ened. Diamonds? Maybe there was a shipment

d Langton's lapse of concentration, made his move. on had no gun, he spun like a top on his toes, inside h. Langton stood open, rocking on his heels, at And Dineen made his mistake.

niss Langton with a first straight to the gut. But his up for the decisive blow to Langton's chin -- and ton, thrown off balance by Dineen's quick spin, ight, found his footing, and rammed the bottle neckmidsection. Dineen folded like a leaf.

o run. The bartender was starting around the corner nick billy-club clenche in his meaty fist. Langton Pineen's gun from the tabletop and drove for the und it full, as Dineen's bokout man suddenly loomed, nis hips.

pars as a gunman, Langton had learned many tricks, o protect his life, often at the expense of the lives of used one now.

nto the doorway, hunched low, under the long barrel rgo man's Colt ,45. lis right hand shot out, ramming nto Manning's groin, bowling him over as his knees e agent's gun fired, narrowly missing Langton, as the his fist in agony. the bartender drew back, startled by angton stepped outside, gun held low under his arm, es shrilled in the street

ne gun into his pants, slowly moved into the crowd corner. he slipped away, losing himself in the ad started, and headed for Nob Hill.

## Chapter

curtains, stained glass, persian rugs and silver such were the trappings of the establishment Langton b Hill, San Francisco's most elegant district. The d the bar had a standing order to forcibly eject ose bearing and costume did not match the opulent angton, after his dip at the docks and escape from Company, did not measure up to the desired

r needed no bung-starter, his bunched fists were like rippled as he rose, strode menacingly, purposefully

The voice was feminine, soft. A black-haired lady flowing silk dress rose from a long, ornately-covered a bevy of scantily-clad lovelies lounged long-legged. The floor, he look of astonishment changing to one of e drew near to Langton's wet hair, fingered the grimy, kin jacket, and whispered his name in wonder and in stood erect, let her hands roam on his stubble fac. the heavyset bouncer, she took Langton to her room

undressed him, bathed and nursed him. Presently he oft sheets, his aches and fatigue subsiding in deep

ne warm on his face, pouring down on yellow shafts French windows as he awoke, much later. Her long or his forehead, his chin, he turned.

e put her finger to his lips, smiled, kissed him. Long. a long time. He drew close, held her, made up for the months.

near its zenith when they lay spent, drained. She drew one elbow, studied his long, lean form, his chiselled, ce. A wistful sigh of resignation left her lips. g, eh, Langton?" They haven't pinned you down yet.

ail can hold ... the man not even a woman's arms can Langton said nothing. His eyes flickered, he ran his hrough her hair.

while..." her voice was languid, bittersweet. axed, let his memory wander, through the long years of ree towns and nameless trails. Living from bank job to to bullet, sultry senoritas in old Mexico and worn-out in fly-blown roadhouses. With nothing ahead but town. And always, dogging his trail, one step behind, teron Dineen, Wells: Fargo manhunter and Langton's

gaze out the window, pensive, moody. In his heart, men.

e high, shimmering chandelier, the lace curtains lose.

breeze over the open, cut-glass French windows.
do too bad with your half from the El Paso job, baby."
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 an, one-step night haul

a song and dance girl when L out of the profit of

a good ven one Wells Fargo behind. , gaining access to keys and cash. After she had set "All down -- and here we go." Langton was too late. The ball

i 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-ee

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

tained 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

"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."

"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 along 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 lowhanging 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, alkiline 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 vere 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

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 women. But that was after he had killed a dozen

Leslie did not know Langton, but Langton knew him. How he dealt buildn't have it any other way.

Leslie did not know Langton, but Langton knew him. How he dealt he satin sheets, turned his head to admire the brass and spun the wheel. Crooked. And Langton knew Leslie hated to

the ball spin once, twice, and the small ball bounced close, then past his, Langton. I'm not like you, I couldn't run forever. I 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 no chance of that, and they both knew it. Their woman slip onto a stool behind Leslie. She fingered her drink slowly, either could only be brief interludes, calm moments of raised her eyes and looked full at Langton.

He returned her stare boldly, and she looked away. He turned on had first met her back to the game. His pile of chips was growing. Time to make it or d movement from the he cor he looked up, saw her full lip mouth words over even white teeth. Red five, red five, he read, and skills to get a job realised she had a clear view of Buskskin's hands and feet from

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.

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 ha settled around the table. Leslie's lips turned up, gathered confidence, opened to a grin. The he turned slowly to the redhead

"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. Golde eagles rippled on green felt, clinked and rolled crazily on the floor hands reached for silver and bills, bodies pushed each other pe mell in a greedy rush. Leslie grabbed for his gun, pulled trigger the table crashed into him, pinned him on the floor. His bull chinked into the ceiling.

Langton threw a bottle of the chandelier, smashing the gas lamp plunging the room into darkness. Tongues of fire from the broken lamps licked and danced on the floor. Glass smashed, fists beg to fly, chairs crashed, hands reached for the booze and cash behind the bar. Cam Dineen swore, his attempts to reach Langton thwarts by the crazed, drunken crowd. The ransacking had begun. it could

Langton dove over the fallen table, clambered over sprawle bodies, and snatched the redhead from her seat at the bar. struggled, her head rocked as Langton backhanded her on t 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, pinne 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 wer

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

"What diamonds?"

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