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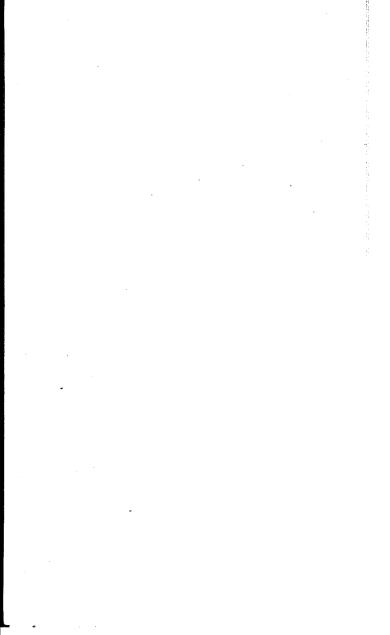
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A WICKED OFFER

"The wildcat has sharp claws," Desperado remarked. "I'll have to remember not to rile you if I stay around long enough to encounter you again." He tipped his hat. "Good day, Miss Sommers."

"Wait! About that job . . . "

"I haven't changed my mind. I don't work for females. Never have, never will."

Chloe bristled angrily. "Why are you so prejudiced against women? There's nothing a man can do that I can't."

He gave her a slow grin, granting her a glimpse of his deliciously wicked dimple. "You'd be surprised by what a man can do that you can't." A predatory gleam darkened his eyes. "Then again, maybe you already know. If not, I'd be more than happy to show you."

Other Love Spell and Leisure books by Connie Mason: **BEYOND THE HORIZON** PIRATE **BRAVE LAND, BRAVE LOVE** WILD LAND, WILD LOVE **BOLD LAND, BOLD LOVE** VIKING! SURRENDER TO THE FURY FOR HONOR'S SAKE LORD OF THE NIGHT TEMPT THE DEVIL PROMISE ME FOREVER SHEIK **ICE & RAPTURE** LOVE ME WITH FURY SHADOW WALKER FLAME . **TENDER FURY** DESERT ECSTASY A PROMISE OF THUNDER PURE TEMPTATION WIND RIDER **TEARS LIKE RAIN** THE LION'S BRIDE SIERRA TREASURES OF THE HEART **CARESS & CONOUER** PROMISED SPLENDOR WILD IS MY HEART MY LADY VIXEN

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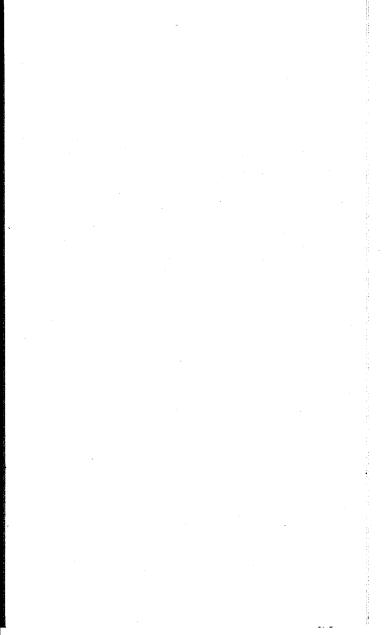
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GINING STATES



Chapter One

He blew into Trouble Creek on a raw April wind, beneath a sky that had a sullen, almost bruised look. The tails of his gray duster flapped behind him in the breeze like giant bat wings, revealing long, muscled legs clad in buckskin trousers mellowed to the color of butternut. A fine layer of trail dust covered his hat and coated his face, making the deeply grooved squint lines around his eyes more pronounced. The man rode tall in the saddle; one could see his tension in the set of his broad shoulders and the stiffness of his spine.

He reined his mustang down Trouble Creek's main street, his dark eyes narrowed into wary slits. Though he looked neither right nor left, his inscrutable gaze remained watchful. Nothing escaped his notice. Not the ragtag collection of buildings he remembered from his youth nor the two new saloons

that hadn't been there eight years ago when he'd returned to make peace with his father.

A rueful smile touched his full lips when he noted that Miss Milly's whorehouse was still the grandest place on the town's main street. A deep dimple appeared in his right cheek with his smile. It was totally unexpected in his rough-hewn dark face, which spoke eloquently of his Indian heritage.

