

# SHAKEDOWN

BY  
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## Chapter 1

The tramp steamer cleared the final breakwater at the mouth of the harbor as it labored into San Francisco Bay. Langton hung back from the other passengers huddling the rail straining for the first glimpse of their destination. Almost all his fellow passengers were shoddily dressed and reeked of poverty, more than likely would-be gold miners who'd found only hunger and cold in the snow-choked passes of the Klondike.

Langton certainly didn't look or feel much better. He'd been forced to hop the steamer out of Portland with only a few spare belongings in a saddlebag and cash in a money belt when Dineen and his Wells Fargo bloodhounds were closing their trap on him. He had bribed the wrong person in the company for information on upcoming shipments, and they had come very close to pinning him down in his hotel.

Langton wasn't surprised at the stoolie's treachery; after all, if Wells Fargo couldn't trust him, why should he? He had pried from his informant a few details on a jewellery delivery by train to Frisco, but for all he knew now, it could be another trap set for him by Dineen, security chief for the company and Langton's sworn enemy.

The only uncertainty nagging Langton now was what would be waiting for him at the dock. He wasn't sure if he had covered his tracks in his rush from Dineen and his hired guns. Perhaps they had picked up his trail and traced him to this boat. If so, there was sure to be a welcoming party dockside, with cold steel and hot lead to greet him, not warm handshakes.

The landing dock loomed larger on the starboard bow. Langton avoided giving into the temptation to push through the crowd to examine the waiting crowd dockside; he wanted to be sure to spot any welcoming party before they saw him.

He peered over the shoulder of one of the hard-luck miners and scanned the milling figures for familiar faces. So far so good ... he didn't see anyone packing a gun, or any heavies standing together in small groups.

The weatherbeaten steamer slowly lumbered into position parallel to the docks. Two sailors stepped forward from the captain's cabin, and began to untie the ropes holding the gangway against the outer wall of the ship's stack. The boat slowly eased into its berth.

Langton looked down between the hull and the planking of the dock. Froth bubbled up from the beating of the ship's propellers, and the hull thudded rhythmically against the wooden pilings, slipping back a few feet to expose a thin strip of dirty brown water before swinging back to slam the dock again. Langton ran his right hand over the heavy Colt .45's strapped against his thighs, hidden from sight by the long, frayed buckskin jacket he had won in a poker game two nights before from a panned-out prospector.

The gangway slid into place to connect the rocking boat with dry land, and the first passengers began to slowly test their way down. Langton took one last look through the crowd gathering dockside to greet the members of the landing party, and satisfied he was not expected, milled in with the press of bodies making their way to the gangway.

As he placed his deerskin boot on the first step of the ramp, his right hand froze on the railing. A familiar figure stepped out from behind a pile of lumber stacked on the edge of the dock, and leered an unhealthy smile as he saw Langton at the head of the gangway.

Dineen ... the man who had dogged his steps, stalked him relentlessly ever since Langton had first relieved Wells Fargo of some of its surplus cash ... nestled his hand on the butt of his gun in its hip holster, and motioned for two other heavysset men to approach. Together they took up positions at the end of the ramp, supremely confident they quarry was boxed in.

"Come on, fella, what's the holdup? Move on or get out of the way!" Angry voices rose sharply behind Langton, and impatient, jostling hands began to push on his back and shoulders. Below him, Dineen advanced one, two slow steps up the gangway, and brought the dark borehole of his revolver to bear on Langton's middle.

With his left hand, Langton brought up his saddlebag and threw it heavily at Dineen, spoiling his aim and throwing him momentarily off balance. He brought his whole weight to pivot on his right wrist, swung his legs over the side of the gangway, and pitched down into the green-brown surf pounding against the dock's pillings, disappearing from sight.

Dineen swore, dashed up to the middle of the gangway, and brought his gun around over the edge to point to the water below. The boat shifted in its rhythm, and swung over to slam against the structure with a shuddering blow. Moments later, as the ship once more surged out from the dock, there was not a shadow of a target to shoot at.

## Chapter 2

Langton fought for his bearings in the cold murk between the ship and the dock, and struck the surface in panic. His lungs were hot and hurt like hell. His legs were somewhere below him, but they would not respond as he wished.

The heavy iron guns pulled him down. Langton quickly released his holster belt, and the coal-black Colts slid from his hips and began their slide to the deeper darkness below. There was little time left now, his lungs yearned to expel their burning burden.

With one last desperate look from his icy legs, his head broke the surface, and he pushed the waste air out of his hot lungs. His hands found a slimy, cold pillar in the gloom, and he wrapped his body

around it. He inhaled several lungfuls of the stale air, and looked to see where he was.

