

JEANNIE LIN



THE LADY'S
SCANDALOUS NIGHT

Undone!

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Аннотация

Tang Dynasty China, 759 A. D. Yao Ru Jiang, known as River, has woven many romantic dreams of honorable swordsman Wei Chen from her brother's stories. Their meeting should have been a happy event; instead, Chen arrives to tell River he is duty bound to kill her brother for rebelling against the warlord they both serve. River would do anything to distract the handsome, conflicted warrior from his mission—even take him as a lover. . . .

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Yao Ru Jiang, known as River, has woven many romantic dreams of honorable swordsman Wei Chen from her brother's stories. Their meeting should have been a happy event; instead, Chen arrives to tell River he is duty bound to kill her brother for rebelling against the warlord they both serve.

River would do anything to distract the handsome, conflicted warrior from his mission—even take him as a lover....

Author Note

The Lady's Scandalous Night stemmed from all those late nights at my grandmother's house, watching Hong Kong and Japanese melodramas on television with "the cousins". My idealistic young mind was always tortured that these young, beautiful couples had to sacrifice themselves and their love for the sake of honor and duty.

This story is linked to *The Dragon and the Pearl* and takes place alongside the larger story. The two tales can be read in any order and it's my hope that reading one will enhance the other. I was fascinated by the idea of two sword brothers pitted against each other. These warriors swore an oath to serve their master, yet one of them has broken it. I was also inspired by the idea of arranged marriage. Though a prospective husband and wife often met for the first time on their wedding day, an arranged marriage was an agreement between two families, often with much history and context behind it.

What if all these vows of honor came into conflict with one another all at once?

A few historical notes: The late Tang Dynasty is known for the rise of the *jiedushi*, warlords who were often promoted from the field out of necessity. Governor Li Tao is protected by a fictional elite group of fighters known as a *Rising Guard*, which is an homage to the historical *LongWu* or *Dragon Martial* guard that

formed within the imperial army.

The Dragon and the Pearl is about the warlord Li Tao, whereas The Lady's Scandalous Night is a story about the swordsmen who served him. As always, I hope you find this peek into the Tang Dynasty as intriguing as I have. The more I explore imperial China, the more I'm swept away.

For more background information, you can find me online at <http://www.jeannelin.com>. I always love hearing from readers!

Acknowledgements

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Most importantly, a heartfelt thanks to my editor Anna Boatman for always respecting the story and helping me untangle the many threads of this tale to turn it into something beautiful.

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Chapter 1

Tang Dynasty China, 759 A.D.

The shop was exactly as Chen had imagined it. The cabinets were fashioned from dark, polished cherrywood. The counter kept meticulously clean. He stepped up to it and a shadow moved in the back room. A shape through the beaded curtain.

The Yao family sold paper. They had a mill and purchased logs transported down the Great River from forests west of there. All these things Chen knew from so many stories, told over so many days. More details than he remembered of his very own family, which he'd left behind to serve in Governor Li's army when he was little more than a boy. Chen was no longer a common soldier, of rank too insignificant to mention. He was a trained swordsman and a trusted bodyguard who would die to protect his master.

As Yao Ru Shan had been. Once.

The curtain at the back of the shop parted. A middle-aged man appeared and greeted Chen with proper deference, but it was the figure still beyond the curtain that held Chen's attention. The young woman sat at her desk with a brush in hand. He only had one glance before the strands fell back in place. The wooden beads tapped together in muted harmony.

He had already memorized the curve of her neck and the perfect angle of her wrist as she bent over her writing. From

across the room, filtered through the beaded barrier, there was nothing more to see but form and shape. But the shape of her was enough to capture his thoughts.

The clerk bowed behind the counter. "Honored sir, what can we do for you?"

"I am looking for Master Yao Hui-Rong."

At that, the woman stood. Chen watched her shadow approach from the corner of his eye. Before the clerk could answer, the curtain parted once again.

"Yao Hui-Rong is my father."

And now she became more than an elegant silhouette. More than a name he had repeated to himself in the dark.

"Lady Yao."

Chen greeted her, palm to fist, head bowed. In the moment before he lowered his eyes, he'd already taken in more than was polite. She resembled her brother and she didn't. Her features were strong, but tempered. Her hair was coiled tight and fixed with ebony pins. Her mouth was small and curved, the only part of her that could be considered soft. Ru Shan called her River.

When Chen straightened, River wasn't looking at him. Instead her gaze had fixed onto the sword at his side.

"I apologize. My father is ill." Her voice sounded strained. She must have noted it, because when she spoke again it was forcibly clearer. "If you have any news..."

This was harder than he thought it would be. "It is of the utmost importance I speak to him directly."

She looked to the clerk and then back to him. Her robe was blue, nearly black, like the fading twilight. The collar of it closed high around her throat. It was unnecessarily austere, he found himself thinking.

“Then I can take you to him. If you can watch the shop, Liao?” She turned uncertainly to the clerk, who nodded.

River came around the counter to stand deliberately apart from him. “My manners are nowhere to be found. Your name?”

