

Warming Emerald

The Red Petticoat Saloon

By

Maren Smith

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Prologue

That it might end badly for everyone involved never once crossed Garrett's mind. He wasn't the sort of man who liked to pause or calculate the odds or consider such minor details like consequences for one's actions. Consequences happened whether a man acted or not. Life in the military chasing down renegade Indians and the occasional outlaw had taught him that. But in special cases, like this one, consequences had little to do with the choices he made. Right now his only consideration was making sure his brother fought out of... *whatever* he'd just battled his way into, because Cullen was all the family Garrett had and to Garrett, family was everything.

Also, bar room brawls were fun. Especially those that involved as many beautiful combatants as this one.

A few minutes ago, Garrett had been at the Singleton's Mercantile, stacking up all the supplies he seriously hoped they'd be able to pay for on the wood-plank sidewalk, when he'd spotted Cullen running down the middle of the street. The last time he'd seen him run like that, they'd been in the middle of a shootout with fifteen hostile Sioux braves and their commanding officer had just fallen off his horse with bullet holes and more arrows in him than a porcupine had quills. All these years later, Garrett still remembered thinking that. Those memories had a lot to do with the jolt of adrenaline that shot up his spine and down his legs, forcing him to drop the canvas sacks of flour and beans he'd been carrying before he tore off running down the street after his brother.

Garrett was too far back, however. He saw Cullen duck into a dusty side alley between the furrier and saddle shop, but by the time Garrett reached the far end, he'd lost sight of him. It was the scream that led him the rest of the way, straight down the street into the two-story white whore house with the bright red shutters: The Red Petticoat Saloon. He'd been meaning to pay this place a visit once he got up the cash, he just hadn't known it would be under these circumstances.

The brawl was well underway and Cullen smack in the middle of it when Garrett pushed through the Red Petticoat's swinging doors. Tables were broken and chairs upturned. Shards of glass were scattered across the liquor-splattered floorboards, crunching under his feet as he took

in the utter chaos. Beautiful combatants was right. Soiled doves they might well be, but this was one brothel not stocked with wilting wallflowers.

Of the dozen or so scantily clad ladies poised in various states of shock and disbelief, only a handful of women had rushed to join in the fight. He saw Cullen, leaping over the bar in pursuit of a Mexican man trying his best to keep the fight clear of the ladies—none of whom were helping him reach that end. He saw Chinny—little Chinny, the China girl Cullen had rescued from drowning only one week earlier, standing no bigger than knee-high to a very injured cricket—limping around the bar as fast as her wounded knee would take her, to get between the two men. He saw the brothel’s blonde madam leap on his brother’s back, sparking Cullen’s involuntary defense reaction that ended with her being flipped through the air. He saw Cullen’s shock as, mid-flight, he recognized his assailant as female and, too late, tried to soften her landing. He broke a table with her, which in turn redoubled the Mexican’s rage. The wind knocked out of her, she lay gasping and sucking at air while the two men threw themselves at one another with renewed vigor.

He saw the sheriff’s redheaded wife, still wearing her pink petticoats, swing a bottle at Cullen’s head, but Chinny caught her arm and shoved her back. The redhead fell, but she came up again, shouting at Chinny, “Are you crazy?” just before she grabbed a chair instead.

Chinny grabbed the chair too, and the two wrestled, each woman hell-bent on wresting it from the other. Having spent a week in that headstrong little China girl’s company, it didn’t exactly surprise Garrett that she could (wounded or not) hold her own in a physical confrontation.

“Stop this! Stop this right now!” Wooden spoon in hand, a dark-skinned woman stood blocking the kitchen doorway, the whites of her wide eyes visible all the way around as she alternated between yelling at Cullen and fighting to hold back the two small Indian boys who were equally intent on breaking free of her to get into the thick of the brawl.

He saw the brunette throwing bottles from behind the bar, the two blondes—one armed with a chair and another with a billiard cue (really cute that one, hair all done up with pearl teardrops, bright red dress with the skirts tied up so high that he could see the ruffles of her drawers and neckline cut so low that each heaving breath gave him a sneak peek of pink rouged nipples)—watching Cullen beat the tar out of their Mexican friend and wondering if they really ought to join in or not.

Loved the nipples. Absolutely loved them.

