

Chapter One

December 1876

*T*he wiry man bent his head low on his chest and kept his arms folded in front of him to conserve warmth as he shuffled faster up the frozen dirt path toward town. His wet robes hung heavily from his shoulders, stinking and covered with dirt. His wide brimmed flat beaver hat was pulled low over his head of shiny, bowl-cut black hair. He kept his chin close to his chest while his dark eyes darted ahead through the narrow slits of his eyelids. He was Chinese and if he should raise his head, some drunken cowboy may take offense and kill him on the spot. He was getting closer to town and he must be very careful not to offend anyone now. His lower back hurt unbearably, and although he was building the muscles, his arms ached. The sun was just coming up, turning the midnight sky shades of cherry blossom pink, and he would have to be opening the laundry very soon. He would take a short nap after he cleaned up, before he had to start washing shirts for the gamblers and the ladies. The miners disgusted him. They never washed anything. They stank of horseshit and sweat.

Hong Kee plodded faster through the freezing, ankle-deep mud that was a constant in the streets of Deadwood Gulch. Mud was not really the correct word for the mixture of natural moisture, piss and shit that mingled with the fine mica glittered dirt. Even though it was very early and the cold was like a snake crawling up under his clothes to bite his skin, he passed many people beginning their day with chores. The discovery of gold less than a year ago had caused the camp to grow quickly, and in just a few short months, there were now what some thought to be more than 10,000 people crammed

into the narrow canyon along Whitewood Creek. They brought animals, hardware, liquor, building and a lot of stink with them.

He had been here for almost six months now. It seemed so much longer. He was very close to success. He mustn't give up yet. He would try to visit the opium dens before he left to dig again tonight. It made the work seem lighter and helped him to think about his family back in China waiting for his return. He had written to them, telling them he would return to make them all rich. They must be so excited. He neared his little shack in the Chinese section of Deadwood and thought of a warm cup of tea.

His home was a quickly built shack made of thin slices of pine nailed to a pine frame with a tar paper roof, about twenty-five feet wide by fifty feet long. It stretched from the edge of a well-used and muddy Main Street to an alleyway behind for unseen trafficking between buildings in the section of town known as Chinatown. Chinatown was relegated to the lower end of Main, after the badlands, a row of brothels and saloons, and even farther north, upper Main, where the hotels, restaurants, respectable theaters and even churches were located.

He reached the door of his home at the back of the laundry. He quickly pulled the door shut and after waiting a few moments to make sure he wasn't being followed, he pulled his dirty skirts up and drew a nice sized deerskin bag out of his stocking. He pushed a stack of crates to the side, revealing a hole in the rough-hewn pine floorboards. He pulled a long thick knife from beneath his robes, a parting gift from his father-in-law. The fine bone handle was inset with mother of pearl, the blade honed to a sharp edge. He used it to carefully begin to dig away at the soft dirt underneath the floor. In a moment he had uncovered a stash of soft dirty deerskin sacks glittering with mica dust just like the one resting at his feet. He lovingly lined them up and counted them. Eleven, yes, they were all there.

He took each bag, pulled the drawstring open and spilled a little of the contents into his hand. The little pieces of jagged frosty white and orange quartz were topped with chunks of golden glitters and they almost seemed to dance in his hand. The big mines had stamp-mills that crushed the rocks with a deafening noise that echoed through the camp, but he would wait until he got home. He could not risk exposure. He was Chinese.

If he worked just a couple of more weeks, he would have enough to be considered wealthy back home. His wife and children would be treated much differently after he arrived with such riches. He dug the hole deeper and gently lowered all twelve bags in, then covered them up again and moved the crates back into place. He scanned the area with bloodshot eyes. Satisfied that no one would notice that the crates had been moved, he shuffled toward the stove and lit a fire to warm the tiny room and then made his way to the stiff little cot in the corner that served as his bed. His exhaustion pushed all thoughts of hot tea from his head.

He would have to be careful not to sleep too long. The cowboys and occasional gunfighter who came to his laundry were very impatient. His ancestors would not be happy if he were foolish enough to be killed when he was so close to his goal.

