

Connory

Chap. 1

They had been following him for three days off and on. It had turned into a deadly game of hide and seek, the advantage switching back and forth several times. Now, with the sun burning in his face, the big man knew that he had found the right spot to make his stand. Off in the distance, perhaps four or five hours away, he could see the dust trail of his pursuers and the occasional glint of the sun off some metal surface, such as gun butt or a horses bit.

He settled back against the face of the cliff in the shadow of the overhanging ledge to rest and plan his defense. He was atop a long ridge, the last twenty feet of which consisted of a sheer cliff face. Off to one side was a deep canyon with a trickle of water sluggishly moving in its bottom. The far end of the ridge ended in a spectacular view of the drop off into that canyon, but provided no way around without going several days out of the way. At the near end, the ridge fed into the slope of a ragged granite pile that rose thousands of feet toward the northwest. The only place to cross beyond the ridge was the deep notch where he was perched in the shade. The cut in the ridge had originally been a shattered stretch of granite, but time and weather had worn the sharp edges away until it was just wide enough to let two men on horseback ride through side by side. The pass was easily defended, however, by a pile of tumbled boulders that provided perfect cover for the last fifty yards of the approach to the cut and uphill all the way. They would have to send a dozen at him at once to have even a chance, assuming he let them get that close.

The man was large by any measure, and powerfully built. Many men made the mistake of underestimating him because his size made them think he was slow and uncoordinated. He was neither of those things. John Connory stood six feet ten inches in his bare feet, his 300 pound frame muscular but lean and tough from years at sea on the great sailing ships. He wore buckskin pants and shirt in the fashion of the mountain men, his dark auburn hair long with the braids of the plains Indians keeping it out of his face. His beard was long and straight, but he kept it trimmed short enough so that it didn't interfere with his weapons or tools. His slate gray eyes gave him a piercing look that he used to advantage in dealing with the Indians he encountered in his travels.

Connory had left his native Scotland at the tender age of ten, already large for his age, as an apprentice cabin boy. Although his father was of noble birth, he had lost his fortune and could barely provide enough subsistence for John's younger brothers and sisters. His father had asked a friend to secure John a position on a ship trading in the Far East so that he would be able to learn a trade and make his fortune. By the time John was 14, he had grown to just over six feet and almost two hundred pounds, and had shown an aptitude for navigation and numbers that earned him a position as apprentice to the ship's navigator. By the age of 20, he was navigator and second officer, and had saved a sizeable fortune from his share of the profits of the trading journeys. Eventually, he became ships master in his own right. His reputation as a master seaman was known far and wide in ports around the

world, and his crews were fiercely loyal because of his fairness and honesty in dealings with other men. He had begun to plan for his retirement when a rogue typhoon roared out of the north Pacific and broke the spine of his ship. He managed to limp into harbor in San Francisco a week later, but the ship was too far gone to save, and sank at the dock as they were unloading what was left of the undamaged cargo.

Two days later he had sold the cargo, sold the broken ship for salvage and wired the proceeds to the owner's New York offices. He paid off the crew and helped them find berths on other ships with captains of good character, then walked away from the sea forever.

Connery sighed as he reran the events of his life in his mind's eye. That had been nearly three years ago. Now, he was sitting in sweat soaked buckskins waiting for a dozen Cheyenne to catch up to him. He took a few sips from his canteen and dribbled several drops of the precious water on a large whetstone that rested on his thigh. Setting the canteen aside, he reached up behind his right shoulder and pulled the huge Bowie knife from its scabbard. He began to stroke the 12 inch blade with loving precision across the stone, working the edge from both sides until it gleamed with deadly intent.

He carefully fed the knife back into the scabbard, then took his Henry rifle and stripped it down. He carefully cleaned the dust and grime from the parts, then carefully reassembled it applying a bit of oil where necessary. He used a slightly oily rag to wipe down the stock and outside metal surfaces before leaning the rifle against the rock wall next to him. He followed the same careful but precise procedure with each of the huge Walker .44 percussion pistols that hung from his belt. He extracted the ball from each chamber, snapping a cap on each nipple to make sure the hole into the chamber was clear and dry. After cleaning and oiling each pistol, he carefully loaded each chamber with a fresh powder charge. Instead of using a standard round ball, he loaded a conical bullet with a hollow base. The 260 grain bullet was far more accurate than a ball, and because the hollow base expanded to fill the bore tightly, it reached higher velocity and almost twice the range.

The sun had dropped lower in the sky by this time. With a seaman's practiced eye, he guessed that he had perhaps three hours left before the sun dropped below the ridge at his back. He did not want to fight, being a peaceable man by nature, but he did not shrink from it when necessary. The Cheyenne for some reason had decided they wanted his scalp and had been pursuing him without letup. Sitting in the shadows as he was, he was sure they figured he had crossed through the pass and headed for the safety of the settlements just a day and a half away on the other side. Connery had thought of doing just that, but didn't know the country that well, and when he came on the pass, decided to use its natural defensive attributes to make his stand.

The last thing he did was to remove his spare pouch of gunpowder from his saddlebag. It was the last of his Scottish powder, and he hoped he wouldn't have to use it. He would have to return to San Francisco to order more of it, but it was worth the cost and six months wait. He took a length of rawhide and wrapped the leather pouch until it was a hard bundle. He knew that the tighter the rawhide, the more powerful the explosion would

be. He used a shard of granite to scrape out a hole under the base of the topmost boulder, then carefully inserted the bundle of powder into the hole, trailing a six foot length of fuse. He packed the dirty sand and gravel back into the hole on top of the charge, then trailed the fuse back to his firing point, using handfuls of dirt and a few pebbles to keep it from moving in the slight breeze coming down the slope of the pass from behind him.

Pulling a chunk of venison jerky from his bag, he stretched out behind his firing point, getting as comfortable as possible. It was almost time for the dance to begin.

The Cheyenne, an even dozen of them, approached the pass weaving back and forth among the sage and cactus, reading the sign of the white man's passage on the run as they went. Their ponies were just loping along to conserve their strength, but fast enough to keep an incessant pressure on their quarry. Finally, however, the ground grew too rocky to easily follow the trail from horseback, so they dismounted and lead their horses as they advanced up the beginnings of the long slope that culminated in the pass ahead.

They were within one hundred yards of the pass when the leader raised his arm over his head, his Winchester 66 repeater grasped around the breach. He sensed something wasn't as it should be, but could see no sign of it anywhere. He stopped, shading his eyes with a hand as he carefully scanned the rocks above them for signs of life. Just as he was beginning to start moving again, a sharp pain in his cheek and his left shoulder caused him to jump sideways and fall to the ground. An instant later, the crack of a Henry rifle echoed across the canyon. Blood was trickling down his face and shoulder where fragments of bullet and rock had peppered him. He knew that he had come very close to dying, and his rage at hiding like a woman filled his mind, forcing caution into the dark recesses of his thoughts. He jumped up and screamed insults at the white man, challenging him to fight like a true warrior instead of from ambush like a coward.

Connory, whose shot had achieved its purpose, smiled grimly. He was under no illusions as to the honor of the Cheyenne warriors. He knew that if an opportunity presented itself, they would kill him without a second thought. But he knew their culture well, and knew that he might be able to intimidate them into abandoning their goal.

He stood up, standing directly in line with the sun at his back. The warriors below could not see who he was, only that he was huge and black and unafraid with the sun at his back. He spoke to them in their own dialect, speaking of things that no white man should know, making them uneasy and skittish. The Indians looked to their leader, who was a subchief in his own right, and not without a certain amount of prestige among his peers. He hesitated, and in that instant, lost the advantage. The dark apparition stepped forward and seemed to grow taller. That was all the warriors could stand, their superstitions getting the better of them. They vaulted onto the backs of their ponies and thundered off across the chapparal the way they'd come, leaving their leader to battle the demon on the hillside. Suddenly feeling very small and very alone, the leader finally got onto his pony and backed away. Backing up several yards, he suddenly gave a huge war whoop and followed his men.

Connory, grinning from ear to ear, stayed on the pass until the Cheyenne were completely out of sight. He had gambled, and won, and was filled with adrenaline. He lost no time, though, in gathering up his gear, including the precious powder, and hightailing it over the crest of the ridge to the place where he'd left his horse. The huge bay stallion nickered at him as he approached, impatient to be moving again. The back of the horse came up to Connory's shoulder, and was powerfully built, with a sleek hint of Arabian and Berber bloodlines mixed in. Connory slid the Henry into the saddle scabbard and secured his saddlebags behind the saddle. He stepped into the stirrup and the bay took off as he swung his leg over its back and settled into the saddle. Within a matter of minutes, he had put a mile behind him. The horse worked its way around the scrub brush effortlessly, seeming to instinctively know the easiest path to take.

An hour later, the sun was all but gone on the western horizon, and Connory could detect no sign of the Cheyenne war party that had followed him for three days. He kept going, though, preferring to put as much distance as possible between himself and them just in case they changed their minds. Two hours later, he crossed a small stream and made a cold camp in a small grove of trees on the far bank.

Connery

Chap. 2

The next morning, Connory was up with the sun, sipping hot coffee. He sat with his back against a pinon pine that was old when Robert the Bruce walked his native Scotland, watching the sun creep slowly up the sky and listening to the quiet sounds of life in the trees behind him. Finishing the second cup, he stood and stretched, chuckling as his horse snorted and stamped its feet in eagerness to get under way.

Several hours later the sun reached its zenith and Connory began to see signs of civilization. The trail across the chapparal became a rutted wagon track and soon fed into what was obviously a regular road running off into the east. Just off at the edge of his vision, he could make out a dust cloud and hear the jingle of harness as the Butterfield stage began its final approach to the town.

By the time he rode down the center of the weather beaten town, the stage had discharged its passengers, changed horses and continued on its journey east. The curiosity and momentary excitement of the local residents whenever the stage arrived had dissipated and events were once again back to the routine of day to day existence. Connory rode slowly along, absorbing the flavor of the place, observing the people on the street and under the overhang of the boardwalk. He spotted the hotel at the far end of the street and nudged the bay a bit as he set course for the hotel. His horse instinctively pulled up in front of the rail on the shady side of the building, plunging his nose into the water trough that ran along the length of it. Connory wrapped the reins loosely over the rail, affectionately slapping the horse on the shoulder. He pulled his rifle free, then untied his bedroll and saddlebags and threw them over his shoulder. Stepping to the side a bit, he moved around the corner of the steps and climbed up to the broad veranda that spread down two sides of the hotel on either side of the swinging doors at the entrance way.

He stepped through the doors and stopped to let his eyes adjust to cool, dark interior. His other senses drank in information, however. He could hear several conversations going on among patrons in the lobby, and the clink of whiskey glasses in the bar off to his left. His nostrils were filled with a mixture of smells ranging from polished oak to leather and horsehide upholstery, to the sharp noxious smell of the spittoon near the front desk. As his eyes adjusted, he could see the desk clerk watching him expectantly, and saw the momentary lapse of the half dozen others as they noted his presence before returning to their conversations. He walked across the carpeted lobby to the polished oak counter where he laid his rifle across the top, dropping the saddlebags and bedroll to the floor at his feet.

“May I help you, sir?” The clerk, rather small and thin, peered up at Connory through thick spectacles.

“I’d like a room facing the street, on the second floor, if one be free.” His deep voice rumbled pleasantly across the countertop. Reaching for the quill pen next to the ink well,

he turned the ledger book around and signed his name in a large flowing, bold script that told the clerk this man didn't care who knew he was staying here, that he had nothing to fear or hide. He caught himself gaping at the huge man in wonder, instinctively knowing this stranger was a man of honor and integrity, and not to be trifled with.

"Very good, sir, I do have such a room. It's the best room in the house, with a parlor sitting room and a bathtub. It's \$2.00 a day, with \$.50 for the boy who heats and carries the water for the bath."

"Verra good, my friend. Have the young lad prepare the bath straight away. Here is enough for the week in advance. I don't know if I'll be staying beyond that." He turned the ledger back to the clerk, then picked up his rifle. "If you could send my gear up to the room, I will be in the bar washing away six months of trail dust. Call for me when the bath is ready, if you please, sir."

Connory turned and went through a second set of swinging doors into the bar, which was even darker than the lobby, but it was also noticeably cooler. He began to feel the fatigue and tension melt away as he stepped up to the bar. He was pleasantly surprised to find an attractive red-headed woman behind the bar ready to take his order.

"First things first, lass, if you don't mind. Do you have a cloth that you can dip into some cool water?" He peered at her impishly, a slight grin beginning to curl his lips.

The woman nodded and took a fresh bar towel from a stack on the shelf behind her and dipped it into the small barrel that held the bottles of beer. She squeezed the excess water from it and without a word handed it to Connory, curiosity clearly showing in her expression. Connory took the cloth and leaning his head back, draped it across his face from forehead to chin. After a moment, he put both hands up and vigorously rubbed the cool damp cloth over his skin and beard, then he wiped his hands on the remainder of the dampness in the cloth.

"Now, lass, I'll take one of those cool beers, and a bottle of your best whiskey." He grinned and tossed her the cloth.

"Coming right up, stranger." She grinned and turned to her task. She reached into a large tub and pulled a large green bottle from the water that filled it half way, wiping the excess water from the sides and bottom. A porcelain stopper with a leather gasket was held in place by a wire spring lock, to keep the beer pristine and allow for the final fermentation and aging. She cocked her thumbs under the lever on the side and pushed up. The wire spring popped out and up and the pressure popped the leather seal on the stopper, followed by a gush of foam as the pressure inside the bottle suddenly released. She placed the bottle on the bar with a flourish and turned to the back of the bar. Reaching down, she pulled a bottle of whiskey from the dark shelf, and wiped the dust from it with the damp towel.

"This is the best in the house, sir, and the last of it. You look like a man of good taste who will appreciate fine whiskey, not the usual swill that passes for it around here." She looked

pointedly down the bar at the small group of men who looked as if they had been there for days. She set the bottle down in front of Connory with a freshly washed shot glass next to it, and wiped the bar with a flourish, smiling up at him.

"My thanks, lass. I have grown quite fond of your American whiskey, if it be of good quality. Would you care to join me in a wee drop?" He stopped after pouring a shot, the bottle tilted expectantly, waiting for her answer. Her brilliant smile became dazzling and she quickly put another glass down next to his. He filled it and set the bottle down, then reached out and took up the shot glass.

"To America, and to the prettiest lass I've laid eyes on in many a year!" The redhead laughed and taking up her glass, tossed it back smoothly in one motion. Connory's eyes twinkled with humor. It was obvious the girl enjoyed the finer things in life. He made a mental note to be sure to see her as often as possible while he was there, as he threw back the shot and poured another. He nodded toward her glass, and the girl grinned, nodding that she would have another. They had just finished the second drink when the desk clerk stepped through the swinging doors and made his way to Connory where he stood at the bar.

"Your things have been placed in the room, and a bath is ready and waiting for you, sir." He held out a bottle green key tag with the number 22 in gold on it. Turn right at the top of the stairs and its the third door down. The bath is in the room at the far end of the hall, and the boy is handy in case you wish more hot water or towels. Supper is served between six and eight in the dining room on the other side of the front desk down the hallway. If you wish to eat in your room, I can have the kitchen send up a tray."

"Thank you, sir." Connory took the key and nodded his head to the clerk, who quickly turned and almost ran back through the swinging door back to his desk. Turning back to the girl, he picked up his rifle and grabbed the bottle around the neck, and said, "If you would be so kind as to bring my beer, I will pay you when I can get into my saddlebag."

"I'll be along directly, sir, just as soon as I check on my other customers." Connory gathered up his belongings, and went back out the doors to the lobby, and then up the broad staircase to the second floor, turning right down the hall. The door to room 22 was half open, and as he pushed into the room, he saw his saddle and bedroll stowed in the corner of the room, and the saddlebags were laying on the bed, propped up against each other. A chest of drawers with a mirror vanity was to his left next to the door, and a large brass bed was against the wall on his right. He could see that the sheets were sparkling white and clean, even in the dimly lit room.

He propped his rifle in the corner next to the chest, and set the whiskey bottle down on top of it. Striding over to the windows on the outside wall, he raised the blinds to let in the late afternoon sun. Glancing out the window, he had a commanding view of the entire length of the main street, and a portion of the side street across and two doors down. Turning back toward the bed, he poked it with a stiff finger, nodding with satisfaction at the feel of it.

Wasting no more time, he took up the whiskey bottle and reentered the hallway, turning to the right toward the bath room. As he stepped through the door, he was enveloped in clouds of steam that were rising from the huge clawfoot bathtub sitting on a small raised dais in the center of the room. A boy, seated off to one side, jumped up as he entered, touched his forehead with a finger and stood waiting for instructions. Connory dug out a silver dollar from his belt pouch and flipped it to the boy, who caught it deftly on the fly.

"Is there anything I can be gettin' you, sir?" he said expectantly.

"Nay, boy. If you would keep a weather eye for the pretty lass from the bar, to let her know I'm in here, she'll be bringin' my beer to me shortly." He reached out and tousled the youngster's hair, and the boy grinned back at him as ran out to keep watch in the hall.

Connory quickly stripped off the stained and sweaty buckskins, hanging them from a wooden peg in the wall next to the door. He stepped gingerly into the bathtub, savoring the heat from the water. He had just settled down into the tub when a tap came at the door, and the boy stuck his head inside the room. "The bartender is coming with your beer, sir."

"Aye, lad, send her in if you please." Connory leaned back against the tub, feeling the heat slowly draw the stiffness and tension out of trail hardened muscles and bones. He picked up the bar of soap sitting on a wire tray fastened to the side of the tub and began to work up a lather of the strong smelling soap.

A quick double rap came at the door, and the redhaired bartender stepped into the room, smiling at him. "I have your beer, as requested, and I took it upon myself to bring this as well." Grinning, she held out a long cigar with a gold band around it near the rounded end. "I figured since you appreciate fine whiskey, you might also like a good cigar."

Connory grinned, and shaking the water from his hand, took it from her. He nipped the end of it with he teeth just as she produced a large kitchen match. She flicked the end with her thumbnail and it flaired into flame, then held it cupped in her two hands so he could get the cigar started. He watched her as she held it not quite touching the tobacco, letting him draw the flame in. It was obvious she'd done this many, many times in the past. The room was soon filled with the aroma of a fine cigar, the smell of soap, and a hint of fresh flowery perfume that could only be coming from the girl perched on the short stool where the boy had been sitting.

Connory could see the girl now from head to toe, and she was truly a beautiful girl. Her dress was a dark green, with a satiny sheen to it, consisting of a long floor length pleated skirt, and a jacket styled bodice of the same material, with long sleeves that came to the wrist. Showing under the jacket was a starched white blouse with tiny gold buttons running from neck to waist, and white lace ruffles over the thrust of her bosom and at the wrists. He could see that she wore a pair of black riding boots on her slim feet, as she sat with the heels hooked over the lowest rung of the stool. But it wasn't her well shaped figure that drew his attention, it was her face. Her features were delicate and feminine, yet with a hint of steel in the jawline. Her eyes were wide under arched brows and a delightful

shade of blue that hinted of summer sky and robin's eggs. Her hair was the crowning touch. It was fine as spun silk, hanging down well past her shoulders, shimmering with dark red and coppery highlights as she moved her head. The faint breeze coming through the partially open window blew her scent to his nostrils, and he realized the flowery smell was from her hair and not from a perfume. Yet, he imagined that he could still smell a slight earthy fragrance of clean freshly washed female that brought a slight blush to his cheeks and quickening to his pulse. Something in his manner as he gazed at her caused her to smile slightly and cock her head just a touch, wondering what he was thinking.

Connory quickly cleared his throat, drew on the cigar, and reached down next to the tub for the whiskey bottle to cover his embarrassment at being caught staring. The girl smiled and cocked her head even more, batting her long silky eyelashes at him, sure that she had caught him out.

Pretending that nothing was amiss, she asked him what brought him to Bent Creek.

Connory

Chapter Three

"First, lass, tell me your name." He puffed on the cigar, peering at her through the smoke.

"I am called Mary Katherine Rudibaugh. I answer to Mary Katherine, but I prefer Kate. My brother and I own this hotel, which was started by my father some years ago. Our parents were returning from a trip to Chicago when their stage was ambushed by indians. They and several other passengers were killed, and we inherited this place. My brother went back east to settle the family affairs and has not returned yet."

Connory could tell that she was still greatly upset by the recent past events, but that her pride and inner strength would not let her break down in front of strangers. He admired her for the courage it took to do so. "It appears that you are doing a fine job of running things, Kate. I haven't seen such clean sheets in a hotel in a long time. Its obvious you take pride in your work."

Kate blushed from deep down, hiding a pleased smile behind her hand. Her eyes sparkled with delight at the compliment. "Thank you, sir. You are most kind. Now, tell me what brings you to our tiny little town. There's precious little around here to draw anyone but passersby!"