And then Garrett saw her. The slender, brown haired, green eyed woman who let out that high-pitched Indian war cry just before she leapt—*leapt!*—from midway down the staircase onto the bar, and from there onto Cullen’s back. Hers was a state of fantastic undress: black corset loosely laced over the top of a thin-strapped camisole; bright red petticoat tied back to show off the ruffled drawers and stockings she wore as she wrapped her legs around Cullen’s waist. Almost like a lover, if only she hadn’t also latched an arm around his neck and hooked her fingers into his mouth, pulling as if she wanted to rip his cheek apart. Too pale to be a true Indian, too sun-bronzed to be the well-bred white woman her facial bone structure suggested, she yanked Cullen’s head back, clearing the way for either the Mexican or the redhead and her chair to get the upper hand.

Blood, as they say, is always thicker, especially when it came to life or death, or even mismatched bar fights. Garrett had no idea what might have started this, but he tapped his hat down low so as not to lose it, planted his foot on the seat of the only chair in the saloon still standing upright, and launched himself into the fray. The target he fixed on was the little “savage” on his brother’s back. “Yeeeeehaaah!”

His war cry wasn’t half as elegant as hers, but he had her attention from the moment their eyes—and then their bodies—collided. He tackled her, ripping her hand out of Cullen’s mouth (if that hurt, he’d be sorry about it later). Wrapping his bigger body around hers to absorb as much impact as he could, when they hit the floor together, he rolled, crashing into the bar back first, not that she appreciated his chivalry. The minute they flopped to a stop and his arms closed around her, she became a wind-mill of dervish writhing unlike anything he’d ever experienced from any woman before. She kicked (he had no immediate plans to become a father, but he did so like the option; thankfully, she missed), her elbow thumped his gut hard enough to knock the wind from him, and all four of her limbs scrambled to roll him far enough for her to get on top.

It became his new favorite position in an instant; she could get on top of him any time. The king of inappropriate thoughts, that was his first.

That he might actually lose the fight to her was his second, because she was a heck of a lot stronger than she looked.

Garrett lost track of Cullen after that. He lost track of Chinny, the redhead and her chair, the bellowing Mexican as he swung his fists in brutal meat-pounding blows, and the blonde

madam as she gasped and wheezed and rolled onto her stomach, crawling to get back into the fight. He lost track of everything except how it felt to have that little savage's luscious bottom pushing and pumping flush up against his groin as she bucked to evade his embrace. He rolled on top of her out of sheer self-preservation. He sat on her—all right, that was out of pure deviant delight—and one at a time, caught her slugging fists and pinned her wrists together to the floor above her head.

“Behave,” he told her, pointing the sternest finger he could manage just off the tip of her cute little nose. There was no hiding his grin, however. “I mean it now. Behave.”

Those green, green eyes of hers lit with a fury unequal to anything, except perhaps his amusement.

“Behave,” he warned again, as the pink bow of her painted lips peeled back from all her pearly white, savage little teeth. He yanked his finger back before she bit, the snap of all those pearlies clacking together like a spring-loaded fur-hunter's trap. He was so startled, he laughed at her. That was when “behave” became the least of all her hostile intentions; she bit him. Hard. Sinking her teeth into the soft pad of his right palm, she gave savage a whole new vocabulary, growling and snarling and grinding her jaws to make the pain shoot straight up his arm. It lanced through him to land with a thump of unexpected interest all the way down into his groin. He hissed, but never quite lost his smile, not even when the pink of her lips turned dark with his blood.

She tried to knee him again, but Garrett wedged his legs between hers, anchoring his hips into the cradle of hers while she arched and twisted, growled and ground, her teeth sinking in deeper, breaking more skin. Her wildly kicking feet thumped the floor. Her hips curled and rubbed, the hot core of her femininity grinding against the front of his trousers like a woman in the throes of the most seductive passion.

He probably shouldn't have found her growls half as cute as he did. He definitely should not have been this turned on, but it had been a long time since his last tussle between any woman's sheets and this explosive little armful was nothing if not alluring as she squirmed and wriggled and fought to throw him off.

All right, her little teeth were really digging in now. He grinned, showing her his. She growled louder. He couldn't help it; he laughed. That arching buck of her hips was too distracting; he bucked back, thrusting once before grinding down, letting her feel the full and

unapologetic response that her primal savagery had aroused. Those lovely green eyes of hers widened, losing a degree of their earlier fire to swift-rising surprise. He thrust again, catching her leg when she kicked, hefting her thigh up over his hip and pinning it there while he cupped her bottom. Cupped and squeezed. A nice little handful.

She spat his hand from her mouth, sucking a startled breath instead.

Her nipples stiffened, twin peaks creating mouth-watering buds beneath the white cotton of her frilly camisole and above the lifting cup of her black corset. He wondered if she were aware of it. He wondered if she'd rouged them.