Hong Kee had found the old man dying in the snow under a low gray sky. It was obvious he was a miner from the clothes he wore and the tools he carried. His wrinkled old face was as thick as leather and as dark as tobacco juice. His pale blue eyes were clouded and his long thin hair was whiter than the snow, giving him the aura of a ghostly being. He was wasted and thin and weighed little more than a bag of laundry. Hong Kee would have just taken him to the doctor in town and left him there, except that as he carried the old man into town, a bag had fallen from his pocket. In it were several good-sized chunks of quartz covered with gold nuggets.

Hong Kee tended the old man himself, hoping to discover the source of his wealth. As the old miner lay dying and delirious with fever on the little cot in Hong Kee's shack, he mumbled about the night and the mother lode.

Hong Kee wasn't sure he understood everything the man said in his heavily Dutch accented effort at English. He was confused and wondered why the old man insisted on calling out about the night. The old face shed wrinkles and virtually came back to life as he dreamed about the day he found it. He had found the man elected to register claims and gave him the marks for his log. The hills were steep and the rock was hard, making the work nearly impossible for an old man. So he had sent for his grandson to come and help him and the old man was anxious that he should show up before he died. He cleverly registered it all in the youngster's name, just in case he died before his arrival. He had been very careful to conceal the entrance to the little mine and had shrewdly piled brush at the entrance to keep claim jumpers from robbing it.

The frail old miner drew his last breath on the morning of the third day and Hong Kee set out to find the hidden treasure. The snow had begun to melt a little, although it was bound to snow again. Winter was far from over. It took him four days of searching to find the entrance, even though he knew from which direction the old miner had been coming as he found him and what to look for. The mine was a rectangular hole about five feet high by three feet wide, chipped out of solid rock about ten yards into the side of a steep hill. The location near the top of the rocky hill, and the tailings dumped just outside the entrance, made it hard to spot from below, near the creek, where anyone normally would explore the small side canyon. The old man had done a good job of keeping the entrance small and low so it would be harder to find. The brush he had piled before the entrance concealed it even further.

Hong Kee knew nothing about mining, but it didn't take him long to figure out how to chip the golden mineral from the hard rock. It wasn't tough to find in the little hole. Gold was clinging to the side of the wall of the cramped tunnel in a fully exposed vein of quartz. Hong Kee was sure there was more gold in the hill further on, but he had no intention of wasting time digging any more tunnel. The grandson could show up any day and discover that he had jumped his claim and Hong Kee would end up dead very quickly. He would take as much gold as he could from the exposed deposit and make his way back home to China a rich man. Greed could ruin his good fortune. ✨

Chapter Two

July 2006

*I*t was hot. The sweat had been pouring down his muscled back through his dirty white T-shirt all morning and it wasn't even noon yet. The weather was hard to figure out. One day it was 60 degrees and the next over 100. He looked up at the sun through squinted eyes and decided he would take a break after he finished moving this pile of wood chips into the next truck. He was just grateful for the cool breeze that occasionally blew off the pines. The air had such a clean, pine scent, but the pile of chips must be getting rotten on the bottom, because it didn't smell so good. The acrid stench of decay stung his nostrils. He shifted in the seat of the loader so that the can of chew in his back pocket didn't bite into his back-side and went back to scooping the dusty chips into the waiting truck.

He was moving the big rusted bucket into the last of the back of the pile when something caught his eye. The bright color was out of place here in the woods. The mounds of chips were at the back of the lumber yard property where they would be out of the way until they were needed. Consequently, there were very few people who ventured out this far into the yard, so when he saw the flash of blue fabric it immediately set off an alarm in his brain. He really didn't want to get down and check it out. He wanted to finish the load so he could take a break and cool off. But something made him jump down from his seat onto the hard packed ground.

As he moved around the front of the machine, his stomach began to rise and his heart began to race. He stopped and stared at the body, partially emerged from the pile. It was all he could do to keep from crying out. He stared at the face. The girl's eyes were open

wide as if in shock and between the parted white lips crawled a gnat. Wood chips were stuck to her everywhere. He sunk to his knees and covered his face with his big dirty hands, peeking out between his fingers, as his breath came faster and harder until it became big gasping sobs that started in his gut. He knew the face. He had even kissed the face once or twice in the past. The closest he had ever come to death before had been to lean over his grandpa's coffin in the clean and quiet funeral parlor and whisper good-bye. He knew this would wake him in the middle of the night for a long time to come. He leaned forward and heaved his breakfast over the parched rocky ground.



