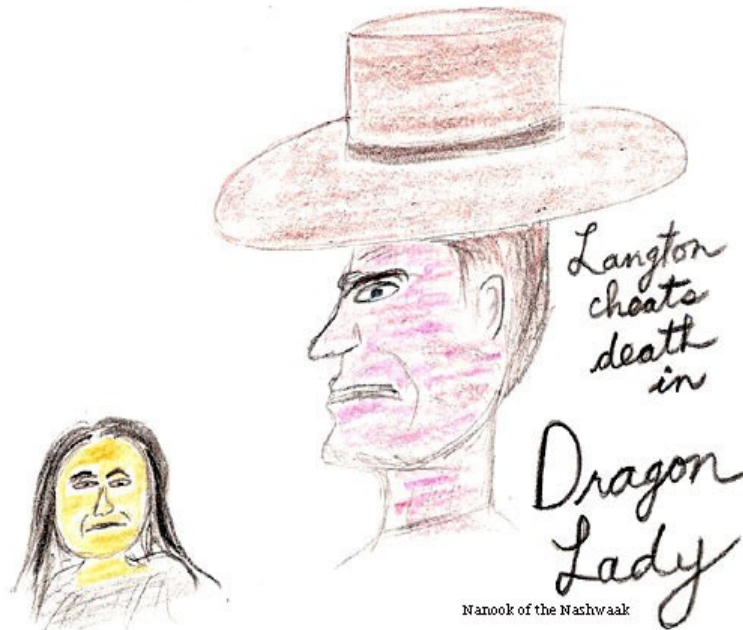


Langton Rides Again



Langton, outlaw of the Wild West, cheats death in two short story adventures.

Violence. Mature readers only, please.

By **Nanook of the Nashwaak.**

PS: I hope you find my stories better than my artwork!

Shakedown

Chapter One --- Desperate Dip

The tramp steamer cleared the final breakwater at the mouth of the harbour as it laboured 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 diamond 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 bodies 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 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 ... rested 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 their 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 pilings, 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 Two: Bottle Bluff

Langton fought for his bearings in the cold murk between the ship and the dock, and struck for 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 kick 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 lungfulls 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 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 groin, 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?

"Foxx, 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 Dineen 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'd 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 our 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 a shipment coming up after all!

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

He couldn't miss Langton with a fist straight to the gut. But his right fist shot up for the decisive blow to Langton's chin --and missed. Langton, thrown off balance by Dineen's quick spin, lurched to his right, found his footing, and rammed the bottle neck-first to Dineen's midsection. Dineen folded like a leaf.

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

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

Langton spun into the doorway, hunched low, under the long barrel of the Wells Fargo man's Colt .45. His right hand shot out, ramming Dineen's gun into Manning's already sore groin, bowling him over as his knees went slack. The agent's gun fired, narrowly missing Langton, as the man clenched his fist in agony. The bartender drew back, startled by the gunfire. Langton stepped outside, gun held low under his arm, as police whistles shrilled in the street.

He stuffed the gun into his pants, slowly moved into the crowd milling at the corner. He slipped away, losing himself in the confusion he had started, and headed for Nob Hill.

Chapter Three: Sanctuary at Nob Hill

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

This bouncer needed no bung-starter. His bunched fists were like hams, biceps rippled as he rose, strode menacingly, purposefully toward Langton.

"Sully, wait."

The voice was feminine, soft. A black-haired lady wrapped in a flowing silk dress rose from a long, ornately-covered couch, where a bevy of scantily-clad lovelies lounged long-legged. She crossed the floor, her look of astonishment changing to one of concern as she drew near to Langton. She reached up, ran her fingers through Langton's wet hair, fingered the grimy, sodden buckskin jacket, and whispered his name in wonder and worry. Langton stood erect, let her hands roam on his stubbled face.

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

Sunlight shone warm on his face, pouring down on yellow shafts through open French windows as he awoke, much later. Her long fingers ran over his forehead, his chin. He turned.

"Anna." She put her finger to his lips, smiled, kissed him. Long. He had been gone a long time. He drew her close, held her, made up for the many missing months.

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

"Still running, eh, Langton? They haven't pinned you down yet. The man no jail can hold ... the man not even a woman's arms can keep for long."

Langton said nothing. His eyes flickered, he ran his hands slowly through her hair.

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

Langton relaxed, let his memory wander, through the long years of lonely, two-horse towns and nameless trails. Living from bank job to holdup, bullet to bullet, sultry señoritas in old Mexico and worn-out saloon girls in fly-blown roadhouses. With nothing ahead but another dusty town.

And always, dogging his trail, one step behind, Dineen. Cameron Dineen, Wells Fargo manhunter and Langton's sworn enemy.

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

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

"You didn't do too bad with your half from the El Paso job, baby." She had been on the inside, had supplied the keys and the layout of the First National in El Paso. Langton took the bank for all it was worth, in a clean, one-step night haul.

"I needed this, Langton. I'm not like you, I couldn't run forever. I thought you might come with me..."

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

She had been a song and dance girl when Langton first met her in Cheyenne, singing the same worn-out trail tunes night after night, working for a cut of the profit on the liquor she helped sell to the miners and lumberjacks. She was fed up with the small time, was looking for the big break when Langton found her.

They made a good team. She used her business skills to get a job on the inside with banks, mining companies, even one Wells Fargo express office, gaining access to keys and cash. After she set it 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 Janie 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 Four : Pearl of the Orient

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. SP had needed a man with a lot of ships and few scruples, and Hartley filled the bill. His agents had scoured Hong Kong, Canton and Shanghai, dangling dreams of a new free and prosperous start in America, the land of the Golden Mountain, 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 of the entire Pacific coastal region from Canada to Mexico.

Langton greased the doorman's palm and stepped softly inside, then shifted 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 room was crowded, dark. 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 to the corner of the roulette table, set down a handful of double eagles and straightened his cuffs, ready to get 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 corner of his eye.

The redhead was motioning. He looked up, and saw her full lips mouth words over her even white teeth. Red five, red five, he read, and realized she had a full 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 smile played over her ruby lips.

Leslie paid 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, eh 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 the corner of his mouth, flicked the butt to the corner. A hush settled around the table. Leslie's lips turned up, gathered confidence, opened to a grin. Then 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 looked at Hartley's wife. A thin smile gloated on her face, as Buckskin spun the wheel.

The ball bounced 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 fist. Cam Dineen.

Chapter Five: The Big Brawl

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 at the chandelier, smashing the gas bulbs, plunging the room into smoky gloom. Tongues of fire from the broken lamps licked and danced on the bar and 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?" shot Langton.

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

Langton swore inwardly. He has 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 bunched her hair in his hand, pulled it back. He felt no pity. The woman had almost cost him his life.

"What diamonds?"

He applied more pressure, pushed 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 twisted 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, and the blade clattered to the ground.

Orange goutts of flame blossomed in a roar of cordite at the alley's mouth, the bullets missing Langton and the woman by inches. He pushed her to the ground, as human shapes spilled into the alley. He drew, spaced two, three quick shots of his own at the flashes, saw one shadow drop, heard it moan, as the others cringed, retreated around the corner.

Langton vaulted a small fence at the back of the alley, and eluded his pursuers in the dark, twisting streets.

Chapter Six: Hartley

Again, Hartley took the small, black felt box from his wall safe, hefted it tentatively, ran his fingers slowly over its smooth corners. The weight and shape of the box fitted snugly, pleasantly in his hand.

He opened the box, tilted it, let the contents spill over onto the table. A smile creased his face as the diamonds rolled and sparkled end over end on the teak surface. Some were ice-clear, some were tinted, with glints of blue and pink on fine-cut edges. Several larger, rougher stones contrasted with many small, sharp-cut multi-faceted gems. He gathered them in his hand, poured them from palm to palm, one by one, all at once.

The diamonds had come from China, some gotten from the coolies sold to Southern Pacific, some taken in exchange for opium and silk. Hartley had been adding to his hoard for years. The possession of the diamonds meant more to him than did their mere monetary value. Some men were obsessed with gold; Hartley's obsessions were diamonds and young women. He kept the diamonds, but he wasn't so handy with women.

His marriage to Mandy had been a mistake. He had realized only too late she was a two-bit con artist out for his money. She was too clever, too greedy. He had still not been able to roust her and her gang of hired toughnuts from his saloon in Frisco, the Pearl of the Orient. He hadn't seen the profits from that operation since he sent her packing several months ago. He'd send in his boys soon enough, and if she happened to stop a bullet in the doing, so much the better.

He wouldn't actually give the diamonds to Janie. He'd dangle them in front of her as bait, she seemed simple enough to take it. After all, she was a whore, and a good-looking one at that. She wasn't in the business for nickels and dimes.

He had been planning to carry the diamonds down to Frisco himself, but decided against it. He had always done business with Wells Fargo, including not a few shipments of hot goods that had gone through under the thin guise of the sprawling express company's respectability.

Wells Fargo would insure the diamonds, and they would travel with an armed courier known only to the company, Hartley, and Hartley's trusted help. In two days, on the morning train from Seattle to San Francisco.

Chapter Seven: The Deal

Two days, thought Langton. Precious little time to stage a job. He had little or nothing to go on. He wouldn't be able to pick out the courier among the passengers on the crowded train, let alone wrestle the diamonds from him and get away clean. Not without help. The risk was just too high. Who could he recruit?

Anna, perhaps - but then again no. She had called the con game quits long ago, when she had gotten together all she wanted. She had her house, her ladies - why risk it all for something she didn't need?

He thought of Hartley's wife. Mandy, he had heard her named. She was out for a quick profit too, as Langton had found out to his own expense. Could she help? Or then again, would she?

He had treated her harshly. She had been handled roughly, but, worst of all, knew Langton, her pride had taken a beating. Then again, he reasoned, she was a businesswoman. She may be persuaded to cooperate after all, if the price was right.