His smile softened. He looked at her lips, flecked crimson at the corners with his blood. His hand throbbed. His cock throbbed harder.

"Behave," he purred one last time. He'd have loved to have said more, except that was when the sheriff showed up and stopped everything with a well-aimed and somewhat deafening shot fired into the ceiling.

"Je-sus Christ," Jeb Justice declared, the irritation in his voice carrying easily through the sudden quiet that filled the Red Petticoat bar. "What. *The* hell! Is going on in here?"

The little savage lay tense and unmoving beneath him for all of only four or five cock-enticing seconds, then she began to squirm again. No longer fighting, now she wanted only to break away. Garrett let her go, but in slow degrees—captured wrists first, then all the rest of her temptress's body. She rolled when he rose off her and scrambled out from under him. He gave her bottom a sharp smack, just a sting to remember him by before she found her feet.

Somewhere in the struggle, she'd knocked his hat off. He found it, stepped on, behind the bar. Shaking off the splinters of broken glass, he replaced it on his head and repaired the unwanted crease in what was otherwise a well-trained brim. By the time he found his feet too, she had fled all the way to the kitchen door. She grabbed up one of the small boys, hugging him to her. She wasn't exactly hiding, but she had tucked herself behind the wooden-spoon-wielding woman's skirts before she looked back at him, but he knew he had unnerved her by the way she stared at him over her shoulder.

Her nipples were still perked though, and his cock was still hard.

Garrett saw her hands tighten on her little boy's back and her whole body shudder when he smiled at her. He touched two fingers to the brim of his hat, not quite tipping it, but it was for her and her alone if only she hadn't just ducked into the kitchen and out of his sight.

Feisty—his hand and cock throbbed in unison—he liked that.

Chapter One

Four months later

“He’s back,” Opal sang as she came up the stairs, her arm tucked into that of a young (considering the smell of him) cowhand. That it was his first time sampling the mysteries found only on the upper bedroom floor of a saloon like the Red Petticoat was as clear as the blush on his cheeks and the uncertainty in his still boyishly young eyes. Unfortunately for Lydia, she knew Opal wasn’t talking about the nervous young man hovering on her arm.

“Thanks for the warning,” Lydia said, suppressing a grimace as she slipped past Opal and headed down the stairs. She brushed at her skirts, a nervous gesture and one that instantly annoyed her. She had nothing to be nervous about. She hadn’t done anything wrong and she certainly wasn’t interested; one of these days, Garrett would get the not-so-subtle message she kept sending him and stop coming.

Today, however, was not that day.

Her emerald gaze swept the lower floor as she descended the curving staircase. The lower bar area was packed tonight. It was packed most nights, but tonight it was damn near elbow to elbow and shoulder to shoulder. She spotted a very pregnant Ruby in her white blouse and black corset, skirts swept back to expose the bright pink petticoat that declared her off-limits and unavailable when it came to the pleasures of the boudoir. These days, that was a delight sampled only by her sheriff husband. That he allowed her to continue working here surprised everyone, but here she stayed, delivering drinks to thirsty patrons all through the crowd with her high, round belly leading the way.

The night was early, with the setting sun still painting the skyline in shades of amber and apricot. Behind the bar, Amy was laughing and chatting and wiping the sweat from her brow as she hurried from one drink order to another and occasionally even took a shot when a particularly flirtatious regular bought her one. Charlie was also hard at work, banging out the lively strains of *King Alcohol* and *The Ole Grey Goose*. Somewhere behind the stage curtains, his wife, Silver, would be getting ready for her next show and no doubt half the grubby cowboys

and miners packed in here tonight had come to hear her sing. The other half had come for Sunny, kicking up her heels on the stage, the ruffles and hems of her skirt well up above the hem of her drawers as she whooped and blushed and danced the Can-can to the delight of every man sitting in the front row.

Tucked behind the far end of the bar, lingering in her office doorway, Jewel stood with arms folded and one ear tipped to something Gabe was whispering. She might be listening, but her sharp blue eyes never stopped scanning the swell of patrons clapping, stomping, drinking and dancing, gambling, flirting and in every way possible, spending the hard-won proceeds of their week's labor in her place. They didn't have enough girls, not enough by far, but Dottie was doing her best to entertain as many as possible as she danced within a circle of rowdy men, laughing and kicking up her feet as she gave each a skirt-twirling turn around the circle. Her cheeks were flushed and rosy, as if she were having the time of her life, and she probably was despite the stifling heat.