Gretchen woke up in a great mood, which was very unusual for her. It helped that she didn't have to get up so early this morning. She was definitely not a morning person. Maybe it was age, but mornings were getting harder all the time. The old house smelled good this morning. The windows were open all night and the fresh summer air blowing through the forest really helped to clean out the musty smell that radiated from the 100-year-old-plus rock-walled basement. The sun was shining and she knew it was late, but what the heck, she didn't have to work at the store until one this afternoon. She looked at the clock, nine-thirty, perfect.

She showered and made her way down the hall to her son's room. She peeked in and saw he was still sleeping. At fifteen, Danny was big for his age. He stood six-foot-two and weighed at least one-seventy-five. His sandy blond hair and clear blue eyes he had thanks to his mother, but the easy-going, come-what-may attitude and unrelenting patience he inherited from his father. She was glad he had not inherited his father's sudden temper. Gretchen was glad he

was such a good kid because it would be hard to spank him anymore now. She smiled, sure that he had stayed up until two or three in the morning playing his new computer game. Danny was the smartest kid she knew, and it wasn't because she was his mother. He pulled straight A's in school while working part-time at her store downtown.

Gretchen closed the door so she wouldn't wake him and walked to the front door for the newspaper. Since the divorce, she enjoyed sitting by herself and reading the paper over a cup of tea. At thirty-six, Gretchen was aging well. The divorce five years ago had helped her shed two-hundred and twenty-five unwanted pounds, two-hundred of them belonged to her ex, and giving her the size six figure she always wanted and the freedom she craved. Her shoulder-length honey blond hair offset her deep blue eyes. She was pretty, sometimes too pretty. She found it could be difficult to conduct serious business with a man while he was staring at her breasts or making moon-pie eyes at her.

She had spirit and took what life dealt with an attitude that suggested she knew what was coming and had already prepared for it. In truth, there were certain parts of her life that still lacked certainty and that bothered her. She liked things neat and tidy, with no loose ends.

Moving to Deadwood was an act of desperation, but it had turned out to be the best move she could have made. Her little clothing store on Main Street was doing all right and it gave her an opportunity to be with Danny when he worked for her, cleaning up and sometimes acting as a sales clerk. She had made a lot of friends already and felt as though she were no longer an outsider, but a native. The night life appealed to her and the small town atmosphere gave her an opportunity to get out and still feel safe.

She spent the morning puttering around the kitchen, cleaning

the house, and making a dinner for Danny that he could microwave later. The house was old, with a lot of character, and she kept it spotless. She finished fixing her face and got dressed for work. She woke Danny up at noon and, after giving him a list of chores and a hug, she grabbed her keys and headed for the front door.

As she opened the heavy wooden door to leave she gasped in surprise and almost ran into the man standing on the front porch.

"Rick! What are you doing out here? You almost scared me to death," she gasped clutching her throat.

Rick was dressed in his "police uniform," a checkered shirt and blue jeans. As Chief of Police he had the option of wearing whatever he wanted to work and he chose the casual look. He said it kept those with whom he came in contact a little more at ease, but the gun and handcuffs hanging from his belt gave him away as a cop. He wrinkled his forehead and looked down at the paint peeling from the floor decking. "I'm sorry Gretchen. I've been standing here trying to avoid knocking on your door."

She squinted her eyes and one side of her mouth raised slightly as she studied him. It was obvious something was wrong. "What is it?" she asked apprehensively.

"I really hate this part of my job," he whispered. He grabbed her by the arm and turned her back toward the door. "Let's go inside. I need to talk to you."

Gretchen was really worried now. Rick and his wife, Linda, had been drinking buddies on several occasions while patronizing the saloons downtown. She could tell that this was not going to be happy news. They moved into the small living room and sat on the couch. Rick sat close and kept his hand almost protectively on her arm.

"I have some really bad news." He hesitated and drew a deep breath as if it would help to clear a path for the words. His eyes

teared and his voice shook. "Jennie Murray's body was found this morning up at Sutler's Mill. We think she was murdered. I'm really sorry Gretchen, I know you were very close." He lifted his hand to his face and wiped away the tears that had escaped down his cheeks.