"My uncle and his wife have a ranch about 40 miles north of here. He made me promise that when I quit the sea, I would come and help him run the place. I had not planned on coming here this soon, but Fortune doesn't always follow the plans we mortals make for ourselves. When my ship sank and left me stranded ashore, I decided that now was as good a time as any.

Its taken me nearly two years to make it here, though. I felt I had to earn enough to be able to buy into the ranch, so I've been slowly working me way here in between jobs as a trapper, a hunter, and sometime scout. His name is Evan Donnelly, and the ranch is called Knockando, after the area we come from in Scotland. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"Not the ranch, no, but I have heard of your uncle. He was an acquaintance of my father. He visited him from time to time here whenever he came for supplies. His wife, Anna, would pass the time with my mother and I over tea. She is a very nice woman, although a bit timid for my taste." As she looked at him he realized that she was frowning, and that something she had suddenly remembered troubled her.

"What's the matter, Kate." he asked. "Such a frown doesn't belong on such a pretty face."

"Well, I just remembered that its been a couple of months since they've been into town for supplies. I know that Anna was waiting for some material for curtains and a dress to come in from St. Louis. I'm sure they would've been in before now." She stood up abruptly, and started toward the door. "I'm going to go across to the general store to see Mrs. Hanson

and check if they've been in. I'll meet you in the bar downstairs after you finish up here."

Her sudden alarm turned up the flames of his own worry. "I'll be down directly."

Without another word, Kate stepped briskly through the door and down the hall, and Connory started scrubbing the trail grime from his hide in earnest, the whiskey and cigar all but forgotten. Ten minutes later, he bellowed for the boy to bring more hot water to rinse off with, and ten minutes after that was climbing into a fresh set of buckskins retrieved from his bedroll. He quickly checked his weapons, then locked the room and headed downstairs to the bar.

As he walked into the bar, he saw Kate pacing back and forth in front of the bar, nervously twisting a bar towel in her hands. As he walked toward her, she saw him and stopped moving, a look of deep concern on her beautiful face. She didn't even give him a chance to ask what she had found out, just launching into the story.

"I was wrong, its been *three* months since they've been in to town. Mrs. Hanson has had the material for Anna for over a month now. She also told me that your uncle had ordered a new Winchester rifle in .44 caliber from her husband last time they were in. That's an expensive gun and a man wouldn't pay for something like that in advance and then not pick it up."

"I do believe you're right, lass. Can you take me to see Mr. Hanson. Maybe that he can remember something else that would be of help."

"Of course, follow me." Kate took his hand and led him out the service door at the end of the bar into the alley. She turned and went around the corner of the building to the street and made straight across the street to a store with a large front window, and a sign hanging over the boardwalk that said "Hanson's Mercantile and General Store" on top, and "J. Hanson, Prop." underneath. Connory followed, glad for once to have long legs, for he was hard pressed to keep up with Kate as she made her way across the street. Without even slowing down, she stepped up onto the walk and through the door, nearly tearing the bell over the door from its attachment. Connory had to duck to get through the doorway, but once inside was able to stand up easily due to the high ceiling. He realized that there were shelves all around the room high up, that required a ladder that traveled on rollers on a track that was fastened all around the room.

Mr. Hanson, finishing up with a customer, came out from behind the counter and shook Connory's hand. "You must be Evan's nephew, John. Am I correct?" The spectacles that he wore gave him a somewhat fragile bookish look, but Connory could see that there was hard muscle and strength under the open collared merchant's shirt.

"That I am, sir, and glad to make your acquaintance. Kate, here, tells me that my uncle and his wife are several months overdue for their normal visit for supplies, and that some items that they had ordered from you have gone unclaimed for some period. Is there anything else you can tell me that might shed some light on what has happened to them?"

"That is correct, my boy. Your aunt ordered 15 yards of material from my wife for curtains and a dress, and your uncle had me order a new rifle direct from the factory for him. Its one of those new 'One of One Thousand' Winchester model 1873 lever guns. Its also got a fancy walnut stock and engraving on it. A right purty thing it is. He paid me in advance with real gold double eagles. I could tell he was real eager to get that gun. I'm plumb sure he'd abeen here before now to get it."

"Could I see it?" Connory asked. An uneasy feeling began to crawl around between his shoulder blades as he watched Hanson go back behind the counter and then into the store room behind the curtains. It was several minutes before he came back out with a fancy, hand tooled rifle scabbard, which he set on the counter in front of Connory. There was a single strap holding down the fleece lined flap, which he popped open as he turned the end of the case toward Connory.

Connory reached into the end of the case, grasping the sleek polished butt and slowly dragged it into the light. The rifle was a superb example of the gunmaker's art. The wood was the finest high grade walnut, with plenty of dark swirls in it. The buttstock and forearm were from the same tree and perfectly matched. The metal work was superb with the finest of the engraver's art tastefully applied to the side panels and metal furniture of the gun, all blued to a high luster. The final thing that grabbed his attention, though, was the gold filled engraving on the side of the barrel that read "One of One Thousand." The rifle was perfectly balanced and the lever silky smooth as he dry cycled it. He gave a low whistle of admiration as laid it down on the top of the leather case.

"That's a damn fine rifle, Mr. Hanson, and I know my uncle would not be letting it languish here were he able to get it. You've been doing business with him for some time. Is there anything that maybe struck you as peculiar the last few times you saw him? Anything at all that might account for his absence since."

Hanson stood and thought for a moment, one hand cupping an elbow and the other rubbing his beard. For several minutes he stood thus, on occassion muttered under his breath and shaking his head. Then, he jerked upright, his finger in the air. He called out then to his wife. "Mrs. Hanson." He shouted up the stairs leading to the upstairs residence. "Mrs. Hanson, come down into the store for a moment, woman."

Connory could hear a woman's heels across the floor, and then Mrs. Hanson came briskly down the stairs, wiping flour from her face and hands. "What is it, Mr. Hanson. I'm right in the middle of baking bread."

"This is John Connory, the nephew of Evan Donnelly. He's come inquiring after the whereabouts of Evan and his wife. What was it you told me the last time they were here,

after they'd left. Something about Anna was upset and worried about something, but wouldn't tell you what it was?"

"That's right, dear. She was quite upset at Mr. Donnelly about something he was involved in, something with another rancher, complaining that he wouldn't listen to her. She was afraid of something regarding that, but I couldn't get her to tell me more, because you and Mr. Donnelly came back into the room right after he'd paid you for the rifle he wanted. I could tell she was worried, but also angry and frustrated because he wouldn't listen to her. I think she would have given him a whack with a rolling pin out of sheer frustration! "

"Another rancher, you say? Who else ranches up that way? I understood my uncle had several thousand acres with good water and timber, and plenty of grazing. Could somebody be after his land?" Connory asked.

"Well, there's Buck Sexton with the Lazy River brand over west of your uncle, and Jim Winslow farther north. But both of them boys have got spreads just as big as Evan's, and with plenty of water and grazing of their own. I can't see them starting any trouble. The only other thing is that the railroad right of way runs over near the east side of the ranch. The rail agent shares an office here over with the telegraph agent in the assayer's office."

"Thank you, Mr. Hanson. I'll go by there and see if they can tell me anything." Connolly said. "In the meantime, I'll be getting my things together to head up to the ranch as soon as possible. If you have anything in the way of supplies that you already put up for my uncle, I'd be obliged if you got them ready. I'll pay for them and take them, and the things they ordered with me. Do you mind if I keep this rifle with me?"

"Not at all, my boy, not at all. I just hope that nothing is wrong. Your uncle is a good customer and a good friend. I'll have everything ready for you in a freight wagon by tomorrow afternoon." With that, he took Connory's hand and shook it, then turned and went back to the store room to begin work.

Connory turned to Kate and Mrs. Hanson. "Thank you, madam, for your help. I will let my aunt and uncle know of your concern if I'm able. Now, I must prepare for the trip. Kate?"

He held out his arm, and she instantly took it, allowing him to escort her out the door and back across the street to the hotel. They went back through the door in the alley, and as soon as they were inside, Kate turned to Connory and said in a no-nonsense tone, "I'm going with you."

Connory, seldom at a loss for words, could only stand and stare at her.

Connory

Chapter Four

The rest of the day seemed to stretch into forever for Connory, almost as if the clock stopped ticking. He knew it was just worry about his uncle, but that didn't ease the strain one bit. Kate made him dinner and served it at the bar, but the lighthearted banter they had engaged in earlier in the day didn't seem appropriate to either of them, so they sat and quietly told each other about their lives, and eventually their hopes and dreams for the future. Connory had always been a solitary man, and since most of his life was spent at sea in positions of authority, he seldom had the chance to open up to another soul. He was unused to expressing his innermost feelings, making many awkward starts and stops before finally saying what he really felt. In the end, though, he felt strangely relieved that he had finally been able to tell someone about such things. He silently thanked God for steering his path across that of Kate.

Kate, for her part, had little problem telling Connory what her innermost secrets and dreams were, as is the way with most women. Having been born and raised in the rough and tumble man's world of the West, however, she understood that most men had little or no experience when it came to discussing intimate things, especially with a female. So, she gave Connory all the room he needed, using her feminine ways to draw him out little by little, and quietly relating her own situation during his long pauses.

By the end of the evening when the last customer had left the bar and retired to his room, they had a mutual respect and appreciation for the other that went far beyond mere words. Neither of them had said it yet, but they both knew that whatever happened in the future, they didn't want to be apart for any reason from that point on.

Connory finally looked up and realized they were the only ones left in the bar, the desk clerk had long since turned down all the lamps but one, and locked the door to the saloon. He stood up and stretched. Kate watched him from under half closed eyelids, her blood beginning to race. He moves just like a big cat, she thought, sleek and powerful and sure of himself. With a sultry little quirk to her lips, she moved around the corner of the bar and slipped easily into his arms, feeling her pulse quicken as her body pressed against his trail hard muscles. She tucked her head into the hollow of his shoulder and they stood quietly for a moment, just enjoying the sensations of holding another being close. After a few moments, Connory gently kissed the top of her head, and then her forehead when she tilted her head back.

"We've got a long ride ahead of us tomorrow, and a lot to be done before we can leave. It may be that we should march ourselves off to our beds afore I forget that I'm a gentleman and the son of a Scottish laird." Even as he said the words, his desire overcame his good intentions and he pressed his lips against hers in a kiss that seemed to be as hot as the fires of a volcano. A wave of passion swept over Kate and she melted into him as if she were trying to climb into his skin, giving back as much passion in that kiss as she received. Connory finally was able to force himself to break the embrace, taking a step backward and

holding her at arm's length. His breathing was ragged, and his skin was flushed despite the dark trail tan. Kate groaned deep inside at the separation, looking up at him with deep longing in her eyes, her skin as flushed as his was.

"You have quite an effect on me, sir." she stammered. "I think you are correct that we need to retire to sleep and contemplate the events of the day." She flushed again as she spoke, an impudent little smile turing up the corners of her mouth. With a grin and a somewhat sheepish look, Connory stepped back and gave her his best aristocratic bow, sweeping the floor with his hat as if he were Sir Walter Raleigh meeting the Queen of England. "May I escort you to your room, madame?" he asked.

"Certainly, sir. It would be my pleasure." and she curtsied with a grace that took his breath away. He held out his arm, picked up the lamp from the bar and escorted her out into the lobby and up the stairs to her door. She turned the knob and pushed the door open slightly, then turned and gazed up into his eyes for a moment, looking as if she was searching for something. Satisfied at what she saw, she reached up with her right hand and gently caressed his left cheek with her fingers, and smiled. Then, without a word, she turned and stepped through the door, closing it slowly and silently behind her. Connory stood mesmerized, watching her go. After what seemed like a few seconds, but which was actually several minutes, he visibly shivered, breaking the spell. With a grin like a school boy he walked down the hall to his own room, unlocking it to step inside. The brilliance of a half moon spread just enough light under the partially closed curtains to let him see where the bed and other furniture was, so he didn't bother to light the lamp. He pulled off his boots, and peeled out of the buckskin pants and shirt, then climbed into the bed. As he laid his head on the pillow, he was sure he could still smell the scent of her on his own skin. Smiling, those were his last thoughts as he fell into a deep sleep.

Connory awoke the next morning with the sun streaming through the curtains in his eyes, and an insistent knocking at the door of his room. Bloody hell, he thought to himself, it must be all of eight o'clock! The knocking grew more insistent, and annoying, so he sat up in bed and stretched, working the kinks out his neck and shoulders. Then, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up, reaching for his pants at the same moment.

"Just a minute. Stop pounding on the bloody door!" he yelled. He fastened his belt and then reached for his pistol hanging on the bedpost in its holster. As soon as he felt the solid reassurance of the big Walker in his right hand, he reached over and flipped the catch on the door, then stood back. "Alright, come on in if you've a mind to."

The door popped open immediately and the boy from the bath stepped through the door, stopping abruptly and almost losing his balance at the sight of the barefoot, bare chested Connory, wearing just buckskin pants and looking down the long barrel of a Walker Colt at him. Connory growled and raised the muzzle of the big gun toward the ceiling. "Damn,

boy, you nigh got your fool head shot off. Don't you know better than to wake a man sudden like that?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I meant no harm." he stammered. "Miss Kate sent me to tell you that Mr. Hanson has the wagon ready, and that she is awaiting you in the lobby, ready to go." As soon as he saw that Connory understood, he turned and vanished like smoke, glad to still be able to move. Connory laughed as the boy scampered down the hall, realizing he'd probably scared the boy out of two years growth. Reholstering the pistol, he grabbed his shirt and boots and finished dressing. After checking his weapons, he put on his hat, and taking up the Henry rifle, locked the room and went downstairs to the lobby.

He was two thirds of the way down the stairs when he caught sight of Kate standing by the window, her back to the room. She was a vision of the practical western female. She wore dark blue denim pants, tailored to fit but still comfortable, boots that were suitable for walking as well as riding, and a dark green flannel shirt that did nothing at all to conceal the beauty of her feminine form. A 5" barreled .45 Colt in a well-worn but cared for black holster hung on her right hip and somehow didn't look out of place at all. Across one arm she carried a dun colored canvas jacket that had a plaid felt lining, with dark leather cuffs and collar. Leaning against the window sill was a Winchester carbine in a buckskin cover, with a tan colored Stetson hat hooked over the end of the rifle.

She turned quickly at the sound of his boots on the stairs, flashing a dazzling smile at him in greeting. He stepped over to her and leaned down, kissing her solidly on the lips, not caring who was watching. He stood back up, grinning at the sudden flush of red that suffused her throat, as she looked around to see if anybody had seen anything, outwardly embarrassed at the public display, but secretly pleased at his audacity. The clerk, who had been watching intently, suddenly discovered a great deal of work that needed doing, and made himself disappear.

"Good morning, Kate, my love. 'Tis a fine day for a trip to the country, judging from the sunshine and cool breeze coming through the door. And how are you this morning? Did you sleep well enough?" He smiled at her, holding the fingers of her left hand in his own as he spoke.

"I slept quite well, although I had the most intense dreams that woke me several times. But, they were pleasant enough, and I fell immediately back to sleep again. In any case, I am rested and well ready to be off. Mr. Hanson left a note with the clerk very early this morning that the wagon would be ready whenever we are ready to leave. We'll have to spend one night in camp, so I figured the earlier we start, the closer we can get before dark."

"That sounds like a good plan, Kate. I'll stow our gear in the wagon, then I must get my horse from the livery. I don't want to have to depend on a heavy wagon if we have to move fast. Should I borrow a horse for you while I get mine?"

"I already anticipated that need. My own mare is already tied to the tail gate, ready to go."

"Good. Let's go." With that, he picked up her rifle, took her Stetson and set it on her head, and walked out the doors onto the boardwalk. The heavy freight wagon was already pulled up alongside the hotel, hitched to a team of four heavy draft horses. They weren't fast, but they could pull a heavy load all day without complaint. He stepped over and stowed the rifles and other personal gear under the wagon seat, then started inspecting the load in the wagon bed. He saw the usual staples of flour, coffee, salt, beans, and salt pork. In addition, there was a large barrel of kerosene, four small kegs of gunpowder, a hundred pound ingot of pure lead, several coils of barbed wire, bolts of fine cloth inside a heavy burlap bag, nails, some assorted hand tools, a half barrel of fine Tennessee whiskey, and a large gilt framed mirror encased in a heavy frame crate for protection. Altogether, Connory estimated the load at nearly a ton, and not an inch of space to spare in the big wagon. Finishing his inspection, he walked down the street to the livery stable, where he quickly saddled his horse and paid off the bill. Ten minutes later, he was tying the reins to the wagon tailgate. His big stallion took immediate notice of Kate's mare, and the two horses were soon talking in horse. Satisfied that they were getting along, Connory walked across the street to Hanson's store.

He strode into the store and walked up to the counter. Hanson stuck his hand out in greeting, shaking Connory's hand. "I had a good deal of the load already on the wagon when we talked before, so it took me much less time than I anticipated to finish the load. I've got a bill of lading for you to give to your uncle when you see him. I pray that everything is well when you get there."

"My thanks for that, Mr. Hanson. If it isn't, I'll know the reason why in short order." He took the papers that Hanson held out to him, and folded them, then put them into a belt pouch for safekeeping. He counted out enough gold eagles to pay for the freight, giving them to Hanson. Hanson handed him the fancy new Winchester that his uncle had ordered, along with several boxes of ammunition. "I truly do hope that everything is well."

He thanked Hanson, and the two men shook hands again. Connory piled the boxes of shells into the crook of one arm, and settled the rifle across the opposite shoulder and walked back across the street to the wagon. He settled the rifle in its cover into the hollow of the seat well, then pulled his Henry from its cover and placed it upright in the corner of the wagon box where he could reach it in a hurry if he needed to. Then, he spread a couple horse blankets across the hard wood seat of the wagon to cushion their backsides. Satisfied he was as ready as anyone could be, he went back into the hotel bar to gather up Kate.

She was standing by the bar, sipping from a steaming cup of coffee when he came in. She motioned for him to come and have some of the hot coffee while taking a sip. A plate of steaming biscuits sat on the bar, along with a big slab of churn butter on a small plate and a pot of apple butter jam.

"Have some coffee and biscuits while they're still hot, then we'll be on our way." She smiled up at him over the rim of her cup.

"Now that surely does make my mouth water, Kate." A man could get used to this kind of treatment real quick, he thought. Used to the sea fare of wormy hard tack, bad coffee, and salt beef that was more gristle than beef or the rough food of the trail camp, real fresh brewed coffee and homemade baking powder biscuits were a luxury to savor. He quickly split a hot biscuit, then smeared plenty of butter and apple butter jam on each half. The biscuits almost melted in his mouth, and he made noises of delight that brought a sparkling laugh from Kate as she fixed herself another biscuit. Two cups of coffee and several biscuits later, they washed their sticky fingers off in a basin of warm water and wiped them dry. Kate went into the lobby to let the clerk know they were leaving, and with Connory holding her arm, they stepped onto the boardwalk and walked to the wagon. Connory handed her up onto the wagon seat, then climbed up after her. He unwrapped the heavy reins from around the brake lever, kicking the lever out of its lock notch at the same time. When he slapped the reins, the big grey draft horse on the right front tossed its head and started to pull, and within two or three steps the other horses had fallen into step with the lead horse, and the wagon surged ahead. Minutes later, they were rolling along at a steady pace that would eat up the miles without tiring the team.

Connory

Chapter 5

They made good time despite the roughness of the trail. Countless wagons had carved deep ruts in the path that caused the heavily laden freight wagon to jolt unexpectedly from side to side as the iron tires were forced back into the center of the groove. Fortunately for them, the seat had reasonably good springs under it and the heavy load slowed the jerky reaction of the wagon body to a gentle swaying that Connory found not unlike the rolling of a deck beneath his feet. He had no trouble matching the movements of the wagon with his body, falling into an instinctive swaying in compensation. Kate had snuggled up close early in the day, and quickly had fallen into the same synchronized rhythm as Connory.

The miles melted away as the big team settled into an easy pace. Connory stopped for about ten minutes to let them rest every hour or so, with a longer rest for a drink of cool water from a small stream they crossed shortly before noon. While he tended the horses, and checked the load to make sure it was still securely tied down, Kate sat on a large flat rock at the edge of the stream, dangling her bare feet in the cool bubbling water.

