner a short while later, Carissa listened to the comings and goings in the room. Hotel management had arrived while she was climbing from the bed, not daring to look at George's lifeless body, while she pulled down her gown with quivering hands. When covered, she'd looked up and flushed crimson at the horrified and knowing looks the hotel staff were giving her. Though her modesty was long since compromised, she bolted for the protection of the dressing screen, where she had remained until now. And although they couldn't possibly see her through the four solid tapestried panels or around the tall, gilded frame, she covered her face with shaking hands at their whispered comments.

"This is dead husband number three. I read it in the society page."

"Yeah, and all died under suspicious circumstances."

"Don't know what's suspicious about this. He's forty years her senior, if he's a day. His old ticker surely couldn't take the excitement."

"She's the black widow," a woman breathed.

"What's that, Sally?"

"I read her first husband died of food poisoning, then Mr. Barrett, he was the second unfortunate spouse. You know him, Joe, he managed the bank down the street."

"What of him? Get on with it, girl."

"No need to get testy," Sally bit back. "D'you wanna hear or not?"

"Sorry," the one sounding like Joe mumbled.

She huffed impatiently, before going on. "Like I was sayin', Mr. Barrett, he passed in a freak fall down the stairs. Snapped his neck like a twig."

"Are you suggesting she might have killed him? Pushed him perhaps?" another man asked.

"I'm not suggestin' nothin'. I'm just tellin' you what the paper said."

There was a pause, then one of the men added, "Good thing after I sent word to her family, I also summoned the police."

Carissa was ready to step around the screen and ask if they had all lost their marbles, or if they thought she was deaf and couldn't hear their spiteful gossip, when a familiar voice entered the mix.

“Where is my daughter? Carissa Anne?”

Evan Fulwiler’s booming voice instantly stilled the wagging tongues as silence fell over the room.

“I’m here, Papa,” she whispered. Not moving, she listened to the thud of footsteps on the thick, rug covered floor as her father came to her, appearing at the end of the screen.

“Come along, daughter,” he said with a heavy sigh, holding out his arm for her. Although she was angry with him for putting her in this position to start with, she rushed to him and flung herself in his arms, wailing miserably. “Now, now.” Not one for displays of affection, he thumped her on the back once or twice, then murmured gruffly, “Hold the waterworks until we get in the carriage.”

He then guided her out from behind the barrier and across the room. Carissa didn’t look at the others, assuming nasty looks would match their hurtful words. She just wanted to go home and not see any of them ever again. Papa paused to speak to one of them, however, thwarting her quick escape plan.

“Send her belongings to my address tomorrow, good fellow,” he ordered one of the hotel staff as he passed him his card. “I’ll have my secretary see to the arrangements for the deceased.”

“The police have been called, sir. They’ll want to speak to the widow.”

“Good God, man? Whatever for?”

“Um, well... he died, sir.”

“Look at him. At his age, he had one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel. Having a young bride in his bed was the nudge that took him out. Nothing nefarious here.” He turned with a red faced Carissa toward the door.

“What should I tell them?”

“That he died happy? How the hell should I know? If they insist on asking ridiculous questions, they may come by my house in the morning after breakfast.” He said this over his shoulder as he escorted Carissa out the door. As he did, he looked down at her. “Good grief, you’re not dressed.” He shrugged off his day coat. “Put this on. It will save us time.”

“I feel sick,” she murmured.

“Well, for Christ’s sake, don’t puke. The gossip is already going to be terrible!”

As he hustled her down the stairs, she averted her eyes from the curious stares that came her way. When she had climbed into the carriage and her father followed her in, she slumped

against the cushions, burying her face in her hands as she fought off both nausea and a throbbing headache.

She was done. Thoroughly distraught, she'd already made the decision and was determined to never go through this again.

Opposing all three of the marriages Papa had negotiated, in the end, when he insisted vehemently, and quite loudly, like the obedient daughter she'd always been, she complied. Going willingly to the altar, or the justice of the peace in her and George's case. And perhaps that was the crux of the problem.

Her father was a force to be reckoned with. And, he wasn't only bluster. She'd learned that by watching his ruthless business dealings, where lesser men trembled in their boots under his intimidation. And, from being on the business end of a paddle a time or two herself in her youth. That had shown her the error in trying to defy or argue with him. He wasn't a cruel man, just distant and pragmatic, especially where his only child was concerned. It hadn't always been that way. Before her mama passed, he'd smiled often, laughed fully, and Carissa knew with all her heart that he loved them both. He'd changed after that, lost in grief and anger at first, then becoming remote emotionally, turning his focus on business and building his wealth, both of which he could control.

Yes, he continued to care for his daughter, but nothing was the same again.

As far as Carissa, she'd withdrawn. Always a shy girl, she'd become more so, retreating into fantasies in her head, and those between the covers of her books. Often, her papa told her to get her head out of the clouds and pay attention. For a young girl dealing with loss, however, the dream-like world she created was so much better than her reality. In her mind, her mama was still with her and her papa, happy and loving. She grew up to be the bride of a handsome young man who loved her dearly. He provided for her and the babies they would have, and put her and their family ahead of everything, especially money and business. But after three dead husbands, she'd come to the realization that girlish fantasies were only good for books and pipe dreams.