She listened to him and sat in shock as his words began to soak in. "How... What..." She couldn't finish the sentence. The tears came to her eyes slowly. Gretchen didn't like to cry. In fact, she detested it. Crying had never been tolerated by her parents and she had learned the lesson well. The few that spilled out now were endured only for a few moments before she gained control and willed them to stop. But her chest began to feel heavy and the ache in her heart grew like it was a sponge soaking up spilled vinegar.

"If there's anything I can do...." Rick sat bowed slightly forward his face contorted with despair, the tears still spilling down his cheeks.

"Rick, what happened?" Gretchen whispered.

"We don't know for sure yet. We've just started the investigation." He stopped and slowly lifted a pad and pencil from his pocket with great effort, as if it weighed a ton. "When was the last time you saw Jennie?"

Gretchen thought for a moment and ran the last few days through her mind's eye. "I think it must have been Tuesday night. I stopped at the Number 10 for a drink after I closed the store and she was working. We talked about borrowing some horses to go for a ride on Saturday, tomorrow. She said she wanted to see something up near., Oh God, she said she wanted to look at something out near Sutler's Mill."

Gretchen turned her face, looked out the window at the sun shining through the trees and thought, "Jennie's never going to see that again. Jennie's never going to see anything again. Why?"

"Gretchen, can you think of anything else she might have said

that could be important?"

He sucked down a sob. Embarrassed, he quickly looked away.

"No, not right now," she said, looking at him suspiciously through the corners of her eyes. She wondered what that was about. He was acting pretty strangely. He must have conducted investigations before, but from his demeanor today you wouldn't be able to tell it.

"You're sure. I mean, did she talk about anyone in particular that she might be involved with. You know that might have had a reason to do this?" he pressed. He turned to study her face, staring into her eyes.

"I'm sure. Jennie didn't talk about the men she went out with. It wasn't something she shared, with me anyway."

Gretchen caught a glimpse of Danny's curious eyes peeking around the corner from the kitchen. He had heard them talking and was trying to hear the whole story.

Rick gripped her shoulder and said softly "Well, if anything comes to mind, please call me, okay?"

"Yes, of course I will." Gretchen thought that he was pretty intense, but it was the first murder Deadwood had seen in quite a long time and he would have a tough job keeping hysteria to a minimum. In Deadwood it wasn't only the old women who enjoyed tossing gossip like a bowl of fresh greens in dressing.

"Look," Rick said as he laid his hand over hers, "I'm really sorry to have to ask this of you, but I need you to identify the body. Jennie's only living relative is her grandmother and even if I thought she would make it through the ordeal, I couldn't stand to make her do it. Do you think you would be up to it?" he pleaded. His eyes were still moist and they had that sad puppy turn to them.

She didn't want to, but what else was she supposed to do? He was right, Jennie's grandma was nearly ninety years old. So she went

into the kitchen and filled Danny in on the parts of the story he hadn't overheard and then asked him to go down and work her shift at the store. She rode to the county morgue with Rick in his black and white.

On the way she began to question him. "How did she die Rick? I have to know."

"It looks like it was a blow to the head. I doubt she ever felt a thing. One of the guys working up at the mill found her in a pile of wood chips he was moving. It really shook him up. We don't think she could have been there more than a day and a half. It seems like whoever did it wanted her to be found. They picked a spot where they knew someone would be working. The guys at the mill had been moving piles of chips over in that area for the last several days." He stopped and glanced at her. "Are you doing okay? I mean I know this is a shock for you since you two were so close."

"You know, I think I'm more mad than shocked. Who would do this to her? She was so sweet and yeah, I know she slept around, everyone knew that, but she was a good person. I mean look at how she took care of her grandma all these years. She worked her butt off at two jobs just to keep that old house of theirs. Did you know that it has been in their family since 1902? What's going to happen to the old lady and the house now?"

"I don't know. I doubt she'll be able to keep it. She'll probably have to go into a low-income rest home down in Rapid City."

"Who did it Rick? Who did it?" She fought the tears as her chest tightened. She thought of Jennie just a few days ago, so happy and in love with life.

"Wish I knew. But I will find out, don't worry." His words were ground through clenched teeth. ❄