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The little Chinese boy said nothing, did not even look at Mandy. He stopped long enough to hand her a message, and disappeared. She unfolded the note.

Mrs. Hartley - I hope you're not too disappointed about missing me with your knife. You're not the first to miss. But few have come closer. Meet me in the lobby of the Franklin Hotel in an hour. I think we can do business together. Come alone or I won't show.

Langton

She sat alone at the corner table, stirring coffee that had long since gone cold. Langton was late, and she was a fool. She pushed aside her cup, got ready to leave. Then she saw the little Chinese messenger boy scurry up the stairs, tap on a door. Langton showed, started down the stairs.

She had steeled herself for the encounter, rehearsed her opening lines. She would call the shots, ask the questions, get the answers. The words caught in her throat, would not come. Langton strode effortlessly, confidently, to sit across from her.

"Can I get you a drink, Mrs. Hartley?"

She looked up, nodded. Presently she sipped on a glass of sour mash on ice. Langton came directly to the point.

"Do you love your husband, Mrs. Hartley?"

Her face colored, her eyes flickered, dark, angry. Her fingers tensed around the glass. But she paused, caught her breath, found her composure. She did not splash the drink in his face, did not stand up, storm out livid with rage. She answered, calmly, with ice in her voice,

"Is this how you get your kicks, Mister? I suppose you want to know how we do it, too?"

A grin creased Langton's face. She was doing just fine, he thought. It looks like she can handle the pressure. He decided to turn the screw just one more notch.

"That's okay, Mrs. Hartley. Everybody in San Francisco knows you two don't do it together at all any more."

She rose to leave. Langton grabbed her wrist, not gently, not harshly.

"What about diamonds, Mrs. Hartley? Do you love diamonds?"

She sat down again, slowly, watched him, said nothing.

"You know I'm after those diamonds. I know you want them too. If we both try for them alone, neither of us has a chance. We'd only be in each other's way."

He released her wrist, lowered his voice.

"Together, though, I know we can pull it off. I can't go near them, they're expecting me. I need someone else."

He decided to appeal to her pride.

"I need a good actress. Someone with nerves, someone who won't break under pressure. I think you're that person."

Briefly, Langton outlined his plan. She would provide the inside information. It wouldn't take much to bribe Hartley's men, he wasn't well liked by his help. Langton would provide the plan, stage the getaway.

"What do you say, Mrs. Hartley? 50-50?"

She lifted the sour mash to her lips, smiled.

"Call me Mandy, Langton."

She reached for the nearly full bottle.

"I think we can do business together. Shall we go to your room and seal the deal?"

Chapter Eight: The Sting

Mandy's sources in Hartley's employ were still good, as long as they were paid promptly and well. The main plan for the transfer of the diamonds was confirmed, the details revealed. Even the name of the courier was known - Manning, Dineen's man in the street of only a few days before. Manning had already done business with Hartley, and had met Mrs. Hartley on several social occasions. Strange, thought Manning, how the old tightwads always seemed to get the best-looking women.

Manning relaxed, watched the countryside change from his window seat one car away from the bar car. The train was leaving the mountains, rolling downgrade into less rugged landscape. Small towns approached, flashed by, receded in his window, ever more frequently as the Southern Pacific train neared the populated area of San Francisco.

Dineen had been mistaken, thought Manning. Any chances for Langton to make a play for the diamonds were rapidly diminishing. They were only half an hour out of Frisco. Christ, he swore, I sure could use a stiff drink right about now.

Manning looked up as the compartment door opened. A tall lady, red-haired, in a black dress stepped in, looked his way, smiled at him. Why was she familiar? Where had he seen her before?

"Why Mr. Manning! What a surprise! I was just on my way to the bar car for a drink before we get into town. Won't you join me?"

Recognition dawned on Manning - this was Mrs. Hartley, the wife of his client. Surely he could have a drink, he thought. Mr. Valentine, Manning's and Dineen's boss, and president of Wells Fargo, cautioned his agents against drinking on duty, but this, reasoned Manning, was different. It would be discourteous to turn down a drink with the wife of an esteemed client.

"I'd be honoured to have a drink with you, Mrs. Hartley."

Together they walked to the bar car. Hartley's wife chose two facing seats by the end of the bar, and beckoned for the waiter. She ordered a Pisco Punch, Manning chose straight vodka on the rocks.

"As a matter of fact, I was speaking to your husband just this morning," bantered Manning. "I was surprised you weren't at home."

"I was finishing up some business on his behalf, so I couldn't be there," she lied smoothly. Obviously, as she had hoped, he didn't yet know that the wife of his distinguished client had been thrown out. This reassured her.

The drinks came.

"Allow me, Mr. Hartley." Manning reached for his wallet, but she already had her money out.

"By no means, Mr. Manning. You're my guest."

She paid the waiter, tipped him handsomely, took the drinks. Manning looked away to tuck his wallet back into his pants pocket, and the woman slipped a small tablet into the glass of vodka. She placed the drink in front of Manning, and caught a glimpse of a broad-shouldered man letting himself silently into the men's washroom at the other end of the car.

"May I propose a toast, Mr. Manning. To Wells Fargo - may it prosper."

She raised her glass, touched it to his, smiled. They brought their glasses to their lips, smiled. Small banter ensued for a few minutes.

Manning put his glass down. He tried to think of a toast to match Mrs. Hartley's, but found he couldn't concentrate. His stomach, his head were heavy.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Hartley, I must go to the washroom. The vodka seems to have gone to my head." He rose unsteadily.

"Let me help you to the washroom, Mr. Manning." She held up his slumping body, guided him to the door. He was fully unconscious, beginning to fall, as she reached the washroom door with him in tow.

Two big, muscular hands reached out through the washroom door, grabbed the inert form and pulled him in.

She turned, met the quizzical frown on the waiter's face. "Some people just don't know when they've had enough," she quipped. The waiter grinned, gave her a knowing look, turned and headed back to the bar.

Langton pulled the limp form into a cubicle, searched it, found the pouch, checked its contents to make sure. Two, three shining crystalline gems played into his palm. He replaced them, closed the pouch and put it into his pocket. He bound and gagged Manning, jammed the cubicle's door shut.

He turned to the mirror, adjusted his disguise. The oversize Stetson, tailored pants and sports coat, leather boots without spurs lent him the appearance of a cattleman who had long since made his fortune, a gentleman rancher who would never have to step in cow shit again.

He left the washroom, confident, at ease. It was in the bag. The train was slowing, making its approach to the station. Langton walked the length of the bar car, headed for the main exit. Mandy rose as he passed her seat, walked close behind him. As they passed into the next compartment, momentarily alone, he slipped her the diamonds. She dropped the pouch into her purse.

"Still nervous?"

"A little," she replied. She reached out, grabbed his arm. Langton felt her shake for an instant, then she was calm. As they emerged out onto the landing, they looked no different from any other husband and wife on the train.

Chapter Nine: The Switching Yard

Cam Dineen stood at the rear of the platform, shielded from view of the incoming train by a hand truck piled high with luggage. He glanced over to Foxx, who was guarding the other exit from the platform. He too was watching from concealment.

Dineen swore. He was tense. He had wanted to go with Manning on the train, would even have taken the diamonds himself. But he knew Langton would smell a trap, would not come close, if Dineen had ridden the train as well. Instead, the young fool went by himself. Dineen wouldn't have wagered a plugged nickel the kid would make it to Frisco with the rocks.

He didn't worry too much about the kid, even less about the diamonds. Langton was the prize Dineen had chased, over deserts, mountains, and international boundaries for nearly twenty years. And he would get him.

The train chuffed, hissed, and shuddered to a stop on the platform. Porters stepped down, opened doors, reached for luggage. People began to file down the steps, slowly, agonizingly slowly. No sign of Manning. Most of the passengers were out now, still milling around the coach door. Just one tall man in a suit, a big Stetson covering his face. The man turned, to help a young, red-haired lady in high heels down the steps ...

"Mrs. Hartley!"

Even as the words left his lips, Dineen knew he was making a mistake. He reached for his gun, stepped out from behind the baggage truck. He stopped, his face frozen in astonishment as he saw the flinty features of Langton peer his way from beneath the brow of the Stetson.

Langton wheeled, grabbed Mandy by the arm, pushed her back up the steps, into the train. He scrambled up after her. His big foot thrust up, out, to strike the door latch on the other side, snapping the lock. The door whipped open, and they jumped out into the switching yard.

Dineen raised his weapon, aimed, checked himself. He couldn't risk a shot, too many bystanders. He raced for the train door. Travelers milled about, lovers embraced, suitcases lay underfoot. Dineen pushed, weaved, hollered, cursed. Langton was getting away!

Langton found his footing, looked left, right. He spied a loading dock, with freight ready for the cars. Behind, doors opened to the streets outside. Their only chance.

They jumped over several sets of tracks, rushing, criss-crossing, staggering. Mandy was hampered by her long tight skirt and high heels. A freight train came closer, several tracks away. Langton judged its speed, the distance, saw they had just enough time before it cut them off from the dock. It would also make good their getaway.

Langton went first, pulled her after him. It would be close, closer than he anticipated. Then they were across the tracks, safe for a moment. He turned to Mandy.

The train came on, hit a switch, veered directly at them, only feet away. He jumped aside, pulled at her. She screamed, tried to free her heel, caught in a crack between two ties. The train came, her scream shrieked, stopped abruptly under the crushing, grinding wheels.

Langton stood, alone, immobile, horrible. A vein swelled, pulsed in his forehead. The train rolled on, and on. When it passed, Langton was gone.

Chapter Ten: Janie

Hartley was disgraced. The San Francisco newspapers had gotten wind of the fiasco in the switching yard, had given it lots of play in the scandal sheets. Too many people had seen it happen from the train, someone had recognized his wife.

The whispers spread. Was it true she had been running from the law? Had she tried to steal from her husband? Who was the crook she had been running with? Did he push her? Did he escape with a shipment of diamonds?

