

Jade's Dragon

The Red Petticoat Saloon

By

Maren Smith

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Prologue

She always wondered, had Madame Jewel known the kind of trouble that followed her, would she still have taken Chin in the night Nettie found her huddled in the back kitchen doorway, soaked to the skin in the cold monsoon-like rain of winter and shaking as she clung to her bundle of belongings.

Thin notes piped from reed flutes were Chin's only accompaniment as she turned and twirled, ten feet of pink ribbon flying in the air all around her as she danced for an audience enraptured by the sight of her in the elaborate silk gown of her ancestors—pale blue and pink fabric trimmed in pearl white, with sleeves every bit as long as the rippling ribbons she danced with and every inch embroidered with the depictions of seasonal flowers, swooping long-tailed birds and butterflies. It was standing room only tonight, as so often it was when Chin danced, but she wasn't thinking about the audience. Comprised mostly of rough and dirty miners, a few cowpokes, and at least three upstanding citizens of Culpepper Cove—every one of them watched her movements with the same hungering attentiveness of half-starved lions and yet, she knew, not one would spare so much as a kind word for her, Madame Jewel or any of the other gems once Sunday rolled around.

So no, Chin didn't think about the audience. Instead, she let the music of her homeland move her and she thought back to that first night when the cook, Nettie, had flung open the back kitchen door to cast out a pot of dirty water only to have Chin tumble in, literally, at her feet.

Although months beyond the anniversary of her twentieth birthday, both the colored cook and the brothel madame did as most in America had when taking in her foreign features and diminutive height—they mistook her for a child. Clucking like hens over a new-hatched chick, they wrapped her in a blanket and swept her in to sit beside the fire. They gave her hot soup and even hotter coffee. They stripped her down to her shift, where the tiny buds of her small breasts, the dip of her waist and curves of her womanly hips went completely unnoticed under the bulk of the blanket they wrapped her in. They asked repeatedly where her family was, how she had come to be there, lost and dripping and ill—because by then the fever she had contracted on the stagecoach west had sunk its fearsome claws in so deep that, nearly a full week afterward, she

was still alternating between baking hot sweats and chills so violent that the sound of her chattering teeth could be heard rooms away.

They'd called a doctor for her. It was only when the kindly Dr. Norwood ordered an ice bath and stripped her to nothing to put her in it, that they all discovered the truth—or at least, the only part of Chin's truth that she was ever so careless to let slip: Chin was not a child.

The bells on Chin's silk slippers and in the coiffure of her jet black hair—the waist long tresses pinned up into a fan of gold combs that dripped with pearl-teardrops and more bells—jingled as light and airy as the steps that moved her into another swooping turn.

“Oh, child,” Madame Jewel had sighed, as she sank down to sit on the edge of her bed the morning after Chin's fever had finally broke. Her gowns had been luxuriously soft and the same sapphire blue of her eyes, which had gazed into Chin's in both sympathy and concern. “Do you know where you are? I've sworn my gems to secrecy, but if anyone saw you enter here...” Pausing, she'd shaken her head. The elegant coiffure of curls tumbling like golden sunshine down over her shoulders. “Tell me where your family is. I will try to get you back to them.”

“Work,” Chin had croaked back, her broken English garbled by the dryness of a throat still parched from fever. “Please, I need to work.”

“We'll talk about that later,” the madame had said, patting her hand. “When you're well enough to know what you're saying, and if you still want to stay.”

But Chin had been in America for four years and on her own in her native China for two more beyond that. She knew better than anyone that “later” offered no promises, and for the next six hours, she'd pushed her worth every chance she could. She shown her hands, calloused by years of needlework.

“We'll talk about it,” Madame Jewel had promised, giving her arm a reassuring squeeze.

She'd fallen out of bed in order to make it and then fallen again on the stairs, trying to empty her own chamber pot in order to prove that she could and would do anything asked of her. Women on the run could not afford to be too prideful. That was when she met Mr. Gabe. Half a dozen people came charging up the stairs when she collapsed on them; Gabe had reached her first.

It had been the most amazing and confusing sensation, when he scooped her into his arms and carried her back to her convalescing room. His brown hands as he'd tucked her back into bed had felt almost fatherly. So had the stern look he'd leveled at her, her still fever-addled brain

turning his Mexican features into comforting Chinese ones as he'd pulled the sheet extra tight and in no uncertain terms said, "If you get out of this bed again, I will bust your butt. Understand?"

