

Del Norte

A Western by Julia Robb

Text copyright December, 2013 Julia Robb

All Rights Reserved

**No part of this book may be used or reproduced
in any manner whatsoever without written
permission except in the case of brief quotations
embodied in critical articles and reviews.**

**Thanks to Jim Gressinger for allowing me to use
his wonderful photograph for Del Norte's cover
and Cliff Lawless for help with the cover design.**

For more information, see juliarobb.com.

**Other books by author
Scalp Mountain**

Saint of the Burning Heart

PROLOGUE

The white sandstone grave marker stood tall as a man and had a thin, sharp top, like a finger pointed at heaven. It read, “Ameríco Chapas, 1823-1868, Asesinado, Dios Lo Vengará.”

Murdered, God Will Avenge Him.

The carving was easy to read because it never stood above a grave in San Angela’s desolate cemetery, scoured by the sun’s translucent hammer while sinking into six feet of wind-swept dirt.

Instead, someone carved it, then lugged it down the street and

propped it against the back wall in Magdalena's saloon.

Thomas discovered the stone when he came to work after lunch one day, his usual time. He did his chores with drooping eyes; wiping the bar, washing and polishing glasses, emptying the spittoons, loading the shotgun.

A flash of white washed across his vision and he turned and saw the stone leaning against the dim back wall, shadowy, yet glowing.

What has she done?

Though the saloon was large, filled with wood tables and chairs, a faro table, a bar and back mirror that ran half the length of the building, the monument already dominated the space, as if Américo Chapas himself stood beside it, groaning about his

dismal fate: “Dios Lo Vengará.”

“Get rid of it, hire somebody to drag it to the graveyard where it belongs,” Thomas said to Magdalena, after she emerged from her rooms in the other half of the building.

“No,” she said, “Nobody remembers him but me, nobody cares, not even mama, not even Rosie.”

“This is trouble,” he said.

Magdalena knew Thomas was right; but since it was Thomas who asked her to remove the gravestone, she was forced to ignore him.

If she listened to him even once, about anything, where would it end?

So the marker stayed.

Chapter One

A man bent over her in the freezing boxcar and Sing Kum thought he was the most handsome male she had ever seen. Her lungs brimmed with so much liquid they wheezed and her body burned with fever, but she noted the man's clear dark eyes, blue ink hair, big bones and glowing brown skin. He was taller than most Chinese, almost as big as a white man.

She raised her arms like an infant, knowing he would save her, and he did. He scooped her up, eased off the car and ran, sprinting over rails, over couplings linking boxcars, detouring around engines snorting steam into gray air.

Minutes later, the man folded

himself under a doorframe, ran into a hut, laid her down on rags filling two joined packing crates, then piled stained quilts over her body.

It wasn't possible to stand under the low ceiling, so the man bent his knees and shuffled as he moved around the hut.

Filthy rags were the only defense against wind blowing through the warped, gray board walls, but a fire leaped in a shallow pit scooped from the dirt floor.

A fist-sized hole in the ceiling sucked some smoke up and out of the hut, but most of it swirled around them.

“Who are you?” the man asked, in Cantonese dialect.

“I am Sing Kum,” she said, then closed her eyes and let

warmth and sleep take her.

Sing slept for three days, waking only when her bladder filled, forcing her to leave the shelter—one in a long line of huts—and squat on the frosty ground.

On the third day, the fever evaporated, leaving her moist and cool.

“What is your name,” she asked the man.

“I am Lan,” he said in Cantonese, then added, in English, “I’m ace high.”

Ace high?

Lan forced tiny spoons of soup in her mouth, bit by bit, as though she were a baby bird.

“Eat, eat.”

Another sleep. She opened her eyes and saw Lan sitting by the fire, clutching his knees.

“When did you leave Canton,

why were you in the boxcar?" he asked.

"Evil men forced me on the ship and we sailed many weeks toward Gum Shan," Gold Mountain. "They told me I would live as a hundred men's wife. After many weeks, we came into the harbor, the evil men came and took me from the cabin and over the water in a little boat, then into a town built on hills."