Wells Fargo knew. They had recovered the diamonds from the shapeless, bloody bundle of rags that had been Mandy. She had been carrying them after all. The express company was hurting too, they hadn't acted fast enough to hush it up. Again, it was shown that the company that had won the West was not as all-powerful as it claimed. The company's success was wholly dependent on its image and reputation - after this setback, business would falter, profits would sag.

Hartley's pride, his self-respect, were shot. He had just been to see Janie at Annie's house, told her he couldn't give her the diamonds. They were being held by Wells Fargo, they would be needed as evidence at the inquest, he said.

She laughed in his face, called him a little man. If she couldn't have the diamonds, she said, she didn't want anymore of him, either.

She was like all the others, he realized, as he left the fancy house. After his money, not himself. He always had to buy his women, always paid through the nose for what other men got for free.

Langton watched Hartley shamle down the steps, shuffle down the street. He waited long enough to watch him turn the corner, and then Langton crossed the street to enter the big house.

Sully looked up from his seat behind the bar, gave Langton a grudging nod. The bartender went on polishing his glasses. Anna was not in sight.

He turned to one of the ladies reclining in the lounge, put his question to her in a low, yet firm tone of voice. Yes, she answered, Janie was in. She was alone, in her room three doors down the hall.

She came to the door, opened to his knock. She was tall, statuesque. Her hair was brown, with streaks of blonde. She met his eyes, sure, confident.

"Do I know you?" she asked, with more than a trace of indignation lending a sharp edge to her even voice.

Langton was not expecting such a challenge. From what he had heard, he was prepared for a vapid, ordinary sort of woman, one whose ambitions were no higher than the next customer. It was now his turn to be taken aback, to choke on his words, doubt his purpose.

"I entertain my guests on appointment only, Buster. Take a powder." She began to close the door.

"Don't you want the diamonds, Janie?"

She paused, relaxed, and in that instant Langton slipped inside. She looked him over, studied his face.

"I know you now. You're Anna's friend Langton, isn't it?"

"That's right, lady. Keep it to yourself."

They stood silent, facing each other. Janie's mind raced, as she put the pieces together.

"So it was you. The man with Hartley's wife in the train station when"

She could not continue. Langton turned away, looked out the window, turned again to face Janie. She read his cold, rough-hewn face, looked into his dark, silent eyes, could not hold the exchange. She looked down to her feet.

"You want those diamonds bad, don't you?"

"Uh huh. He didn't give them to you, did he?"

"Hell no. I sent him packing, too. I worked him for all he was worth. I won't end up like the other women he's gone through ... " She stopped, realizing too late she had said the wrong thing.

Langton paid no heed.

"Do you know what he did with them? The diamonds, I mean?"

She did not answer. She smiled thinly. Again, Langton saw he was dealing with a shrewd player, one who would bear watching. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Let's suppose I know where they're keeping the diamonds, Langton. What's in it for me?"

"A quarter, a half, you name it. It's not really the diamonds I want any more."

He turned, caught her eyes.

"I'll pay anything to get those diamonds. Name your price."

She rose lightly from her bed, loosened the lace fastenings restraining her womanliness. Pink played, bounced on soft white, and darker curls of spun gold glistened as she came to him. She raised a thigh, lifted a leg, stroked him with her hands, her thighs. Her lips parted, warm and moist, in Langton's ear.

"The price may be a little more than you can afford, Langton."

Chapter Eleven: Anna

Anna was waiting. Langton had told her he would be back in a few days, as soon as he took care of some business. She knew him well, knew there was no guarantee he would ever come back. But he had always kept his word before, even when it cost him. Besides, she had a feeling she would see him soon enough. She had been right this way before.

Some questions troubled her, all the same. Why had he been asking questions about Hartley? And Janie? Janie had always been headstrong and ambitious. It might even be better, she reasoned, if Janie were sent out on her own. She seemed clever enough to get what she wanted.

She closed her ledger books, went to her mirror. Business was good.

Satisfied with her appearance, Anna left her room, went downstairs. The usual number of patrons vied for elbow room at the bar, a few tried their luck on the green felt of the gaming tables on the main floor. Not a bad crowd for an afternoon.

She smiled at Lily, one of her girls, one she trusted as a friend. To her surprise, Lily turned away without returning her smile. Anna went to the bar for a drink. The barman served her businesslike, dismissing her attempt at friendly conversation. Something was wrong.

Lily came up beside her, spoke lightly. "Your gentleman friend is here."

"Oh? Is he all right?"

"Oh yes, he's just fine," answered Lily. Anna always respected Lily for her frankness and honesty. Lily didn't let her down now.

"He's been in with Janie for an hour now."

Anna set down her drink, hurried down the hall to stop before Janie's door. She stood, confused, debating whether she should go in. What was he doing in there? What was she doing out here?

The door opened slowly as she hesitated. Langton stood at the doorway, adjusting his shirt, stuffing the tail down into his pants.

Anna stood in shock, saw past him to Janie's bed. Janie lay across the sheets, only partially covered by a tangle of silken cloth, in lurid repose. Her hair was tousled, her eyes were half-open. She gazed at the ceiling, her fingers in her mouth.

Anna and Langton faced each other for two, three long seconds. Then she bolted, ran up the stairs and into her room, closing the door behind her.

Langton straightened his clothes, tightened his shoulder holster, left the house. He thought all of him had died inside when Mandy was killed. Now he knew, as long as a man is still alive, there's still a little of him left to die.

Chapter Twelve: Cam Dineen

Cameron Dineen looked up once more at the dodger hanging on the wall of his office. Langton's face peered back at him in grimy black and white from the yellowing reward poster. The mouth was hard and the eyes were hooded in the artist's rendering of Dineen's arch foe, but Dineen was looking past the paper image and into the darkness of his own crushed spirit.

Wells Fargo's senior detective had been humbled, humiliated. Twice Langton had almost been close enough to touch, a third time Dineen had him at his mercy, set up for the kill and lost him when he missed his punch. It seemed Langton was mocking him, forever shifting, dancing, just out of his reach.

Was he meant to catch Langton? It seemed Dineen's whole life, the force that pushed him, kept him drawing every breath, was his hate, his need to extinguish this flame that burned hot deep inside him. When he caught Langton, would Dineen be the same? Would life go on, have meaning, could he find peace within?

Dineen knew he must eliminate this foe, the only one who eluded him when so many other enemies languished in dark cells, or rotted in unnamed graves, victims of Dineen's unwavering dedication to the company. Perhaps, when it was over, with Langton gone, he could retire, enjoy the peace he craved. But while Langton still lived, still preyed on Wells Fargo, Dineen would find no peace.

Dineen left his office, walked down the hall, and gently opened the door to Mr. Valentine's office, let himself in. He was expected. His ears rang, his mouth was dry. Valentine was angry, and justifiably so.

When the papers hit the streets, Wells Fargo's stock fell four full points on the San Francisco stock exchange. Wells Fargo, a proud, mighty lion in the West Coast business world, was no longer a glamour stock.

Valentine did not blame Dineen openly. He did not need to.

"Why did you send Manning by himself, Cam?"

"Langton wouldn't have come close, Mr. Valentine. He would have smelled a trap. I wouldn't have had a chance."

Valentine set his cigar down into the ashtray. He leaned forward in his seat, peered at Langton through the curls of smoke.

"I don't think you understand, Cameron. You had a job to do. Your job was to bring those diamonds here to San Francisco without any incidents. We wouldn't be in this mess if you had safeguarded the shipment."

But Langton" protested Cameron Dineen.

"Langton hell! You set a trap for him you couldn't spring! You're forgetting, Cam, you have to protect our shipments first. First the company job," he emphasized, "and then you can settle your account with this Langton person."

"But you don't know how dangerous he is. He's taken more money from Wells Fargo than any four other men!"

"Yes, I know," continued Valentine. "That's why I'm thinking of taking you off the job. He knows you too well, sees through your tricks. We might need someone new, someone with a fresh approach, who won't let his personal passions conflict with his professional work. You're getting on, Cam, maybe you should take a desk job."

Dineen had his pocketbook out, took out his badge. Wells Fargo, special investigator. He set it down on Valentine's desk, spoke past the lump in his throat.

"Well sir, if that's the way you feel..."

"Easy, Cameron, keep your badge. I have a feeling he's still around, you might get another crack at him yet."

He opened a drawer in his desk, took out a small pouch. He pulled the drawstring, watched the tinted stones tumble into his palm, between his fingers.

Both Dineen and he were silent, absorbed, as the diamonds poured in a shimmering stream onto the thick dark teak desktop. Valentine looked up as the last gem sparkled to a stop at his wrist.

"I've heard that Hartley's been talking to the papers about the job. He's trying to discredit us. We'll have to silence him somehow. Don't we have a file on him somewhere?"

"Yes, sir, down in Records on the bottom floor," answered Dineen.

"Everybody else has gone home. Why don't you fetch it for me, Cam? I'd like to take a look at it."

Relieved, Dineen let himself out, closing the door behind him.

The only other persons in the building were the janitorial staff, cleaning hallways, dusting furniture, emptying wastebaskets. Dineen moved aside to let one janitor pass, pushing a cart piled high with brooms, mops and brushes, and continued down the hallway to the stairs. Strange, he thought, everything seems clean enough up here.

The janitor, clad in white cotton overalls and peaked hat, continued slowly down the hall, stopped outside Valentine's office. Slowly, purposefully, he opened the door, let himself in, pulled his cart after him.

Valentine looked up, shook his head. "You're a little late, fellow. Your friends were in here just after five o'clock."

"Sorry, sir. I'm new here."

He made no move to leave. Still moving slowly, he turned to the door, closed it, pushed the lock.

"Get out of here! I'll have you fired! What's your name?"

The tall form turned, even more slowly, bringing to bear a huge, dull-black Colt .45.