That threat had felt almost fatherly, too. It stayed with her, for all of the three hours in which she, exhausted by her efforts, slept. When she awoke, however, she tried again and again, she made it halfway down the stairs before he met her coming up them. Though she didn't fall, he still picked her up. He carried her back upstairs and put her to bed...though not before laying her stomach-down across his lap and paddling the seat of her undershirt until it was all Chin could do to endure in silent compliance.

"I need work," she'd begged, once more tucked back into a roll of warm blankets.

"Rest," he'd replied, and calmly walked from the room. "You do not want me to put you back in bed again."

It was almost midnight before Chin gained the strength and determination enough to try again. This time, opening her bundle of meager belongings (all so carefully tied into the folds of a plain brown blanket), she'd donned her great-grandmother's silk dancing dress. Hands shaking as badly as her legs, she'd brushed out her long hair and pinned it up in combs and jade beads. She even pulled out her paints, powdering her face milky-white and coloring the bow of her upper lip a brilliant red. Donning her pearl beaded and embroidered slippers, she'd made her way back to the stairs.

Despite the late hour, business at the Red Petticoat was only just beginning to boom. Boisterous music pounded from the piano. Gems worked the crowd, playfully dodging pinching fingers and equally playful slaps to the bottom from potential customers only too eager to spend their hard-earned pebbles of gold for a half-hour of pleasure between the coveted thighs of a favored whore. Gamblers, drinkers, singers, dancers—every square foot of that lower floor was a bustle of brothel activity...and every square foot of it fell motionless and silent within minutes of the first man noticing her.

If Gabe wasn't the second, it was close enough not to matter. She tried not to shake as he came out from behind the bar where he'd been quietly talking to Madame Jewel and headed unerringly for the stairs. She could feel the look he gave her in every nervous and desperate twist that writhed inside her like a belly full of snakes. She tried to be calm, to exude nothing but

peace and tranquility as she spread her arms before all those silent, staring men, and then she began to dance.

Sick for too long, she only managed two twirls before she collapsed, falling to her knee on the first dipping swoop. Gabe reached her before she mustered the strength to stand.

“Work,” she’d pleaded.

He clenched his teeth, sending a tic of muscle leaping along his strong jaw just before offering a hand to help her rise. He did not carry her this time, but walked her back to her room as if she were still the grand lady her mother had raised her to be. He was every bit as gentle as before when he stripped her from her gown, wiped the paints from her face with a cool cloth, plucked the combs from her hair one by one until her long, straight locks came spilling down in a waterfall of blackness around her shoulders and waist. And when she was at last reduced to nothing but her shift, he took the wooden hairbrush from the dressing table by her bed and pinned her firmly facedown across his capable thigh. Shift up, bottom bared, with her legs trapped in the masculine vise of his own and nothing but empty air to protect her flesh from the bite of that awful brush, what he’d done then had reduced her quite shamefully to anything but lady-like silence.

She hadn’t just wept, she’d wailed. She’d sobbed. She’d danced upon his knee in ways her father and his so-rarely-cut bamboo rod never had, and when it was over, once more tucked back into bed, he’d moved the dressing table’s chair to her bedside and sat on it. Burly arms folded across his chest, he’d watched her. Waiting for that inevitable moment when at last her wounded tears dried and the throbbing that had so fiercely consumed her backside in the most miserable of bonfires subsided enough for her to once more give in to stubborn desperation and rise.

That moment never came. Hiccupping and gasping, still very much a teary-eyed, runny-nosed mess, Chin hadn’t yet recovered when Madame Jewel walked into her bedroom. She never gave Chin a chance to beg for employment.

“If you get out of this bed again before I allow it,” she’d said, quite sternly, “I will fire you before you can begin working.”

It was all Chin wanted. She stayed in bed after that, but she also kept her secrets hidden and her past unspoken. She improved her English, immersing herself in the will to lose all trace of her accent, only to forget every American word she knew whenever someone got too close or

asked her where she was from. Or why she had immigrated. Or what a woman as lovely and delicate as she—with skin so soft and refined, hands that had never known a field plow, and face that had never been kissed by the harsh reality of daily weather working a farm—what a woman like her was doing in a place as rough as the mining boom-town of Culpepper Cove. She ignored the marriage proposals and the other gems' tentative offers of friendship. She kept herself apart. She ate alone. She stayed alone. And every penny she earned she withdrew from the bank just as fast as Madame Jewel deposited it in her weekly account.