And oh, was it hot. Every window had been pinned wide open, letting in as much fresh air as the California night saw fit to provide when it was mid-October and summer stubbornly refused to relinquish the temperature to fall. Everywhere she looked, she saw dirty cowpokes and dirtier miners, gamblers and town folk, the richest and poorest of Culpepper Cove's citizenry with more than one public official with a wife waiting for him at home. Rupert Stowe, for instance; the manager at Culpepper's Savings and Loan, he was the one person no gem from the Red Petticoat (or any woman from any profession, for that matter) wanted to run into while doing business at the local bank. His opinion of whores was clear in every dirty look he shot them... in the cool sanctity of his bank, at any rate. His look here was far, far warmer. As lecherous as any other man, fresh in off the plains or down from the mountain with a pocket full of gold dust, a body full of aches and strain, and the bone-deep thirst to lose himself in either mug after mug of warm beer and whiskey, or the equally warm flesh of a smiling woman.

Lydia had more than one regular in tonight, and... oh God... there he was. Garrett Drake, youngest brother to the man who had only months ago stormed into the Red Petticoat Saloon with vengeance on his mind and two fists that would not be stopped before he'd exacted it. He had gone after Gabe as if the two men had been mortal enemies for years, and all because of Jade.

Well, she was gone now. Most of the gems Lydia had known when she first started here were now gone.

Lydia would be here until the day she died. Some days, she almost hoped that would come sooner rather than later.

Her hand light on the rail, Lydia didn't realize she had stopped two steps from the bottom of the staircase with her gaze frozen on that tall man waiting patiently across the saloon with his hat in his hands. Like a gentleman caller when she knew full well he was nothing but a hard-scrabble rancher, barely making ends meet. Or a soldier; her gut seized in trepidation, but there was no denying the way he stood by those swinging doors. As if they were a post and he the sentry assigned to guard them. He kept to himself. He often did when he came, but he was smiling. He was always smiling.

And he'd brought flowers. Again.

A yellow rose this time. Just the one. He had it tucked into the folds of the black wristband he wore, keeping it safe from having the fragile bud crushed or those sunshine-colored petals from accidentally being plucked. Last week he'd brought a pink one. The time before that, it was blue with a white and black center, though it wasn't a rose. Where he kept getting them, she had no idea. But he was persistent, devilishly so. She had to give him that.

He also hadn't noticed her yet. He turned his hat between his hands, before combing back his light brown hair with his fingers. It was too long, the wisped ends a good inch below his collar line and in desperate need of a barber. They practically touched his shoulders when he turned his head to survey the room and twirled his hat around and around between his idle hands. He looked amused, but then, he always looked amused, even when he wasn't eyeballing a couple of drunken miners do-si-doing one another in increasingly unbalanced circles. He laughed a little before his eyes were caught by Sunny, skirts held high for the Can-can she was dancing, her bare feet, shapely ankles and calves holding more than one man in the boisterous crowd spellbound. Garrett tipped her a wink and a nod before looking away. It was probably too much to hope that he'd fix his infatuation on her instead. Deputy Tey wouldn't like it, but that would be his problem instead of hers.

Frowning, Lydia picked up her black velvet skirts, showing off the bright red petticoat ruffles underneath but also ensuring she didn't trip on the hem as she descended those last few steps into the midst of the crowd. The minute her shoe touched the main floor, she felt him. It

was a trick of her imagination and she knew it, but she felt him all the same. His energy, crackling under and around all the many feet stomping, tromping and just plain standing between them on these whiskey-splattered floorboards until it found her. She felt that slow shiver of awareness fizzle up the back of her legs, sparking across the surface of her bottom, crawling up the ladder of her spine to raise every fine hair upon the nape of her neck. She didn't go to Garrett—she never would—but it didn't matter. Though she headed straight for Gabe and Jewel, her body reacted just as it had that night four months ago, while rolling on the floor under Garrett's cloying embrace, tasting his blood in her mouth, feeling his skin on her lips even after he'd taken his hand away, hearing the amusement in his voice as he told her again and again with that light of seductive amusement dancing in his grey eyes: *Behave*.

He'd all but sung it to her, the crooning allure of his voice setting her belly on fire. Her nipples had tightened and they tightened still, a maddening sensation that was amplified by the press and rub of her corset as she breathed and that refused to be ignored. Head held high, Lydia crossed the floor, feeling nothing but her own electric awareness of him and the erotic scouring of her breasts within the confines of her tightly-laced clothes.