"The name's Langton, Mr. Valentine."

Valentine froze. His throat worked, then his arms moved, in a futile attempt to conceal the puddle of diamonds between his elbows.

"Well, what do we have here? This makes my work a lot easier, Mr. Valentine. Much obliged." Langton's eyes shifted, caught the glare of the bright stones.

Valentine's right hand jerked for his desk drawer, ripped it open. His palm clamped around the butt of a derringer, brought it quickly to bear. But Langton was faster. His right hand holding the Colt swept out in a short, tight circle, slamming the piece against Valentine's temple. Valentine began to slump sideways, even as the small derringer spat forth fire. The ball passed by Langton's head, singeing his white janitor's cap. The small gun clattered noisily to the floor.

Langton had to hurry. The element of surprise was gone, disappeared when Valentine's gun went off. Dineen must have heard it, would be even now bolting up the stairs. He gathered the diamonds, poured them into the pouch, stuffed them into an inside pocket. He ripped off his janitor's uniform, went to his cart. He heard voices, running footsteps on the stairs.

Dineen ran down the outside hall to the door, palmed the brass knob. It would not turn. "Mr. Valentine." No answer.

He drew his gun from his holster, stood back. Aimed for the lock, fired. The lock was bent, twisted. But still it held. He aimed, fired again. The lock gave. Dineen pushed the door open, rushed inside.

Valentine was slumped over his desk, moaning, groggy, coming to. The diamonds were gone from the desktop. The wind blew from the open window. A heavy rope ran over the sill, out into the night. It was tied firmly to a stout leg of Valentine's heavy desk.

Dineen ran to the window, peered out. The rope swung limp, lifeless, to the dark alleyway below. The outlaw was a broad silhouette in the glare of the gas lamp as he made for the alley's mouth. Dineen raised his gun, drew a bead on Langton's broad back. At this distance, he couldn't miss.

His fingers tightened on the trigger ... But then Langton's gun fired, smashing the gas lamp and plunging the alley into darkness. Dineen fired once, twice, heard his shots careen wildly in the dark, missing their mark. His last shot ricocheted off the wall at the alley's mouth, narrowly missing the dark shape that spun around the turn and out of range around the side of the building and down the dark street to freedom. Langton's footsteps echoed faintly through the night canyons of San Francisco's streets.

The End

Dragon Lady

by Nanook of the Nashwaak

Chapter One: The Lotus Flower

The irony of it never failed to amuse Langton. He spent a fair time in mining towns, and the bars were always bursting while only a few staggerers were out on the streets in the bright midday. Seems the miners couldn't wait to hit straight for the dark saloons the moment they emerged above ground after a week or more in the dusty black shafts and pits.

Langton paused in the dust beside the entrance to the saloon. The notes of a nameless cowboy tune floated to his ears from a piano towards the back. He couldn't decide which sounded worse, the dead keys or the random bursts of gunfire in the streets. It didn't seem to matter much either way to most of the drunken miners. The only time they became excited was whenever a poker table laden with the wages of the last shift was overturned.

Slowly, he eased open the batwing doors with his left hand, all the while keeping his right hand by his hip holster. He tugged the brim of his hat a little farther down on his forehead, and slowly and silently shifted to his left. He stood still for several seconds until his vision adjusted to the smoky gloom of the dive.

Langton cringed as he glanced down to the floor of the bar. Patches of grimy sawdust and hay were ground into the hard-packed dirt between the puddles of mud and broken glass, and black, wet stains spattered tables and chairs alike. The sawdust on the floor hadn't been changed for several days, Langton thought. But he knew it was more important in a hellhole like this to keep your eyes on the action than to watch too closely where you stepped.

So this was the notorious Lotus Flower, in the Chinatown ghetto of Tombstone, Arizona territory .. the bar where he was supposed to meet

the fat Chinaman. More likely someone would come for him. This didn't look like the kind of establishment the Fat Man would frequent.

Langton didn't know why he had been sent for by the Fat Man, but the prospect of easy money piqued his curiosity. The Chinese controlled the bars in Tombstone, and no one knew for sure what deals might be done or undone or for what drugs, prostitution, coolies, gambling ... but for sure it was unsavory.

That didn't matter to Langton. He was a violent man when he had to be, but he had his own code of justice. He didn't meddle in other folks' business if there was no profit in it.

Langton looked over the crowd at the gaming tables, checked the faces lined up along the bar. He had a vague feeling someone somewhere was watching him. He shrugged it off, chose elbow room beside an older gent, a barfly down on his luck cadging drinks wherever he could.

« Gimme a whisky, barkeep. »

As the barkeep turned for the bottle, the barfly perked up. « Don't let him water your drink, mister. »

The barfly was right. Langton's first drink was watered down. Usually, he didn't tolerate being cheated by a barkeep. Sometimes, depending on the type of establishment, he'd draw his pistol and whip the bartender with it. He kept the sight on the end of his gun's barrel razor-sharp for times and purposes like this.

Often, just grabbing the barkeep by the shirt-front and showing him the wicked cutting edge up close was enough. But Langton was known to give the occasional demonstration and carry out his threat, if he judged the barkeep – or anybody else – had earned it.

Langton decided to let this one grievous mistake go unpunished. He didn't necessarily want to queer his appointment with the Fat Man. But when the second drink proved to be even weaker than the first, Langton decided he had enough. He would let no man play him for a fool.

« Let's make a deal, barkeep. You give me a fresh bottle of your best whisky, and take your watered-down drink away. »

« What's in it for me, mister? » answered the barkeep with a hint of swagger.

Langton raised his gaze, looked the barkeep square in the eye. Not bad, he thought. The man has a spine after all.

« Maybe I won't grab your scrawny neck and pistol-whip you into a bloody mess. »

Langton held his steely gaze on the barkeep. Slowly, he edged his right hand out of sight below the level of the bar. The barkeep, even more slowly, edged his hand below the bar on his side, and paused. A bead of sweat broke on his upper lip, as he stared into the coal-black orbs of Langton's flinty, chiseled countenance.

After several breaths, he brought his hand back up, nice and easy, and placed the full, unopened bottle of whisky before Langton. A ghost of a smile played across his thin lips.

« On the house, mister. It's gotta be the best, it's all I got. » He turned, and went about his business, freshening up the other patrons' drinks.

There it was again, that tingle, that feeling of being stalked by someone unseen. He kept his left hand around his glass on the bartop, his head bent toward his bottle, and his right hand close, but not too close, to the holstered gun on his hip.

Slowly, he scanned the other patrons along the bar, down one side of where he sat, then up the other way. Some men were stone-faced and immobile, their hands and eyes on their drink. Others were engaged in animated conversation, and still others were plying themselves with liquor in one hand and grasping a woman with the other. No one seemed interested in him.

He checked the mirror on the back wall over the barkeep's head, saw nothing ... then he heard the soft swish of a curtain being pulled, coming from behind the bar. He caught a glimpse of what might have been an eye, then it disappeared, as the small space between the bottles on the back wall once more assumed the colour and darkness of its surroundings.

Langton poured a glass of the dark liquid for the barfly, who nodded in gratitude and downed the rotgut with two quick bobs of his adam's apple. Satisfied the whisky wouldn't kill him outright, Langton poured himself a glass and topped up the barfly's glass as well.

Langton then turned back to the bar, and beckoned the barkeep over with one crook of his index finger. The barkeep pretended not to notice, until Langton slid a pair of crumpled bills onto the wood of the bar. He sidled over slowly, then turned to Langton with an ingratiating smile on his face as his fingers closed on the cash.

« I'm looking for a Chinaman name of Wang Lien. Some folks call him the Fat Man. I hear he's an important man in Chinatown. »

« Sorry friend, can't help you. We don't allow no Chinamen in here. Take my advice, don't ask any more questions about Chinamen. They'd just as soon stick a knife in your back as look at you sideways. »

Langton wanted to press it, but thought better of it. The fewer folks knew what he was up to, and who he was asking questions about, the better. He nodded, and the barkeep went back to the other customers.

« Mister, you looking for the Fat Man? »

Langton turned to the barfly, who had perked up from his alcoholic stupor on his right.

« What can you tell me, old man? »

In response, the barfly pushed his glass closer, watched with greedy eyes as Langton filled it with the vile fluid till it trembled at the very rim. He tipped the glass to his lips, then turned his moist, rheumy gaze to Langton.

« He lives under the whorehouse two streets back behind the jail. »

Langton moved to top up the ruined man's glass again, but then held the bottle in mid-air an inch above it. « Tell me more, friend. »

« Can't tell you much more, mister. Just watch your step ... no one gets in to see the Fat Man without an invitation. Sometimes folks go in there and never come out again. »

Langton had heard stories like that before ... rooms deep in curtained mazes, hiding opium dens, whorehouses, even whispers of an opulent chamber where men were tied down and tortured to death. Few people really knew what went on in the rabbit warren of hovels behind the main streets of Tombstone.

Langton wasn't a music buff, but the piano player was hitting so many dead keys, he turned to look that way. He was surprised to see a small Chinese man-child pounding away on a rickety stand-up near the back of the bar. A hulking form hurled obscenities at the young player.

« Cummon ya little Chink bastard, play the Yellow Rose of Texas! » The big man leaned over the kid, spilling his drink on the keyboard and on the kid's fingers as the waif played bravely on.

« Are you deaf, ya little monkey!?! » he bellowed, and put his hand on the kid's shoulder and shook him.

Langton spoke without thinking. « Back off, Jack, » he mouthed, just loud enough for the red-faced drunk to hear him and peer his way through the smoky haze.

Langton surprised himself with his own actions. ' I should have kept my nose out of it, it's none of my sweet business.' But the drunk's actions had touched a nerve somewhere inside Langton when he grabbed the youth. Langton knew there was no backing down now.