If Madame Jewel knew that, she never said anything. And so, once more, for the seventeenth time in six years, Chin started her life anew. That had been four months ago, but it bothered her, and every now and then she couldn't help but wonder: Had Madame Jewel known the kind of trouble that followed in Chin's silk-slipped footsteps, had she known the circumstances that had forced her to flee her beloved homeland, would she ever have offered Chin a room, a bed, a wage and the name of Jade in her employ of coveted gems?

Would she have rescued Chin from her back kitchen stoop, instead of leaving her outside to die?

Somehow, Chin didn't think so.

Chapter One

“There’s more cock out there than in every henhouse, chicken ranch and farmyard in the county combined.” Peeking through the stage curtain, blonde-haired and blue-eyed Rose eyed the noisy crowd. Turning, she cast Sapphire a somewhat cynical laugh. “Listen to that racket.”

Charlie had been at the piano for hours already, pounding out the liveliest tunes—Turkey in the Straw, Camptown Races, Molly Do You Love Me?—for the pleasure of all the Red Petticoat’s hardworking patrons. The saloon was crowded, with every inch of danceable floor space occupied. The romping stomp of more than sixty pairs of boots kept up the tinny beat and could be felt through the floorboards. Without enough women on the floor, miners ready for fun had taken to dancing with each other.

“That, my dear,” Sapphire answered, “is the sound of money.” She flicked the ringlets of her black hair over her bare shoulder. She wore what most of the gems wore on working nights: a thin white shift (unlaced just enough to coax the straps to fall off her shoulders), a tight, underbust corset and the bright red petticoat that had made this particular brothel infamously famous in the few short months since it had opened. “We need to get some of that before it’s all gone.”

Smirking, Rose didn’t move. “It’s not going anywhere. Not yet, anyway. Not until *she’s* done with them.”

Turning, both women gave Chin identical looks of good-natured amusement. Though she couldn’t help overhearing, Chin said nothing. She leaned in closer to the backstage mirror all the gems shared and continued applying the finishing touches on her makeup—white rice powder from neck to hairline gave her face a ghostly paleness and amplified the peach pinkness that striped across her eyes from one temple to the other. Her black painted eyebrows stood out starkly against such a palette. So did the blood-red of her paint, applied only to her upper lip and only upon the curves of the bow itself. To Chin, it was a look passed down through the centuries to all noble women in her country; to the men of Culpepper Cove, it was an exoticness never seen anywhere before. On nights when Chin danced, it was this look that packed the house.

“What do you say, Jade?” Rose called. “How many “pockets” you feel up to draining tonight?”

Putting the cap back on her bottle of lip paint, Chin set her brush aside. Though she knew they were only teasing, she did not smile as she stood and quietly moved to join them. Though neither woman was particularly tall, at less than five feet herself, both towered over Chin as she slipped between them to part the curtain with her fingertips.

It was standing room only tonight. Cowboys were dancing with grizzled miners, raising thick clouds of dust because very few ever bothered to hit the washhouse before coming here. At the bar, Amethyst looked both frazzled and fantastic. It was amazing how effortlessly she did that. Her eyes were bright and her color high as she rushed to fill order after drink order, flashing tantalizing glimpses of both bosom and ankle as she worked, climbing up and down the ladders behind the bar, reaching for the upper-shelf liquors even though there were easier bottles within reach. It was those “stolen” glimpses of calf that kept the tips rolling in. And for every coin or grain or pebble of gold dust they offered, she always did the same teasing gesture, leaning over the bar, offering not her hand to accept, but the valley of her mostly bared breasts for them to drop their money in. By the end of the evening, she jingled with every flouncing step that took her on up to bed.

Chin envied that. She envied that look. Even with a face shining with perspiration, Amy always looked fresh and sweet and beautiful. When Chin’s face grew shiny with sweat, her makeup ran. Very early on, she had learned that while Jade the Dancer had the power to draw the crowds, it was her small, delicate, China-doll features that the miners and cowboys wanted. Without her makeup, Chin was nothing more than another immigrant. She might as well be working at any one of now thirteen laundries that had sprung up in Culpepper Cove or out of her own tent.