It was times like these she missed her mama dearly. She wouldn't have let her give up on her dreams, ever. And she would have interceded before letting her papa marry her off to old men. Tears tightened her throat and she couldn't contain a shuddering sob.

"Dry your eyes, girl," he droned, deep and low, hating tears, always. "Papa will take care of everything, again."

That's what she was afraid of. His way of taking care of her was marrying her off to one of his friends, all like him, wealthy, successful, older men.

At forty-two, her first husband, Jeffrey Ward, hadn't been doddering, though twenty years her senior was significant. Although not a love match, he'd been kind, and surprisingly gentle when he'd taken her virginity on their wedding night. In the six months that followed, she settled into their amenable marriage convincing herself she could be content. In reality, she'd given up on her dreams of being swept away by the love of her life. In fact, she'd put away her silly romance novels that she'd voraciously gobbled up as a single young woman. Instead, she focused on making the best of her life with Jeffrey. And, she grew fond of him, so when he'd died abruptly during supper one night, she'd been greatly distressed. A reaction to the shellfish she'd served, the doctor surmised. That was hardly her fault.

Her second husband, Randolph Fischer, was certainly too old for her at the age of fifty-seven. And like Jeffrey, he was a longtime business associate of Papa's and had begged for her hand. Her father had agreed on her behalf, saying that a widow who was less than fashionable—referring to her red hair and freckles, and her rather rounded figure—couldn't hope for a better offer. She suspected it was also to accomplish a profitable merger of their two businesses, as well as two families that had sweetened the pot for them both. Carissa had once again gone reluctantly to the altar, having nothing in common with her groom, a man old enough to be her father.

He was kind to her, but there was no romantic spark like she'd read about in her books. And what happened in the bedroom was uncomfortable. After three months, he tripped on a loose rug in the upstairs hall at the top of the stairs, and tumbled to his death.

When George had come along, not a year later, she had balked. At sixty-two, thirty-three years her senior, he was much too old. Again, her father had pushed her objections aside, deciding for her.

"You're not getting any younger, gal," he had told her, "and we need an heir for Fulwiler Shipping. George has nine children and is still active and robust. Besides, he'll leave you set for life in a few years and you can travel as you're always harping about."

That said, she'd found herself once again married to an old man. On the morning of her wedding day, a bride, only to become a widow later that night.

"Never again," she groaned.

“Of course not,” he harrumphed. “What are the odds another husband will die mid-rut?”

“Papa!” She protested both his coarseness and his insensitivity, but as usual, he ignored her.

“I’d have thought old George made of sterner stuff,” he mused aloud. “He rode daily, played golf, and was an active sort of chap. Though he did have a liking for his food. I’m surprised he didn’t crush you.”

“He very nearly did. If that maid hadn’t come along and brought those men—” She dropped her head back as she remembered the four stout men who had freed her had also seen her naked. Among a myriad of other emotions was a deep sense of shame. As sure as the sun would rise in the east the next morning, she was certain the tale of her humiliation would run rampant through town. “There is no other choice for me except to move out of town, Papa. I’m ruined.”

“How’s that?” he quipped.

“All those men saw me bare. And the maid called me ‘the black widow.’ ”

“Pshaw,” he scoffed. “That will blow over. Besides, I have good news. Harvey is due back in town at weeks’ end.”

His business partner and best friend for three decades, Harvey Dixon had left New York to open a port office in Charleston over a year ago. She was fond of him, as he was of her, always friendly and kind, and generous, bringing her presents from his travels as well as on birthdays, Christmas, and special occasions. He was like an uncle to her, and she looked forward to seeing him after being away so long, but she didn’t see how his return was good news or important at a time like this. She remained quiet, turning her head to stare out the window into the darkness, seeing nothing.

“His timing is piss poor. Had I known he was going to be back, I would have waited and wed him to you instead of George Baxter.”

That caught her attention and her head whipped around. “Pardon me?”

“When he heard you’d wed again, he confessed his disappointment, hoping to claim you for himself when he returned. I didn’t know he had such tender feelings for you, but in his last letter...”

“You’re not serious,” she breathed, her mouth dropping open. “Uncle Harvey is family.”

“No blood relation, you know that.”

“Still, it’s... well, it borders on incestuous.” She shuddered at the thought, nausea welling up again. “No! I’m done with old men.”

“Harvey isn’t old. He’s my age.”

She stared at him for a moment, seeing his silvered hair and the deep grooves that age and long hours on the docks had carved in his face. He obviously had a different definition of the term than she did. “He’s old enough to be my father, Papa. Two years older than you, in fact.” Stating the obvious made no impression because he simply shrugged. “No. It’s plain I’m not intended to wed. I’m done with marriage, and care not a whit that I live out my days as a spinster.”

Papa leaned in, his finger extending and wagging in her face. “Now see here, missy. You live under my roof and will do as I say. I need a grandson to carry on both my name and my business. And I’m tired of waiting. You’ll do your duty, enough said.”