He slid his liquor to his neighbor, stepped away from the bar and confronted the mean drunk. Langton was no slouch ... he stood just under six feet, lean and loose-limbed on soft feet. But he was giving away six inches in height and an easy hundred pounds to his opponent.

« You should know better than to mess with Maddog McCabe, » sputtered the drunk. He lifted his meaty hand, waved an index finger in Langton's face. Langton didn't flinch.

« Get your dirty finger out of my face. »

McCabe's face went even redder with rage. Spittle sprayed in Langton's direction as he raised his hand again. Made to jab his finger on Langton's chest.

Langton moved with the deceptive speed of a striking rattlesnake. He wrapped his fist tight around McCabe's finger, bending it back and forcing McCabe towards the floor. McCabe winced, cried out. But he did not fold. His left hand clawed his hip holster, found the grip of his gun, yanked it out and began to bear it on Langton.

But Langton was quicker. His boot flicked out, caught McCabe's wrist before he could level the gun, and sent the gun tumbling into a pile of sawdust under the bar.

Keeping his grip on McCabe's index finger, Langton delivered a short punch with his free hand to McCabe's soft midsection. Then he wrenched the bigger man's arm behind his back, frog-walked him to the batwing doors, marched him out onto the sidewalk, and pitched him headlong into the midday dust of the street.

Langton walked down the boardwalk without glancing back.

Chapter Two: The Dragon Lady

The spies of the Dragon Lady were quick to summon her to the secret hole that looked into the Lotus Flower. Who was the gunman? Why was he asking for the Fat Man?

The Dragon Lady did a brisk business in reward money. She had copies of current and not-so-current wanted posters from local sheriffs, detective agencies and the Wells Fargo express company.

If a man whose face was on one of these dodgers entered the Dragon Lady's den, he'd best not pass out drunk here. He wouldn't want to welch on his bar bill, either. There were three or four toughs on the Dragon Lady's payroll at any time in the bar who could drag out drunks, or come up behind a deadbeat and stick a gun in his back. The offender was likely to wake up behind bars, soon to face the music.

Otherwise, she left them alone. It would be bad for business if she busted every petty crook who came into her bar. They made up a sizable share of her clientele, after all. Just as long as they didn't cause trouble and cost her time and money.

But she made an exception for the high rollers. Sometimes the reward money was just too good to pass up. People had short memories, and if there was a reward out for those folks, they were fair game for her, or for anybody else for that matter. The regulars always came back for the booze, gambling, drugs and women without a second thought.

She put her eye to the spyhole just in time to witness the exchange between Langton and the barkeep. She recognized him right away. It was the gunman the Wells Fargo agent Dineen had spoken to her about.

« Don't do anything, » Dineen had cautioned. « Langton's slippery and dangerous. Send me a wire the moment he sets foot in your bar. I'll pay double whatever's on your poster if I can arrest him myself. »

The reward for Langton was more than she'd made off her last ten bounties. She could grab him now, but the temptation to hold out for

double or nothing was too great. She watched him carefully, noticed he kept shifting around, casually but intently checking out the action up and down the bar and in the mirror. Maybe he wouldn't be all that easy to walk up to from behind after all.

She noted Langton's coal-black eyes, the hard line of his jaw, the cold set of his lips then she realized she had been staring too long. His eyes flicked over to meet hers for a split second, and she hurriedly drew the curtain back over the peephole. Her face was warm, and her breath had caught in her throat.

She decided to send the wire to Dineen in Frisco first thing in the morning. But that meant Dineen wouldn't arrive for several days at the earliest. In the meantime, she decided to find out what he was up to. She might make a few plans of her own for the man they called Langton.

Chapter Three: The Piano Player

Perhaps it was a creak in the worn boards of the sidewalk that gave the little piano player away. He was sure he could follow anyone, anywhere, without being detected. But not this time.

He lost sight of Langton for several seconds, as the lanky man turned around the corner. The piano player used the opportunity to break from cover, hurrying to the edge of the building to peer around at Langton and plan his next move.

In the same second, a left hand grabbed him roughly by the shirt front, yanked him into the alley and hoisted him against the wall, eye-to-eye with the stranger who had just thrown his abuser into the street.

Langton said nothing yet. With his free hand, he frisked the small form. He had been surprised once before by a quick slash from a hidden blade by an unlikely assailant, and vowed he would not make the same mistake twice.

« Speak up, kid! Who sent you? Do you speak any English at all? »

« Put me down, mister! »

So the little China boy can speak after all, thought Langton. Cheeky little punk, too.

« I'll give the orders around here, kid. »

Langton had few scruples when it came to getting his way with others. His rough voice, razor-sharp gunsight and calloused knuckles were all powerful tools of persuasion.

Yet there were lines that even he would not cross. Bullying children was one of them. The kid knew this, and played it to his advantage. After all, this stranger had intervened on his behalf in the Lotus Flower just a few moments ago.

Slowly, Langton eased the slight form of the child down the wall and set him on his feet. But he did not relax his grip on the urchin's shirt front. Chasing children down unfamiliar back streets held no appeal for him on this day.

« You Langton, Mister? »

« Who wants to know, little man? »

« I am not little man, old man. My name is Willie. »

« All right then, Willie, tell me who sent you. »

The boy peered back at Langton through slit eyes of almond black. No answer came from his lips.

« Okay kid, you win. I'm Langton. Now tell me who sent you or else, »
Langton bluffed.

A hint of a smirk played on the kid's lips. He seemed to savor the small triumph he had wrested from the big man.

« Wang Lien sent me to find you. He's the Fat Man. Let me go and I'll take you there. »

Langton followed Willie down one dark alley after another. Almost imperceptibly, they entered the local Chinatown, a warren of shabby shanties and low lean-tos. Clutches of gibbering men were gathered on the stoops and in the mouths of narrow alleyways.

Some called out to Langton, doubtlessly tempting him to enter into their dark holes to sample illicit pleasures of the flesh. Some sat slumped over, their eyes fixed on an inner realm only they could see through their opium-induced haze.

They came at last to one hovel slightly less rickety than the rest. Willie spoke briefly to two sullen shapes guarding the entrance, who then grudgingly stepped aside and left Willie and Langton just enough room to enter.

Langton was led through a maze of shifting and parting curtains of various colors. He soon gave up keeping track. Women, children and old men seemed to scurry in random directions around him.

At one turn, the acrid stench of spent opium and unwashed bodies assaulted his nostrils. He hesitated, turned to part the curtains and glimpsed rows of men, not all Chinese, lying on rough bunks, in a haze of smoke, heads lolling, eyes glazed, and limbs splayed awkwardly.

Willie reached back and grabbed his arm, took him through two or three more curtains, until they came to a larger, well-lit room, with silken curtains and comfortable furniture. Jade icons rested on small tables, beside tea sets and trays of food.

A fat man reposed amid the cushions. He waved Willie away, and turned his gaze to Langton.

Chapter Four: The Fat Man

The Fat Man was finishing a meal and licking his fingers when Willie parted the curtains for Langton to enter. Langton declined the offer to partake. He didn't make anything of the Chinaman's morbid obesity. He knew corpulence among these people represented power and authority, and demanded a certain respect.

Wang Lien wasted no time coming to the point.

« You big gunfighter, Misser Langton? You shoot many men? »

Langton said nothing, but made a nearly imperceptible nod.

« Good, good. You shoot women too? »

Again Langton remained silent. Only a slight creasing of his forehead and a twitch of his eyebrows betrayed his reaction.

Wang laid out his problem. His business interests depended on a steady flow of women and opium from the Chinese importers in Frisco, to run his cribs and dens throughout the Southwest. His last two shipments into Tombstone, stagecoach runs in from the railhead a hundred miles north in Bisbee, had gone missing along the way. No trace of the drugs, the women or the drivers had been found, until the body of the driver of the first coach turned up in a most unlikely place.

It was lying swollen and bent-legged on the heap of bodies in the alley behind the opium den run by the Dragon Lady, below the Lotus Flower. It was among the other corpses of the unfortunates who had drawn their last breath from the pipe, and were thrown out and left to rot.

It was common knowledge that few men made it out of the opium dens alive. Once their money was gone, they were given the golden bowl ... a hit of pure China white that sent them off on a voyage of no return.

Normally, the corpses were picked up sporadically by the local undertaker for a token fee and buried in a pit behind town, but Wang often sent a beggar to check the corpse pile in case any of his clan or

tong ended up there. The body of the driver got thrown into the pit before Wang had a chance to see it.

When the body of the second driver was thrown onto the heap, Wang had it brought to him before the undertaker made his rounds. There were ligature marks on the neck, ankles and wrists, and the corpse stank not only of death, but of opium as well. Both feet were swollen, and the soles burnt red and black.

So the rumors about the torture chambers in Chinatown may be true after all, thought Langton.

The supply interruption hadn't been good for the Fat Man's business. Without a dependable source of opium, men were leaving his dens and getting their fixes in the competition's operations. More houses were opening all the time, with more and purer dope, while Wang was forced to cut his dwindling supply thinner every day.

Women were a problem too. There would always be clients for his women, miners between shifts and roustabouts in town for a drunken spree, but they never had much money. Besides, they often beat the women up, usually so bad they couldn't get back on their backs for several days or even longer.

Wang needed fresher, younger girls, who would command higher prices and cater to more discerning, less bruising customers. He couldn't match the entertainments of his competitors. He wasn't sure how much longer he could stay in business.

Wang was fairly sure his women were ending up across town at the Lotus Flower, and that his drugs were being sold all over town, he told Langton. But he couldn't prove it. He didn't see his women before they were delivered to him, so how could he know what they looked like. Same with his drugs ... all he knew was that even though his shipment never arrived, the town was awash with opium. It had to be his that everyone was smoking everyone that is, except his own usual customers.

« I want you to find out what's happening to my shipments, Langton. I want you to meet the next one at the station in Bisbee, watch my man, make sure it arrives here intact.»