“I see some regulars,” Rose murmured, widening the crack in the curtain so she could see out too. “There’s your Mr. Jackson. He’s brought flowers again.”

Probably because he meant to propose again; Chin withered at the thought. Not that Jackson wasn’t a nice man. He was—kind, gentle, courteous, with weathered hands that knew how to play a woman’s body in those small hours of the night when he left his sleeping children (all seven of them under the age of ten) to find comfort in arms that, when he closed his eyes, she couldn’t help but think he imagined were his dead wife’s. That he needed a helpmate was clear,

but that helpmate wasn't Chin. Once upon a time, swearing her love and loyalty to a man had been her favorite dream, one carefully cultivated by her mother. These days, Chin was her father's daughter. She was practical. She could not—would not—make vows of forever when she knew she could not honor them. Too many ghosts haunted her past. Even if they didn't, in places like the Red Petticoat, dreams of hearth and home, husbands and families, did not exist for women like her.

Except for the rare few exceptions. Ruby, for instance. Automatically, Chin located the vibrant redhead as she dashed between tables and dancers, distributing food from Nettie's kitchen and drink from the bar, all while dodging pinches and pats as only the wife of the sheriff could. But then, Ruby was the only one of Jewel's gems not wearing the red petticoat of a whore and she never had. Hers was pink. She was untouchable.

Lapis had worn the red, though. Not only had she also found a husband, but she'd married the mayor, of all people.

And then there was Crystal, now the traveling bride of the wealthiest gambler Culpepper had ever known. And Amber, and Citrine. But, Chin's stubborn mind insisted, these were the exceptions, not the rule. These were the fairytale endings that she knew better than to believe she'd ever find for herself. No, she'd gotten out of China. She still had her life when no one else—not her grandparents, her aunts, uncles, parents, cousins, and certainly not any of her brothers, their wives or their children—none of them could say the same. *That* was her fairytale ending. It would never get any better than that, and Chin knew it even if Mr. Everett Jackson, Editor-in-Chief at the Culpepper Daily with his weekly visitations, flowers and hat in hand, did not.

“Ladies.”

Sapphire and Rose jumped, and all three spun to stare at Gabe. His frown was as impressive as the unspoken threat he made when he hooked his thumb in the wide black leather of his belt. Though it wasn't directed at her, it was a threat Chin felt shiver straight up the back of her legs before shimmering across the surface of her bottom, like the softest summer breeze slipping beneath her bloomers.

“Why do we have men dancing with men out there when there are two ladies, both of whom are, I believe, scheduled to work but who are instead—” He gave the blushing gems a stern look. “—standing idle back here?”

“Sorry, Mr. Gabe,” Rose stammered. A woman normally quick with a smart retort, it was amazing how quickly looks like his could reduce her—or Sapphire, or any of them, for that matter—to flushes, stammers, and a prompt about-face in behavior, especially when he stood, as he was now, with his thumbs hooked in the belt he rarely used as anything but a visual reminder for how it *could* be employed. “We were just on our way out now.”

“Long, hard night ahead of us,” Sapphire cheekily agreed. Dipping in close to Chin’s ear, she mock whispered, “Only profession in the world where that’s a good thing.”

Giggling, Rose grabbed Sapphire’s arm and both ducked through the curtains, disappearing down the stairs that flanked either side of the stage.

“Oops,” Sapphire apologized, accidentally bumping into the trio of Chinese musicians coming up the stairs. Lin Wei tipped his head, long ponytail falling over his shoulder as he shouldered his pipa lute, and he and his two sons made way for the ladies to pass. Without a word, they then continued to the stage, taking their usual place in the rear to provide Chin with as much room as possible to dance while they played.

With nothing left to do herself now but wait until they were ready, Chin lingered at the curtain, alternating between watching as they tuned the strings on both pipa and erhu, and Xi, the youngest boy, practiced silent notes on his flute, and noting who in the rough-stock crowd were already taking notice of them. Men began to cluster around the stage, jostling one another in their eagerness to claim the best vantage spots.

“Busy night,” Gabe commented, and for the second time Chin jumped a little. It was amazing how cat-like a man that big could move. She hadn’t realized he had crept in to stand right behind her until he reached past her shoulder to part the curtains for himself.

