

# WNN

up, Langton would come in for the cleanup. There was a difference, though. She was saving her split, wanting enough to open a fancy house in Frisco. She needed the security, the sure footing. He robbed banks, ran con jobs because it was his life. The booze, women, good times that money bought were fine, but they did not satisfy him. The getting of money, the thrill of the sting sustained him, gave him drive, purpose.

The money never lasted long, was never meant to. So much of it went for whisky, fine clothes, fancy women, no-limit gambling. Langton could never be happy, never breathe with a secure source of cash. And so, no matter how much they seemed alike, how much they wanted to believe they could be compatible, they could not be more different.

"A man named Hartley ever come in here?" asked Langton, casually.

"Hartley..." she paused. "Yes, that's him. He comes in here to see Jamie quite often. He's one of our best customers." She frowned. "Too good, I'm afraid."

How's that?" queried Langton.

"I'm afraid he's quite taken with her. He's said he'll take her away soon."

"You wouldn't want to lose Janie, is that it?"

"Oh no, if she wants out, that's okay. There's no shortage of girls looking for work. It's Hartley's wife that bothers me."

"His wife?"

"She's been jilted, and she doesn't like it. She's going to raise hell if he leaves her high and dry. I heard he kicked her out without a cent. I don't need that kind of hassle, Langton. I pay enough to the cops and judges to leave me alone now as it is."

"Hartley's spending a lot of cash on your Janie, huh?"

"Bundles. Dresses, champagne, you name it. She told me last night he was going to bring her a special gift."

"Is that so?" pushed Langton.

"Uh huh. I think he's bringing her a box full of diamonds."

## Chapter 4

The famous gas lanterns of Frisco were shrouded by low-hanging fog billowing in off the bay. Langton kept to the well-lighted streets. He did not believe in avoiding trouble, but to tempt it was the way of a fool.

Hartley's dive was on the waterfront, not far from the huddled warehouses and warrens of DuPont Street. Chinatown began here, and Hartley's would-be emporium, straddling the invisible border, was aptly named the Pearl of the Orient. From what Langton knew of Hartley, though, he wasn't expecting to find many Chinamen inside.

Hartley had made his first fortune freighting in coolies for the Southern Pacific railroad. Espee had needed a man with a lot of ships and few scruples, and Hartley filled the bill. His agents had scored Hong Kong, Canton and Shanghai, dangling dreams of a new, free, and prosperous start in America. Before crowds of gullible, impoverished Chinese -- for a price.

When their gold, silver, and jewels were safely in Hartley's hands, the immigrants were herded into leaking, pest-ridden hulks similar to those that had hauled black flesh from Africa not so long ago. Those who survived the scurvy and the rats were sold by the head to Southern Pacific, to lay the hot and heavy steel rails across endless expanses of furnace, alkaline deserts. Hartley didn't stop there -- his ships carried opium and slave women as well, to satisfy the booming markets to the entire Pacific coastal region from Canada to Mexico.

Langton greased the doorman's palm and stepped softly inside, then moved to the left to let his eyes adjust. The joint was dark, the only bright pockets of light were around the gaming tables, which were illuminated by gas bulbs set in overhead chandeliers.

The place was crowded, loud. Smoke hung in layers, troubled only slightly by a current of air from a door ajar at the back behind the bar. An old man pounded out Texas tunes on a tilted piano in the corner, and washed-up, puffy women leaned up against the bar. He didn't recognize any Wells Fargo agents in the crowd, and decided to take the risk.

Langton shouldered his way through the crowd of gamblers ground the faro tables and roulette wheels, and elbowed up to the bar. Calmly ignoring the barfly cadging a drink beside him, he bought a bottle of band-name whisky. He knew enough not to try their house liquor. He made his way to the corner of the roulette table, set down a handful of double eagles and straightened his cuffs, ready to set to work. He looked up at the dealer to place his bet, and stopped. The dealer was Buckskin Frank Leslie.

Leslie -- a deadly killer, a legend in his own time. A few years back and hundreds of miles away, in a raw, wide-open mining camp called Tombstone, he had been the trigger-finger of the Earp brothers. He was there to cash in when Doc Holliday and the Earps tamed the town and worked it for all they could. He tended bar, dealt faro at Wyatt Earp's bar, the Oriental, until he was sent to Yuma Territorial Prison for killing a woman. But that was after he had killed a dozen men.

Leslie did not know Langton, but Langton knew him. How he dealt and spun the wheel. Crooked. And Langton knew Leslie hated to lose.

"Far cry from the Oriental, ain't it, Buckskin?" spoke Langton.

Leslie looked up, studied him, then said evenly, "You here to play or have a chat? Put up or shut up, Mister."