Thin strips of faint sunlight shone through the slats of the boardwalk five feet above his head. The dark bulk of the ship loomed ten feet to his right in the dock. Footsteps pounded, and voices rose in anger. Dineen's and those of his flunkies.

"If the bastard shows his head, shoot him straight away! Do you understand? I'm not letting him get away again this time!"

It was time to move. Langton felt for the belt strapped around his waist, satisfied that his cash was safe around his midriff and not still in the bag he had thrown at Dineen. He began moving from pillar to pillar, stopping only to push flotsam out of his path as he moved away down the dockside from the ship's berth. The air was loathsome, and Langton did not let his eyes linger on the dark indeterminate shapes floating in the cold water.

He was not as far from the ship as he would prefer when he emerged from under the dock, but the cold water was beginning to numb his arms and legs. He would have to take his chances and resurface here. It might be all right if he could get topside before they spotted him. He wouldn't have much chance, unarmed and exposed, crawling onto the dock.

Luck was with him this time. A low crate screened his lanky frame from sight as he slithered onto the rough-hewn planking of the dock. Shivering and slimy, his energy at a low ebb, Langton lay still for several heartbeats, drawing air deeply into his lungs and willing his racing heart to slow down. Footsteps sounded near. Langton raised his head over the crate edge to scan the dock.

He caught a quick glimpse of an armed man approaching, pistol drawn and eyes shifting, obviously hunting for elusive quarry. Langton quickly ducked down before the hunter's gaze came back in his direction, and pushed his way on his wet elbows to the edge of the crate. His right hand shot out to grab an ankle, and holding fast, Langton came up on one knee, then the other, throwing the surprised detective sprawling onto the rough flooring of the dock. The detective's gun fired aimlessly, then went spinning and tumbling away back toward the ship's berth.

He was spotted almost immediately. Dineen turned leveled his gun. There was no time for Langton to retrieve the pistol only a few feet away. The man he had upset was struggling to his feet, and Dineen and his other assistant were pushing through the milling crowd, unable to fire yet coming closer. "Manning, get up! Nail the bastard!" Langton turned and snapped his boot into Manning's shin, and Manning went down again with a yelp. Langton headed for the dock exit, moving for the street, where he would have a chance to elude his pursuers. A bullet spun past his ear, the crash of a gun exploded. He shifted course slightly to veer near a group of dock workers moving crates, hoping Dineen would have to hold his fire for fear of striking innocent bystanders.

The cold water was telling on Langton, slowing him down. The effort of running in wet clothes didn't help either. The footsteps of pursuit pounded nearer. They were gaining. He wished he had a gun.

Langton ran up the end of the docks, sprinted up a street. He was wheezing, the blood rushing, pounding in his temples. With one last spurt, he turned again, jostling passersby, darted around the corner, into the busy street.

Seconds later, Dineen and his two heavies bolted around the turn, expecting to frame Langton in their gun sights. He was not to be seen. Dineen froze -- swore -- planned his move. Langton must have ducked into one of the dives -- which one?

"Foxy, you check the bars on that side of the street. Manning, stay outside, keep your eyes open."

Three doors down, Langton watched them through the grimy window of a darkened bar. He positioned Manning in the street, saw Blood and Foxx begin their shakedown. He figured he had two minutes to set his trap.

He stared into the barroom, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness of the gloomy sinkhole. He strode to the bar, ordered a bottle of whisky. The barkeep didn't want to serve him, was reaching under the counter for the bung-starter, relaxed as Langton slid him a healthy bill.

The barkeep took a look at Langton's wet buckskin jacket. "Funny about that, I didn't know it was raining out."

"Well, you know how quick these Frisco thundershowers can come up," quipped Langton. He kept his voice light, grinned smoothly as he took the bottle from the counter, and walked over to the dark corner by the door. He could feel the barkeep's gaze on his back. He sat down, and looked toward the bar. The barkeep shifted his glance, and went back to work polishing the bar. As he turned away, Langton poured the rotgut onto the sawdust floor, and stood up silently to stand beside the door with the empty bottle in his right hand.

The door swung slowly inward from the bright sunlight of the street to the bar's sunken darkness. Cameron Dineen stepped in, stood momentarily helpless as his eyes adjusted to the gloom, and shifted to his left. A sharp jab stung his side, and a voice he knew all too well stung his ears.

"Hello, Cam," whispered Langton. "How's you know I was coming?" Dineen played for time, glanced through the window for his lookout man. Did Langton have a gun? What was he packing?