“No more so than any other night,” Chin replied. How true that was, too. They were all busy nights these days. The cool of spring had faded into the heat of summer and gold fever only made the lonely hours of darkness feel hotter. And the influx of miners just kept coming, arriving by the dozens every day, overflowing the hills and streambeds with claim stakes—the vast majority of which never yielded more than a poke’s worth of dust for all the blood, sweat and tears poured into the back-breaking hope of finding more.

Chin wouldn’t be a miner, not for all the gold in the world. Subconsciously, her fingers trailed along the red stitching of her silk gown. It was the same color red as the petticoat she normally wore, the one this place was named for.

“They look about ready,” Gabe said, glancing to the musicians next.

That, too, was a statement that required no answer, which made her suspicious of what Gabe wasn't saying.

“Almost,” she agreed, checking Wei's progress for herself. He and his sons, Ling and Xi were almost set up. Gold miners by day, twice a week the Lins offered their musical skills so Chin could dance to proper music, the way her mother and grandmother had. Chin always paid Wei for their time—two dollars a night, of which he always gave her one dollar back when he took his place as her first customer. Because she reminded him of his daughter, he'd once told her. He never once acted anything but fatherly, and so she never charged him what her time was worth. Instead, she always let him lead her into the bathing room for a hot bath, and then sat silent and still while he used a pearl-backed comb to painstakingly brush out her long black hair.

Chin didn't know the smallest details about Wei's daughter—whether she was young or grown, living or gone—all she did know was how the old man's hands held a complete lack of lust as he washed, then dried and then spent the remaining allotment of his purchased time caressing her hair. To the best of her recollections, Chin couldn't remember her own father ever doing that. But in the shadows of the bathing room, with the piano music pounding out “Old Folks At Home” to the accompanying stomp of all these boots keeping lively time, sometimes it was hard not to place Wei's hands (if not his face) in her own father's stead.

Drawing a deep breath, Gabe let the curtain fall. “You've got a full dance card.”

They both knew dancing was not what she would be doing once she came down off the stage. Even as she felt it, Chin disregarded her instinctive pang of regret. It was the most useless emotion of all, and she knew it. *The fortunes of men are as variable as the winds*, as her father used to say. He would not have encouraged her to wallow in regrets.

“Jade?” Gabe asked, startling her back to herself. Had he asked her something? She hadn't heard.

She turned from the curtain, giving him all her dark-eyed attention. “I'm sorry?”

“Your first assignment after the dance,” Gabe repeated. “You have the right to choose, you always will, but the gentleman who approached Jewel has offered a hundred dollars if you'll consider allowing him to be the first.”

One hundred dollars? Chin held herself frozen, at first too startled to do anything but fixate on so princely a sum. It was a joke. It had to be. Nobody paid that much for sex, not with

one woman. Not when such a price could have bought the favors of every gem in the Red Petticoat!

Suspicion, like a heavy boulder, crashed down through the middle of her. Her eyes narrowed. As her temper flared, the accent she worked so hard to banish came popping out. “He wants to put his fingers in my ass,” she accused.

“If you get completely tore up in temper, are you going to start yelling at me in Chinese?” A faint glint of amusement lit Gabe’s teasing smile. “The client has already assured both Jewel and me that he wants nothing out of the ordinary.”

Nobody paid a hundred dollars for “ordinary.” Chin’s eyes narrowed further. “He wants me to put mine in his!”

That spark of amusement very nearly became a smile, but Gabe knew better than that, especially with her. He bit it back even as he reached for her, closing his warm hands on her shoulders and giving her a gentle attention-snaring shake. “He said *nothing* out of the ordinary. Just a half-hour of quiet time with a woman from his own country, that’s all he wants.”

A woman from his own country. Chin would have shied back a step except that Gabe continued to hold her.

“I know,” he said, anticipating her withdrawal, albeit an understanding that was lined with threads of hardened resolve. “I’ll support your decision if you want to say no; we all will, and you know that. But—”

Chin flattened her mouth. She could hear that “but” coming long before he’d said it.

“—one hundred dollars,” Gabe reminded her. “That’s a lot of money to dismiss without so much as a second thought.”