Langton smiled, tossed a coin on red and lit a smoke. He watched the ball spin once, twice, and the small ball bounced close, then past his wager. He played on listlessly, losing some, winning a little more. Behind the table at the bar, he noticed a tall, slim, red-headed woman slip onto a stool behind Leslie. She fingered her drink slowly, raised her eyes and looked full at Langton.

He returned her stare boldly, and she looked away. He turned back to the game. His pile of chips was growing. Time to make it or break it. He reached down, took almost all, and moved to put them on blue five when he noticed movement from the he corner of his eye. The redhead was motioning. He looked up, saw her full lips mouth words over even white teeth. Red five, red five, he read, and realised she had a clear view of Buckskin's hands and feet from behind.

"All down -- and here we go." Langton was too late. The ball

danced, spun, and -- now Langton saw it -- jerked into red five. He glanced toward the woman. A coy smirk played over her ruby lips.

Leslie payed off one or two small bets, but gained more chips than he lost. Langton watched her lips, read the call, bet accordingly. Jackpot.

Two, three times it worked -- and Leslie looked up at Langton with a cold sneer. "Riding a hot one, et, friend?"

Langton spoke, slowly, casually. "You here to play or have a chat, Buckskin? If you can't handle it, just let me know. Too bad your old pardners Doc and Wyatt aren't here to back you up."

Leslie didn't flinch. "Don't push your luck, pardner."

There was only one way Langton played, only one way to win. To go all the way. Once more he glanced, read the sign -- her dark eyes flashed, then she looked away -- and he set all his chips on the number she had named. Red 8.

Leslie looked first at the pile of chips, then steeled his gaze on Langton, as if to ask if he was sure. His hand reached up, pulled the soggy smoke from his lips, flicked the butt to the corner. A hush had settled around the table. Leslie's lips turned up, gathered confidence, opened to a grin. The he turned slowly to the redhead. "Mrs. Hartley?"

"Take him, Buckskin, take his shirt."

In that moment Langton knew he had been played for a sucker. His face went white as he looked at Hartley's wife. A thin smile gloated on her face, as Buckskin spun the wheel.

The ball bounced, jumped, and jerked. Blue 3. Leslie reached over with his dealer's rake to haul in Langton's money. Langton started for his gun, but didn't make it. A familiar voice, tinged with scorn, came to him from the door.

"Langton. hands up. It's all over."

He stood in the doorway, blond, tall, a wide smile on his lips and a black gun in his hands. Cam Dineen.

## Chapter 5

For two long, deep breaths, silence and suspense reigned in the crowded, smoke-filled bar. No one spoke, no one moved. Then Langton acted.

His hands flashed to the table, wrenched it up and over. Golden eagles rippled on green felt, clinked and rolled crazily on the floor. Hands reached for silver and bills, bodies pushed each other pell-mell in a greedy rush. Leslie grabbed for his gun, pulled trigger as the table crashed into him, pinned him on the floor. His bullet chinked into the ceiling.

Langton threw a bottle of the chandelier, smashing the gas lamps, plunging the room into darkness. Tongues of fire from the broken lamps licked and danced on the floor. Glass smashed, fists began to fly, chairs crashed, hands reached for the booze and cash behind the bar. Cam Dineen swore, his attempts to reach Langton thwarted by the crazed, drunken crowd. The ransacking had begun. it could not be stopped.

Langton dove over the fallen table, clambered over sprawled bodies, and snatched the redhead from her seat at the bar. She struggled, her head rocked as Langton backhanded her on the mouth. He lifted her limp form onto his shoulders, rushed behind the bar and out the back door into the alley.

There was no one in sight. He lifted her off his shoulders, pinned her against the rough brick wall. Slapped her. Again. She came to, venom in her eyes, curses on her lips.

"Talk, lady. who set me up?"

"Dineen. He said you'd be coming her, I said I'd set the trap. The rip-off was my idea."

Langton swore inwardly. he had underestimated his nemesis, Cam Dineen. Had fallen into the trap. Again, as always, women were his downfall.

"Where are the diamonds? When are they coming in?" He held her hair, pulled it back. He felt no pity. The woman had almost cost him his life.

"What diamonds?"

He applied pressure, rode her harder, higher against the rough brick wall.

"Talk, lady, I haven't got all night."

She winced, spoke between clenched teeth.

"In two days, on the Seattle train. By armed courier."

"How many men?"

"One."

"You sure?" He bunched her hair, pulled tighter.

"Yes, yes! God!"

He slackened his grip. Running feet pounded near the alley entrance. he turned to peer that way.

He turned back almost too late. She writhed, her arm whipped up, the knife slashed his shirt, as he turned to avoid the brutal swipe. he slapped the knife hand, struck her in the stomach, hard. The knife clattered to the ground. She folded, fell breathless, as human shapes spilled into the alley.

To be continued  
next week....