“How you can expect a grandson out of these bad arrangements, I don’t know. You keep marrying me off to old men.”

“It isn’t like we had a line of young bucks begging for your hand. Don’t you think I would have wed you to a strapping, virile young man if one had offered?”

“What?” she squeaked.

“It’s my fault, letting you get educated. With your head stuck in books all day, and no woman to teach you the finer points of feminine refinement, you’ve scared off all the eligible society men. And then there’s your appearance.” He threw out his hand, flipping it up toward her head. “Cursed with my flaming hair and,” his eyes scanned down her body, frowning at what he saw before he finished, “my generous shape. Nothing like your mother’s delicate beauty. As it were, beggars can’t be choosers, and some of my friends liked the idea of a plump, young bride.”

Tears stung the backs of her eyes at his words, however true they might be. “Gastineau, he offered.”

“That mealy-mouthed fancy-pants artist? I paid him to leave you be.”

Wordlessly, she stared at him, reeling from the shock of his revelation as her heart twisted in pain. Her one true love, or so she’d believed at the time. She’d met the young French painter, Gastineau Dumont, at a street fair she’d attended. As she stood at his booth admiring both his looks and his work, she noticed a sign that he offered painting lessons. She’d signed up immediately, more to be close to him than a great desire to paint. After several weeks, they’d

fallen in love, but shortly after he'd told her of his plans to ask her father for her hand, he'd vanished.

"Oh. My. God," she whispered, wrapping her arms around her waist as the truth cut into her like a knife. All she received from him was a hasty note that a family emergency took him back to Paris. After waiting and wondering for months, she'd been ready to follow, had her ticket bought and was packed when word of his death arrived. That had been six long years ago. "He didn't die, did he?"

"No, he eagerly took my money and hightailed his popinjay fancy ass back to Paris."

She couldn't look at him and turned to stare unseeing out the window. A tear rolled down her cheek. She thought Gastineau had loved her, as she had him. She'd grieved for him, crying inconsolably for weeks. Evidently he had more of a fondness for her papa's wealth than for her. At least he wasn't dead, or she might have been convinced the moniker of "black widow" was well deserved.

"Not to worry about Baxter, though. After a respectable mourning period, you and Harvey can marry quietly. The tongues will flap for a while, then after a few years pass and a few babies fill your nursery, none will recall the circumstances."

His voice dimmed in her consciousness as the realization of what had happened gripped her chest. Not only George dying on top of her, but Gastineau taking hush-money from her father, when she believed his words of love, then no one else coming up to scratch, and her papa—practical businessman that he was—taking care of the problem with arranged marriages to a parade of old men.

It wasn't surprising, not really. Her papa was old-fashioned, looking down his nose at outspoken women, suffrage movements and widows who managed their own affairs. He was always outspoken about how women needed a man to take care of them and that their place was in the home, raising the children. Her mother had been that way; his delicate, fragile Annalise. He compared her disposition to her mama's often although that's where the similarities ended. She hadn't minded before, finding comfort in that she was somehow like the mama she loved dearly and only remembered vaguely.

But now, three times a widow, she was beginning to resent his highhanded ways. Tired of having her decisions made for her, like Papa always did, mostly without her input, stomping on her toes and doing it his way, despite her objections when she tried to have her say. Rarely had

he agreed with what he called her womanish sensibilities. Then there was his constant and relentless pursuit of a male heir, never once considering that in this day, a woman might have an opinion and want to choose her own husband. But he thought her a ninny-headed piece of muslin, why would he ever consider it? Made for the kitchen and the bedroom, and providing a man with the offspring he demanded. That's what women were to her papa, and to society, as he saw it.

As he droned on and on about his plans for her and Harvey, she'd finally heard enough.

"I won't marry him, Papa. I'm through. Three dead husbands are enough. I'm done."

"Nonsense. You're almost thirty. You only have a few childbearing years left. Harvey is still young—"

She snorted, which earned her a sharp glance, before he went on. "He's still very popular among the widows. And he's virile, by his accounting, though always too busy with business to settle down. Now he too wants a child. Fulwiler and Dixon Shipping can't fizzle out after we're gone. It needs to carry on through our sons, our heirs."

He didn't know how much his words hurt her. Through two wives, after her mama passed, he'd remained childless except for her. Evan Fulwiler had tried desperately to sire a son, yet it appeared it wasn't meant to be. That didn't mean he stopped trying. His second wife had died while in childbirth, as had the baby, another daughter. The other marriage had ended after ten years in a very public divorce when her father had severed the union, accusing the poor woman of being barren. Publicly humiliated, Ruth had slunk out of the city never to be heard from again. And that left her papa with no wife and stuck with a daughter who he thought was empty-headed, and a grave disappointment for not having the correct sex organs. That was when he'd gotten the idea to use her womb to procure his precious heir.

But no more. Let him marry again and procreate on his own. Tired of old men, humiliated as one after the other died and people pointed fingers, black widow and a money-grubbing opportunist some of the nicer things they called her. No, she had a plan, one that left her papa, New York City and its snobby society, essentially her whole life, far behind.