Langton poked the mouth of the bottle into Dineen's spine, jerked it back. "Ease your iron onto the table, Cam. No foolish moves." Dineen weighed the risk, then laid his Colt on the notched table top. "Filth like you always attracts flies, Langton. You offered out man in Portland good money, but he can't live without his daily pipe of opium," he paused for effect. "You're too late for Hartley's diamonds anyway, Langton!"

Langton stiffened. Diamonds? Maybe there was coming up after all!

Dineen sensed Langton's lapse of concentration, in Confident Langton had no gun, he spun like a top on his heels. Langton's reach. Langton stood open, rocking on his heels. Dineen's mercy. And Dineen made his mistake.

He couldn't miss Langton with a first straight to the right fist shot up for the decisive blow to Langton missed. Langton, thrown off balance by Dineen's lurch to his right, found his footing, and rammed the first to Dineen's midsection. Dineen folded like a leaf.

It was time to run. The bartender was starting around the bar, a thick billy-club clenched in his meaty hand. He snatched up Dineen's gun from the tabletop and doorway. He found it full, as Dineen's lookout man swung his gun cocked at his hips.

In his long years as a gunman, Langton had learned many tactics, to protect his life, often at the expense of his enemies. He used one now.

Langton spun into the doorway, hunched low, under the Wells Fargo man's Colt .45. His right hand shot up, Dineen's gun into Manning's groin, bowing him over. He went slack. The agent's gun fired, narrowly missing Langton. Manning clenched his fist in agony. The bartender drew back the gunfire. Langton stepped outside, gun held low as police whistles shrilled in the street.

He stuffed the gun into his pants, slowly moved toward the corner. He slipped away, losing consciousness. He had started, and headed for Nob Hill.

## Chapter

Silken curtains, stained glass, persian rug, chandeliers -- such were the trappings of the establishment entered in Nob Hill, San Francisco's most elegant. The bouncer behind the bar had a standing order to individuals whose bearing and costume did not match the decor ... and Langton, after his dip at the docks and Dineen and Company, did not measure up to requirements.

This bouncer needed no bung-starter. His bunched muscles, biceps rippled as he rose, strode menacingly toward Langton.

"Sully, wait." The voice was feminine, soft. A blonde wrapped in a flowing silk dress rose from a long, ornate couch, where a bevy of scantily-clad lovelies lounge. She crossed the floor, her look of astonishment changed to concern as she drew near to Langton's wet hair, frayed sodden buckskin jacket, and whispered his name into his ear. Langton stood erect, let her hands roam on his face.

With a nod to the heavysset bouncer, she took Langton up the stairs, undressed him, bathed and nursed him into a lay between soft sheets, his aches and fatigue subsiding into slumber.

Sunlight shone warm on his face, pouring down through open French windows as he awoke, much to his surprise. He turned over, his fingers ran over his forehead, his chin. He turned.

"Anna." She put her finger to his lips, smiled, kissed him. Had been gone a long time. He drew close, held her, many missing months.

The sun was near its zenith when they lay spent, drawing herself up on one elbow, studied his long, lean forehead, rough-hewn face. A wistful sigh of resignation left her lips.

"Still running, eh, Langton?" They haven't pinned him yet. The man no jail can hold ... the man not even a woman can keep for long." Langton said nothing. His eyes flicked to her hands slowly through her hair.

"Just for a little while..." her voice was languid, bitter.

Langton relaxed, let his memory wander, through the lonely, two-horse towns and nameless trails. Living the hard life, holdup, bullet to bullet, sultry senoritas in old Mexican saloon girls in fly-blown roadhouses. With not a word of another dusty town. And always, dogging his trail, Cameron Dineen. Cameron Dineen, Wells Fargo manhunter, sworn enemy.

He turned to gaze out the window, pensive, mood he knew he wouldn't have it any other way.

He fingered the satin sheets, turned his head to a bedstead, the high, shimmering chandelier, the weaving in the breeze over the open, cut-glass French windows.

"You didn't do too bad with your half from the El Paso. She had been on the inside, had supplied the keys to the First National in El Paso. Langton took the bait, worth, in a clean, one-step night haul.

"I needed this, Langton. I'm not like you, I could have thought you might come with me..."

There was no chance of that, and they both knew it. Moments together could only be brief interludes, a peace on a troubled sea.

She had been a song and dance girl when Langton was in Cheyenne, singing the same worn-out trail tunes working for a cut of the profit on the liquor she had sold to the miners and lumberjacks. She was fed up with the looking for the big bucks when Langton was here.

They made a good team. She had her business on the inside with banks, mining companies, even express office, gaining access to keys and cash.