Despite the heat of the noon sun, she felt relaxed and content, leaning back against the rock with her face turned to the sun. The sun soaked into her body like water into a dry patch of ground. She began to doze off, a smile turning her lips as she dreamed about the kiss she had gotten from Connory last night. Something tugged at her insides, deep down, as if a string inside her was being gently tugged. Her unconscious mind felt her nipples stand up against the rough material of her shirt, which caused that pesky string to be tugged a bit harder way down deep in the pit of her stomach. She made a tiny noise and squirmed slightly, which caused her to wake with a gentle start. A deep flush rushed to turn her shoulders and chest and cheeks a dusky rose color, as she quickly looked around to see if Connory had seen her inadvertent display of desire. She sighed in relief as she saw he was still pushing and prodding at the wagon load, methodically tightening the ropes that secured it. Unable to help herself, she cupped her breasts in her hands and squeezed them gently, pressing the supple flesh outward between her fingers until the nipples were between her thumb and forefinger of each hand. She squeezed harder, slowly letting them stretch and slip through the grip of her fingers at the same time. This time, a heavy twinge convulsed her insides, centered deep down between her legs, in the center of her being, then a bright light burst behind her eyes and spasms raced from the core of her being to the tips of her fingers and toes. She gasped heavily and had to lean back against the rock to keep from falling into the stream. The intensity of her passion took her by surprise, and she was unable to move for several moments. Finally, as if from far away, she realized that Connory was calling her, and she forced herself to sit up, taking several deep breaths to regain her composure.

She quickly wiped the water from her feet and tugged her socks and boots back on, and climbed back up the bank of the stream, brushing the dust and twigs from the back of her clothes. She smiled at Connory as she approached the wagon. She hoped that he wouldn't

notice that she was walking with a loose, swaying motion or that her face was still somewhat flushed.

Connory in fact did notice her gait and color, but assumed that it was from laying in the sun and being relaxed and content. He grinned back at her, remarking that it was time to be on their way. When she had seated herself next to him on the wagon box, he pushed the brim of her hat up with a finger and peered closely at her face, slight crinkle of a frown pinching his brows.

"You must be careful taking the sun, Kate, or you will turn that beautiful skin to leather." He grinned at her in amusement. "I don't fancy kissing a gnarled old boot!"

She grinned back at him, then leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. "Never fear. I have no such plan in mind."

Chuckling, he gave the reins a hearty pop and bellowed at the lead horse to "heave to, laddie." The team, by now well used to each other, all pulled together at the same time, and the wagon surged ahead, bouncing through the bubbling stream and up the shallow bank on the other side, quickly settling into the mile-eating pace of the morning. The track they had been following turned off toward the west, but their direction remained north. The pace slowed now, as the team had to pick its way between large boulders and patches of mesquite, and an occasional scrub oak. The ground also began to rise slightly as they got closer to the foothills of the mountain range off in the distance to the northwest. Connory knew that by morning, they would top out on flatter ground that ran off to the northeast for quite a distance. The land there was dotted with alpine meadows and stands of old growth pine that were well over a hundred feet in height. Several swift mountain-fed streams provided water throughout the range, making it an ideal place for raising cattle, while the natural border created by the foothills acted as a fence to keep the cattle from straying down into the more arid lands to the south.

Several hours passed uneventfully. Kate alternated between dozing against his shoulder and gazing about the landscape with interest, pointing out things that caught her eye. Hardly a minute went by, however, that she wasn't intensely aware, on an instinctive level, of the man seated next to her. While she had been raised in the west, and had a practical streak that put many men to shame, she was still a quintessential western woman - a romantic at heart. She had learned at an early age to trust her instincts about people. Her instincts now were telling her that she was safe with this man, that being with him was the right thing to do, no matter what. But, she still wasn't certain that he shared her feelings. She was smart enough to know that men didn't always understand the difference between lust and love. She knew he liked her, and that he desired her - the kiss was enough to prove that - but did he want to spend his life with her as she did with him? She pushed the doubts deep into a corner of her mind, and leaned back against his shoulder, content for the moment to accept the current situation.

"Whoa, laddie." Kate was shaken out of her light sleep as Connory tugged on the reins to stop the wagon. She looked ahead past the horses to see that they had topped out on a wide

bench snuggled up against the eastern slope of the mountains they had been getting closer to all day. She could see green grass clear out to the horizon, with stands of trees scattered over the landscape.

"We're about a half day's ride from my uncle's range," Connory said, "over that way." He pointed off to the northeast, where the lengthening shadows creeping down the foothills turned the horizon into a purplish smudge. "I don't want to roll up there in the dark, since we don't know what may have happened to my uncle, so we'll find a good spot here and spend the night. We can take up again at first light and be there before midday."

Stepping down from the wagon, he handed her the reins. He reached into the wagon box and pulled out his Henry rifle. He partially opened the breech to make sure it was properly loaded, then walked back to untie his horse. The big stallion was somewhat irate at being tied up all day, and it took him a moment to calm the animal. Finally, the horse lowered its head and gave him an affectionate bump as if to say he forgave him. Connory laughed and vaulted into the saddle, baring touching the stirrup.

"I'm going to see if I can surprise a couple of rabbits for our supper. There's a stream down in that hollow off to the left with good cover behind the trees for the wagon and horses. Can you pull the wagon down there and get us set up?"

"Of course. I'll have coffee ready for you by the time you get back." She slid over on the seat and unhooked the reins and gave them a good pop. The team laid into the harness and in short order she had steered the wagon down the gentle slope toward the grove of trees he had pointed out to her. Connory pushed his hat back with a finger, and grinned as he watched her go. His horse snorted and buck hopped a bit, eager to be off, so he give it a gentle kick in the ribs with his boot heels, and they rode off in the opposite direction, looking for dinner.

Connory was worried. Throughout his years at sea, he had nurtured and developed a sense of awareness for his surroundings that had saved his hide on more than one occasion. Every so often he would get a sort of an itch between his shoulders that he just couldn't get rid of. He discovered that every time that itch showed up, something happened that put his ship, or someone in the crew, or even himself at risk. He learned to heed that itch, and over the years got to the point that when it showed up, he started looking for things that were potential dangers. He'd had the itch all afternoon as they drove north, but try as he might, he had not been able to detect any irregularities.

Now, out on his horse, and fully armed and ready, he began in earnest to find out what was bothering him. As soon as he was out of sight of the wagon, he kicked the stallion up to a high gallop and turned back on their backtrail, keeping high up on the slopes above the trail. He stopped every so often in the shadow of a boulder or a scrub oak, just to listen and watch. His horse sensed the urgency of his master and pricked its ears up, catching every rustle and scratch within fifty yards. After the third stop to look and listen, Connory felt the stallion tense under him, becoming still as a rock. The horse's head came up and his

ears turned forward. Connory quickly focused on the low hills a few hundred yards to the east and across from his own position.

He was about to call it a false alarm when he saw a tiny glint of sunlight. He opened his long glass and watched the far slope intently. There it was again, barely visible through the brush and rock. Seconds later, he saw a tiny puff of dust as a heap of gravel was disturbed, causing it to slide down the slope in a miniature avalanche. Now he was certain, someone was following them, and being very careful not to reveal themselves. He watched intently for several more minutes, but was never able to catch a glimpse of the mysterious shadow. He carefully and quietly worked his way around to the backside of the slope and then rode as fast as he could back toward the plateau to Kate and the wagon. He was sure that he hadn't been seen, but wasn't going to take any chances.

Kate had made camp in a superb little hollow off to the side of the trees. The wagon was pulled up under some huge old pines, completely shielded from view until you were almost on top of them, with the horses staked out in a tiny little glen nearby. Anyone coming up the trail would have to know they were there and then look hard to see any signs of life. He grinned to himself, realizing that she was a lot smarter than he had given her credit for.

He approached the camp from the back side, coming through the trees until he was within a few dozen yards, then dismounting and walking in silently. As he stepped out of the trees, he froze in his tracks, realizing that he was staring down the barrel of a Winchester carbine less than 20 feet away. Kate was ensconced behind a large boulder, completely at ease as she sighted down the barrel of the rifle at his wide chest. He ruefully realized that if he had been a stranger, he never would've heard the shot that killed him. Kate flashed an amused grin at him and raised her rifle as she stood up, planting the butt firmly against one hip as she stood watching him come into the campsite.

He threw the reins of the stallion over a low hanging branch, motioning her over to the deadfall that sheltered the tiny fire she had started to cook coffee. She poured a cup of the streaming liquid and handed it to him, then sat down and leaned into the crook of the deadfall waiting for him to join her. He squatted indian style next to her, cradling the cup in his big hands.

"We're being followed." he said, not one for mincing words in times of danger. "About three miles back near as I can figure. I didn't get a look at whoever it is, but I saw enough movement to know it isn't an animal. I caught some sun flashing off metal three or four times. They're taking a real slow time of it, too. Just to make sure they don't get found out. I'm afraid it'll be a cold camp tonight, so finish off the coffee and put out the fire before the sun goes down. I'll see if I can't find some likely spots to spring a surprise on our mysterious visitor."

Kate reached out and picked up the coffee pot filling their cups to the brim, then doused the fire with the rest of it. She carefully kicked dirt over the soggy remains to kill any smoke that might trickle up. She took the pot and stowed it in the back of the wagon under the seat with their other gear. When she got back to the deadfall, Connory had just put the

finishing touches on two bedrolls partially hidden by the fallen trees, but just exposed enough to make it look like someone with no worries was camping there.

"Now what?" asked Kate, looking around. Where do we hide?"

"There's a pair of big boulders back that way," as he cocked his head over his shoulder, "with a depression big enough for the two of us, and plenty of cover if it comes to a fight. We'll work our way over there as soon as the sun goes down. Maybe we'll get lucky and catch the coyote that's tracking us."

Connory

Chapter 6

They finished setting up the false camp, and made a brief supper of cold beans and the last of the coffee. By the time they were done, the swiftly sinking sun was just a bright orange sliver on the horizon and deep twilight was settling onto the landscape like a heavy blanket. Connory picked up his rifle and moved toward the spot he had picked in the boulders. Kate seemed to melt into the shadows and then reappeared at his side a moment later. They quickly climbed into the pocket between the boulders, plunging themselves into a blackness as impenetrable as India ink. The floor of the small cave was soft with several inches of sand built up on the bedrock. They found an easy place to sit and began watching their camp.

Kate realized that Connory had made up their bedrolls to make it look as if they were asleep after a hard day on the trail. Despite the blackness of the night, after awhile she was able to pick out details around the camp such as the wagon with the hobbled horses quietly grazing just beyond it. She was sure anyone who was following them would discover them in their hiding hole. It felt to her as if her breath was roaring in her ears as loudly as if she were screaming. Yet, she could hear the tiny sounds of rodents in the brush coming out to hunt for food, and hear the wings flap on a large owl as it glided by searching for those rodents she'd just heard. She realized that the night was far from silent, but was filled with tiny noises from the myriad creatures that came alive after the sun went to sleep. She began to view the night as a friend instead of an enemy.

Several hours went by, and Connory saw nothing, except for one curious coyote who cautiously crept into camp to sniff at the bedrolls. The wily scavenger quickly lost interest when he found no open food containers or scraps from supper. Connory took note, however, when the coyote's ears suddenly stood up and pointed down his back trail. The animal heard something and tensed briefly, then melted into the blackness as if he had been smoke. Connory shifted his position slightly for better back support and silently eared back the hammer on his Henry rifle, trying to detect what the coyote had heard.

After awhile, he heard the rattle of gravel as it slid down an embankment about 40 yards off to the right. That's just off our trail, he thought as he carefully brought the butt of the Henry up to his shoulder and settled it in. He was about to dismiss the noise as that of an animal when a brilliant yellow muzzle flash lit up the night, and the sharp crack of a Winchester assaulted his ears. He swung the muzzle of the Henry slightly left and squeezed the trigger just as the muzzle flash faded, quickly working the action and firing two more shots just to the left and right of the first. He was rewarded by a yelp of pain as his third shot connected. He could hear the unknown assailant scrambling back away from the embankment, and then a moment later, the sound of a horse galloping away wafted back over the hill. He waited for several more minutes to make sure their erstwhile foe hadn't left an accomplice behind to pot shoot them as they emerged from their hideout. Finally satisfied that there were no others waiting in ambush he stood up and stepped out of the

entrance to the small cave, holding his hand out to Kate to assist her in climbing out behind him.

"Come on, let's see what we can find out about our back shooter." He started off toward the embankment, dodging the small bushes growing in the sandy soil. At the base of the bank, he found an empty shell casing from a Winchester. It was from one of the new model 1873 rifles, marked as a .44 WCF around the primer. That narrows things down a bit, he thought. He knew the rifle was in high demand, and that having such a rifle would be a source of gossip among the locals. He filed that away for future use.

At the top of the sandy embankment he found the telltale signs of someone laying prone on the crest of the rise, and a small chunk of driftwood the shooter had most likely used to brace his rifle against. As Kate watched, he examined the ground intently, reading the markings in the sandy soil as easily as most people read a newspaper. After a couple of minutes he looked up at her.

"You can see here where whoever it was was laying across the crest of the ridge." He used his fingertip to trace the outline of the impression left by the body. "It looks like he waited for awhile to make sure of his shot. What he didn't figure on was someone firing back at him so fast. I fired almost instantly after his shot, then once more to either side. He rolled to his right and then back to the left, and it looks like I hit him with my third shot." He pointed to a dark stain on the sand, a series of progressively smaller spots trailing away from it for several feet before they disappeared.

Connory spent another twenty minutes bracketing the area before he picked up the trail fifty yards farther down the ridge. A bit farther beyond that he found where a horse had been tied out of sight of the camp. The blood sign stopped there and the hoof prints moved off toward the north, quickly reaching a gallop based on what he could see.

Satisfied that their unknown assassin was long gone, he quickly caught up with Kate and they returned to the camp. Now that they were both wide awake, he put a fresh pot of coffee to cook on the rekindled fire. Kate quickly put together some pan bread and thick slices of lean bacon for breakfast. Both of them sat quietly waiting for the meal to cook, thinking about the events of the past few days. Connory finally put down his coffee cup as if he had come to a decision, leaning forward to settle his crossed arms across the tops of his knees as he sat on a weathered stump near the fire.

"There's more to this than some road agent trying to hijack a load of supplies, Kate." He looked over at her across the fire, as she laid several strips of bacon and a large chunk of pan bread on a pair of tin plates. She nodded her agreement as she partially stood to hand him one of them.

"Nobody knew I was coming to town, that's certain. My uncle does not even know I am coming as I sent no letter ahead. That means someone has been watching who came and went and what their business was. I told no one who I was except for you and the owner of the store. I think somebody was watching to see who showed up to deliver the freight

order to the ranch. And I think their purpose is not robbery else they would have attacked us at any of a dozen good spots for an ambush along the way so far. No, they want us to just disappear, and to ensure that they are not seen in the process of getting rid of us. That explains the attempt in the middle of the night."

He paused and took several large bites of bacon and bread, then washed them down with a gulp of coffee. "Another thing, whoever is behind this is paying well. The shooter was using a new Winchester .44. There aren't many of them around yet. Most with repeating rifles use a Henry like mine, or the .56 Spencer." He held up the spent casing he'd found on the ridge. The early morning sunlight glistened on the golden brass as he turned it over in his fingers.

"But why, John?" Kate frowned, searching his face. "What could possibly be going on that someone would go to the trouble of watching the freight company, and watching who came and went in town. They could not possibly know that you were coming or what you looked like, and I had no idea your uncle was overdue until Mr. Hanson told us."

"I don't know, lass. As you say, nobody knew I was coming, so it has to be something on this end, something to do with my uncle or the ranch. There is some reason they don't want anyone coming up here, nor have they allowed anyone to come down for supplies. That, however, was a mistake. It raised the suspicions of the store owner - though not enough for him to talk to the law at this point."

"I doubt they were worried much about the law. The nearest Marshall is nearly a week away. Nobody would make that trip without a lot more evidence of foul play." Kate poured more coffee into their cups and sat back down across from him. "Most people kill their own snakes around here anyway. Always have."

"I suspected as much," he said as he stuffed the last chunk of bacon into his mouth. He followed that with the last of the hot coffee in his cup. "Well, then. That means that somebody doesn't want us to get to my uncle's ranch for some reason unknown at this point."

Connory stood up, stretching his big frame to work out the kinks. Kate stared at him, watching the muscles flexing under the buckskin shirt in fascination. When he finished, he put his arms down and stretched out his hand to help her to her feet, catching her off guard. She felt a flush rising across her chest and up her neck as she realized she'd been caught staring. Connory grabbed her hand, grinning like a rogue, his eyes twinkling with amusement. Despite her embarrassment, she couldn't help but grin back at him. Connory swept her up in his other arm and planted a hearty kiss on her mouth, then set her down on her feet. She swayed a bit, catching her balance, sputtering in mock indignation at his boldness.

"Come on, girl, we must be gone. I have a plan in mind." With that, he marched off to hitch the team to the wagon and saddle their horses. Kate quickly put out the fire and

gathered up their utensils, then stowed everything back in the wagon. In short order, they were rolling out of the camp back onto the rough track that served as the road.

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For the first few miles, Connory stayed close by on his big stallion. He moved ahead a bit and scouted the trail immediately in front of them but stayed mostly in sight of the wagon. The terrain finally leveled out onto a high chaparral with occasional deep gullies and the odd wooded hollow. Connory rode off out of sight briefly near one of the wooded areas, then popped up out of a gully on Kate's right, just a few hundred yards away. He galloped over to meet her, signaling her to rein in the team.

"There's a creek bed up ahead there with a wide shallow stream running a bed of rock." He leaned forward a bit and pointed for her. "The stream runs off to the right until the gully peters out where you saw me top out over there." He swept his arm around to the right and pointed back behind him.

"We're going to conceal the wagon around the bend of that gully, then we'll ride in to the ranch from a different direction. My hope is to catch some sign of whoever it was that ambushed us without them seeing us, and to perhaps make them think we turned back after being shot at."

"I like that idea. I don't fancy getting shot at again just for bringing a wagon load of goods to someone." She popped the reins over the shoulder of the leader, and the team moved out toward the hollow, eager to reach the water they smelled on the dusty breeze. Connory and his big stallion jumped out at a fast canter, getting into position to guide Kate down into the stream bed. Several minutes later, they rattled to a stop about 20 yards around the bend in the stream, completely out of sight of the place where the trail crossed the shallow stream. By the time they stretched a heavy canvas tarp over the top of the wagon and fastened it down, the silt they had stirred up in the stream bed had either settled or been swept downstream, so there was no evidence of their passage from any point during the crossing. Connory had unhitched the team, and left them hobbled on a small bench up against the bank that had plenty of grass and easy access to the water. Hobbled as they were, and with plenty to eat and drink, he was sure they wouldn't stray for at least a couple of days. He figured that whatever was going on with his uncle's ranch, it wouldn't be more than a few days before he got to the bottom of it.

Connory and Kate rode back up the stream bed, past the crossing point into the thick stand of trees on either side of the stream before climbing out on the far bank. They headed north and west, toward the high peaks that were on the near horizon. By late afternoon, they were well up into the foothills and lost among the scattered pines that dotted the lower slopes of the mountain range.

They stopped for the night on the edge of a high alpine meadow, with a stand of pines at their back, and the chaparral spread out below them for miles to the north and south. Far off to the southeast the chaparral gave way to high desert cut by ravines running off even farther to the east. From their perch, they could see the dry river beds that cut across the base of the foothills and the chaparral until they hooked up with the ravines. The landscape had a rugged beauty all its own, especially as the deep purple shadows crept across it as the sun sank behind the mountain at their back. Just as the sun dropped below the peak, Connory thought he saw a glint of sunlight sparkling on something metallic, but it was so quick and then gone that they were plunged into darkness before he could say anything to Kate. After years at sea, he knew how the light of the setting sun could play tricks with your eyes, so he kept silent on the assumption that it was a trick of the light. His cautious side, however, bade him to file it away just in case. It had been a long, tiring day, and they wrapped themselves in their bedrolls without even bothering to eat. In just a few minutes, Connory and Kate lay snuggled together, sound asleep, Kate knowing that Connory would protect her and Connory knowing the big stallion would warn him of any approaching danger.

Connory

Chapter 7

When Connory woke the next morning, the sun had just started to creep over the eastern horizon. The sky was filled with dusky pink and rose colored highlights on the bottoms of the clouds. Even as he turned to give the still sleeping Kate a kiss on her tousled hair, the sun burst above the horizon, and bright, glittering golden rays bathed their camp in a warm glow. One errant sunbeam caught Kate's hair, making it glisten and bathing her flawless skin in a soft peach color that held him transfixed for a moment. The rising sun quickly moved higher, however, and that look of angelic peace passed from sight.

The air was crisp and cold at the elevation they were at, and there was a heavy layer of dew on their blankets. He carefully flipped the blanket back to avoid an icy shower, and got to his feet. The sun had risen high enough that it lit up the drops of dew all across the meadow as if they were tiny little lamps. He could see that sparkling light for hundreds of yards to the far side of the meadow, and his big stallion had a blanket of stars across his rump and on his mane. The horse stamped his right front hoof when he saw Connory up and moving, and knickered a quiet greeting. The stallion shook his head and created a sparkling halo of light for a few seconds as the dew was flipped up into the air from his mane. Connory laughed quietly as the horse suddenly sneezed from the shower of cold mist he'd created.