"San Francisco."

"Yes. They pushed me through the streets, but they stopped for food and I ran until I saw the Tianlong dragon; I even saw his breathe puffing into the sky! I was afraid to touch it, but I saw the men coming so I climbed in the opening and found it was not a magical creature, but a box. Then it moved!"

Lan snorted. “It was a train.”

“I had no food and no water, I was so thirsty, but then the box ran over high mountains, up and up, and white water came down from the sky and floated inside; I know what it was, Mrs. Stewart, at the mission hospital in Canton, told me about snow. I gathered it up to drink. I was sick, then the box stopped and you found me.”

“You rode the cars all the way from San Francisco to Omaha?”

“What is Omaha?”

“Here. We are in Omaha, a town, in a state called Nebraska; states are like provinces in the Middle Kingdom, like Canton.”

Thinking a moment, Sing Kum concluded she might be luckier than she thought.

“Are you a man?” she asked, politely, reluctant to embarrass

him in case he was a heavenly being in disguise, like the ones Mrs. Stewart told her about.

“Yes, I am a man. What do you think I am?”

Blood rushed to her face and she breathed faster. She sat all the way up and felt her hair tumbling over her shoulders.

“Then, will you sell me back to the evil ones?” she asked.

Surely he would not, she concluded, but what if he wanted payment for her care and he could get it by selling her? She was valuable because she was young and pretty, only seventeen.

Sing approved of her slender arch of eyebrow and sensitive lips, and she liked her wide, wondering eyes. She didn't look like the other peasant girls, broad-faced, with coarse skin.

“No, I won’t sell a strong girl like you, who will prosper in this country. It was cold and you lived all the way from California. That’s very good.”

It was hard to disguise how much she liked the way his eyes filled with lights, like pieces of shattered glass, and the way his rough American clothes clung to his hard, muscled body.

“Did your family sell you?” he asked.

“Yes, the pigs rotted with a sickness, and it stopped raining.” Sing wrinkled her nose against the memories and the smelly quilts currently pulled to her chin. The quilts were grimy and the cotton sprang from the red and blue patches.

How can I trust him, she asked herself, but decided to believe he

was a good person because he rescued her, he fed her, and besides, what would she do without him?

Returning to her father's farm was impossible. How would she get there? Her father would just sell her again, and why would that be better than staying in this new land?

“How did you come here?” she asked.

“Say Omaha.”

“Omaha.”

“My friend, Ah Ti, said let's go to America. We took a ship at Canton harbor and went to California. We worked for the railroad. We built rails all the way to Utah and we dug tunnels through the mountains.

“One day he stood in the chair drilling a hole for dynamite, he put

the dynamite in the hole and boom, he was gone and we never found his body.”

“Ah Ti was crowbait,” Lan added, in English, shrugging, as if he were talking about a dog.

Crowbait? Dynamite?
Tunnels?

Sing Kum didn't know what to say. She knew people mourned for the dead—but she only knew this by watching what went on around her. She had never personally mourned anybody and knew nobody mourned her.

“What is crowbait?” she asked.

Preening, Lan said, again in English, “He was blown to smithereens.”

“The English word meaning small pieces?”

“Yes, but he was weak. He

wanted to return to the Middle Kingdom, he complained, he would not learn English.”

“But he was your friend.”

“Yes, but to prosper here, a man needs a strong heart. I have a strong heart. I will be somebody, I will be head of a prosperous family, I will not be a poor Han man who bows before Manchu.”

“But you are a Han. How can it be different?”

“I am an American, not a celestial. I will never return to Canton.”

“Where is California?”

“Where ships come in from the ocean. Your ship sailed into the harbor in San Francisco, in the province of California. Say Cal-i-for-ni-a,” he said, rolling it on his tongue, as if he were savoring a rice ball spiked with pickles.

“Cal-i-for-ni-a. I know how to speak English because Mrs. Stewart taught me,” she said, in Cantonese, then added, in English, “Nice meet yourself, my name Sing Kum.”

“You pronounce well. I could not speak English for the first three years, my tongue would not stay flat. Nobody knew what I said. Now I speak American.”