“Wei Chen. I served with your brother in the military governor’s first battalion.”

“I’m Yao Ru Jiang,” she murmured.

Jiang. River. He’d always thought it sounded pretty. “An honor,” he replied.

He waited for her to recognize his name, but she averted her eyes as she started past. Perhaps it was too much to hope. Too needful. The clerk Liao bowed once, as an afterthought, and then followed them with his eyes as Chen followed River out into the street.

“Our house is outside of town,” she explained.

He knew that as well. Ru Shan had told him of this town, the mill, and of his younger sister. Chen had devoured every word and used the images to fill in empty moments and empty spaces within. He’d never thought that he would have to use this knowledge to hunt down his comrade, the brother of his heart.

“My horse is at the stable,” he offered.

“Our home is not far.” Her eyes grew wide before she turned

away, blushing. "I'd...I'd prefer to walk."

Was it the prospect of riding with him that made her so nervous? Etiquette demanded that he do something quickly to ease her mind and set their interaction back on steady ground. He wanted to do this properly, or as properly as could be expected.

"The lady is right, it would be a shame to waste this sunshine."

He took her side at a respectable distance. River snatched a brief sideways glance at him before casting her eyes downward. He found his palms sweating.

They continued wordlessly to the edge of town. From there, a dirt path led toward the river.

"I haven't been completely honest with you," he said, breaking the silence.

She paused for a moment, her lips pressed tight, then continued down the path.

"I knew your brother well. I consider Ru Shan—" He faltered. "I consider him a friend."

"It is always good to meet friends."

Her words were brittle. She knew. Even this far within the province, they would have heard reports of the unrest as well as rumors of who was instigating the rebellion. When he first learned of Ru Shan's treachery, he hadn't believed it. Doubt was quickly replaced by confusion, then anger. Now he didn't know what to feel as he hunted for Ru Shan.

"He spoke often of you," Chen continued. "Ru Shan and Ru Jiang. Mountain and river." He fumbled for more. It was difficult

to walk beside her. It was difficult to be pleasant while he held back what he'd come to tell her. "It seems very poetic."

"Our family only makes the paper. We know nothing about the poetry written on it."

"I'm no poet either," he admitted.

"No, you're a swordsman. A trained killer."

Her directness took him aback, but she was right. He deserved this coldness from her.

He was trained. An expert. A clean death was a mercy, in a way. The final mercy and the only one he could give.

She had to get the swordsman away from town. There were too many people who could have seen her brother come and go. One seemingly harmless comment could mean his death.

River knew the men of the first battalion were fiercely loyal. They had honed their skills with the sword, the knife and the bow. They would follow an oath of honor through all the layers of hell.

Now one of those men walked beside her: sleek, silent and predatory. Ru Shan had spoken of this man like a brother, not this hard-edged warrior beside her. They had suspected someone would come, but she hadn't expected it to be Wei Chen. Her heart pounded and she grew faint as the blood rushed through her. She'd been wrong about him, so wrong.

"You're tall," Chen said.

She frowned, struggling to find a suitable response.

"You're taller than I imagined," he amended.

Why would he care to fill the silence with this and that?

“My brother is tall,” she replied.

Her hands were shaking. She tucked them into her sleeves to hide them, and remained focused on the path ahead as they left the town behind them. His eyes were on her. She was certain he could see her guilt and sense the heat burning beneath her skin. Some careless remark could send this hunter after her brother.

The courtyard house stood on the river across the bend from the mill. They came to a halt outside the front. River paused with her hand on the wooden gate and forced herself to look directly at him.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me,” he said, almost gently.

“I don’t believe you.”

Of all things, her lack of trust seemed to wound him. This hardened, steel-eyed soldier who faced death and dealt it in the same breath.

“You don’t know me, but I served with your brother among Governor Li Tao’s trusted bodyguards,” he explained. “Recently Ru Shan was released from the governor’s service. The circumstances were—not ideal.”

Her brother had been marched into the forest for execution. At the last moment, Governor Li had relented. Ru Shan should have just come home and then none of this would be happening. Her heart ached to think of it.

“My brother did speak of you,” she admitted.

Ru Shan had spoken Chen’s name many times to her father and to her. Chen was accomplished, highly skilled, disciplined.

Had the warlord known to send the one man her brother would refuse to fight?

“My brother told me that you saved his life when he first went to battle.” She watched his face, searching for signs of the friend her brother so admired. “Our family owes you a great debt.”

Chen’s eyes grew cold. “That was a long time ago. Any debt that exists is only between your brother and me.”

“He hasn’t come here.”

She’d spoken too hastily. The swordsman pinned her with his gaze and she struggled not to look away while heat rose up the back of her neck.

“I know,” he said after a pause.

Chen had searched through the town, as she suspected, though it seemed he hadn’t interrogated the inhabitants yet. Otherwise he might have discovered that Ru Shan had been there. Her brother was still too close, only three days’ ride away.

“Why do you wish to speak to my father?” she asked.

“Ru Shan and I are brothers, in spirit if not in blood. I came to pay my respects to your family, as I should have done long ago.” His tone was calm. So calm. “And then I must apologize.”