Connory decided to let Kate sleep as long as possible while he went about the business of rubbing down both horses and drying their coats before getting them saddled and ready to move out. He had a large square of tanned chamois buckskin that he used for rubdowns. It was butter soft and thick and absorbed water like a sea sponge. It wasn't long before both horses were dry, saddled, and ground hitched in a patch of luxurious long grass. The stallion was ripping up huge mouthfuls of the rich grass as fast as he could chew them. Kate's mare was eating more delicately, but no less eager.

Connory kindled a small fire for coffee, and was just sitting the pot down to brew when Kate opened her eyes and smiled at him. Connory stepped across the small fire and reached down, expertly flipped back the blanket and took her hands in his. In a single, powerful movement, he'd lifted her up off the ground onto her feet, then gathered her into his arms. Her own arms snaked up and around his neck as his encircled her around the waist and shoulders. She turned her face up to his even as he lowered his head toward her face, and their lips met halfway. The kiss was long and soft and deep, and they both lost themselves in the sensations of the moment, their bodies molded tightly together in perfect union. They finally broke apart gasping for air, their blood pounding in their temples.

"Ye'll be the death of me yet, woman," he murmured in her ear, his accent more pronounced in the passion of their embrace. Kate just smiled and closing her eyes, laid her face into the hollow of his shoulder and tried to get her body to melt into his. They stood that way for several minutes, lost in the sensations coursing through their bodies.

Connory finally gave her a last gentle squeeze and stepped back, breaking the embrace. Kate looked up at him, mock disappointment making her lips pout. Grinning, he kissed her on the end of the nose, then swatted her rump, causing her to yelp in surprise and jump to the side.

"Drink your coffee, girl, we've no time to waste on frivolities." He poured, then handed her a steaming cup of coffee, along with a cold chunk of bread left over from the morning before. He did the same for himself, moving off to gather the horses up. He led them back to the small fire, which he proceeded to kick out with his boot. He topped off their cups, then dumped the remainder of the coffee on the smoldering ashes of the fire making sure it was out before stowing the small pot in his saddlebag. Minutes later, they were climbing toward the narrow pass that was several hundred feet above them.

By mid-morning, the sun was beginning to get a bit warm. The trail to the pass was narrow and rather torturous, winding back and forth across the steep mountainside. They often had to dismount and lead the horses around large boulders or across mounds of scree that blocked the path. Both horses were surefooted, and didn't stumble, but took their own sweet time at a couple of places, gingerly putting one hoof ahead of the other, feeling their way through. Finally the trail widened out a bit, and they realized they had entered the pass itself. They were able to ride side by side in all but a few places, but it was easier going than Connory had expected. As they topped out in the pass, he could see a much wider trail going down the west slope of the mountain to another alpine valley that was choked with pines along both sides, a crystal blue mountain brook running through the center with grassy flats on both sides from the bank to the tree line. The little valley ran off to the northwest, dropping in elevation as it went. He saw a small flock of mountain sheep on the far slope of the valley and a band of elk grazing on the grass between the stream and the trees.

He sat looking down over the beautiful vista stretched below them, letting the horses rest. Kate pointed off to the north, and down the mountain.

"When we get down to the chaparral, we're only about 15 miles west from where the wagon trail comes around from the east slope."

"My uncle's spread is just north of there about 10 miles. If we push we can be there just after sundown. That suits me fine, though, since I want to do some looking around after dark before making ourselves known to anyone. We still don't know who took that shot at us, and I don't want to ride into a trap." Kate nodded in agreement.

Connory reached down and patted the stallion's neck, and flicked the reins almost imperceptibly. The horse started eagerly down the trail toward the meadow, smelling the fresh grass and water. An hour later, they stopped to rest the horses and let them fill up on the lush meadow grass. Connory wanted both horses well rested and fed because he planned to push hard the rest of the way, so that they were in position by the time full dark descended on his uncle's ranch.

Eight hours later, they were sitting in the shadow of a huge blow down of lodge pole pines. The night was like ink, and you could barely see your hand in front of your eyes. The wagon ruts that made up the approach to the ranch house came out of the trees a hundred yards to their right, toward the south, and followed the far side of a small valley up to a small flat area maybe a hundred yards across. A large, solid looking log ranch house was nestled up against the back of the valley, with a barn off to one side on the north, and corrals for riding stock just beyond that. In the other direction, Connory could see a low shed that probably held either chickens or pigs, and another small shed-style building and corral that held a couple of dairy cows. There was a split rail fence that closed in an area like a paddock south of that, but it was empty, and the grass was as high as the fence, so it appeared to have not been used for sometime. At the other end of the flat bench behind the corral and north of the barn, he could see what looked like a small bunkhouse with some pines partially blocking the view. There was a faint glow of yellow coming from a window on the off side of the house, but he could see little other detail.

He shifted his gaze back to the main house. It was large, nearly 100 feet across the front and almost as far back. A long, covered porch ran the length of the front, with the front door in the center and two windows on either side of the door. A set of four steps went from the path up to the porch, with a railing on either side of the steps that met a railing running along the porch from end to end. The logs forming the walls had been finished flat and smoothed down, and the crossed ends dressed down to a square angle. The spaces between the logs were filled with a white substance that looked like plaster from where they were. The top of a large stone fireplace rose above the roof at each end, and there was a partial second floor that ran along the full length of the back half of the house. There were several windows along its length, and a pair of smaller rock chimneys poked up above the rear roof line. The front half of the house had a sort of wall or parapet around it and was a good ten feet off the ground. Connory thought he could see a small door in the wall of the second story that opened onto the roof, making him assume that one could make use of the roof if need be. On second look, he decided that the place was built with an eye to defense, with heavy shutters that could be lowered over the windows. The thing that bothered him most of all, however, was that the big house was dark and silent, and looked as if it had been that way for awhile.

Connory silently stepped down from the stallion, tying the reins off on a thick branch that poked out of the tangle of fallen pines. He motioned to Kate, who followed suit. They moved off to their left, in and out of the shadows like ghosts, following the tree line. After several minutes, they were far enough over that he could see the direct light from the window on the bunkhouse, but could see no evidence of anyone being inside. The corral was empty, and the barn doors were closed, so he could not see if there were any horses inside in stalls. His sixth sense began to jangle in the back of his mind, so he drew one of the big Walker .44's from its holster. Kate had grabbed a 12 gauge double shotgun almost as an afterthought when they had left the wagon, and carried it now, both mule ear hammers at half cock over loaded chambers. She knew she couldn't hit much at a distance, but close up she was more than a match for anyone she met.

They moved across the edge of the flat toward the bunkhouse, making as much use of the shadows as possible. After what seemed like forever, they had worked their way to the corner of the bunkhouse. There was a door that opened directly into the corral and a similar door from the corral into the barn in the area where the corral, bunkhouse, and barn met. Connory motioned to Kate to slip between the rails of the corral and to head toward the door to the barn. He followed a few paces behind her watching the bunkhouse door. He gently lifted the latch and pulled on it. The doors opened easily, and made little noise which surprised him. Grateful for that, he stepped into the dark barn then stepped a pace to the left to let Kate follow him through the door. As she stopped next to him, he quickly shut the door behind them.

He quickly became aware of the scent of horses, manure, old musty hay, kerosene, and leather that were typical of a normal barn, but there was a sickly sweet pungent odor, a cloying sort of smell, that overlaid everything else. Being no stranger to the smell of death, Connory knew immediately that something was very dead somewhere in that barn. The dread that raised his hackles earlier became a knot in the pit of his stomach. Kate too, had become aware of the implications of the stomach wrenching odor, and had covered her mouth and nose with a handkerchief. Motioning her to stay there, he started to search the barn, moving methodically from place to place. After nearly a half hour, he was back. He leaned down and put his mouth near her ear.

"The place is empty, no horses, no people. The only place I haven't looked is in the hay loft. The ladder is over there," he whispered, pointing to his left. "I'm going to climb up there to check, and I want you to stay down here in the shadows with that scatter gun to cover me."

Kate reached up and touched his face to let him know she agreed, knowing he couldn't see her nod in the dark. He nodded and took her hand, then led her slowly over to the ladder up to the loft. He pushed her behind the ladder into an inky blackness, squeezing her hand before he let go. Then he holstered his Walker and climbed as quietly as possible up the creaking wooden steps of the ladder. As soon as his head rose above the floor of the loft, the odor of death enveloped him as if it were alive and seeking to steal his own life and soul. It was so thick, the air felt sticky and cloying, and it left a horrible sweet metallic taste in his mouth.

He slowly advanced toward the rear of the loft area, feeling his way slowly with the tip of his boot. After several minutes, he rounded the end of a bale of hay and his boot hit something buried under a foot of loose hay. As carefully and quietly as he could, he brushed the hay off of the body he found. Still unable to see who it might be, he risked a match, lighting it on the edge of his thumbnail with a snap that sounded like a gunshot to him. What he saw in the flare of the match caused his stomach to churn. The two men lay in the straw that was stained with body fluids that had leaked from their corpses. It was obvious that they were in an advanced state of decay, and had been there for a couple of months at least. From what he could see of their clothes, he suspected they were two of the Mexican vaqueros that his uncle had employed as cow hands. He remembered that there had been a father and son, with a third man as ranch foreman. Judging from the

similarity in build and dress, the dead ones were the father and son. He suspected that if he dug further, he would also find the other man under the straw.

He blew the match out and held it till it cooled off enough to throw away, then made his way back to the ladder and down to the main floor. Kate stepped out of the shadows into the slightly less dark area in the center of the floor. He pulled her close and whispered in her ear.

"There are at least two ranch hands up there, dead. They've been there a long time. The bodies are starting to fall apart. We've got to search the main house, and then see if there's anybody in the bunkhouse. I don't like the way things are panning out." She could tell from the tone of his voice that he was upset and in a state of anger that she had never seen before. She whispered back to him. "There's a door next to the main barn door." She pointed across the barn behind him.

Minutes later, they were slipping from shadow to shadow, approaching the back of the main house on a well worn path that led from the barn door. They slipped the latch on the back door and stepped silently into what looked like a kitchen vestibule. There were pegs for coats and hats in the walls, and a large walk-in pantry to the side for canned goods. Connory indicated to Kate that they had better stay together so nobody got lost in the unfamiliar house. Once again drawing his Walker, they moved off across the kitchen area and through a dutch door that opened onto a dining room with a large table and at least a dozen chairs. The room was empty.

A door on their left opened onto a large hallway that ran from the back of the house all the way to the front, with a large stairway splitting the hallway, that looked as if it went to the second floor area. On the far side of the hallway, near the rear they found what appeared to be guest bedrooms, then a large library filled with books from floor to head height in bookcases on every wall. At the front of the building, they found a large combination parlor and day room that looked comfortable and well used. So far, the house was completely empty.

They started up the stairs, one on either end of the wide steps, watching the high side above each others' heads, just in case somebody should poke a gun over the railing or the like. At the top of the steps, they found a corridor that ran along the back of the house, from end to end, with a short balcony-like area on either side of the stairwell with a carved railing on each side to keep anyone from falling the fifteen feet or so to the bottom of the steps below. Connory went down the left passage and Kate took the right. She found three smaller bedrooms on her end, that could've been intended for children, but were probably used for guests since she saw no evidence of young ones in any of them. Connory found a large master bedroom on his side, with a large flagstone fireplace against the short wall to the north. The ashes in the hearth were old and had gotten hard. It was obvious that nobody had lived here for at least several months. That fit with the advanced state of the bodies in the barn, he thought to himself.

There were two large bureaus against the front wall, and a large armoire between them. He opened each one in turn, only to find them full of clothes for what appeared to be an older man and woman. He could tell that the woman, though probably older than himself, was small and petite, and from the quality and type of clothing, probably very attractive. He felt sure this was his uncle's bedroom, and he knew his uncle's wife was considered to be beautiful.

Again, there was no evidence that anyone had slept here for quite some time. The bedclothes were clean, but overlaid with a heavy layer of dust. There was also a thick layer of dust on the tops of the bureaus and on the woman's dressing table. He stepped back out into the corridor, finding Kate coming toward him from the far end.

"What did you find," he asked quietly.

"Just empty bedrooms that look as if they haven't been used in a long time."

"Same thing here. This big room was my uncle's bedroom, but there is a heavy layer of dust on everything. Months worth. They have not been here for some time. The armoire and bureaus are full of their clothes as well, so I doubt they took much with them when they left." He looked around for a few seconds, then heaved an exasperated sigh. "Time to check out that bunkhouse. I'm in the mood for some answers. How about you?"

Kate squeezed his arm in sympathy and merely nodded her agreement.

Fairly sure that nobody was around, they quickly exited through the kitchen and retraced their steps to the front of the barn. This time, however, they went around the back side nearest the cliff wall to come around on the back of the bunkhouse. Connory discovered a narrow gap between the barn and wall of the bunkhouse, so he left Kate at the far corner and slipped between the buildings. A few minutes later, he came around by the corner of the corral, and took up a position where he could look down the front of the bunkhouse as well as along the side toward the barn and the end of the corral. He picked up a fairly good sized rock, hefting it in his hand. This should do the trick, he thought. He stood up and threw the rock hard through the front window of the bunkhouse.

He heard a large metallic crash and a yelp of pain, followed immediately by some sulfurous cursing. Within a matter of seconds, two men in long johns came boiling out of the bunkhouse, pistols drawn in one hand, clutching their gun belts in the other. While they were still off balance, he stepped out away from the shadows.

"That's far enough, boys. Drop those six guns on the ground and put your hands high." The big Walker Colt was cocked and pointed in the direction of their bellies. "This Walker .44 will cut you in half at this range."

"Like hell I will, mister!" The tall skinny one pulled the hammer back on a Navy Colt and started to level it at Connory when Kate cut loose with the shotgun from behind him. The roar of the heavy buckshot load split the night, lighting up the whole area in front of the

bunkhouse. The tall man never knew who his killer was as the double load of double ought buck caught him across the lower back and spine, nearly severing his body into two pieces and killing him instantly. The second man had managed by then to get off one round from his Navy Colt, missing Connory by a wide margin. Connory triggered the first shot from the big Walker and it caught the second man low on his right side, cutting a nasty but non-lethal furrow in the soft flesh above the hip bone. The man slammed into the wall of the bunkhouse, screaming in pain, trying to get off another shot at Connory when the second ball from the Walker caught him just off center in the forehead. It passed through the brain and blew the back of his skull into shards, splattering blood and brains all over the wall. The man slid slowly down the wall onto his buttocks, then slowly toppled over on his side, an expression of absolute surprise on his dirt smeared face.

The entire action had taken perhaps five seconds from start to finish. There was an eerie silence that descended onto the place, caused in part by the deafening roar of the shotgun and Connory's Walker at close range. As he and Kate moved toward the door of the bunkhouse, they heard a weak voice inside calling out, pleading for his life. "Please mister, I'm bad hurt. Don't kill me."

Cautiously poking his head around the door, Connory saw the third man stretched out on a cot across from the door, one shoulder and upper arm wrapped in bloody bandages. He eased into the room keeping the Walker at the ready. As soon as he got inside, he could smell the foul odor of rotting flesh, and knew that the man's wounds had gone gangrenous. He could tell by the pasty complexion and red rimmed feverish eyes that he wouldn't last much longer. Then, off in the corner, he spotted the Winchester 1873 rifle, leaning against the wall. His expression hardened. He'd found his ambusher!

He walked over to the sweat-soaked bunk and looked down at the man lying on it. He was of medium build and would've been strong and wiry if not for the wound in his left shoulder. Connory saw that his shot had hit and shattered the man's collarbone, carrying a piece of his filthy leather vest into the wound. He could see the sharp and bloody end of the bone sticking out of the ragged hole left by his bullet. He realized that it had probably bounced off a chunk of granite before it hit, causing a much nastier wound than it would have otherwise. With gangrene from the filth on the vest poisoning his blood, the bush wacker didn't have long to live.

"You're a dead man, lad. I expect you know that. Tell me why you tried to ambush us and meet your maker with a clean soul." He reached up and took a half empty bottle of whiskey from a shelf over the bunk, and held it so the man could take a long pull. The whiskey quickly dulled the pain, and he breathed a bit easier. Connory sat and waited, watching him the way a large cat watches its prey before it strikes.

"It weren't nothing personal, mister. Just a job. We was hired to take care of anybody who showed up here at the ranch, or who was coming here from Bent Springs. Didn't matter who it was. Just a job of work." He coughed, setting off a series of gasping convulsions as his lungs tried to clear themselves of the fluid building up from the infection. Finally, he sank back, gasping, but quiet.

Connory stared impassively down at him, feeling no sympathy for the pain he was in. The man had tried to kill him, and Kate, and had likely helped murder the ranch hands he found in the barn loft. There was a good chance he had also helped murder his uncle and aunt. He leaned down and pinned the man's eyes with his own fierce gaze. Despite the knowledge he was dying, the man still recoiled in fear from the hatred that blazed at him from Connory's eyes.

"Where are the bodies of my uncle and his wife? We found the ranch hands in the barn. You've not long to live, but I can make your last moments on this earth a lot worse, now speak up!" His deep voice rose and thundered on the last few words, causing the man to visibly shudder.

"They weren't here, mister, honest! We caught them vaqueros by surprise, but the old man and his wife weren't here. I swear it. Them other two boys tried to track 'em but the trail was cold and they lost it in the rocks less than a mile from here. We was told to stay here anyhow, in case anybody showed up."

"Who hired you. Why did they want everybody dead?"

"Mister, honest to God, I'd tell you if I knew. All I know is we was hired to do a job of work, and we was paid ahead with good Yankee gold. I never seen the man who hired us. You done shot my partner and he was the one who seen him." He coughed again, weakly, and bloody fluid started to leak from the corner of his mouth. Connory knew then that the razor sharp fragments of the shattered collarbone had likely punctured his lung. Every time he coughed, the splinters were slicing up the lung tissue even more.

Satisfied that he was telling the truth, Connory stood and looked around the small bunkhouse. He saw a gun belt hanging on a peg in the wall at the far end of the bunk, a Navy Colt in the holster. He walked over and pulled the pistol from the leather, checking its load as he turned back to the man on the bunk. He rotated the cylinder and pulled the percussion caps off all but one of the chambers.

"Laddie, I'm going to show you more mercy than you deserve, but I'll not see a man suffer the kind of death you are. I'll give you a chance to end your suffering if you're man enough to." He flipped the Colt in his hand, offering it butt first to the man in the bunk. "Now, you've got one shot in that pistol. You can use it on me, or you can end your suffering. If it were me, I wouldn't die the way you are going to if I had another choice."

The man stared at Connory for a moment, then reached up and took the pistol from his hand. Connory stood over him for another few seconds, then turned and walked toward the door. He paused at the door, and turned back to the man.

"What's your name, so I can put it down on the marker?"

"I was born Nathan Buell, in Rock Creek, Tennessee." His voice was nearly a whisper, and the racking cough was coming more often, making it even harder for him to speak.

Connory nodded, and turning, walked out the door, closing it gently behind him. Kate was standing a few feet to one side of the doorway, in shadow, her shotgun reloaded and at the ready. He walked over to her, and started to tell her what he had learned when the muffled crack of the Navy Colt reverberated through the wall, followed by the thud of what Connory assumed was the pistol falling onto the wooden floor of the bunkhouse. Kate jumped at the shot and started to raise the shotgun, but he held up his hand, stopping her.

"It's all over," he said. "That was the man who tried to bushwhack us. I hit him pretty bad, and between the bone fragments slicing up his lungs and the gangrene, he was beyond healing. But he told me what he knew, so I let him end his suffering."

A mix of emotions played over her face at his words, but she quickly recovered, then crossed herself, forgiving the man who had tried to kill them. She looked up at Connory expectantly, waiting for him to continue.

"He said he and his partners killed the Mexicans, but that my uncle and his wife weren't here. One of these two out here tried to trail them, but lost the sign in the rocks a ways out from here. I think we should go back to the main house, and see if we can find anything to show us where they might have gone, or why these brigands were hired to kill them. We'll sleep in the house, and then go back for the wagon in the morning."

Kate nodded in agreement, and briefly squeezed his hand. Then she started back toward the path that led up to house, Connory following behind her, senses tuned to any further threats from the darkness.