And with Chin it was always money first. Always. Because nothing had scared her so deeply as that long voyage across the ocean, with only the clothes on her back and her bundle of family heirlooms in her arms, and nothing—no security of any kind; financial, familial, or cultural—to help support her once she got here. Though she’d been running for two years, it was the first time in her life that she’d truly been alone. Four years had passed since that boat had landed at American soil, but she could still taste the fear. Worse were those mornings when she awoke with not just the taste of it in her mouth, but the chill knots once more tangling up her guts. She’d hoarded her money ever since. That Gabe mentioned it now meant he probably knew. Which meant Jewel knew it too. Maybe the others as well. She wanted to cringe.

Offstage, the piano music came to a boisterous end to the whooping cheers of more than fifty dusty patrons showing their appreciation.

“Think about it,” Gabe said as he let go of her shoulders.

But she didn’t want to. Her mind was a whirlwind, without any discernible thoughts; just feelings. Like dread, a giant weight of which she could already feel settling into the folds of her silk gown. It made her legs feel odd. She couldn’t afford that right before her performance.

“Wei is first,” she said, too abruptly. Gabe’s fading smile vanished and disapproval took its place. Because of her tone, she knew, rather than her choice. Chin did not apologize. Just then, the first plucking of lute strings sang out from the stage and only too grateful for the chance to escape, she stepped through the curtain, leaving the frowning Gabe behind her.

A great whooping cheer followed her to the center of the stage. It was deafening, vibrating. She could feel it through her pale silk slippers, shaking the smooth stage floor. That roar didn’t begin to die until Chin took her place, and then the Red Petticoat became eerily quiet. All talking grew soft, and then ceased altogether.

From the inner folds of each sleeve, she withdrew her fans, white silk stretched over fragile bamboo sticks engraved with peacocks—the white silk colorfully painted to show a flowering countryside with red-wall and yellow-tile buildings that, if she didn’t look too closely, could almost have been her own family’s home. She posed, a demure woman striving for peace and serenity though internally she was having a hard time finding a rooting place in either. Somewhere in this room was a man from her own country. Someone willing to pay a princely sum for the pleasure of being her first for the night. Apart from Wei, Chin had no Chinese regulars. Very, very few of her homeland people came to this country with money. Even fewer became wealthy once they got here. So, who was he?

Where was he?

Chin kept her eyes on the floor, waiting while the quiet turned heavy. She stretched out her arms, letting the fans become extensions of her hands. For almost a full minute, silence reigned, broken only by the creak of chairs, the shuffle of cards, and the clink of chips tossed upon the gambling tables far across the room. Amethyst and Ruby never stopped moving. They rushed behind the bar and through the dense crowd, respectively, filling food and drink orders. The sound their shoes made seemed obscenely loud in the quiet.

Then the reed-thin notes of a flute piped one warbling stanza before Wei and his eldest son followed on both lutes. It was an age-old melody, one she remembered her mother dancing to in those shadowy years of her childhood, back when life was perfect. Closing her eyes, the graceful shadow of her mother in her mind, Chin snapped out both fans and let the melody move her.

Her knees felt weak. So weak that when she took that first step, she almost went down. She disguised that wobble with a spinning turn and a fluttering swoop of one fan, and used the opportunity to steal her first peek out over the sea of watching men. Charlie was still sitting at his piano, flipping through his music sheets to pick out the next set while she kept the patrons occupied. Everett Jackson had vaulted to his feet already. He was standing, flowers in hand, checking his tie, smoothing down his hair, trying to smile and yet looking as if she were already telling him no. Again. Turn complete, she dropped her gaze to the floor once more and pulled herself into the next regal pose.

The fan dance was best when done in a group of carefully choreographed women, but nobody here knew that, so Chin didn't bother with perfection. Her mother was surely looking down from the back of the *shen* of the Dragon King, shaking her head with her mouth held in that pinched, disapproving way. Still, not caring allowed Chin the freedom to direct her thoughts not to the lack of other fans snapping open and fluttering in flawless synchronization with her own, but to who in the crowd might have one hundred American dollars to waste on an extravagant half-hour with one woman. Her gaze went to the gamblers at the far tables, but none of those were looking her way.