Switching to English, Lan said, “I learned a bang-up job.”

Bang-up job?

“I speak English because I listened in the hospital,” she said.

“What hospital?”

“My father...” Sing reverted to dialect. “He put me at a mission hospital in Canton, to work. He kept all my wén. Do you see these clothes? They gave me these clothes at the hospital, before my

father took me back to his house, to slave in his fields.”

“I want pretty, clean, new clothes, I want to wear silk,” she added, and was still so weak she could not prevent tears seeping from her eyes.

A Manchu woman once passed the hospital in a horse-drawn carriage, wearing a silk qipáo, embroidered with purple flowers and Sing daydreamed about that dress, what purple flowers would do for her eyes, how the silk would feel against her body.

Skin now gleamed through Sing’s frayed cotton pants and tunic, her long sleeves were tattered on the ends, and the cloth was so dirty it looked black rather than the original blue.

Just thinking about the lice,

which fed on her body, made Sing begin scratching.

“Well, if you stay with me, I will buy you new clothes,” Lan said.

“How will you be rich?”

“This is a great nation, everyone who works hard is rich, so money will also come to me.”

Leaning toward her, Lan—radiant, though his noise ran with smoke irritation—grabbed the back of his head: “You see, no queue! The Manchu won’t let Han men come back to China without a queue, so they will know us, so they can force us to kowtow to them, but I will never return. I am different from those peasants.”

“How did you earn wén, in Canton?”

“Some things this, some things that. Someday I will tell you my

story.”

Why did he refuse to tell her, she wondered, and in the quiet that followed remembered her father’s house. Sing tried not to think about her family, but she could see her father grabbing her hand and prying her fingers open, grabbing the coins she earned.

It still hurt. She wanted the wren to buy the dress, a hand mirror, earrings. She would have gladly given her father half her money, why did he take all of it? Why did men treat women like slaves?

They stayed in the hut two more days, then the third day, at dawn, Sing heard voices shouting, gunshots, steel pounding wood.

Jumping from his quilts, Lan grabbed her arms and pulled her toward the door, then turned back

and snatched the quilts from the floor and threw them over his shoulder. He groped for a bundle hiding behind a box, peeped out the door and then began running, clutching Sing's wrist.

Outside, men shot guns into the air, they ran up to the shelters with sledgehammers, pulled their arms back and hit the wood until it crumpled into boards.

Flames destroyed shelters. Sleepy people, most of them Chinese, stood looking around them, bewildered.

“Get out, get out, Union Pacific Railroad property,” the white men shouted at the people, who scattered before them.

Footsteps ran up behind her and something hit Sing's back; Lan turned, threw his burdens down and hit the attacker's neck

with his fist, punched the man's stomach—hit his bearded, twisted face.

Astonished, the attacker fell back and Lan doubled up his fists and slammed the attacker's nose, which broke with an audible crack and spray of blood.

Maybe Lan was not a real man, but a god like Lu Tung-Pin, Sing thought, dazzled with admiration, an immortal who rewarded her with a new life because she had been brave in the face of great danger.

That was the first and last day on the run.

If Lan had been anybody else, Sing knew they would have frozen in Omaha, been discovered huddled against a building, like two pieces of human petrified wood.

In China, the poor were discarded on the street like trash.

Instead, Lan led Sing past the fragrant restaurants in town, looking through windows, and then he stopped at The Delmonico, as if he knew something she didn't.

Peering in, Lan's nose squashed against frosty glass.

A group of men wearing leather on their legs and guns on their hips threw their coins on the table, then lugged their saddles outside, banging the door behind them.

Her protector picked the cowboys over with his eyes, walked to the man who swaggered most, imitated the expression on the white man's face—good-humored and tolerant—stuck his hand out and said, "I'm Johnny

Lan.”

Johnny?

Grinning, the cattle boss shook Lan’s hand: “You’re the first chinaman I ever met.”

An hour later, she and Lan were in charge of a chuck wagon and cooking three meals a day for ten hungry men, bumping up and down on the wagon seat as the horses pulled them south to the wide horizon.