Connery

Chapter 8

Kate and Connery went back into the house and walked slowly down the hallway, their boots echoing eerily in the darkness. They stopped several times to let their eyes adjust to the blackness, and the faint light of the new moon that was shining through the front windows. At the door to the library, Connery stopped and looked about until he saw a kerosene lamp sitting on a small table against the wall just beyond the doorway. He lifted the chimney and struck a match, lighting the wick. Turning it as low as he could and still keep it burning, he dropped the chimney down over the weak flame. It flared up just enough to let them see where they were going without giving away their presence unless someone was looking into the windows from close up.

They stepped into the library and closed the door behind them. As soon as he realized there were no windows to give them away, Connery turned the wick up on the lamp until the bright glow filled the room. The bright yellow flame gave a warm buttery glow to the polished wood shelves and the leather covered bindings of the hundreds of books that lined the walls on all sides.

In the far corner of the room a large hand carved oak desk with a highly polished top sat as if in command of the room. Another kerosene lamp with a green shade around the top of the chimney sat on one corner, and a polished bronze pen and inkwell set sat on the other. A large leather bound desk pad sat on the glossy desktop in front of the large stuffed leather chair that sat patiently waiting for an occupant. A small silver serving tray with a decanter of cut crystal and several small crystal glasses sat in the center of the desktop above the desk pad, as if waiting for the master to return to partake of the rich amber liquid inside the decanter. The room radiated comfort and warmth, and tranquility, and Connery could almost feel the presence of his uncle in the room.

He moved around behind the desk, and sat down gently in the huge chair. On either side of the chair there was a set of three drawers, fitted with polished brass handles and brass keyholes. In the center was a long shallow drawer that run from side to side between the other drawers. He pulled on the center drawer and it slid silently out, gliding on its well oiled runners. Inside, he saw several pens with gold nibs, a short stack of stationery with his uncles' family crest in the upper left corner and various other implements used by a gentleman to complete his correspondence.

He motioned to Kate to set the kerosene lamp on the corner of the desk at his left. He pulled open the top drawer, discovering that it was actually a file drawer that comprised one single drawer that was as deep as two drawers. An exquisitely thin series of wooden panels divided the drawer into nearly two dozen individual slots, most of which each contained several sheets of paper. At the far left side of drawer was a slot that was as wide as three of the others but only half as long. He could see the end of a small ledger book

sticking up above the recessed edges of the slot. He pulled it out and placed it on the desk pad in front of him. Hesitating momentarily at the invasion of his uncle's affairs, he heaved a sigh, then flipped the ledger open to the first page. The first page was a list of the contents of the file slots in the drawer, and covered the usual bookkeeping areas one would find in the journal of a ranch owner. All the entries save one were in black ink and had long since been entered. The last one on the page, however, was in blue ink and looked as if it was much newer than the rest. The entry read "Bonnie Belle" in his uncle's tight script. He scanned the entry to the right across the pages, noting that a date and what appeared to be tonnage was entered in each column. The amounts started out fairly small, getting bigger over a period of about six months and then staying relatively constant for several pages. There were entries for nearly two years under the Bonnie Belle heading.

Being familiar with bookkeeping from his years as a ship's master, he soon discerned that as each increase in tonnage was logged, large amounts of cash had been deposited in a San Francisco bank via the bank in Bent Springs. He found other entries for supplies purchased from Mr. Hanson, wages paid to the now dead vaqueros, profits from the sale of yearling beef and spring lambs, and the various and sundry items of ranch life in the west. When he finally completed studying the ledger, he flipped the cover closed and sat back, sighing. Kate had been silent the entire time, letting him work, but came around the desk and put her hand on his shoulder in sympathy, letting her other hand smooth his hair back from his eyes.

He smiled up at her and reached up to squeeze her hand briefly. Leaning forward, he picked up the crystal decanter and two glasses and poured each one full. He handed one to Kate and motioned her to sit down in the chair nearby. He waited until she was settled, then stood up and began to talk, pacing back and forth as he did.

"I have discovered that my uncle is a very wealthy man. He has made a handsome profit from his cattle operations and on spring lambs and wool from the sheep. He has also dabbled in mustangs provided to the Army. His wife has also apparently inherited quite a large sum from her father. Between them, they could live in luxury in New York, or Paris, or London without fear of financial problems. But, he became involved in something two years ago that has brought him more wealth than all the rest combined. I'm not sure what it is, but it appears to be a mining operation of some kind. He calls it the "Bonnie Belle" in the ledger entries, and lists large tonnages being shipped out every month for nearly two years. There are also entries of large amounts of cash that increase each time the tonnage goes up. The total for that one venture alone is over half a million dollars!"

Kate gasped, her hand rising to cover her mouth in shock. Her eyes as big as saucers, she whispered, "half a million.... dollars?"

Taking a deep pull on the glass of whiskey, Connory swallowed and nodded. "No wonder someone is trying to kill them! He's been shipping something, most likely ore - and very rich ore at that - for too long not to have had someone find out what is going on. We have to get back to Bent Springs as soon as possible and start tracking this down. I don't know where my uncle and his wife are, but those gun hands couldn't find them, so I can only

assume they've escaped at this point. Until I have some more answers, I'm only speculating, and their lives may depend on how soon I can figure this all out.

"I have to go through the rest of these papers to see if I can find some kind of claim or anything else that will help protect this. Why don't you go up and go to sleep while I'm doing that. Someone needs to keep watch anyway, and I can do that while I work. I don't think anyone will be coming around tonight anyway."

"Are you sure?" Kate took his face in her hands and looked into his eyes, the concern she felt clearly showing on her own face. He nodded and bent down to kiss her gently, first on the lips, then on the forehead. He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a squeeze, then released her. "Yes, I'm sure. Get some sleep. I'll wake you if it looks like anything is happening."

She stood on tiptoes and kissed him again on the corner of his mouth, and walked out of the library toward the stairs to the second floor, her boot heels echoing softly in the dark hallway.

Connory spent the next several hours going through every document he could find in the desk, and then making a thorough search of all the places in the library that could possibly conceal any other papers. He was about to give up and call it a night when he leaned against the carved edge of the bookcase just inside the doorway to the library, and across from the front of the desk. He heard a click and felt something give underneath the weight of his shoulder. As he regained his balance and stood up, the section he had leaned against popped out about an inch, evidently under spring pressure.

He strode over to the desk and picked up the lamp, and returning to the bookcase, held it up to illuminate the area completely. He saw a recessed area an inch back from the outer edge where one could grasp the portion that popped up to pull it open. He pulled the section out with his right hand, holding the lamp high in the other hand. When it had opened several more inches, he heard another click and the entire section of bookcase opened and swung out into the room. Set into the wall behind the bookcase was a large wall safe, about two feet by three feet. He knew instantly that all of his uncle's really important papers would be locked inside that safe, but then he realized that he had no way to get it open without knowing the combination.

He stood there staring at the thing in frustration, when it suddenly dawned on him that the shiny brass handle was in the horizontal position. His uncle had not closed the safe the last time he was in it, or so it appeared. He grasped the handle, careful not to tip it down toward vertical, and pulled gently. After a brief moment of resistance to the inertia of the heavy door, and it silently came open on its great oiled hinges. Connory grinned at his good fortune, and then held the lamp up close to the safe to see its contents. He found several small shelves of folded papers tied with fancy ribbons and wax seals. There were also several large bundles of cash tied with twine that totaled nearly \$100,000 dollars. He

also found a number of velvet boxes that contained exquisitely cut and mounted gems that he assumed belonged to his aunt, and which were no doubt lavish gifts to her from his uncle. He left the cash and other items in the safe, but took the bundles of papers out and carried them to the desk.

The papers were all legal documents of various types. He found property deeds to the ranch itself, deeds to property in San Francisco that appeared to be warehouses, a number of stock certificates for companies back east, some inheritance papers for his aunt's fortune and a few other odds and ends. As he went through the last packet, however, he hit pay dirt. He found the paperwork filing a claim for a silver mine called the "Bonnie Belle" located in the side of a mountain on the edge of his uncle's land. It had been registered and notarized by the assayer in Bent Springs nearly three years ago. 'Well,' Connory thought to himself, 'that solves the mystery of what they're after.'

The last item gave him pause, however. It was on heavy cream colored parchment with a large red wax seal and scarlet ribbon. Written in elegant script on the parchment were the words "Last Will and Testament" with his uncle's name directly below. Ruefully, he broke the seal and began to read. The document was in flowery legal verbiage, with lots of whomsoevers and wherefores making it difficult to read. It did the usual things wills do, though, in splitting up and parceling out the asset's of the deceased to the duly deserving next of kin. His uncle had set up several bequests to schools in England and Scotland, left small sums to a number of relatives he had never heard of. The final page of the document was the one that left him speechless. It seemed that John's dear mother had been his uncle's favorite sister, and that her son, John, was thus his favorite and only nephew. Since he had married late and had no children of his own, he left the bulk of his estate to his nephew, presently at sea as captain of... John noticed that the name of the ship has been updated each time he had been assigned a new ship, going back well past fifteen years.

He sat for awhile contemplating the turns of his fortune. Finally, he gathered up all the papers and stuffed them into a canvas bag he found in the kitchen. The deed to the mine and the will he put into his belt pouch. He decided that he didn't dare put them back in the safe without knowing the combination because he might never be able to get them out. And, he didn't want them falling into the wrong hands. So, he stepped outside and found a small boulder several yards behind the house that he could just barely move. He hollowed out a hole just big enough to hold the canvas bag and stuffed it in, then moved the boulder back onto the spot. A bit of brushing the dirt with a piece of leafy branch and you couldn't tell it had ever been disturbed.

He went back inside and blew out the lamp, then went up the stairs to find Kate and get some sleep before they had to start out in the morning. She had curled up on the big bed in the master bedroom and was soundly sleeping, so he didn't disturb her. Closing the door, he spread a blanket on the floor just inside the door and lay down on it. If anyone came on them, and tried to open the door, they would waken him instantly before they could enter the room. His years of sea duty let him fall asleep almost instantly, yet he kept a corner of his mind on alert for the smallest noise that didn't fit, ready to spring into action.

Connory

Chapter 9

In spite of having been up until well after midnight, Connory awoke with the first hint of sunrise. He stood for a moment in the dimness of the bedroom, silently stretching his muscles to get rid of the stiffness of the hard floor. He watched Kate at the same time, smiling at the relaxed child-like look of innocence on her face. She had crawled beneath the quilt the night before, and during the night pulled herself into a curled up position with her knees and feet tucked in close. Her hands were together as if in prayer, her extended fingers under her cheek and against the pillow, supporting her face. An errant strand of her silky hair had drooped down over her forehead and exposed cheek. She looked for all the world like a little girl dreaming of dolls and kittens, and frilly dresses, not a care in the world.

Connory felt a surge of protectiveness as he watched her. His wonderment at how quickly they had realized their attraction for each other only made it more intense. He silently vowed he would rather die than see anything happen to her. He leaned down and placed a feather light kiss on her exposed cheekbone, which caused her to sigh contentedly, but it didn't wake her. He turned and silently left the room, going down the broad stairs toward the kitchen. After the events of the day before, he knew they needed a good breakfast before hitting the trail. He busied himself with making a pot of coffee, which he put on a big cast iron wood stove to cook. He found the pantry and managed to put together enough to feed six hungry cowboys. In short order, the pungent smell of mesquite smoked bacon, griddle cakes and dark molasses, and corn bread was wafting through the house on the gentle morning breeze. Connory could hardly contain himself as the smells made his mouth water and his stomach heartily protest its empty state. He pulled the heavy skillet of bacon off the flame and started to step into the hallway to call for Kate, just as she came around the edge of the door into the kitchen. She reached up to grasp his shoulders, planting a kiss on his mouth, her eyes sparkling.

"It smells wonderful, John, and I'm positively famished."

"Well, sit down then, woman, and let me take care of that problem." He had put a stack of griddle cakes on a plate along with several thick slices of crisp bacon, and poured a generous amount of molasses over the stack. He put the plate in front of Kate, then poured her a hot steaming cup of coffee as she attacked the food with relish. Connory grinned as he piled up his own plate. He loved a woman who wasn't afraid to eat a hearty meal. They both gave all their attention to the meal, laughing when they both reached for the same chunk of cornbread. Soon the plates were empty and wiped clean, and they sat back with a mutual sigh of contentment.

Connory produced a cigar he'd found in his uncle's library and sat puffing on it with pleasure for the time it took for another cup of coffee. While he smoked, Kate cleaned up

and put away the dishes. As she finished, he stood and stretched, then reached over and drew her into his arms to give her a huge bear hug and a hearty kiss that took her breath away. Setting her back on her feet, his expression grew serious and he sat on the edge of the table.

"I've found some of the answers last night going through my uncle's papers. Fortunately, he didn't lock his safe, evidently in a hurry to leave. But, the brigand's that we killed didn't find it, so I think they will still be coming after my uncle or anyone else that they think is in their way." He paused to gather his thoughts. "Based on the ledger entries and what I found in the safe, it appears that he has found a rich vein of silver, and has been taking tons of ore out of it for nearly two years prior to the time he disappeared. That's where all the money came from. I found a large number of stock certificates and over \$100,000 in cash. The real surprise was his will. He has left his entire estate, except for a generous amount for his wife if she survives him, to me. It seems that I am his favorite nephew!"

Kate, surprised by the revelations, could only reach out and take his hand in hers. "God knows I would'na want to gain such riches at the expense of the lives of my uncle and aunt. I can only hope that nothing has happened to them. My uncle is a canny man, so perhaps he sensed the danger and was able to get away afore disaster struck.

"But, since the men who have attacked us and murdered his vaqueros have not found what they need to get away clean, we must be on our way. The US Marshall is nearly a week's ride from Bent Springs, but only two days from here. Since no one knows what has befallen this place, you must ride as fast as you can to the Marshall and tell him what has happened. Then have him accompany you back to Bent Springs. I will go back to the wagon, and bring it up here so that it isn't stolen or found by the wrong people. Nobody would leave a load of freight like that and it would be a tip-off that they had been found out. As soon as I get it here and secured, I will make my best time back to Bent Springs. If all goes well, I should be able to get there soon enough to do some scouting before anyone knows what has transpired. With a little luck, perhaps we can lay a trap for the vermin who have tried to kill us."

"That's an excellent plan, John. I know the Marshall was a good friend of my father. I'm sure he will waste no time in coming with me to Bent Springs to solve this mystery." She stood and walked to the doorway. "I'll gather up my things and be ready to go in ten minutes."

Turning, she hastened down the hall and Connory heard her boots thumping up the stairs as she hurried up to the bedroom. He had already packed his saddlebags and the rest of his gear before making breakfast, so had only to gather them up and head out the door to the barn to saddle their horses. He had just finished saddling Kate's mare when she came trotting around the corner of the doorway into the barn, her own saddlebags slung over one shoulder and her Winchester gripped in one hand. Connory grinned at her, taking the saddlebags and scabbard and securing them on her saddle. His big bay stallion was bouncing up and down on his front legs, eager to be on the trail. Connory and Kate both laughed, then stepped up into the saddle. Connory leaned across his horse and wrapped his

arm around Kate's shoulders, pulling her to him for a quick, hard kiss. She clung to him for a second and kissed back just as hard, then their horses pulled them apart, straining against the reins to be off.

"Be wary, and be safe, woman. They don't know we're on to them yet, and will surely come after us with a vengeance when they find out. I'll see you in Bent Springs in a few days." His bay reared up on its hind legs, pawing the air, fighting Connory to be off. Kate, already heading out of the barn, looked over her shoulder and flashed him a brilliant smile and waved as her mare sped off. Seconds later, Connory was headed back down their back trail toward the place they had concealed the freight wagon. The big stallion stretched out and Connory gave him his head, letting him set his own pace.

By an hour past high noon, Connory had topped out in the shadow of small pines on the ridge above the stream bed where they had left the wagon. He sat for a bit, letting the stallion have a rest after his hard run. Finally, satisfied that he was alone, he nudged his heels gently against the sides of the bay, and slowly picked his way down into the little arroyo. An hour later, he had gathered up the team of draft horses, grown fat and lazy on the lush grass, hitched them up, and started back up the trail to the ranch, pushing the team as fast as he dared, hoping that his haste didn't throw a wheel or break an axle. He drove until he could no longer see the trail, and pulled off on a small flat next to the trail for the night. He left the team in harness, feeding and watering them where they stood. He found a small hollow against a pair of boulders and curled up in his bedroll blanket to snatch a few hours of much needed sleep.

By the time the sun had cleared the horizon, Connory had been a half hour on the trail, again pushing as hard as he dared. The team was a game one, and gave everything he asked of them. Finally, however, Connory could see that they were beginning to get overtired, making missteps as they picked their way through the patches of mesquite. He finally had to stop, pulling into a clearing beside a tiny brook that wound its way across the trail. Several ragged trees concealed the spot from the trail, so Connory was able to unhitch the team to allow them to stand in the cool water of the brook and roll in the grass growing along the bank. As tired as they were, though, they quickly settled down and stood dozing in the shade of the trees. By the time Connory had made a small smokeless fire for coffee and beans, the sun had set, so he kicked sand over the fire and wrapped himself in his blanket. Knowing that his horse would alert him to any intruders, he was soon sleeping in exhaustion.

The next morning, he was once again on the trail as the sun rose. Fed, watered, and rested, the team was pulling hard and he estimated that he would be at the ranch by mid-morning. Still thinking in nautical terms when it came to estimating time in his head, he came within sight of the ranch by about 2 bells, or 10 o'clock. Half an hour later, he was unloading the food supplies and stowing them in the kitchen pantry, then pulled the wagon around behind the barn so that it was out of sight. He unhitched the team and turned them into the corral, then forked several bales worth of hay into the bin in the corral. The water trough was fed by a trickle from a tiny spring that had been diverted from a seep up on the hillside behind

the barn, so he didn't have to worry about them running out of water before anyone could get back to check on them.

Less than two hours after arriving at the ranch, he was thundering back down the trail toward Bent Springs on the big stallion. If he pushed the horse to the limit, he could be back by sundown the next day. He didn't expect Kate and Marshall to show up until two days after that. He figured that would give him time to do some quiet reconnoitering with the help of Mr. Hanson. He particularly wanted to find out if any records still existed in the Assay office on the deed filing of his uncle's mine.

He knew he would have to be careful in his questioning, as he had no idea who in the town might be in cahoots with the claim jumpers. He had also begun to suspect that someone knew the contents of his uncle's will and that it had all been left to him. That would explain why someone had lain in wait to ambush him on the trail to the ranch. He had certainly made no effort to conceal his identity when he checked into the hotel. He suspected that word had spread quickly among the nosier residents of the town, including the riffraff, as soon as he signed the register. Every town had its shady characters that seldom showed their faces where the regular citizens could see them; those who provided the means for those who skirted the edges of the law to do their deeds yet maintain a semblance of respectability in the bright light of day.

He pushed on, his brain picking at all the information he had gathered so far, frustrated that he didn't know more, mulling over every possible combination of circumstances he could think of. The big bay stallion had settled into a stride that ate up the miles, and it seemed as if he could go on forever at that pace. The sun had set hours ago, but a full moon had risen that lit up the high country, painting everything in a silvery glow that slowed the stallion only a tiny bit. It was past midnight before Connory finally reined the horse in, slowing him to any easy canter so he could cool down gradually. A bit later, he crossed a small stream and decided to stop to let his horse rest and graze and have some water. Between the wagon, and the long hours of riding, his body ached from head to toe, and he knew he needed to rest himself if he was to be of any use when he got to Bent Springs. The bay nickered to him softly as he fell asleep, as it tugged up mouthfuls of grass along the bank of the little creek.

Connory 1-10

Chapter 10

By the time Connory had unloaded the freight wagon, then started back toward Bent Springs, Kate had reached the Marshall's office in Durango. She and her horse were exhausted, covered in dust that had become crusted on hide and clothes by sweat. As she stepped down from the saddle at the hitching rail outside the Marshall's office, her knees nearly buckled in exhaustion, but she held onto the saddle until the momentary weakness passed. A young boy was standing on the boardwalk outside the office, watching her with eyes as big as saucers. Women were a rare enough sight on the mining frontier, but beautiful women - even with two days of embedded trail dirt - were as uncommon as a brass band. Smiling at the boy, she motioned for him to come over.

"You want to earn a shiny new dollar, young man?" The boy nodded eagerly, a big grin splitting his face. "That's good. Now, you take my horse over to the livery stable. You tell the stableman to give her a double helping of oats and plenty of water. If you curry her real good I'll give you another dollar besides this one." She held up a shiny silver dollar so it caught the light. The boy's eyes were riveted on the coin, and he nodded quickly.