"Emerald, my girl!" came a boisterous shout to her right.

Her stomach clenched and spasmed. Lydia turned, but already she knew that voice. As if having Garrett in the bar weren't bad enough, her number one regular (in his own mind, at least) was also here. Lewis "Colonel" Curbe, a man who, had he ever truly been in the military, likely never reached quite so high a rank. Still, that's what everyone called him, including his wife. Like so many Red Petticoat patrons, the Colonel didn't let a little thing like marriage get between him and the fun to be had behind the Red Petticoat's swinging front doors. Lydia found it hard to hold that against him. If she had nothing but Abigail Curbe's pinched, disapproving face to go home to night after night, she might opt to spend them at the Red Petticoat as well.

Muscling his way through the crowd, the Colonel grabbed her up with a whoop and a toss into the air before catching her about the waist in a bear-hug that all but crushed his massive drink-reddened nose into her breasts.

"Down!" Lydia bellowed, grabbing onto his shoulders for fear of being dropped. Her tone startled him almost as much as it did Lydia herself. She caught her balance when he immediately thumped her back on the floor, then quickly covered her upset with a laugh that was as shaky as it was false. "My!" She caressed his arm, pretending to be impressed by the ripple of

biceps she barely felt. He might well have been military at one point in his youth, but he'd spent all that time since supervising his sons' work on their mining claim from the comfort of his living room chair, and he had the belly now to prove it. "Y-you surprised me, Colonel."

He looked from her to the hand she caressed upon his upper arm. His frown eased back to smugness. "Scared you, did I?" He obligingly pumped a fist to make his lack of a bicep a little more noticeable. "You oughter know by now, Emmy girl, 'virile' is my middle name."

A less likely middle name, Lydia could not imagine. More like "pant, wheeze and pass out" or, as she preferred to think of him whenever she absolutely *had* to think of the Colonel, "twenty-dollars base fee with a five-dollar tip on the dresser if she let him do the kinky extras."

Lydia faked a broader smile and swallowed enough of her slow budding anger to bat her lashes at him. "How very strong you—"

The room spun as Lydia was seized from behind, her arm only this time and only long enough for Garrett to step between her and the Colonel. A living, breathing, smiling wall of muscle that did not have to be pumped to be seen or felt.

"Do that again," Garrett said, "and I just might get upset with you." He still had his hat in his hand, that flower tucked into his wristband, and that smile that never quite reached as far as the cool stone of his eyes.

The Colonel was too drunk to be impressed. He stiffened, a bantam rooster on the verge of crowing. "Son..."

"I am not your son."

The Colonel puffed up even more. "If you were, you'd know your place, by God! You'd also know not to go stickin' your peter into matters that don't concern you. Me and this lil' gal, we have us an arrangement."

"Not tonight you don't."

Recovering her own shock, Lydia grabbed Garrett's arm—now those were biceps worth noting—and wrenched herself free. "You hold it right there, buster!" Trying to shove him back far enough to get between the men was like trying to uproot a mountain. Apart from raising his hand to halt her further objections, he didn't budge.

"Just a minute, sweetheart. The menfolk are talking." When her jaw dropped, he tossed her a wink that suggested he might not be entirely serious. "You can cuss me out for saying so later."

That slow bud of anger became a blackberry bramble large enough to swallow the whole of the Red Petticoat within its thorny embrace in the time it took Lydia to snap her mouth shut again. Heat seared her cheeks. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Gabe pushing through the crowd, heading right for them with his interfering intent darkening his already black stare. Lydia could see Jewel, too. The madam was frowning, but while both of the Petticoat's owners had forgiven Cullen Drake for the brawl that had disrupted their lives and destroyed their furniture once they understood he did so in defense of Jade, thinking it had been Gabe who had abused her, both Jewel and Gabe continued to worry about Chin. That no one had seen her since Cullen had taken her away was a constant source of worry and speculation. No one had seen much of Cullen either, but as Sheriff Jeb Justice so often liked to say, the Drake brothers had always kept pretty much to themselves.

Until Garrett, that is. Over the last four months, they had seen a lot of Garrett and every time they did, he caused problems. Just like this one, those problems almost always involved her.

"You got a lot of nerve," the Colonel growled.

"You ain't seen half of what I've got," Garrett assured him, "but I can appreciate how you must be feeling. You've worn your hide to a frazzle all week long. You got a little jingle in your pocket and you've probably thought of nothing but dipping your Little Man Johnson into an Emerald well of pure, unadulterated delight, but now—" Garrett raised both hands, halting not only her huff of affront, but the Colonel's sputtering. "—now, that's just not going to happen. Not in Emerald's well, at any rate, not for at least a good hour."