« What's in it for me, Wang? »

Langton didn't much care where the money came from, cash was king, after all. Wang offered him drugs and women, all he could handle, but Langton demurred. First the cash, then he would be free to choose his own pleasures as he wished. It didn't take long for them to settle on a mutually acceptable fee for services rendered ... if Langton could fulfill the terms of the arrangement.

« I've got five women and a load of opium coming in on the Bisbee train in three days, Langton. I need you to ride with my man on the coach into Tombstone. I want you to guard the shipment until it comes directly to me. »

« Why did you send me to the Lotus Flower, Wang? »

« I wanted you to get a feel for the competition, to see if you could find anything out on your own first, » said Wang.

It was only the softest rustle and the slightest tremor of the curtains in the far corner of the room, but Langton sensed that someone was lurking behind, listening to their conversation. He briefly debated going over to the corner and pulling the curtains apart to expose the eavesdropper, but decided against it. He knew there was no such thing as a secret in Chinatown.

Chapter Five: Cam Dineen

Cam Dineen read once more the telegraph with the hated name that the Dragon Lady had sent him that morning.

It had taken long enough for Langton to show up, thought Dineen. Usually a bounty as big as the one on Langton's head brought results sooner than this.

Mr. Valentine, the president of Wells Fargo, had laid it on the line with Dineen not so long ago. Dineen's strict instructions were to inform the Wells Fargo rep in the closest office to Langton's whereabouts, and let the rep deal with the criminal. Stay out of it.

But Dineen's pride and his burning hatred of his arch-rival were all-consuming, to the point where his loyalty to his company was compromised. He didn't give his boss's implicit instructions a second thought.

Three day's travel by train and horse from his office in Frisco to Tombstone, thought Dineen. Anything could happen by the time he got into the wide-open mining camp.

If he did contact his people in Tombstone, thought Dineen, Mr. Valentine would find out what was going on within the hour. Dineen would be denied a piece of the action, no doubt. But Langton must be his, and his alone – the reason for every day he stayed alive, until he ran down the hated gunfighter who had mocked and eluded him all his career.

Dineen went back to the telegraph office, reached over into the basket marked FILING, and removed the other copy of the Dragon Lady's telegram. As the telegrapher opened his mouth to protest the breach of company policy, Dineen put a finger to his own lips, then peeled off a healthy banknote from his money clip. After a quick, furtive glance around to ensure there were no witnesses to the transaction, the older gent nodded conspiratorily and smoothly palmed the proffered bill.

Dineen then left the Wells Fargo building, and strode across the street to Western Union. It wasn't uncommon for agents of one company or the other to use the services of their competition. Sometimes it added an extra layer of secrecy and security to their operations.

« DL –Keep eye on L only stop reward yours plus bonus when I capture stop Arrive in Tombstone soonest stop CD. »

Chapter Six : Maddog McCabe

McCabe brooded morosely over his drink. The bartop was stained in shades of blood and rotgut, ridged in black with the scorch marks of innumerable smokes, and cratered with the slashes and stabs of a thousand knives.

The dirt floor was caked with clumps consisting mainly of sawdust, held together by sweat, spilled liquor and vomit. Smoke rolled in clouds over rough and wobbly tables, where grizzled gamblers tossed bills, coins and cards with careless flicks of their wrists.

McCabe wouldn't go back into the Lotus Flower for a few days. His humiliation was too raw just yet. He wouldn't make it inside anyway, the bouncers knew him now, and would laugh in his face and show him the door.

He was spoiling for Langton. His hatred was bitter and all-consuming. He would find Langton, and gun him down from behind if he had to. I might be a coward, he thought, but I'm not stupid.

He had prowled the blackest holes of Tombstone, searching for him, places where even the miners feared to tread --- dens where the opium smokers and eaters sprawled heavy-lidded and slack-jawed on filthy straw --- pits where brawlers beat each other bloody for five and ten-dollar purses, no quarter asked and none given - anywhere he could talk or muscle his way in and stay for more than five minutes --- and could not find him. He'd watched the hovels that passed themselves off as hotels and seen no sign of Langton entering or leaving.

McCabe fed his hatred with another swill of his poison, draining his glass and reaching for the bottle. He'd run out of places to look. He would need help, someone with connections and informers who could locate Langton. There would be a price to pay there always was for men like him... but it would be worth it. It was time to pay a visit to the Dragon Lady.

Chapter Seven: Willie

Willie was an orphan, and lived by his wits. His parents had been lured to the Golden Mountain, the name America was known by in China, by the flesh merchants with promises of free land and endless opportunities. The ship that carried them to San Francisco was little different from the slaveboats that had hauled the Negroes from Africa only several decades earlier.

Willie and his father were sold to the South Pacific Railroad Company, and his father soon perished with so many other coolies in one of the countless rock slides and dynamite blasts as the endless steel tracks were forced through the mountain passes.

Willie knew then that his turn would come. Sooner or later the white man would point his finger at Willie, and he would be sent up the slope with the dynamite lashed to his back. Several times, Willie had seen the white man press the ignitor before the coolies could make it back down safe off the slope. He knew he would have little or no chance of survival if he stayed. So he bolted, and this was where he went to ground, in Tombstone, with many more of his countryfolk.

He never learned what happened to his mother, and the more he saw and experienced in the shadowy half-world of Tombstone's Chinese ghetto and the misery of the silver mines and railroad camps, he realized he was better off not knowing.

Willie had a knack for being in the right place at the right time, when money changed hands and secrets were shared. He made it his business to know what was going on, and usually found a way to profit when deals went down in Chinatown. He also possessed an intimate knowledge of the labyrinths and secret passages that linked the drug dens, gambling pits, cribs and whisky joints that festered in the lawless mining camp.

He had been close enough to eavesdrop when the Fat Man pitched his deal to Langton. And he often found his way to the Lotus Flower, noting

who came in, how the deals for drugs and women were made, and what went on in the private chambers of the Dragon Lady herself.

Yes, he knew what happened in her satin-sheeted bed, how unfortunate men were used, abused, and made to disappear after she was done with them. Some were tossed down disused mine shafts, he knew. Others were hauled out of town and dumped, left for their bones to bleach in the desert sun.

An even bleaker fate awaited those who had incurred her displeasure, or failed to satisfy her desires. Several of the bodies bore burn marks in various places ... testaments to her cruelty, and marks of scorn for the inadequate. These victims were tossed onto the pile of other wasted hulks who had spent their last living hours in her dead-end drug den.

Chapter Eight: Bisbee Station

Women and drugs, thought Langton. What the hell, he couldn't change the world. In his time, he'd used both. However, he never used alcohol or drugs so much that they spoiled his aim.

Actually, he reflected, women were most often his downfall, always getting in his way and foiling his plans. Especially when he thought he knew what he was doing, he thought ruefully.

He arrived in Bisbee scant minutes before the train pulled into the station. He knew there were supposed to be five women and one crate of opium to go into the coach Wang had sent him up with. You could never be sure when women were involved, said Wang, and Langton had to agree with him. One Chinaman was also included, guarding the women and the drugs, and would drive the coach back into Tombstone. Langton would ride shotgun beside him.

With a final chuff of steam and squeal of brakes, the train pulled in level with the platform. Doors opened down the line, and passengers began to step down. Presently, a male Chinese stepped out of a near car, soon followed by a file of women.

As the group descended from the train and assembled on the platform, Langton observed that there were not five women, but six in all. He looked the women over carefully. Why, he asked, were there six, and not five as he had been led to expect? The Chinese answered with the shrug universal to all languages. So sorry, so sorry, then an unintelligible stream of sibilant Cantonese.

The women were no help either. Several could barely walk, as their feet were bound and twisted into grotesque shapes. Others, Langton observed, couldn't utter a word if they wanted to. Their tongues had been removed at birth, when they were sold into slavery by parents who wanted only sons to carry on the family name and provide for them in their old age. This was likely not the only surgical injustice inflicted on them, Langton knew.

Langton quickly tossed all scruples aside. He had a job to do, and it was not up to him to right all the wrongs in this world. He decided whoever sold these women to the Fat Man must have added one more as a gesture of goodwill. Maybe it was none of his business after all. He herded the motley crowd into the coach, climbed up onto the shotgun seat beside the Chinese driver, and they began the ride into Tombstone, half a day's drive away.

The Dragon Lady looked Langton over from the corner of her eye. Her spy in the Fat Man's chambers had been right, this was the man she had watched from concealment at the Lotus Flower.

Maybe she was pushing her luck, after all this was the third time she was pulling this stunt. But they couldn't be onto her, there had been no witnesses left alive after the last two heists. It didn't matter anyway, she was here now and she was committed. It would work again this time, she would make sure.

She stole another glance at the round-eye – stared maybe just a second too long, as he seemed to feel her gaze on him and turned to look back at her. She flashed a coy smile of naïveté, and quickly turned her head. She'd make special plans for him later.

She had met the train one stop up the line from Bisbee, accompanied by a Chinaman in her employ similar in stature to the fat Chinaman in Tombstone. The man introduced himself to the guard, explaining that the woman in his tow was a gift to the Fat Man, and handed over a parchment inscribed in Chinese characters attesting to his friendship and goodwill. The guard bobbed his head several times, nodding and shuffling his feet, and uttered his understanding. A few bills from the bogus fat man pressed into the guard's hand sealed the deal. It was as easy as that.

She felt for the small pouch of powder concealed in the flounces of her dress. She would wait patiently for the right moment – then the drugs,

the women, and yes, the rough-looking round-eye – would be hers, to do with as she pleased. She was sure she could handle both him and the driver – and then her own hired gun would arrive and take over the transport of the merchandise ... Mad Dog McCabe.

Chapter Nine: The Abandoned Mining Camp

Langton watched the sagebrush and cacti slide silently by as the stage rolled on through the desert toward Tombstone. He was familiar with the terrain, after riding this way in the opposite direction to meet the train at Bisbee. Although the lay of the land was mostly flat, there were several dry washes, low hills and blind turns where highwaymen might lie in ambush.