"Yes'm. I'll do a real fine job." He reached out and took the coin from her, then jumped down and took the reins off the rail. Kate smiled and stepped up on the boardwalk as the boy tugged her weary mare off to the livery stable. She took her hat off, and tried to slap the worst of the dust off before she entered the Marshall's office. When she stepped through the doorway, she had to stop to let her eyes adjust to the darkness. The office window was shuttered against the heat of the day and the only light was from a small kerosene lamp on a shelf at the back of the office behind the desk. Shutting the door behind her, she closed her eyes and basked in the coolness of the semi-dark room.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" Kate was startled out of her moment by the voice somewhere in front of her. When she opened her eyes, she saw a man seated in a chair behind the desk. He had pushed the chair back on its rear legs in order to prop his booted feet on the top of a pulled out desk drawer. He was just putting his feet back to the floor as she stepped up to the desk.

"I need your help, Marshall. But for that, we must leave as soon as possible for Bent Springs. Men have already been murdered, and more are at risk, so haste is of utmost importance."

"Well, ma'am, that's quite a story to lay on a fellow right out of the blue like you done." He tipped his chair forward with a solid thump and stood up, settling his gun belt back into its proper place. "Suppose you have a seat and start from the beginning." He extended his hand toward the empty chair at the end of the desk.

"Marshall, I've been in the saddle for the better part of two days straight to get here. How about you give me a hour to get a bath and some clean clothes, and then I'll explain everything over some hot food. My horse, and me as well, are just about played out, so we can't leave before dawn in any case. You'll have plenty of time to arrange for your absence. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going across the street to the hotel to clean up. Call for me at the desk in an hour, if you please." She smiled sweetly at him through the trail grime, then turned and walked out of the office into the brutally bright afternoon sun.

A bit over an hour later, true to her word, Kate was just coming down the stairs of the hotel, freshly scrubbed and looking alert and rested when the Marshall entered and stepped up to the desk. Despite the borrowed denims and plaid shirt she wore, he tipped his hat back and gave a long silent whistle as he watched her come down the steps. Even in boots and work clothes, she was a vision of beauty. He found himself becoming jealous of the man who was able to claim her as a companion.

A few minutes later, they were seated in the cafe next to the hotel, sipping hot coffee. As they waited for Kate's order of steak and potatoes, she related the events of her and Connory's trip to his uncle's ranch. When the steak arrived, she devoted several minutes to putting a serious dent in the big slab of meat, then continued telling him about the men they had been forced to kill, finding the decomposed bodies in the barn, and Connory's revelations going over his uncle's paperwork. The Marshall, soon caught up in the tale, as well as enthralled by her beauty, asked only a few questions during the relating of the facts. As Kate finished off her dinner with a big piece of blackberry pie, the lawman in him began to take over, intuitively asking questions that helped Kate recall a number of small details she'd missed in her telling.

Finally, the effects of two days of hard riding, a hot bath, and a full stomach were more than Kate could control. Breaking into a jaw cracking yawn right in the middle of a sentence, she laughed in embarrassment. The Marshall, in the process of lighting a cigar, started to laugh, and ended up in a coughing fit instead.

"Ma'am, you'd best take yourself up to your room and get some sleep." He held up his hand as she started to protest. "We'll take out for Bent Springs at first light. You've convinced me. Now, I have to make some arrangements for my deputy to take over while I'm gone, and get my gear ready to go. I'll call for you at first light. Have a good rest, ma'am."

He kicked the chair back, and strode out of the cafe. Kate paid her bill and returned to the hotel. Five minutes later, she had crawled into bed without even taking off her boots, asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

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By the time Kate and the Marshall rode out of Durango at dawn heading east to Bent Springs, Connory had already been on the trail for nearly five hours. He pushed the bay as fast as he dared, stopping only to give the horse needed rest and water, and a few hours to graze on a patch of good grass. He ignored his own growing weariness. He had become accustomed to times of severe hardship as a seaman. There had been many a time when he had gone for as long as five days without sleep or food during typhoons, when it was either give in to fatigue and pain to lose the ship to the sea, or battle the storm until it passed. Those times stood him in good stead now, and only the need to care for his horse eased the hardship.

It was past midnight of the second day when he and the bay silently walked into the deep black shadows behind the livery stable. The town was as quiet as a graveyard. He could see one or two dim patches of light glowing from behind drawn curtains or closed shutters, but otherwise every window was dark. Working quickly and quietly, he dipped a bucket of cold water from the trough in front of the livery's big doors, and then dragged a couple armloads of hay from the corral. He then stripped the saddle and blanket off his horse and gave him a quick rubdown with handfuls of hay. He piled his saddle and the rest of his gear in the corner created by the back of the livery barn and the corral, out of sight from casual observers. Satisfied that the horse was taken care of, he started working his way toward Hanson's store, keeping to the shadows and alleys as he went.

Coming down the alley behind the store, he picked his way around barrels and other debris until he was just underneath the second story window of the living area above the store. He gathered up a few small pebbles and gently tossed them against the window above. The noise sounded to him like the crashing of cannons in the darkness of the alley, but in reality it wasn't even enough to alert the numerous stray dogs that rummaged for food during the night in the alleys and garbage dump. He was about to give it up when he saw the flash of a match, and then the more steady glow of a kerosene lamp being lit. He stood back so Hanson could see it was him standing below the window, and saw the curtain part just enough to let someone look out. Then the light grew more subdued and the window was raised. Hanson poked his head out, surprise on his face.

"Connory? My God, man, its the middle of the night. What's wrong? We didn't expect to see you for weeks."

"I need your help. I don't know who is watching me, so I dare not make myself known until I can try to get some answers. Kate is on the way with the Marshall from Durango, but I don't expect her for a couple of days yet."

"Well, step up to the door there, and I'll be down to let you in." With that, he pulled his head in and slid the window closed. In what seemed like only a few seconds, Connory heard the latch being unlocked, then the door popped open about half way. Hanson, barely visible in the dim light of the stars coming through the door, stood in his nightshirt motioning Connory inside. He had to turn half sideways to slip through, and then Hanson closed and locked the door again.

"Come on, we'll go up to the parlor so I can turn up the lamp without drawing any attention. Follow me." He held the dimly lit lamp high over his head and lead the way through the store and up the stairs behind the counter. He turned left at the top of the stairs and when Connory came around the corner, the lamp was just beginning to flare up to full brightness. Hanson set it down in the middle of the table, and motioned Connory to sit. "I'll be right back," he said and disappeared down the dark hall to the other side of the stairs.

A moment later he came back wearing his pants and hooking his suspenders over his shoulders. He reached into a sideboard as he came around the corner of the table and pulled out a bottle of whiskey, then reached in and brought out two large tumblers of cut crystal. He pulled the cork out of the nearly full bottle and poured a generous amount into each glass, handing one to Connory.

"You look as if you need this," he said. "I can tell you've been riding all day." Connory took the glass, held it up to the light for a second, noting the rich amber color before taking a big gulp. The whiskey was smooth as silk, but of high proof, and burned pleasantly in the pit of his empty stomach. "More like two days." He took another large drink, then looked at Hanson.

"Well, to business then. Halfway to my uncle's ranch, I noticed somebody on our back trail. I doubled back to see if I could catch who it was, but they were staying well hidden. Later that night, somebody tried to bushwhack us. I had set up a false camp and managed to wing him with the Henry, but he got away before I could get a look at him.

"When we got to the ranch, we found three men in the bunkhouse. Two of them tried to take me, but between Kate and I we killed them. The third man turned out to be the bushwhacker and he was in a bad way. My shot had broken his collarbone and carried a piece of dirty leather into the wound. Gangrene had set in, but the broke bone had cut up his lung real bad and he would've bled to death anyway. He lived long enough to tell me that they had been hired by someone he didn't know to kill my uncle and his wife and anybody else who showed up looking for them. But he also said that my uncle and his wife had not been there when they came to the ranch. Somebody here in Bent Springs is involved and is likely the one who hired those gunnies. We found the bodies of three vaqueros in the barn, and from the condition they were in, they'd been dead for at least a month, maybe two. There was no sign of my uncle and aunt, and that is good at this point, because it means they might still be alive. "

He paused to finish off the remnants of his drink. Hanson poured them each another healthy dollop, allowing Connory to speak at his own pace. An hour later, the bottle half gone, Connory finished. Looking intently at Hanson, he spoke with an intensity that commanded the other man's attention.

"I intend to find out what happened to my family, no matter what it takes. I don't want to be rich because they're dead, and the men who are behind this are going to pay a heavy price if that has happened. I need to get into the Assay Office so I can check the records

without anyone knowing I was there. If I'm seen, it may tip off whoever is behind this. I don't think they found the deed when they ransacked his office at the ranch, and if there is a copy in the Assay Office, I intend to take it and hide it somewhere safe until this is over. Can you get me in there tonight?"

"By God, John, we can try. I know Dobkins, the assayer. He's a solid man, and should have no qualms about helping you. Let me finish getting dressed, and we'll go rouse him."

Hanson quickly strode from the room, returning a few minutes later strapping a heavy Navy Colt around his waist. He wore it military fashion with the butt forward, the flap of the holster unsnapped and loose. As Connory stood up, he pulled the big .44 out and carefully checked each chamber to be sure the caps were tight and in place. He glanced up at Connory as he rotated the cylinder.

"Its not new, but its an old friend, and has never failed me." He grinned as he finished and slipped it back into the holster. "Let's go. Dobkins lives in a small house behind the Assay Office. We can get there in the dark without being seen."

Ten minutes later, they were tapping on the rear window of Dobkins' house. Connory was surprised when Dobkins appeared almost immediately, peering through the curtains. It was almost as if he had been waiting for them. A few seconds later, he heard the creak of the back door opening, and Dobkins stepped out into the dim light with a double barreled shotgun leveled in their direction.

"Ease off, Sam, its Hanson, and I've got John Connory with me. We need to talk to you on an urgent matter." Hanson lit a match and held it up to reveal their faces for an instant to reassure the wary assayer. Being a serious and direct fellow, Dobkins wasted no time asking questions, instead raising the shotgun skyward, motioning for them to come inside. Seconds later, he was striking a big kitchen match to light a kerosene lamp on the kitchen table. He kept it turned down low, barely alight, and waved for them to sit down at the table.

"You said this is urgent. I'll warrant it had better be at near three in the morning." He laid the shotgun across the top of the cupboard, and picked up the poker to stir up the embers in the stove. He quickly added some kindling and soon had a fire going. He placed a coffee pot on top of the stove to brew.

"It is. I'll let John tell you," said Hanson. Dobkins nodded and sat down across from the two men. Connory proceeded to give him a shortened version of what he had related to Hanson. By the time he was done, the coffee had boiled, so Dobkins poured each of them a hot cup of the strong brew. He sat there staring at Connory over the rim of his cup for several minutes. The other men sat patiently, sipping the hot liquid from their own cups. Dobkins finally leaned forward and set his cup on the table, resting his arms on the table.

"Mr. Connory, I don't know you from Jehovah, but I know your uncle, and I count Hanson here as a good friend. If he says you are alright, then that is good enough for me.

Give me a moment and we'll go over to the Assay Office to see what we shall see." With that, he stood up, with Connory only an instant behind. Connory reached out with his hand across the table, and grasped the hand of the assayer.

"Thank you, Mr. Dobkins. I'm sure I don't know what I would have done without your help. You may be saving lives tonight, and for that I am grateful."

Dobkins harrumphed self-consciously as Connory pumped his hand. "My pleasure, sir. Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment." He turned and left the kitchen. Minutes later, they were going out the back door and stepping across the fifteen feet of alleyway between his house and the back of the Assay Office. He bent down briefly and unlocked the door, then they were inside and he was lighting the lamp on his desk.

"Nobody can see this lamp from outside as there are no windows, and the clerk's desk and counter are in the outer office. I keep all the deed records in here in the safe." He gestured toward a huge safe against the wall opposite his desk. "Let me open it, and we'll get started."

The safe was at least six feet tall, and four feet wide, and deep enough that a man could step inside when the door was fully open. It was obvious to Connory that the door was extremely heavy, because he could see the effort Dobkins made to swing it open. In the light of the lamp, he could see that each side and the back of the safe was divided into compartments for filing deeds and other legal documents, and one section held a series of thin trays for storing small ore samples. Dobkins pulled out a small shelf from the top of the rear wall and set a small lamp on it which lit up the interior of the safe well enough to read the fine script and print on legal documents. In short order, he located the drawer containing Connory's uncle's deed, and started riffling through the papers inside. He stopped twice, briefly, to read something, then pulled out a heavy parchment sheet that had a wax seal on one corner, and trailed a section of satin ribbon embedded at one end in the wax. He turned and removed the lamp from inside the safe, blowing it out. He then laid the parchment carefully on the desk in front of Connory.

"Here 'tis. Filed two and a half years ago by your uncle, and witnessed by myself and my clerk." He pointed to a notation at the bottom of the page, which consisted of a series of symbols and numbers, and what looked like an amount of weight to Connory. "This is the results of the assay on the ore sample he brought in when he registered the deed. The vein is heavy with silver, one of the richest ever filed in the territory. Its no wonder that he's taken as much out of that mine as you say he has. And its no wonder that anyone who knows of it would try to take it away from your uncle."

"Aye, that's the question alright." Connory sat staring at the deed in front of him. "The question now, though, is who else might know of it? Who found out? I know my uncle would not have said anything to anyone about this simply for reasons of security. So, it has to be someone who either has access to these records, or heard about it somehow in confidence. Its obviously not public knowledge, or every miner and ne'er-do-well in the

area would be crawling all over his ranch looking for that mine. Can you think of anyone who might have been in a position to find out without raising anyone's suspicions?"

Dobkins and Hanson looked at each other, then at Connory, and then again at each other. Hanson scratched his head, deep in thought. Dobkins poured another cup of coffee and started to roll a cigarette as he thought. Then Hanson sat up straight, his eyes wide.

"Well, I don't know any names, but your uncle was buying lots of equipment over the last year or so. You know, you saw the load that you drove up to the ranch. A good part of that was mining equipment. I never saw anyone hanging about, but anyone could have seen those wagon loads and put together the reason for them. Your uncle always picked them up himself, so he would be known to anyone paying close enough attention."

"As far as I know, no other person than myself has been in these records," said Dobkins, gesturing toward the safe. "My clerk only handles the deeds. I add the assay information myself after the deed has been filed and recorded and the information sent to the territorial office. So, that means at least five people - my clerk, the telegrapher here, the one at the other end, a clerk in the territorial office, and the chief assayer there - besides myself, would be aware of the filing, but without the assay information, they wouldn't know if it was worth anything or not."

"Its obvious that the knowledge got out to someone." Connory sighed in frustration. "I need some sort of trail to follow, and right now I've got nothing but bare rock to track on."

"You take the deed and put it in a safe place. I will make some discreet inquiries. There may be someone we've overlooked." Dobkins pushed the deed toward Connory and stood up. "Get some rest and check back with me later in the day."

The two men thanked Dobkins for his help and shook his hand, then took their leave. By the time they got back to Hanson's door, the faintest tinge of dawn was creeping over the horizon. Connory, after the hard ride and the whiskey, realized he was nearly dead on his feet, yawning uncontrollably. Hanson dragged him through the door and pointed him toward a cot in the back room of the store. Connory needed no prodding, and collapsed onto it, instantly asleep.

Connory

Chapter 11

The day was hot. The sun seemed to just sit at zenith for hours brutally cooking anything or anyone foolish enough to venture out into it. The dust stirred up by one of the few who did seemed to hang in the air forever, and by afternoon everyone had a flat metallic taste in their mouths and fine grit was in every nook and cranny exposed to the open air.

The sun had barely started to dip toward the west when the stage came into town, the team pulling it walking slowly, their heads drooping in the heat. The driver and gun guard were covered in alkali dust, and sat slumped on the hard wood seat. The horses stopped without prompting in front of the hotel, and the driver slowly climbed down, exhaustion showing in his deeply weathered old face.

"Bent Springs, folks. End of the line. Light and go into the hotel, and we'll bring in your gear directly." As he spoke, he reached up and tugged on the door handle. He noted that he could feel the burning heat of the metal even through his worn rawhide glove, and was glad to have it on.

There were only three passengers. The first was old lady Jamison, returning from a visit to her sister in Durango. She was met by her son, who picked up her bag and then helped her into a buggy, which lost no time in disappearing around the corner. Next was a fat drummer in a dark frock coat, struggling to drag his sample case at his side, sweating profusely. He staggered into the cool darkness of the hotel lobby, immediately heading for the bar and a cold drink. Finally, the third passenger stepped down. Almost as if on cue, the few people hanging around stopped and stared, for the man had a way about him that alerted those around him the way a cougar would put a herd of deer on alert. He was a handsome man, tall and lean, and well dressed in a black suit with a white shirt with ruffled front and cuffs, a black hat, and black boots with silver toe and heel caps. He wore a .45 revolver in a low slung holster, tied down to his leg and if one looked closely they would see another pistol hanging from a leather rig inside his coat and under his left arm.

It was his face that drew everyone's gaze, however. Despite his handsome features, there was a coldness that showed in his eyes that made people uneasy and unable to hold his gaze. There was cruelty there as well, a kind of penetrating gaze that seemed to see all the way into someone's soul. He made people uneasy, and they parted before him as he strode into the hotel like Moses parting the sea. By the time he had registered and climbed the stairs to his room, the word was spreading about the stranger who got off the stage.

By the time the rumor mill had reached Hanson's store, and Mrs. Hanson, Connory was finally beginning to wake up. Sitting up on the cot, he noted that Mrs. Hanson had set out a wash basin and pitcher of water, a thick towel, and one of her husbands shirts for him on

the table. Mr. Hanson had left him a bottle of whiskey off to one side, an oversize shot glass perched upside down over the cork. He was ravenously hungry, but the stink of two days of trail sweat and broiling sun was near to overwhelming. He peeled down to his under drawers and washed himself as well as he could absent a regulation bathtub. The borrowed shirt fit well enough, and in short order he felt reasonably normal again. He topped his ablutions off with a quick shot from the bottle, then went looking for food.

Mrs. Hanson was in her kitchen, busily frying up potatoes and thick slices of ham, and scrambling a huge pan full of eggs. She grinned at him and pointed to the table when he poked his head around the corner. He grinned back and sat down as she set a steaming china mug of coffee in front of him. By the time he had taken the second sip of the hot brew, she put a large platter heaped to overflowing in front of him. Overwhelmed by the delicious smelling steam that rose from the plate, Connory attacked it as if he hadn't eaten in weeks. Mrs. Hanson just grinned at him, nodding in satisfaction. The last thing she did was set a baking sheet of fresh biscuits, straight from the oven, on the table with a crock of churned butter next to it.

"You eat your fill, and I'll go tell my husband you're up and about. I feel sure he has some news for you." Connory, his mouth full, nodded to her as she turned and left. By the time Connory was finishing up his second heaping plate and was savoring the fourth of Mrs. Hanson's biscuits, Hanson walked in and sat down at the table. He poured himself a cup of coffee and refilled Connory's cup and waited for him to finish.

Connory finally pushed the plate away, leaning back and sipping from the coffee mug.

"You're a lucky man, Hanson, having a wife that can cook like that. To someone who is used to trail food and shipboard fare, this was a feast worthy of the Almighty himself!" Hanson chuckled. "I'll be sure to tell her that. She'll be walking on clouds for a week.

"While you were sleeping, I've been busy. I sent a wire to a friend of mine asking if he'd heard anything in the way of gossip or rumors. All he could tell me was that somebody had been making inquiries about mines in this area, if any were for sale, and so on. He said there's a new chief assayer there, and he and this man had been thick as thieves a few months ago, before the stranger left town.

"Dobkins sent a wire as well, to the chief assayer, and found out that the man he knew had been replaced by someone new. The deed information is on file, but there is no guarantee it hasn't been compromised. He said to work from the assumption that the enemy knows everything and is willing to do whatever is necessary, and to protect yourself and your property."

"Well, that puts the fat in the fire for sure when Kate gets here with the Marshall, don't it?" Connory leaned forward on the table, cupping his hands around the hot coffee cup, thinking. "Well, we can't avoid that. So, we have to use the facts that they know to make them overconfident and hope they make a mistake that gives them away. They probably don't know we're onto them yet, but that won't last. I'm going to stay out of sight for

awhile. Let them stew about where I am. When the Marshall gets here, here's what I want you to tell him..."

For the next half hour, Connory and Hanson worked out the details of his plan. After dark, he would slip out the back of the store and get his horse, and disappear into the hills. In the mean time, Hanson would keep an eye on things in town, and have things ready when Connory came back in to make his play.

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The sun had thankfully dropped below the horizon, to the relief of men and animals alike. The town seemed to slowly come to life as the blistering heat gave way to a soft, cool breeze coming down off the high chaparral. Two hours after sunset, the temperature had dropped to a tolerable 85 degrees.