The Colonel grew apoplectic, his face turning ruddy and his eyes bulging.

"I don't know what other gems are available, but I'm sure if you asked, you might find you a Sapphire well—"

"Sapphire doesn't work here anymore," Lydia said stiffly, knuckles grinding into her hips as the brambling vines of her anger seethed through her.

"All right," Garrett allowed. "An Amber well, then."

"Married."

"Pearl?"

"The same."

Garrett snapped his fingers. "Ruby."

"She doesn't work the upstairs."

“I’m not a worldly man, sweetheart. Can you help me out a little? I’m running out of stones. Ah, Mr. Gabriel,” Garrett announced as the Mexican reached them at last. “I believe I’ve discovered the reason for the Red Petticoat’s constant lack of female staffing. All your gems keep running off with other men.”

The broad fingers of one hand flexed, but otherwise Gabe kept his temper. “Leave,” he said. “Now before I summon the sheriff and have you jailed for trespassing. I told you the last time you were here not to come back.”

Wagging his finger under Gabe’s nose, Garrett said, “Chinny tells us each gem has the right to choose.”

Every thistle on those blackberry vines pricked all at once and her tight grip on her own temper slipped. “If you think for one second that I would *ever*—” She stopped when Garrett abruptly held up both hands. He made a grand display out of showing her they were empty, then he waved them, snapped his fingers, and suddenly two ten-dollar gold coins appeared where none had been mere seconds before. She blinked, the heat of her temper faltering. “How did you do that?”

“Sometimes what passes between two people can only be described as magic.” He offered her the coins. “Dance with me.” His smile never faltered as he held up a staying finger. “Just one dance, that’s all.”

Lydia frowned, the mere thought of deliberate physical contact with this man raising all her fine hairs all over again. It awakened that dreadful pulsing now, too. The one that began in the tip of both already tense nipples and then spread, moving deep down into the pit of her belly until all she could feel was the distracting throb of it centering between her thighs. She stared at those twin coins, already finding it hard to think of anything beyond the alluring thrum of simply wanting to be touched. She’d hated him for doing that to her the night of the brawl. She didn’t harbor any more affection for him now for the same damn reason.

She glared past the money to him. “One dance?”

“Just one.” His smile turned smug in the way that men did when they knew they’d just won the argument. The arrogance intensified in the victorious look he shot the Colonel. “One dance all right by you, hoss, or you want to try outbidding me for a kick-up around the floor?”

Red-faced and flustered, the Colonel glared from Garrett to Gabe, and then, fury darkening him further, at her.

Her reaction was instantaneous. She flinched, jerking back to avoid the grab the Colonel hadn't thrown, and crashed into the chair of the patron seated directly behind her. Beer sloshing into his lap, the man leapt up with a shout, swiping at his soaked crotch before whipping around.

"Hollis, what a mess." Gabe quickly stepped in, shielding Lydia who shrank back from that fury too. She bumped into Garrett, who caught her shoulders and did not let go. Gabe moved again, keeping himself between them and his tone smooth and friendly. "Let me get you another beer and—" He quickly swept the crowd, snapping his fingers and gesturing. "—and some help getting cleaned up."

"Cleaned up?" The grizzled miner slammed his half-empty glass down on the table. "My britches is soaked through! I look like I pissed myself!"

"Then let's get those britches off you," Dottie said with grin, appearing through the crowd as if by magic to take the startled miner's arm. "Ooo!" she purred, pressing in so close that her breasts bumped his chest. In the dense crush of the crowd, no one noticed where her other hand had dipped down to until Hollis jumped. "One of us just hit the mother lode! You ain't got gold 'dust' in your britches, honey. These here are half-pound nuggets if ever I've felt 'em."

Clearing his throat, no trace of his earlier irritation anywhere about him now, Hollis said, "I wouldn't say half pound, but... they are a might big."

"Let's get your wet duds off," Dottie coaxed, pulling his arm to lead him upstairs. "And you can tell me all about why you ain't never come up to see me before this."

Shaken, the brambles of her anger having completely abandoned her, Lydia shot her a grateful, silent apology.

Behind his back, Dottie pointed back at Garrett and mouthed, 'Don't do it' before becoming all smiles again for Hollis's benefit.

"Well, now that that's all taken care of." Presenting his arm, Garrett tipping his hat as Gabe turned once more to glare at him. "I'm not promising to have her back before morning."