Dip...step, toe, step...turn. She snapped out her fans, fluttering to make the silk shimmer as she brought them in close, drawing the hungry eyes of every lonely patron in the room: cowboys with pay burning holes in their pockets; miners with a little gold to show for a week or more of hard panning in cold mountain streams. She drew their eager stares to the curves of her breasts, the flare of her hips. She turned again, letting her fans snap shut... and that was when she saw him: the only Chinese man aside from Wei and his sons in the Red Petticoat. He was leaning up against the bar, dressed in a dark suit and a top hat, with two men standing expressionless in the long black robes of royal bodyguards at the bar behind him. The bodyguards weren't looking at her. They weren't looking with all the practiced determination of men who wanted to, but who knew better.

The man in the suit, however, was watching. He was equally without expression. His mouth did not smile. His white-gloved hands tightened imperceptibly atop the ivory head of his ornamental walking cane. His almond eyes followed her every move, sharp with interest, though not with desire

She knew those eyes; she'd seen them before, although the face that bore them now was far younger than that of the man who'd rode onto her family's estate six long years ago, a company of armed palace guards following in his wake. She knew those hands; the way they held that cane was the same relaxed grip she'd seen that other man use back when he'd drawn his imperial scroll and proclaimed, by order of the Great Dragon himself, her entire household to be that of traitors. Not for anything her father or brothers had done, or his father and his brothers, but for an unforgiveable crime committed by a relation so distant, Chin did not even know his name. For that, her family's rank and property were forfeit, their honor was stripped from them, and her entire household condemned to death. That was when the imperial guard had dismounted. Her father and her brothers had simply stood there, but her mother had grabbed her, yanking her back into the house.

Chin stood frozen on the stage, trapped in the dark of that man's unwavering stare, hearing again the cries of their servants as swords were drawn and the slaughter began. Chin didn't know if her father tried to defend himself. His honor may not have allowed it. All Chin knew was the confusion and panic that had gripped her from the inside as her mother fled with her through the house, grabbing all that was sacred or of value, wrapping silk around jade and ivory heirlooms, and bundling all into a blanket before tying the corners securely. She'd grabbed Chin's hand, racing with her out the back screen door just as the heavy stomp of boots invaded through the front of their home.

The flute and lutes continued to play, but Chin had stopped dancing. She couldn't move. She couldn't do anything but hear the escalating screams—of people, horses, pigs; nothing that was theirs was spared. Her chest tight and beginning to ache, she sucked a hard breath and smelled again the smoke as the buildings were torched. Her heart raced, thundering beneath her breast exactly as it had as she and her mother raced through the temple, across the courtyard, past the gardens and the fence, scattering chickens and not stopping to catch their breath until the cool shade of the forest enclosed them. That forest had been her childhood playground, but it offered

no sanctuary for they had been seen and imperial pursuers were already closing ground fast behind them.

Hands shaking and numb, Chin dropped her fans when the man stepped away from the bar.

Run, she heard, soft as a whisper in her mother's long-gone voice. It was the last thing she had told Chin, although she had not said it very softly back then. No, back then she'd hissed it, panic and fear turning her beloved sing-song voice to a growl as she'd shoved that bundle of precious heirlooms into Chin's arms. *Run and don't look back, no matter what you hear!*

Six years ago, Chin had looked back, watching in horror as her mother ran back toward the soldiers, veering away at the last in an effort to draw them from her own daughter. Six years ago, they had caught her mother anyway and they had killed her, just not right away. Six years ago, at barely more than fourteen, a girl-child who had never in all her obedient life been anywhere without a proper escort, Chin turned her back on her family and fled.

Here and now, in the crowded confines of the Red Petticoat, with miners and cowboys shifting restlessly and beginning to boo the lack of entertainment, that man from her homeland beckoned to her with the pale fingers of his finely gloved hand. She felt the closure that gesture signified, like lightning bolting up through the stage floor and into her badly shaking legs. Oh yes, she knew that man. His name was Quan Ji and he was the son of the man who had murdered her entire family. And that cane he brought with him as he pushed toward her through the dense crowd, it was no innocent walking aid; it was a sword, thin but masterfully crafted for sharpness. And he was not here to pay her a hundred dollars. Not for a poke, ordinary or not. He was here to finish what his father had begun in the bloodstained courtyard of her ancestors' home all those years ago.

Run, her mother whispered, soft as a Shaanxi breeze in Chin's mind. *Don't look back, no matter what you hear.*

Abandoning her fans on the stage where they had fallen, to her ever-lasting shame, Chin did as she was told. Once more, she ran.