Connory had slipped out of town at the precise moment when the sun dipped below the horizon. The last red and gold rays shot down the main street, blinding anyone to movements in the deep black shadows behind the buildings and in the alleyways. By the time the sun finished setting, he was two miles up into the hills, slipping in and out of the deepening shadows as he made his way to a high bench that overlooked the entire town and both ends of the road. He found a large boulder on the edge of the bench where it fell away to the valley five hundred feet below. He tied his horse on the backside of the big rock, then found a comfortable spot to sit and watch the town.

The moon had risen, bathing the landscape in a silvery light that made it easy to see movement, but hard to distinguish details. The moon was beginning to lower toward the horizon when he saw two horses emerge from a large arroyo far off on the other side of the valley. Connory extended his brass telescope and put it on the pair, using his knee to brace the heavy instrument. The light made it difficult to discern features, but he recognized Kates horse, and a bright flash from the torso of the other person was in the right place for a lawmans badge. He was certain it was Kate returning with the Marshall. The time had arrived to put his plan into motion. Minutes later, he was mounted and making his way back down to the valley floor the way he had come, moving quickly but silently.

Within an hour, Connory had worked his way around to a point where he could intercept Kate and the Marshall before they entered the town. He wanted to make sure the Marshall got the updated information from him instead of hearing it third or fourth hand from the gossips in town. He pulled up in the deep shadow of a thicket just off the trail, waiting.

Minutes later, he heard the click of horses hooves and the rattle of loose stones as they approached his position of concealment. He waited until the two had passed him, then gently urged his horse onto the trail behind them. In a low voice, he called out to Kate. She instantly jerked her reins, causing her horse to squat and pivot, squealing in protest.

Connory was surprised to see her .45 Colt out and leveled at his midsection before the horse stopped moving. Despite her surprise, which showed plainly on her face, she still managed to keep her head and react much quicker than he expected. The Marshall, a tough old trail hand in his own right, was only a split second slower. Connory found himself staring down the huge black bores of two .45 caliber pistols that didnt waver so much as an inch in their aim.

Gently, Kate, gently. He chuckled as he stepped down, putting his hands up in surrender. I didnt mean to startle you so, but I had to head you off before you got back into town. There are new developments that put you at a disadvantage for the moment.

He heard a harrumph from the Marshall, and caught the flash of Kates smile in the moonlight as she raised her pistol, dropping the hammer back into place before holstering it. She swung down off her horse in a fluid pirouette and rushed across the ten yards between them. Connory was almost knocked off his feet as she threw her arms around him and pulled his head down to hers, planting a deep, lingering kiss on his mouth.

I was so scared that something had happened to you. She still had her arms locked tightly around his neck, pressing her body tightly against his. He wrapped his own arms around her and gave her a huge hug, then reluctantly pulled her arms down and pushed her lush body away so he could see her face.

Theres a clearing up ahead about a quarter mile. Lets get there off the trail, so I can tell you and the Marshall whats going on. Were about to play the last hand in this game. She nodded and dragged his face down for another brief but intense kiss, then scampered back to her horse and mounted. In short order, the three were hunkered down over a tiny fire, a coffee pot starting to bubble, as Connory brought them up to date and started to lay out his plan for the day. An hour later, they curled up in their bedrolls to catch a few hours of sleep before they put the plan into action.

Connory

Chapter 12

Dawn crept over the eastern range like a sneak thief, slow and deliberate and with little fanfare. It was almost as if it sensed that something evil was afoot and wanted nothing to do with it.

Connory was tucked behind the false front roof of Hanson's store. From there he could see both approaches to the hotel. His vantage point was at the bend of a letter L, and he could see the entire length of the long axis, and a solid two blocks of the shorter leg before it jogged around a stand of cottonwoods on the edge of town. He couldn't quite see the side door into the saloon from his viewpoint, however, as most of it was obscured by an ancient cottonwood at the corner of the roof. He was close enough to hear people coming and going, though, and could see their feet below the edge of the foliage as they made their way in and out of the saloon. This early in the day there was little traffic. Only the town drunk and those who worked early to avoid the heat later in the day were up and about.

He sat and watched the town slowly wake up, the heat quickly rising to the point where he began to sweat. He was just about to sneak back down into the back of the store when a group of 8 men on horseback slowly rounded the stand of cottonwoods two blocks down. There was nothing really notable about any of them thought Connory as he watched them make their way toward the saloon. All were dressed as typical cowhands of the day in leather chaps, dark shirts with vests, and wide brimmed hats worn low to shield their eyes from the brutal sun. They had a sameness about them, yet at the same time he could tell they were not typical stock men. They wore their guns low slung and tied down, and there was a hard edge to their demeanor that made those people who saw them as they rode by instinctively back away and hurry out of sight.

They pulled up in front of the hotel and stepped down off their horses, casually making their way inside to the bar. The last man hesitated at the door, slowly scanning the streets and store fronts of the town that he could see from that position. Satisfied nothing was out of the ordinary, he turned and disappeared into the saloon after the others.

Connory, no longer aware of the heat, quickly came down through the trap door into the rear storeroom of the store. He let himself out the back door and worked his way around behind the buildings until he could slip across the street to the back of the hotel. He was looking for a tree to climb when he found a narrow stairway leading to the second and third stories. The stairs had originally been for the convenience of those wealthy types visiting their favorite girls, but since the conversion into a hotel, it was reserved for use in case of a fire. Connory stepped lightly up to the first landing and let himself into a short hallway at the back of the second floor. The corridor was dimly lit, and he kept to the darkest shadows, his hand ready to drag iron at the first sign of trouble.

He got to the corner of the main hallway just as Kate was stepping out of the doorway to her room. He hissed at her, and she jumped in surprise, her eyes round as saucers. He silently caught her up with his left arm and pulled her tight for a brief but intense kiss. Letting her down again, he put his finger to his lips and moved to the window at the end of the hallway. Looking down, he could see the horses of the new arrivals tied to the hitching rails, and Hanson's store front a couple of doors up across the street. Just as he started to turn back to Kate, the stage hove into view at the far end of the main street. He motioned Kate to take a look, and together they watched the coach pull up and stop right below the window.

A pair of drummers stepped down, dabbing at the rivulets of sweat rolling down their faces with huge squares of linen, dragging their sample cases into the hotel. A small boy got off, standing there looking bewildered, with a large piece of paper pinned to his coat. Although he couldn't hear what was said, it was obvious the driver told the boy to go inside to see the desk clerk. Just as he thought the stage was empty, though, a man in an expensive black suit and gold brocaded vest stepped down from the coach. Connory could not see his face, which was obscured by a broad brimmed hat with a flat crown similar to what one would expect a Mexican Don to be wearing. The man was tall and powerfully built, though the angle made it hard to tell just how powerful he was. Connory saw two things that stood out even more than his fancy clothes. His boots were highly polished and had silver toe and heel caps in the Mexican style built into them, and he wore two guns. One on his right hip rode low in a sleek black holster that was tied down to his leg, and the second was residing in another sleek black holster in cross draw style on his left side. The first gun was a Colt .45, but the second was a rarely seen Smith and Wesson .44 Russian. Both pistols stood out against the black clothing because of the bright ivory grips on each one. Even from 30 feet away and above him, Connory could see the silver filigree work on the grip frames of the pistols.

Connory knew he was making a statement with his mode of dress and the prominent display of his weapons. It was the kind of statement that drew the sort of attention that often got somebody killed, and it was obvious the man was good at making the statement, because such men didn't last long if they couldn't back up the unspoken challenge with action. Kate had been staring at the man, a strange look on her face, and her arms had wrapped around herself as if she were suddenly cold. Connory sensed something wasn't right, and was just about to ask her what was wrong, when the stranger removed his hat to wipe the sweat from the sweatband inside it. Kate jerked hard and her hands flew up to her mouth, trying to conceal the sudden gasping for breath. She lurched back against Connory and away from the window to keep from being seen, looking up at him with wide frightened eyes.

Connory watched the man put his hat back on, and then he disappeared from view as he went into the hotel lobby. He turned Kate around to face him and holding her by the shoulders, looked into her still wide eyes.

“Who is that man, Kate? Why are you so afraid of him?” Whoever the man was, Connory instantly hated him for the reaction he had caused in Kate. She stammered once or twice, and finally spoke.

“He’s my brother, “ she said in a small voice. “I haven’t seen him since just after my father died. I thought he was dead.” She gave another shudder and buried her face against his shoulder.

“Come on, we’ve got to get out of here before anybody sees us. I have no doubt that he is connected to the men who rode in just before the stage got here. There are too many coincidences in play and I don’t want to get caught before I’m ready for them.” He drew her back down the hallway and they quickly made their way down the stairs and across the street in the shadows. He felt like he was in somebody’s sights all the way to Hanson’s store, heaving a sigh of relief once they got out of sight in the back.

The group gathered around Hansen’s kitchen table had a grim visage. Connory had turned his chair backwards and was leaning against it with his elbows planted on the table. He held a large mug in both hands, sipping from it as his mind raced over everything that was in play. Kate sat close beside Connory, sipping from her own mug of coffee, a deep furrow of anxiety creasing her forehead. The Marshall and Hanson sat quietly, just waiting, each smoking a long slender cigar from Hanson’s stock on the counter in the front of the store. After several minutes of silence, Connory set his mug down with a thump, and straightened up. He looked like he was about to say something when a muffled knock came from the back door.

Mrs. Hanson, who had been making a fresh pot of coffee, stepped to the door and peered out past the edge of the curtain. She glanced at the group around the table and then quickly opened the door just enough for the man outside to slip through. Connory recognized the man from the assay office they had talked to earlier.

“I just got a telegraph message from San Francisco. From your uncle’s bank, Mr. Connory. They notified us because we are the office of record for your uncle’s claim. The date is more than a week ago, however. It appears that the telegraph lines were down between here and there, and it’s just now come through.” He stepped forward and handed the yellow paper to Connory.

He quickly jumped past the delivery information and read the body of the message, then read it again. His eyes narrowed a bit and his expression grew hard. He could feel the anger building as he looked around the table at the others.

“It appears someone tried to re-register the Bonnie Belle mine. They even produced a bill of sale with my uncle’s signature on it. Only problem was that they didn’t have the code word needed to authenticate the sale. The bank refused to change the ownership without

the original deed, signed over, as proof of the transaction. The bank manager wired the assay office here to let them know since the original claim was filed here.” He looked at the date on the message. “That happened eight days ago. How long does it take to get here by stage from San Francisco?”

“About a week, if the roads aren’t washed out,” said Hanson. “Today’s stage would’ve been the first one that would’ve gotten here since that attempt was made.”

“That’s just what I was thinking,” said Connory. “Well, the fat’s in the fire for sure now. What they are after is out in the open, and failing to get a title transfer will force them to act in the open in the hopes of catching us before we find out. Thank God for honest bankers!” He slapped his open hand down on the yellow sheet of paper in front of him, making them all jump.

Connory, pacing now back and forth, was thinking aloud but nobody quite caught what he was saying. After several minutes, he stopped and faced them, a determined look on his face. He looked at Hanson and his wife as he started to speak.

“Mr. Hanson, as much as I appreciate your help, this is my fight, and you have no obligation to become further involved. Same goes for you, Marshall. It is fairly certain that you have no legal obligation to arrest them at this point since whatever they’ve done is not in your jurisdiction. And Kate, even though it appears your long-lost brother may be involved, that isn’t a certainty yet. I would not want to see you hurt because of me. That leaves me, and most likely the eight or nine men who are over in the hotel bar at this moment. I will not take it poorly if you decide to stay out of it; in fact, I encourage you to do so.”

The Marshall, leaning back in his chair on two legs, blew a large cloud of blue smoke at the ceiling and chuckled.

“Son, I’m a natural born busybody. Jest can’t help stickin’ my nose in other people’s business. I expect that’s why I became a Marshall, so I could do it legal like.” He hesitated for a second, contemplating the long ash on his cigar. “Besides, an attempted bushwhacking on the road to your uncle’s ranch took place in my jurisdiction, so I figger to make somebody pay for that.”

Hanson nodded in agreement. “Your uncle is a good man, and a good friend. I expect I owe him enough to justify trying to find out what happened to him, at the least. I’m in.”

“Count me in as well, Mr. Connory.” The assayer had stepped up to the table next to Hanson. “I fought in the war under Jeb Stuart. I know your uncle as well, and I live in this town. I want to keep it a clean place to live.”

Connory, looked at them all, and saw only stern resolve. He nodded, and shook their hands in turn. Kate was still sitting next to him, looking up at his face as he spoke. When he looked down at her, he knew it was pointless trying to talk her out of going along with

them, and so didn't even try. He just smiled down at her, and brushed his fingers affectionately over her cheek.

"Alright, the first thing we need is information. Kate, sooner or later, you will have to make an appearance at the hotel. Obviously, you need to find out what your brother is up to. We also need to know who those eight men are that rode in just before the stage got here. See if you can find out who any of them are, and make note of what their weapons are and if they are right or left handed. But be careful, they're all hard cases and gunmen, and I doubt any of them would hesitate to kill a woman if they felt threatened. If I were a betting man, I would expect your brother is the alpha wolf in that pack."

He turned to the assayer. "Telegraph your contact in San Francisco, and see if he can tell you what the man who tried to change the title looks like. Also, let them know that the deed is safely hidden, but that my uncle and aunt have been missing for nearly three months."

"Hanson, can you back up the Marshall while he makes a show of investigating the attempted bushwhacking on the trail? Maybe shake up that bunch in the bar, and make them nervous about who knows what they're up to." Connory got near simultaneous nods from both men.

"I'm going to lay low for awhile, then I'll amble into town and make a show of going to my room in the hotel. Kate, I'll need you to make sure you're at the desk when I come in so you can slip me the key for the room across the hall from mine. I feel certain I'll have visitors after the sun goes down. I'll be across the hall instead, and maybe we can even the odds a bit." The steel edge in his voice made everyone in the room glad they were not the ones that would be facing him.

"Any questions?" Connory looked around at each in turn. "Good. George, you better go first. No telling how long it will take to get a reply to that telegram. Then you, Kate. Be careful, though, we don't know if family ties still have any worth with your brother. Try to avoid him as long as possible. Marshall, those boys have been drinking pretty steady since they arrived. If you wait till just after lunch time, they should be thinking about siestas and senoritas instead of trouble from the law. If things look poorly, make your way back here by any means possible."

The assayer nodded and slipped immediately out the door. Kate threw herself into Connory's arms, giving him a quick kiss and a fierce hug, then she, too, slipped out the door and headed toward the hotel. Connery followed, and moments later was cresting the ridge behind the store as he made his way around to the other end of town. Hanson and the Marshall sat and began the vigil until it was time for them to play their parts.

Connory

Chapter 13

Kate approached the hotel from the back, keeping to the shadows. She slipped up the back stairs and through the door like a ghost, tightly gripping her full skirt to keep it from snagging on anything. Seconds later, she was easing into her room from the rear hallway. She quickly stripped off the dress, and into black breeches and jacket, with a dark blue shirt under it. She started to strap on her holster and .45 Colt, but realized it was too conspicuous. Instead, she opened a small chest against the wall next to her mirror table and pulled out a small, but deadly looking .31 Navy. It lacked the raw stopping power of the heavy .45, but it was sleek and easy to conceal, and up close, was just as lethal in practiced hands. She tucked the sleek five shot revolver into the waistband of her pants behind her back, the butt leaning toward her right side. She adjusted her black jacket, and checked herself in the large mirror. She could see no evidence of the pistol, but was reassured by the hard steel against her lower back. Moments later, she made her way down the stairs to the front desk.

She busied herself behind the counter, making a show of reading the ledger to see who had checked in or out, and checking the register against the receipts in the cash box. A small handful of letters had come in on the stage, and she went through them, separating those for the town's people from those for the hotel guests. Only two were for guests, and she put them into the pigeon holes for those rooms. The other six were set aside to be delivered by the errand boy at the end of the day. Finally running out of things to do, she stepped out from behind the front desk and went around the corner into the bar.

It was cool and dark, and normally felt quite comfortable. Now, however, there were eight hard bitten killers loosely grouped at the far end of the bar. Five sat at two of the tables, and the other three leaned on their elbows, backs against the bar. They were relaxed, but coiled and ready for anything. They had been drinking slowly, but steadily, ever since they came into the place, and now were becoming even more relaxed and sleepy after gorging themselves on roast beef and fresh bread sandwiches. Kate sent the desk clerk, who had been tending bar, to the store room to retrieve beer and whiskey and whatever else was needed to restock the bar for the evening. She took a damp towel and began working her way down the bar, polishing as she went. As she worked, she observed the men closely.

Four of them wore double gun rigs, and all but one with long barreled .45 Colts. The fourth man had a brace of .44 Navy Colts in the leather, butts facing forward instead of back. The rest all had single holster rigs, though one was a left hander. He carried an Adams revolver that looked well used but cared for. Another had a .44 Smith top break with a long barrel, and carried a .41 Colt bird's head revolver hanging butt down in a shoulder harness. The other two had a .45 Colt ready at hand.

Kate had reached the end of the bar nearest them by then, so she made a show of counting the bottles of different liquor on the shelf behind the bar, and pretended to jot down the

information on a piece of paper. In fact, she was recording information on each man, his weapons, and even a few of their individual habits. She slipped the notes into the inside pocket of her jacket and moved back toward the other end of the bar. The desk clerk had returned by then, so she went back around the corner to the front desk, seating herself demurely on the high stool behind the counter. Then, a cold, thin voice spoke behind her, chilling her to the bone.

“Hello, Katherine. It’s been a long time.” She turned and stared into the cold, green eyes of her brother. “It’s been nearly three years now, has it not?”

She tried to speak, but nothing came out, so she just nodded slowly. Swallowing, she found her voice and tried to keep any hint of unease from it.

“Yes, it has, Jamie. Ever since our father’s funeral, in fact. Which, as I recall, you couldn’t be bothered to even attend. I’ve never quite gotten over hating you for that.” Her eyes flashed defiance and hurt at the same time. Her brother simply smiled, tight lipped.

“You know as well as I that the old man and I never got along. He never approved of my ambitions or of the fact that I had no desire to play desk clerk in this stinking little town. His contempt was finally more than I could stand, so I left. It was fortuitous that he died when he did.” The corners of his mouth curled up slightly in cruel amusement when he saw the pain that statement caused in his sister’s eyes.

“If you were so eager to leave, why have you come back now. There is no more here for you now than there was then, and you are even less welcome for all of that.” It was all she could do to keep from spitting in his face in contempt.

“I have business in this area that requires the personal touch. In addition, as the eldest heir, and due to the fact that there is no will to contest it, I plan to sell this hotel and any other assets and then leave here for once and all.” A slow, sinister smile appeared on his face, as he completely enjoyed the look of shock and anger that swept over Kate. He reached into his coat and extracted a packet of documents, sealed with a wax stamp and red satin ribbon, waving them slowly in front of her eyes. “I have the necessary documents right here. You will be settled with a small sum, if only to prevent people from saying I turned my dear little sister out into the world penniless.”

“We’ll talk again, Katherine.” He turned and sauntered off into the bar, laughing at her as he went.

Kate stood there staring after him, tears of frustration and rage running down her cheeks. Her brother was much older than she was, already half grown when she was born, and they had never really gotten along. By the time their father died, any love or sense of familial obligation toward him had been turned into distrust and loathing. Snubbing their father by not going to the funeral had been the last straw. She had felt a great relief when Jamie left, and hoped that he would never come back. All those feelings of pain, distrust, and loathing came crashing back on her as she watched him walk away into the dim bar.

She didn't even attempt to conceal her feelings now; instead, she grabbed her hat and stalked out of the lobby. Minutes later, she appeared at Hanson's back door, tears of anger still running from her eyes. Mrs. Hanson, seeing her state, quickly swept her inside like a mother hen protecting a chick.

Even as Kate had been leaving the hotel, George, the assayer had rushed out of his office in search of Hanson. They met on the street, George speaking urgently, Hanson listening intently. When George finished, Hanson told him something and the two parted and quickly went in separate directions. Fifteen minutes later, George was at Hanson's back door wearing an old Adams revolver in a military style holster, and carrying a .56 Spencer carbine with two boxes of cartridges tucked under his arm. He disappeared inside as soon as the door opened. Within a minute, Hanson arrived and stepped inside, checking to make sure nobody was watching his comings and goings.

Connory took nearly two hours to work his way around to the south end of town. Once there, he sat up on a small flat just below the ridge line and watched his back trail for nearly half an hour. Satisfied that he had not been followed, he remounted and rode slowly toward town. Just as the sun started to sink toward the western horizon, he was coming slowly up the street, riding easily as if he had no cares in the world. He knew that within five minutes the word would spread that he had ridden in. The only rumor mill faster than a small town was shipboard scuttlebutt. It always amazed him how fast the word spread.