He kept his rifle across his knees as the Chinese handled the reins. It had taken some persuasion, but Langton had convinced the driver to hold his tongue so Langton could stay alert. Langton was not predisposed to idle chatter. His thoughts were too dark and sinister to share with strangers for the sheer sake of company.

Several times, he checked his back trail, looking for telltale dust clouds that might betray the presence of pursuit. It was difficult, for their coach had stirred up the dust in its wake already. A dry desert breeze rose, further obscuring their back trail with its own dust devils and gusts. Mirages hovered and receded as the afternoon heat radiated from the flats on either side.

At one point, he motioned for the driver to stop the coach. He rapped against the door, then told the driver to silence the women inside. For several moments, they stood quiet and motionless, as Langton listened for the pounding of hooves or the clank and creak of saddlery on their back trail. He climbed to the top of the coach, crouching down to offer a smaller target, and scanned the perimeter. Although he heard or saw nothing, he was not satisfied. Someone was out there.

The coach turned around a small butte and drew near an abandoned mining camp. The collection of shacks and piles of mining rubble was similar to any one of the hundreds of claims that had been dug and deserted as worthless following the big silver strike at Tombstone several years ago.

A small voice inside the coach spoke a short message in a tone of urgency, and the driver translated for Langton. It was time to offer the occupants of the coach a comfort stop. The few weathered, tumbledown buildings, open to the sky and slanting at odd angles, might offer some privacy to the passengers. Hell, thought Langton, I could stretch my legs a little myself.

He motioned the driver to pull over, and after carefully looking and listening, stepped down to the ground with gun in hand and began to walk around the site prior to letting the women out. Only when he was satisfied that they were alone did he open the doors.

This was the moment the Dragon Lady had been waiting for.

As the women filed out one side of the stagecoach, Langton led the driver to the other side to afford them a moment of privacy, and to satisfy his own call of nature. Once Langton's back was turned, the Dragon Lady nimbly climbed up the side of the coach, out of sight of Langton and the driver, just high enough to reach the water canteens on the seat.

Quickly, she pulled the stopper on Langton's canteen, opened her hand above the mouth, and poured a handful of white powder into the canteen. After restopping the container, she did the same for the driver, placed both back where she found them, then clambered back down, went about her business, and climbed back into the stage.

Langton returned, satisfied himself that everybody was back on board, then climbed up once more onto the shotgun seat. One last look around. This might have been a good spot for an ambush, he thought. Time to get moving, been here too long. A sip of water or two to cut the dust, and they'd be on their way.

Chapter Ten: Hogtied

McCabe couldn't believe his luck. Maybe now, at long last, he was catching a break.

He rode down into the small draw and met the Dragon Lady according to plan. His rifle was already unholstered, and he was looking forward to plugging the guard and driver. He'd dump their bodies down the old mining camp well, where they would never be found in his lifetime.

It was a sweet deal for McCabe. Cash up front never enough, of course, but more than enough for one day's dirty work ... but he got to take the women too.

He didn't care much for Chinese women himself. His tastes ran to larger women, with more meat on their bones. But the Chinese girls were always in demand, as long as the miners still worked the silver lodes deep in the Tombstone mines. He had four women working almost around the clock for him now, but he would soon need more. He would have to restock his stable when his girls were shot, stabbed, beaten or worked to exhaustion, as all too often they were.

There was only one problem. He'd gotten a little too fond of the white powder lately. He was finding it a little harder to deceive himself into thinking he didn't need it a little more, and a little more often.

McCabe wasted little time for pleasantries. He knew they were pushing their luck, after all this was the third time they were pulling this stunt. The Fat Man wasn't stupid, he knew. He'd hire some gunman to find out what was going on.

He was in a hurry to get this over with. The draw seemed deserted, but McCabe knew that even the empty places had eyes and ears. He decided to not risk the report of his rifle, he'd toss them down the well alive.

But then he recognized the inert form of Langton, slouched on his side on the ground in a drug-induced coma, where he had slipped to from the

shotgun seat of the coach. Rage rose up inside him, turning his whisky-veined face several shades of crimson.

« I know this bastard. Death is too good for him. We can't kill him yet. I want to beat him to death myself ... nice and slow. »

« Hands off, McCabe. He's mine, Wells Fargo wants him, and Cam Dineen is going to pay me big bucks if he's still alive when he gets him. Drop the driver down the well, then help me tie him up and load him in the back. He's coming back to the Lotus Flower with me. »

McCabe hesitated. His glance flicked over the Dragon Lady, the women inside the coach, and the baggage on the top. There could be a fortune in there, his for the taking. His fingers twitched as he shifted as his grip on the rifle.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the Dragon Lady's left hand moved toward the curved knife hidden in the folds of her clothing. She knew his usefulness was coming to an end. If she didn't finish him here and now, it would have to be done as soon as this job was over.

McCabe saw the look in her eyes, and stepped back from the brink. He grabbed the driver's unconscious body by the feet, dragged him to the well, and tipped him in. Then he hog-tied Langton, and muscled his body into the vehicle. They headed out for the Lotus Flower as the sun started to set below the rim of the Dragoon Range.

Chapter Eleven : Dragon Lady's Lair

The dreams were dark, tinged with dread and death. Several times, Langton's eyes fluttered open in panic to black silence, only to plunge back into realms of drear and despair.

At last, Langton managed to open his eyes and keep them open. Slowly, the fog lifted from his mind, and the images of gloom receded and disappeared.

He soon realized he lay spread-eagled on his back, on a bed in the darkness. His arms and legs were bound with silk skeins that stretched taut to somewhere in the darkness, and try as he might, panic-stricken, he could not move them in any direction.

He tried to cry out, but the silk gag tied over his mouth and around his head muffled his anguished voice. Langton soon realized the futility of his struggle, and willed his heart and mind to slow down, and save his energy for whatever ordeal awaited him.

Presently, sibilant voices whispered in the darkness, and a dim light shimmered several feet away, showing the outline of curtains from floor to ceiling. The cloth parted, and a small, older Oriental woman carrying an ornate lantern padded over to the foot of Langton's bed.

She bent down below his line of sight, and set the lantern down onto a small table beside the bed. Then, just as silently, she withdrew to the curtain, and returned carrying a larger porcelain urn, closed at the top but for a narrow, flexible tube tipped with an ivory mouthpiece. On the urn's surface, painted dragon figures chased each other over forests of green pine and lakes of azure blue.

The urn was suspended over a small jar. In the gloomy room, Langton couldn't make out what was in the jar, but he didn't need to be told. Once again, he squirmed in his restraints, and tried without success to utter a meaningful syllable through the silk gag.

A brighter light flared as the mute struck a match. She held the flame on its long stick on the dirty white lumps amid the charcoal in the small jar, then removed a small fan from the folds of her robe and gently coaxed the coals to life. Seemingly satisfied, she withdrew behind the curtains.

In moments, the sickly sweet stench of opium reached Langton's nostrils. He drew his breath as slowly and shallowly as he could, even knowing in his heart that intoxication was inevitable. He turned his head as the curtains parted once more, and another female clad in a flowing robe swished silently to his bedside.

Langton's eyes opened wide as he gazed upon her features, recognizing her from the stagecoach ride. So this was the Dragon Lady!

She stood still for a few long moments, then unbuttoned his shirt front. She slowly appraised his chiseled musculature. With a sinuous shrug of her shoulders, her robe slid down her torso to the floor. She reached out with one long slender arm, and ran her fingers over Langton's chest. Her long, sculpted nails dug deep into Langton's flesh, then she withdrew her hand.

Stepping to the urn, she pulled the mouthpiece of the pipe to her lips, and drew a mouthful of smoke into her lungs. A slow smile spread to the corners of her mouth, and a faraway look overtook her almond eyes as the smoke trickled from her nostrils and between her small teeth. Then the Dragon Lady turned her gaze to Langton's eyes, and proffered the mouthpiece.

Despite Langton's best efforts, his eyes opened wide in involuntary panic. An attempt at no came out through the gag as a stifled grunt.

She climbed onto the bed, draping her weight on his chest, immobilizing his head between her knees. The fingers of her left hand pinched his nostrils shut. She lowered the hookah's mouthpiece closer, and worked it under the gag and between Langton's tightly pursed lips.

Chapter Twelve: Willie's Dilemma

Willie had been watching when Langton was dragged into the back door of the Lotus Flower. Usually, he didn't care about the fate of the nameless victims, there was nothing he could do for them.

But this time, he recognized the whisky-swollen features of Mad Dog McCabe, the gwai-lo who had roughed him up in the Lotus Flower two nights before. He had risked discovery by inching closer in the darkness, and was rewarded with a glimpse of the man who had saved him from McCabe for no reason at all.

He knew full well what was in store for Langton. And he knew, even if he hadn't shed a single tear over the fate of all the other victims of the Dragon Lady, this was the one he had to save.

Slowly, carefully, Willie slipped through the maze of the curtain jungle of the Lotus Flower house, careful to avoid detection by the occupants. Sensing that time was of the essence, he risked a quick scurry through the sour-smelling opium den, where emaciated husks of what had once been men and women lolled and sprawled glassy-eyed on filthy bug-ridden bunks, their gaze directed inward to their own private hell.

At last, he crouched behind the curtains of the Dragon Lady's private Shangri-la, and peered between the folds to where Langton lay, sprawled on the bed. Bands of red silk tied around his ankles and wrists bound him to the bedposts. Willie saw no one else in the room.

A tall ceramic vase stood beside the bed, with a long hose fitted with a mouthpiece snaking out from under its lid. A small bowl filled with gleaming coals lined the base of the vase, and a long metal rod, attached to the vase by a thong, rested with its tip in the coals.