"You're not taking her anywhere," Gabe told him.

"Gems get to choose," Garrett reminded and held up the two gold coins for her to see again. "Isn't that right, Emerald?"

He coaxed her with the coins and her chest tightened.

Yes, gems got to choose. Of course they got to choose, but what choice was there for her really? She was a mother without a husband, in a world that offered no means of gainful employment to women. Twenty dollars for a dance? She didn't like Garrett. His brother had stolen away a fellow gem under highly suspicious circumstances and for the last few months it had been as if Jade had never existed in that town. But like him or not, he was willing to pay her as much for a dance as she would be paid to lie flat on her back upstairs, most likely beneath the sweating, rutting pumps of the Colonel. Or worse, bent her over the foot of the bed while his full weight pressed down upon her and the sour heat of his whiskey-laden breath fouled her breaths as he commanded, "Talk 'savage' for me. You like it rough, don't you? Don't you? Let's see if a white man can't tame the wild squaw."

Her whole body shuddered.

"It's fine," Lydia muttered. Gabe frowned, but he backed off. The Colonel frowned too; she knew that without looking at him. She could feel the weight of his displeasure pressing down on her worse than his belly would soon afterward. "One dance."

"Ah, now." Taking her arm, Garrett winked at the Colonel before escorting her through the crowd to a less occupied section of the floor. "That's the thing about dances, sweetheart. No one ever really knows where they might lead."

Seated at the piano, bobbing his head and tapping along to the swift melody, Charlie's fingers moved fast and loose across the ivory keys. He always played as if he'd been born sitting on that bench. And who knows, he might have been. Certainly he switched seamlessly from *Camptown Races* to *Paddy Whack* while the tromping, stomping, half-drunk and whooping miners let out a cheer and Garrett took Lydia into his arms. In the six months since Jewel first named Lydia one of her gems, she had sold at least a hundred dances and been pulled into embraces like this a dozen times over on the nights she worked, but none had felt like this.

Because she didn't like him, Lydia told herself. But then, she didn't like a lot of men.

Garrett's hand came to rest light and respectable on her hip as he took her other in his right. The small section of floor he'd brought her to was open enough to allow the crush of dancers to move, just not by much. So when he began to move with her and she realized they were dancing along the outer edge of the others, one skip-turn-skip at a time taking her closer to that single step that led to the swinging outer doors, at first she saw nothing suspicious in it.

"You look very pretty tonight," Garrett told her.

“Thank you,” she said, without much appreciation. Usually this was where he presented her with whatever flower he’d brought, but the yellow rose stayed in his wristband.

“You’d look prettier if you smiled more.” He bounced once. Stomp, turn, stomp-stomp. Up on the step they went, her black skirts flying out around them as he spun her into another turn, and back down on the main floor, brushing up against the other dancers as they settled in amongst them again.

“Like you do?” she countered. “Smiling all the time only makes a man seem foolish. Or insane.”

“I see.” Amusement made his grey eyes sparkle. “Let me ask you a question. Is he watching us?”

Not understanding why that should be important, Lydia blinked twice. “Who, Mr. Gabriel? Of course he is.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Stomp, turn, back up on the step they went. Lydia spied Gabe, still standing where they’d left him, catching a grumbling earful from the Colonel. By the look of him, Gabe wasn’t giving the man much of his attention and he hadn’t taken his eyes off Lydia. Judging by that frown, he didn’t intend to any time soon.

“He look fit to be tied yet?”

“Yes,” she said, tapping her foot, heel-toe-heel, in anticipation of the next turn that would sweep them back down among the masses.

“Want to see him tied even tighter?” Garrett waggled his eyebrows.

“What?” Lydia almost froze. “No!”

But Garrett was a good dancer, a masterful lead, and when he spun, she followed. The next thing she knew, he’d swept her out through the swinging doors into the night beyond. As hot as it was outside, compared to the heat of the crowded Red Petticoat, the evening breeze brushed her cheeks and shoulders in a soothing, comfortable kiss. If she weren’t so upset, she would have enjoyed it.

“I can’t be out here,” Lydia said stiffly.

“Dancing in the streets *is* illegal,” Garrett replied without remorse. With plenty of room now to move and no more need for the tight, shallow movements of before, he kicked up his feet. Staid stomps gave way to hops, skips and wider, more exuberant spins and turns. He was a much

better dancer than she was. It took all of Lydia's concentration just to keep up, but like him or not, she refused to let it be said she ever cheated a paying customer. A dance was what he'd asked for; she gave him every penny's worth. Up the sidewalk, down into the street, where moonlight and streetlamps were the only illumination. Two men dodged quickly out of their way or Garrett would have danced her right over the tops of them both.