He pulled up in front of Hanson's store and made a show of checking his saddle bags. Taking them off the horse, he went into the store as if he planned on buying supplies. Within a few minutes he was in the back meeting with Kate, Hanson, and George. Connory listened intently to George, who relayed the same information he had given to Hanson. Hanson had been getting ready to go with the Marshall during that conversation, by stuffing his pockets with 12 gauge shells loaded with 00 buckshot, and feeding two rounds into the short barreled double he held in his right hand. The deadly looking piece clicked shut with a metallic snap that sent shivers up Kate's spine. Hanson told Connory that he would slip into the back door of the bar area while the Marshall distracted everyone's attention by coming boldly in through the front as if nothing was wrong. The Marshall would also have a shotgun, and had a reputation as a moderately fast, but deadly accurate draw with a handgun. They would have the eight men in the saloon caught in a devastating crossfire if something happened and shooting started.

Hanson nodded at Connory, and disappeared out the back door again. Kate, while still as angry as she had been, was now in complete control of herself. She told Connory everything her brother had said, almost word for word. She then added that, in her opinion, it had been him behind the attempt to steal the Bonnie Belle mine, and murder Connory's aunt and uncle. She also gave the detailed notes on the eight men in the bar. He felt fairly certain that at least half of them were professional gunfighters with known reputations. The others were unknown in that sense, but he was under no illusions that

they were any less dangerous. Kate's brother, Jamie, was the ringer, however. He knew his work was cut out for him.

Connory watched from Hanson's darkened storefront as the Marshall walked up the steps of the hotel, the 12 gauge double cradled in his left arm with the grip just over his left hand, ready to grab. The mule ear hammers were both at full cock. He had two more shells palmed in his left hand, ready to reload in a hurry if needed. He paused at the top step, checking to make sure his pistol was loose in the worn holster and wouldn't stick if he needed to draw quickly. He adjusted his hat, took a deep breath, and stepped through the bat wing doors and out of Connory's sight.

Knowing the plan, Connory expected that Hanson was stepping through the back door of the saloon into the small storeroom, and then edging out around the corner next to the bar while the Marshall had everyone's attention. Knowing a thing, however, wasn't always helpful when you couldn't lend assistance if something went wrong. No sooner than that thought popped into his mind, than a load double boom, almost as if it were one, echoed out of the hotel doors and into the street. He rushed out of the store onto the boardwalk as several pistol shots rang out, sounding like July 4th firecrackers. Another heavy boom sounded, followed by a scream of agony that cut off abruptly. Seconds later, the Marshall was thrown sideways through the swinging doors, trying to stay on his feet, but his feet wouldn't obey and he fell in a heap, not moving, at the top of the steps. Even from 25 yards away, Connory could see that the front of his shirt was bright red and sticky. A darkening pool of blood was forming under him on the wood of the entrance way.

Connory stopped, straining to hear anything that would tell him what was happening inside the hotel. He was in a slight crouch, his right hand extended out in front of him, the big Walker Colt cocked and ready. Then, hell broke loose.

Connory

Chapter 14

Hanson burst out the back door of the hotel, backpedaling. He tripped and nearly went down, but managed to keep his shotgun leveled toward the door. He cut loose with a quick shot followed almost immediately by a second, then turned and sprinted for the cover of trees across the street behind the buildings.

At the same moment, two men burst through the hotel doorway onto the porch, guns out and ready. They saw the Marshall lying dead in a pool of blood, and then noticed Connory in the street, starting to move towards them. They both crouched down and fired almost together. Connory, seething by now with anger, kept his wits and triggered two fast, but well aimed shots from the huge Walker. The heavy conical bullets caught the man on the right in the hollow at the base of his throat, blowing a fist sized hole through the windpipe and spinal column and out the back of his neck. The man was stone dead on his feet with a look of utter surprise on his face as his body lost all tension and crumpled to the boards in a heap. The second bullet caught the other gunman midway between his belt buckle and his chin at the lower edge of the breast bone. The heavy soft lead slug barely slowed down at all, expanding to nearly triple its diameter as it plowed through the bone blasting the right side of the heart to mush before it exited the back, leaving a hole nearly two inches across. Blood sprayed in a great gout all over the doorway behind him. The man sort of humped up as if he'd been kicked in the gut by a horse and fell off the landing into the dirt behind the hitching rail.

Before the second man had stopped falling, Connory was diving behind a watering trough in front of the store next to Hanson's. Peering carefully around the corner of the trough, he called out to Hanson.

"I'm fine, John, just a bit shaken up." Hanson yelled back. "I've got the back door covered. How's the Marshall? I saw him get hit."

"He's dead," Connory shouted back. "I got the two that came out to finish him off. How many are left?"

"I got one dead for sure, and another out of the fight. The Marshall got one up close, nearly blew him in half when the hombre came at him from the side. Your two makes five. The real hard cases are still in there though."

"Make your way back here if you can. I'll cover the hotel." Connory laid the Walker he had just fired so he could grab it quickly if need be, then drew the twin from his left holster. He had ten shots if needed that he could cover Hanson with, and his own retreat back into the store. Hanson, however, had not lost any time, and was hissing at him through a cracked door. Connory picked up the .44 on the ground and holstered it, then jumped up

and ran for the doorway. Four or five shots from the hotel came after him, but all were wide of the mark by better than 25 feet.

By now, the sun had dropped behind the buildings on the east side of the main street, throwing deep purplish shadows across the street, with thin bright streaks where the buildings had gaps between them. It was extremely hard to see any movement under such conditions, frustrating Connory and Hanson's ability to keep track of their enemies. He was watching the doorway to the hotel, and by pure chance caught a fleeting glimpse of someone running out and disappearing in the shadows on the east side of the street. He'd seen a brief flash of light from a belt buckle just before the man vanished into the dark.

"Well, there's at least one of them out, so probably all of them are by now. You ever fight Indians, Mr. Hanson?"

"Not in the dark between buildings," he said grimly. "I expect I will find out soon enough, eh?"

"Aye, man, that you will. We can't let them trap us in the store, and we've your wife to think of as well. Those vermin wouldn't hesitate to fire the building to get us to come out. Beside that, I'd rather take the fight to them, than sit here waiting for them to come to us." Connory looked at Hanson, who nodded in agreement.

"Alright then, out the back and down the alley away from the hotel. Soon as you can, cross over to the east side of the street, and get behind the buildings. I'll be along directly."

As Hanson worked his way down the dark alley, Connory climbed up through the hatch onto the roof. Carefully looking over the edge, he noticed that the darkness was getting more gray than black. He looked up at the sky and saw the moon beginning to peak out from behind the dark clouds. It was only a quarter moon thankfully, but it also gave the opposition help. It got steadily brighter over the next 15 minutes or so as the moon rose slowly from the horizon to about half way to straight over head. Turning back to the street, this time he noticed George on the second floor landing of an outside stairway. A big rain barrel gave him solid cover, while he had an unimpeded view of the center of the main street all the way to the hotel. Connory took a match from his vest pocket and struck it so that the light was concealed by the false front of the store, but high enough that George should see the flare of the match from his vantage point. He gently waved the match back and forth several times until it burned out. He grinned when he suddenly heard a call from a bird that was native only to the South. Must be one of those Confederate warblers, he thought, grinning.

He quickly climbed down from the roof, and made his way down the alley after Hanson. By the time he'd caught up to him, the moon had reached its height for the night, shedding a thin silvery light over everything. Together, he and Hanson crept around the corner of the bank and back onto the board walk on the east side of the street. They moved like ghosts, about ten feet apart, with Connory in the lead. Two, then three, and a fourth store passed behind them in the dark. Only three to go, thought Connory. But then he realized that they

would have to move out away from the front of the building and around a stack of barrels to get back under the shadow.

Hanson went first and slid around the obstacle quickly. Connory followed, and just as he turned the corner, he heard the crack of Colt Navy .44s and saw the bright flashes coming from two directions. He felt a sudden searing pain on his left side just below the ribs, and knew he'd been hit. It was small consolation, though, when he heard the distinctive boom of George's Spencer hard on the heels of the shot that hit him, followed by a shriek of pain and the crash of breaking glass. He got into the shadows next to Hanson, grunting at the pain when he slammed his side into the wall.

"Those boys are sure enough good shots. Aye, fair enough. A couple inches farther to the right and I'd be shaking' hands with St. Peter." Connory gingerly felt his side in the dark, tracing the deep furrow in his side. The bullet had ploughed a four inch gully on the surface just below his short ribs. It was bloody and hurt like hell, but not fatal. He pulled his bandanna from around his neck, and carefully pressed it against the wound, gasping at the white hot flash of pain that shot up his side to burst like a bomb in back of his eyes. Hanson grimaced as he watched Connory, catching his eye. Connory sensed the question in Hanson's look, and nodded.

"Aye, it hurts like hell, but I'll live, and I damn sure have a debt to pay these boys! Let's go!" He slipped around the corner of the store and crept down the boardwalk in the shadows. Hanson was two steps behind him. At the end of the boardwalk, the street turned to the east, past the front of the hotel across the street. Glancing around the edge of building, he saw a jumbled patchwork of deep shadow and moonlit areas. It was impossible to make out what was a possible bushwacker or pile of old lumber. He knew there was at least one man in that area, possibly more. He picked up a chunk of wood from the ground about the size of his fist. Using his left hand, he flipped the wood into the darkness toward the nearest pile of old planks and scrap wood left over from the latest building going up. The clatter it made seemed incredibly loud in the silence. The rattle of the block of wood as it bounced to the ground had barely ceased, however, when a bright orange flash lit up the street. Connory leaned out and triggered two shots at the area of the muzzle flash. A startled yell and a curse echoed back toward him. He grinned a bit, then signaled Hanson to move across to the shadows between the east side of the hotel and the milliner's shop next door to it.

Hanson sprinted across the 25 yards, crouched as low as he could get and still run. Connory, rather than strain to pinpoint their enemies in the darkness, watched for a flicker of movement as they popped up to fire on Hanson. His tactic paid off when he saw a flicker from across the street behind one of the piles of waste lumber. He instinctively pointed the Walker at the darkest portion of the movement and triggered it. The big pistol roared and a huge muzzle flash lit up the street for yards in every direction. He had a brief picture of his target throwing up both hands as the heavy ball from the Walker ripped through his chest. Connory almost paid for his cleverness with his life, though, because he saw a second man aiming down the sights of a rifle as he crouched behind a hitching post on the south side of the street. He dropped and rolled off the edge of the boardwalk into

the street to disrupt the man's aim, knowing he'd been caught flat, when a thunderous roar sounded from his left. The man with the rifle ducked behind the post as much he could as a double load of Hanson's buckshot peppered the area all around him. Connory came out of his shoulder roll in a tight crouch and cut loose with a pair of shots at the man. The first one missed but made him duck right into the path of the second ball, and he went down hard in the dirt clutching his shoulder.

A couple of seconds later, Connory was leaning against the wall of the hotel, breathing hard. Hanson leaned on the wall opposite him, reloading his shotgun, grinning at Connory in the dim light from the moon.

"Well, now, that was a wee bit of excitement, eh?" He grinned back at Hanson. "Excellent timing with that shotgun as well. That miscreant with the rifle nearly had me."

"Glad to oblige," said Hanson, "glad to oblige. By my count, that puts seven of the eight out of action."

"I'll call it six. I don't know how bad that one I wounded is. He may still be somewhat of a worry. That still leaves the gentleman with the ivory handled pistols and one other. They're still in the hotel as far as I know."

"The one I haven't seen was the hombre who wore his pistols butt forward. Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing him in the bar when this all started. The fancy gent was not there either."

"They're both still in the hotel, most likely. Kate's in there, too. Brother or not, I can't rely on any blood ties between them to keep her safe. I want to take him alive as well, because he knows what happened to my uncle. We've narrowed the odds considerable. I don't want to go up against him until daylight though. We'll gather up George and go back to your store."

Hanson nodded and stood up, ready to move out. Instead of going back the way they came, however, Connory went out between the buildings at the rear of the hotel and they crept back across to the alley running behind the west side of the main street. Within five minutes they were back into Hanson's store. Hanson popped up through the roof and signaled to George on his stair landing perch. Minutes later, they were all gathered around the kitchen table as Mrs. Hanson alternated between feeding them and bandaging Connory's side. The wound turned out to be much worse looking than it was life threatening, though she allowed that he should keep moving around or it would stiffen up and that would be dangerous in the final resolution of their fight.

Connery

Chapter 15

Connery was too keyed up to sit still for long, getting up every few minutes to pace, and to peer carefully out of the front window of the store at the hotel across the street. The hands of the clock seemed as if they were nailed down and time seemed to stop. Eventually, he realized that dawn was approaching as the light turned the street from indeterminate shadows to grayish lumps. He went into the back of the store and roused Hanson and George. Mrs. Hanson appeared with a pot of fresh coffee, and they all gulped down a couple cups each.

“George, I want you up on the roof with that Spencer to cover us. Hanson, take the back stairs and the door into the bar like before. I'm going in the front door to find Kate. Whatever you do, don't let anything happen to her if I get hit. We have them outnumbered, and they're trapped in the hotel, but rooting them out of there will be like going into a cave after a grizzly with just a Bowie knife.”

The two men looked at him with grim expressions on their faces, and just nodded. There wasn't much else that could be said.

Connery waited in the shadows of the front door of the store for Hanson and George to get into place. After a few minutes, he saw a match flair in the shadows near the back stairs of the hotel, and right after several hard thumps as George hit the roof with the butt of his Spencer to tell him they were in place and ready.

He took a deep breath, and stepped slowly out onto the boardwalk, watching intently for signs of ambush. He stepped into the street and moved toward the front door of the hotel, angling so the sun was at his back to make it harder for anyone to get a good sight picture of him. He was still about twenty yards from the hotel steps when he heard a screech of feminine outrage and indignation come from the depths of the darkened lobby. It was followed by a crash of something breaking, and a male bellow of rage.

Connery had taken two quick steps forward when the swinging doors of the hotel burst open, Kate's brother dragging her onto the boardwalk by her long hair. Kate was kicking and scratching like a wildcat as she fought him. Connery's first instinct was to shoot, but he realized that with Kate fighting the way she was, she was as likely as her brother to be the one who got shot. He glanced over his shoulder at the roof of the store where George was trying to get a clean shot with his Spencer, holding up his hand to wave him off.

Turning back toward Kate, he saw her brother haul her up to her feet and backhand her across the face. Kate sagged into his arms, nearly unconscious. As she crumpled toward the boardwalk, her brother got one arm around her neck and under one arm propping her

up in front of him. He turned toward Connory holding his ivory handled .45 with the muzzle against Kate's temple.

“It appears we've come to an impasse, you and I, Mr. Connory. One step closer and she's a dead woman, sister or not. I've come to far to reach my goal to care about family ties now.” His eyes flashed hatred and his twisted grin distorted his handsome face into a pure visage of evil.

“If you hurt her, you bastard, it will be the very last thing you do on this earth.” Connory's voice was hard as stone, and of a tenor that sent a cold chill down Evan's back. He suddenly wasn't feeling quite as sure of himself as he was before stepping out on the boardwalk. He had the instinctive awareness of the coward and bully who suddenly finds himself up against someone who was at least as dangerous as he was, and who wasn't scared of him even a little bit.

“Drop your pistols in the street and back off. I'll turn her loose when I get my horse and get outside town.” Connory just looked at him, a thin, cold smile on his lips, making no move to drop his guns. Evan got visibly more agitated, like an angry rattlesnake. Suddenly, the sound of both barrels of a 12 gauge going off sounded from around the corner by the back door to the bar, followed almost instantly by the crack of the Spencer rifle from across the street.

Connory straightened, and dropped his Walker into the holster.

“It's all over, Rudibaugh. That was your last man getting his just payment. You have no place to run. Tell me where my uncle and his wife are, and you may live to see another sunrise. You'll not see a penny of his fortune in any case.”

Evan cursed in rage, throwing Kate hard to the boardwalk, next to the Marshall's body. He dropped his pistol into the holster, snarling at Connory.

“They're dead. I caught up with them in San Francisco. If you hadn't shown up I would have had everything by now.” He gave a harsh laugh. “I'm faster than you are, Connory. I'm going to put a bullet right in your gut, so you'll live long enough to see me finish my darling sister.”

His bravado had bolstered his courage enough that he was sure he could beat Connory, and he squared off, making sure his Colt was loose in the holster. Connory just stood there, relaxed, waiting. A sense of calm had descended over him as he waited for the other man to make his move.

Rudibaugh's hand flashed down, grasping the ivory grip of his .45. Connory was pulling his pistol at the same instant. But, before either of them could clear leather and fire, the roar of a .45 Colt split the air. Rudibaugh's hand stopping rising, and he hunched up, firing a round into the boardwalk at his feet. At the same instant, Connory's pistol roared twice, punching two half dollar sized holes in the center of Rudibaugh's chest. He fell to his

knees, tottering for a few seconds before collapsing down the steps to land in the dust of the street on his back.

Connory ran up the steps to Kate, who was propped up on her left elbow, with the muzzle a .45 Colt resting across her lap, silent tears running down her cheeks like a waterfall. Connory simply picked her up, cradling her in his arms, and walked into the lobby of the hotel. As he sat her down on settee by the window, she looked up at him and smiled.

“I couldn't let him shoot you. I picked up the Marshall's gun after he threw me down and shot him. He was my brother, but he was no good, and hated my father and me.”

“Aye, you did do that, lassie. He was an evil man, and I'm sure the Devil is showing him his place in Hell right this minute.” He leaned down and gave her a soft, gentle kiss gathering her into his arms, stroking her hair and whispering soothing sounds in her ear.

After a while, they stood and walked back out to the street. Hanson and George met them at the bottom of the steps. Hanson had a flesh wound in his left arm where a bullet had grazed him.

“That last man with the double rig managed to get one shot off just as I cut loose with the shotgun. George must have seen him at the same time, because he hit him with the Spencer, too.” George just nodded, grinning. “The poor fella never knew what hit him.”

“Gentlemen,” said Kate, “I think we should all go inside to the bar and have a drink. It has been a long day.” She turned, and taking Connory's arm walked back into the hotel to the quiet and cool of the bar. Connory paused just as they entered the door, glancing back toward the street. He could see the town folk starting to come out to see what had happened. Then, he turned and let Kate pull him into the bar.

Connory

Epilogue

The day had dawned bright and clear, crisply cold. The sun was warm out of the wind though. Connory and Kate had taken to having their morning coffee where they could watch the sun come up. His uncle's ranch had needed a lot of work, and regular maintenance. So, after they were married they decided that was where they would live. They were sitting out with their coffee, when a buckboard came around the bend in the road on its way to the house.

A short while later, Hanson and his wife pulled to a stop in front of the house. Kate and Mrs. Hanson exchanged warm greetings, and Connory shook hands with Hanson. While the women went inside to talk about women's things, the men took the rig to the barn. They put the horse in the corral, gave it some feed and water, and walked back to the side door into the kitchen. Neither one had said a word at that point.

When they were all seated at the table, with fresh cups of coffee, Connory leaned back in his chair and looked at Hanson.

“What brings you up here? This is a bit of a far piece for a social visit.”

“Hopefully good news. After everything got settled down, George and I decided to do some more investigating. Turns out the new assayer was in cahoots with a clerk at the bank where your uncle was depositing his money from the mining operation. It isn't quite clear, but somehow Kate's brother found out about it, and the three of them hatched the scheme to steal the money and switch the deed. Her brother hired the gunfighters who killed your uncle's hands, and they would've killed them at the same time but they weren't there. Turns out they'd gone to San Francisco on ranch business and a holiday.”

“Well,” said Connory, “that's about what we figured.” He smiled at Kate when she took his hand and squeezed it gently.

“But that isn't the whole story,” said Hanson, grinning. “Remember you told me that Rudibaugh said he had killed your uncle and his wife?” Connory nodded, as Hanson continued.

“He lied.” Connory sat up with a look of astonishment on his face.

“What do you mean?”

“He lied. He never could find them. Turns out they got their business done a lot sooner than they expected to, and decided to go back East. Apparently you, or rather your aunt, has family there that she hadn't seen for a long time. When the news of the fight in Bent Creek appeared in the newspapers there, your uncle started making discreet inquiries. Three days ago, a telegram came in asking George and I to find out what was going on, and to let him know as soon as possible. He's on his way back right now. Should be here in about a week.” Hanson sat back, a huge grin on his face. “What do you think of that?”

“That's wonderful news, and I thank you for bringing it to me.” Connory wrapped his arms around Kate

and hugged her, giving her a big kiss at the same time. “I didn't want to get my uncle's estate because he had been murdered. Now, we can work the ranch as partners like we planned to, and put down some roots. Maybe raise up a couple of wee Connorys.” He grinned at Kate as she blushed.

She looked at him with a twinkle in her eyes, laughing. “No maybes, John Connory. The only question is how many after the one that's coming!”