By the dim light of several tapers on a small stand beside the bed, Willie spied Langton's gunbelt in a far corner. Reasoning that an unarmed flight through the curtain maze posed its own set of difficulties, he

scuttled over to the corner, collected the gun belt, and removed it to his hiding place behind the curtain.

Now to free Langton ... but he suddenly realized he needed a knife. The silk bindings were strong and he knew the knots were thick and tight. He cursed himself for neglecting to bring one.

He fingered Langton's gunbelt, finding nothing of use until his fingers ran over the gun's barrel. He nicked his fingertip on the razor-sharp gunsight on the end of the barrel, and a small smile creased his lips.

Willie palmed the gun, then lifted his hand to part the curtains ... then froze, as the sylph-like form of the Dragon Lady glided into the room and came to hover over the prostrate form.

Chapter Thirteen : McCabe's Plan

McCabe was getting tired of being abused.

He thought Langton was his when he rode down into the draw and found Langton unconscious in the dust. He could have tied him up and let the sun burn him black until he died of thirst. He could have broken his bones and thrown him down the well alive, to keep the driver company until the end. Many other grim scenarios played out in his frustrated mind, all futile.

At least, he thought, he'd share in the bounty on Langton, after the Dragon Lady told him that Dineen, the Wells Fargo detective, was coming to collect Langton and pay her off. But it soon became apparent that the Dragon Lady had other plans for Langton. She had him sprawled and spread in her lair of torture, and McCabe knew exactly the sordid fate that Langton would soon face. He could kiss the reward money goodbye.

Sure, he got to keep the women. But they were more of a headache than they were worth. He'd never see half of the money they took in. They never lasted long either .. those few who weren't beaten or worse after a few weeks or so simply ran off for parts unknown. Besides, McCabe was a busy man. Pimping took more time and attention than he could spare.

He knew there had been a fortune in opium on the coach, easy to sell, with lots left over for his personal use. This latest run was the third he'd made with the Dragon Lady, and he was observant. He knew where it was hidden – in a room between the opium den and her dungeon of carnal delights.

It was time to put his plan into action. McCabe made his way to the office of the local Wells Fargo agent. Dineen would be arriving today with the intention of claiming Langton, if he hadn't ridden into Tombstone already. If McCabe couldn't get his hands on Langton, he could at least claim the reward on Langton's head ... and steal the drugs from the Dragon Lady as well.

Chapter Fourteen: The Raid

At first, Dineen was hard-pressed to credit McCabe's wild claims. Langton was bound and gagged in an opium den in Chinatown? He wanted to dismiss the dirty, whisky-nosed drunk and visit the Dragon Lady at the Lotus Flower, and told him so.

« But that's who's got him tied up, » said McCabe. « And there won't be anything left of him when she's done. »

She hadn't listened to him, thought Dineen. She couldn't leave well enough alone.

« All right, McCabe. Where is this place? »

« You can't just walk in by yourself, she's got guards all around the place. I can get you in though. But I want the reward when we get him out of there. »

Dineen cursed under his breath. It had all seemed simple enough at first. But now he had to trust a dim-witted stranger to lead him into a fortified drug den. Would it be worth it to get his hands on Langton at last?

Common sense said no. But twenty long years of frustration, failure and festering hatred for the one man who was always only one step ahead of him had long since trumped his judgement. He swallowed his caution and his doubt, and conjured a note of swagger into his voice.

« All right, McCabe, you got yourself a deal. Lead me to this hellhole of yours and let's get him. »

The deeper they went into Chinatown, the more Dineen's flesh crawled. It seemed a thousand pairs of eyes watched him take every step, as they passed shanty after dismal shanty.

Dineen held back as they stopped in front of a non-descript shack. Two hulking Chinese emerged seemingly from nowhere to bar the door. What now, thought Dineen. After a brief exchange of words, the guards parted to let them enter. But first they took the guns from both McCabe and Dineen.

As they stepped forward into the gloom, Dineen knew instantly they were trapped. He felt rather than heard the soft tread of steps behind him, and turned and twisted to escape the clutching hands that reached out for him from the darkness.

Dineen's quickness saved him. His narrow turn took his assailant by surprise, and Dineen drove his knee sharply into an exposed groin. The dark form expelled its breath, and fell to the floor with a keening moan. Dineen spun around and bolted into the darkened interior, bowling over furniture and persons in his headlong rush.

McCabe stepped over the threshold and into the gloom, then reached for the long knife hidden in his armpit sheath. One quick turn, and it was buried deep into the belly of the unsuspecting guard. McCabe's other hand grabbed his gun from the hand of the guard as the limp body began to fall.

Then McCabe made his fatal mistake. He fired two shots, one for each of the guards. Any element of surprise they were counting on was gone. A swarm of Chinese closed and rushed him, knocking him down and beating him until the world went dark.

Chapter Fifteen: Smoke and Fire

Willie had seen enough. He gathered his courage, grabbed Langton's gun, and reached out to part the curtains. Then the shots rang out.

The Dragon Lady froze for a split second, then dropped the mouthpiece of the hookah she was attempting to pry between Langton's gag and his clenched teeth. She slid off the bed, into her robe, and swiftly disappeared behind the curtains whence she had come.

In a flash, Willie sprang to the bed. He used the sharpened sights on Langton's gun to cut the gag, then the bonds that held him to the bed.

It took only moments for Langton to gather his wits and stand up straight. He strapped on his gunbelt and turned to Willie, who grabbed his sleeve and led him to the wall of curtains opposite to the entrance used by his captor. Langton pulled back the cloth, and stood face-to-face with Cam Dineen.

For two, three long seconds, they stood in shock, inches apart, staring at each other in utter surprise. Then Langton acted.

He reached for his holstered gun – but he was too late. Dineen pushed Langton back with all the strength he could muster.

Langton took several steps back, fighting for his balance and struggling to free his gun. Arms windmilling, he careened into the hookah. A cloud of smoke billowed, and a spray of ashes spread along the floor as the top-heavy urn tumbled over and rolled. Flames began to dance along the floor, and curtains smoldered and burst into flames.

Dineen continued into the room, unmindful of the smoke and the flames that licked and leaped around the curtains. He was one step away from Langton as Langton's gun cleared its holster.

But Langton did not pull the trigger. Instead, he swept his hand up and around, clipping Dineen in the temple with the butt end of the gun. Dineen went down in a heap, into blackness.

Langton had only seconds left to make a choice. The smoke and heat would soon be unbearable.

He had a job. Somewhere in this maze was a room, and in that room was a fortune in uncut opium that belonged to the Fat Man. If he could find it and make good his escape, he would be a wealthy man.

Then there was this man lying crumpled before him – his mortal enemy, bent on destroying Langton for all the years he had preyed on Wells Fargo and brought him, Dineen, grief and shame. At last, Langton could rid himself of his nemesis forever just by turning away.

« This way! Hurry! » cried Willie, who then darted through an opening where the flames had not yet begun to climb the curtains. Langton reached down, grabbed Dineen's inert body under his arms, and dragged it through the gap as the whole room went up in a roaring whoosh of flames.

Chapter Sixteen : Dénouement

Dineen awoke to a babble of gibbering voices, as several pairs of Asian eyes leered down at him. He lay in the dust of the street, as the cool night air soothed his temple where Langton had clipped him with his gun.

Smoke rolled from the wreckage of what had been the Lotus Flower and the Dragon Lady's lair. Slowly, it came back to him ... his run through the maze of gloom, ending in his brief encounter with Langton, the blow with the gun amid the smoke and fire.

He realized that there was only one man who could have saved him from certain death. The flames that still smoldered among the ashes of the Lotus Flower paled in comparison to the inferno of anguish, shame and self-loathing that consumed him utterly as he wrenched himself upright.

Dineen knew that every breath he would ever take, he took for one purpose only – to bring Langton to justice, no matter what the cost.

Langton barely made it out to the street, labouring under the weight of Dineen's unconscious frame. He dragged the Wells Fargo agent a safe distance from the flames and around the corner of a shack.

Langton had failed. He knew the women were gone, but in the scheme of things, their value to the Fat Man was not great. They were easily replaceable.

The opium, on the other hand, was a crippling loss. The Fat Man had doubled up on this shipment, in hopes of recouping his losses on the two prior shipments that were stolen from him. Langton knew he would have to face the Fat Man, and dreaded admitting his defeat.

Where was Willie?

« Hey Boss! Over here! » Langton turned, and spied Willie, concealed from the crowd of fire gawkers in a narrow gap between the shacks. Langton

looked around, and satisfied that no one was following his movements, edged over to Willie's hidey-hole.

« Look what I got, boss! »

Willie had taken advantage of the chaos and confusion during the fire to raid the drug den and grab the Fat Man's dope. Willie knew he would gain nothing if he returned the drugs to the Fat Man himself. Nothing but pain. So he struck a deal, splitting the fee with Langton. Life looked a little more promising for the homeless orphan now.

The Fat Man beamed with delight as he accepted the jute sack full of opium from Langton. It was not all there, but it would be enough to revitalize his business, especially now that the Lotus Flower's operation had gone up in flames. He'd taken in the women who were displaced by the fire, and his opium dens would again be ready to welcome the frantic users who were desperate for their next bowl of dreams.

Langton took the money, gave half to Willie and decided not to stick around. He knew that Cam Dineen was close, hunting him now with renewed determination. He was sure their paths would cross again.

« Goodbye, Willie. »

« So long, boss. »

Langton mounted his horse, turned it aside, and rode away. He didn't look back.

McCabe awoke to near darkness. He tried to rise, but his limbs were tied achingly tight to pegs driven deep into the hard dirt floor. A rough gag was jammed into his mouth.

The face of the Dragon Lady jeered above his own. Beside him, a small charcoal fire radiated shimmering heat from an iron brazier, and his own knife lay with its point gleaming red among the embers.

It would be a ritual sacrifice. Death by a thousand cuts with a red-hot knife.

The End