“Apologize?”

A flicker of emotion crossed his face, too fleeting for her to catch. A chill traveled down her spine. Her next breath wouldn’t come.

“His shame is my shame.” Chen squared his shoulders before her. He was taller than Ru Shan. Stronger. Colder. “I must

apologize for the sorrow I will inevitably bring you when I'm forced to kill him.”

Chapter 2

Chen didn't threaten so much as promise. It would do no good to beg or plead. His decision had been made. River could see it in the set of his jaw and the way his tone never wavered.

She knew of the stories of the military governor's ruthlessness. Li Tao showed no mercy. His men were the same, except for Ru Shan. Her brother had never belonged among those mercenaries. She'd thought Chen would be different as well, but her first impression was obviously correct: duty came first with him.

"That is unfortunate." Her voice came out strained. She swallowed to try to regain it. "But expected."

"I am truly sorry."

Chen bowed and she wanted to shout at him. What use were such manners after what he'd just told her? But she had to remain calm.

"If I can speak to Master Yao, I will leave and no longer burden you with my presence."

Leave to hunt down Ru Shan. What did etiquette demand she say after a man she'd never met announced he would kill her brother?

"You must stay for dinner."

Chen frowned. Let him be confused. That was her one task now: to keep the swordsman distracted for as long as she could.

"The Yao family is not entirely without honor." She regarded

him pointedly. "And we have nothing to hide."

She pushed the gate open and stepped into the enclosed courtyard. After a pause, Chen's footsteps sounded behind her and she breathed with relief. The servants came to greet them, expressing surprise that she was home so early. The head attendant shot her a meaningful glance. Liao had made it home before her then. He'd warned the others.

"Our honored guest will be staying for dinner," she said. "Prepare tea for him."

"Please don't trouble yourself," Chen protested.

"But you must be tired from your journey."

Another objection lingered on his lips. She insisted again, and he finally relented. Such a simple, familiar pattern of etiquette. It was almost a comfort to be distracted in this way.

"Lady Yao." He must have read something in her gaze. His expression softened. "If the situation had been different—"

She caught a hint of sadness in his deep-set eyes. Their meeting was supposed to be a happy occasion. Ru Shan should have been there to introduce them, as he'd always promised he would.

River wanted to believe Chen was too courteous to be a hardened killer. He had a good face. One that looked sincere. She'd had so many silly, girlish dreams woven around this man and each one opened now and bled.

Chen was supposedly trustworthy and righteous, but his righteousness made him dangerous. He would always adhere to

the strict code of fighting men and Ru Shan had broken that code. For sword brothers, one man's honor was equally shared. One man's shame, also equally shared. Even she understood that much.

"I'll go speak to my father," she said and Chen nodded solemnly.

She assigned one of the servants to take him to the parlor. The moment they disappeared from the courtyard, she hurried to Father's study. Liao was waiting there, pacing in a small circle behind the desk.

"Master Yao has been told," the clerk reported.

"Keep my father hidden," she instructed. "You must get him away tonight."

"But how? With the governor's man here..."

She'd invited Chen to dinner with a purpose. Within the walls of their house, she could control what he heard and saw. "I'll distract the swordsman while you take Father and the others to safety. Stay with him in the south or...or go as you will. You've done your duty."

There wasn't enough time to change their original plan. Liao would gather horses and wagons. The household would be smuggled away in the night.

"But what about you?" Liao asked.

"I have to stay."

The loyal clerk shook his head. "My lady, we can delay the swordsman for you."

She held up her hand to silence him. Wei Chen was a master with the broadsword. Deadly accurate, Ru Shan had boasted. Liao and the servants would be cut to pieces. And even if they did succeed in subduing Chen, they would only bring Governor Li Tao's wrath on all of them for daring to strike at one of his warriors. She needed to keep him here, where he could be controlled.

"He trusts me."

"This servant won't run while the lady stays!"

"You will," she said so forcefully that Liao fell silent. "Wei Chen won't hurt me." She didn't know that for certain. "I'll come and find you when it's safe." And now she was lying.

The ruthless warlord had sent only one man after her brother. If Chen failed, more men would come, but as long as Chen was alone her family had a chance to escape.

Ru Shan had made his life or death choice and dragged them all down with him. This was her own life or death choice. She'd never known she could lie so steadily. Her hands no longer trembled.

"It has to be me," she said quietly.

Wei Chen had looked at her. The sorrow within him had captured her for a fleeting moment and the unspoken promise hung between them. They were supposed to meet and, if all the stars aligned, perhaps even marry. It was a future that was now forsaken, but it still connected them. She would use that bond to gain his trust. It was the only way to save her brother and her

father.

Liao remained hidden in the study while she left to prepare. She spoke to each servant personally to make sure they understood their tasks. Then she retreated to her room.

Her belongings had been packed. They had intended to leave that night. They would escape under the cover of darkness and become fugitives in the shadows. Everything that their family had built over generations was fading away. The mill stood empty. The paper shop would close. She was empty, all hope for a normal life gone.

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