Faster and faster he moved, until her light and proper touch upon his arm became the tightest grip she could manage, both at his hand and his shoulder. She yelped when she stumbled, but he did not let her fall. His arm became a python's grip about her waist and her feet completely left the ground as he swept her into a circle, smaller and smaller, faster and faster. Her yelp became a squeal and then an outright laugh. She didn't mean to, but it was as involuntary as the spinning of the whole world around them.

For just a few off-kilter seconds, they became as if the only two people in all of creation. For just a few seconds, she wasn't who and what she was, and he wasn't like every other white man she had met since her "rescue" from the "savages" one year before. For a moment, she was back in her village and Maska had just returned from the hunt. And it wasn't Garrett's arms that held her close like this, spinning her around and around. It was the father of her son, the light of her starry night, the owner of the first gentle touch she ever remembered back when she was three and he, no more than a horrified boy of ten, dragging her from the wreckage of the burning house he'd found her in. And then, more than a decade later when she barely remembered her days as Lydia and answered only to Mausi, her first gentle touch again as they came together as husband and wife.

Then her feet found the ground again, and the hands that weren't Maska's let her go. They spun apart, Garrett out into the street and Lydia toward the Red Petticoat. She caught a support post, the only thing that kept her from falling as what few tickles of laughter startled out of her quickly choked themselves off again. Slowly, the world stopped spinning and her smile vanished. Even more reluctantly, she fixed on Garrett again.

Bent, clasping his own knees, Garrett was grinning. His eyes seemed only for her, sparing little notice for the two stunned cowboys standing well back on the sidewalk or the dark silhouette of the sheriff walking towards them down the middle of the near empty street. At least not until Sheriff Justice called out in that easy-going, warm-as-summer's-molasses voice, "We don't allow those kinds of shenanigans in the streets, boy, and you know it."

Slowly straightening, Garrett ignored Sheriff Justice's warning. He inched towards her, his steps cautious and his tone soothing as he said, "Easy now."

As if she were a startled mare, all white-eyed and ready to bolt. Her heart racing, she barely realized she was doing it even as she shrank back against the support post.

"Easy." Garrett reached into his pocket. He took out the two ten-dollar coins, holding them up for her to see. "I've got four more just like these, and they're yours for half an hour upstairs in your bed."

He sidled a few steps closer, stretching out the coins for her to take. It wasn't until she snatched them from his hand that Lydia realized she was shaking. No gentle trembling, this. She was shaking so hard her legs barely supported her. If not for the post, she'd have fallen. Her chest ached. She wasn't breathing right. She pressed the coins to her chest, needing that physical confirmation that her breasts were still rising and falling. Her lungs felt no relief, but she knew she must be getting air.

"Half an hour," Garrett repeated, taking the yellow rose from his wristband and offering it to her. "I'll never hurt you, I swear it."

No, he wouldn't ever hurt her. Because she would never, ever again give another white man that chance.

Using the post for support, her head still spinning, Lydia drew herself up stiff and straight. "I hate yellow flowers."

It took all she had not to weave as she stalked up the sidewalk steps. Head held high, she walked back into the Red Petticoat Saloon, past Gabe who was standing guard at the door. He allowed Lydia to pass, but stepped in to block Garrett should he try to follow.

He didn't. Garrett came only as close as the edge of the wooden sidewalk; Lydia knew because he was still standing there the one and only time she looked back, watching what he could see of her beneath the swinging doors. Smiling, without a hint of judgment, he touched two fingers to the brim of his hat.

Her skin still sparked, electrified, sizzling everywhere he had touched her. She shuddered, hating the sensation, needing to get it off her and already knowing one way how. She pushed through the crowd until she found the Colonel standing at the faro table, two fingers of whiskey in his glass while he watched the game play, a sullen frown on his face. His frown did not lighten when she touched his arm.

“Give me two minutes. I’ll put my buckskins on.” Without waiting for his reply, she headed for the stairs. She hoped Garrett was watching. She hoped he continued to watch long enough to see the Colonel being escorted up behind her. She hoped thoughts of what the Colonel and she would do in her room haunted him all the way back to his ranch, because more than anything else, Lydia hoped he never came back to see her again.

But she already knew he would. He was nothing if not persistent.

He just kept coming back.