The rider drew rein in front of the Devil's Den saloon, dismounted, looped his reins around the hitching post and stretched his weary muscles. His throat felt dry as a desert and he was in desperate need of something potent enough to cut the dust clogging his throat.

"Desperado Jones!"

The stranger spit out a curse. Was there nowhere in this part of the world he could travel without being recognized? But what did he expect? His reputation as a fast gun had spread throughout Texas and the West like wildfire. Few suspected that his reputation alone was usually enough to deter all but the most determined men from challenging him. His mean-as-hell reputation had kept him from being killed. His reluctance to kill in cold blood had kept him out of jail, except for minor infringements, throughout his illustrious career as a hired gun. As long as he continued to walk that thin line between legal and illegal, the law couldn't touch him.

But every now and then, like today, a triggerhappy young fool challenged him, forcing him to defend himself. Desperado Jones had the reputation of a lightning draw, so fast, in fact, that no man

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Gunslinger

had ever outdrawn him. But unlike most gunslingers, Desperado Jones rarely shot to kill.

"Desperado Jones! Turn around."

Desperado glanced over his shoulder, sighing in resignation when he saw a cocky young cowboy standing several yards behind him, his legs splayed wide, the fingers of his right hand twitching over the butt of his gun, clearly eager to prove himself to his friends.

Desperado turned slowly, moving aside his duster to reveal a pair of twin Colt .45 six-shooters riding low on either hip and tied down gunman style around each thigh with a leather thong. "I hear you," he answered in a low, hoarse rasp that made the onlookers gathered on the wooden sidewalks step backward.

"I know who you are and I'm gonna prove I'm a faster draw than you," the young man boasted.

"Draw whenever you're ready."

"You don't have to do this," Desperado said in a creepy whisper he'd affected to frighten his chal-

lengers.

The young man blanched but held his ground, sending Desperado a narrow-eyed look that reminded him of a shifty rattlesnake he'd once encountered. "Tate Talbot doesn't back down."

Desperado pegged Tate Talbot for a smart-ass young fool who thought himself invincible. He needed a lesson and Desperado decided he was just the man to give it to him.

"Go ahead, Talbot, draw," Desperado rasped as he assumed the stance of a seasoned gunfighter. Immediately a dozen or more people flattened

themselves against the weatherbeaten businesses lining the street.

Talbot looked uncertain for a moment, then his fingers unflexed and dove for his gun. He was fast, but Desperado was faster. His six-shooter appeared in his hand as if by magic, already belching smoke before Talbot's gun had cleared his holster. The shot reverberated loudly in the unnatural silence, followed by a scream as Talbot's gun flew out of his hand.

"You broke my hand!" Talbot cried, cradling his injured hand against his chest. "That's my gun hand. You'll pay for this, Desperado Jones. Mark my words."

Desperado watched dispassionately as Talbot's friends led him away, presumably to the doctor's office. He shook his head in disgust. It was times like this that made him regret taking up the profession that had earned him the reputation of a fast gun. To Desperado's knowledge, he was the fastest gun in Texas, and maybe in the entire West. Most of the time his reputation alone made the jobs he undertook simple. But squaring off for a shootout every time some overzealous kid with a fast gun and a mean streak challenged him was becoming monotonous. There were too many saddle bums and would-be gunmen out there hoping to make a name for themselves by outdrawing Desperado Jones.

Desperado started toward the saloon, needing that drink more than ever after the gunplay just now. He shouldn't have come to Trouble Creek in the first place, he grumbled to himself. He hadn't

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been back in eight years and had no reason to return now. When a twist of fate had brought him close to Trouble Creek, he'd decided to satisfy his curiosity and visit the town he hadn't seen since he'd returned to make peace with his father and attended his funeral instead. Cursing his damn curiosity, Desperado vowed that this was the last time he'd ever set foot in Trouble Creek.

"Mr. Desperado Jones?"

Tired of messing around with young fools bent on making a name for themselves, Desperado crouched low and whipped around, his gun appearing in his hand faster than a snake can strike. The breath went out of him in a loud whoosh and he slapped his gun back in his holster when he realized his name had come from the lips of a female.

And what a female! She was tall, blonde and slim; her long legs were encased in skin-tight Levi's that cupped her bottom like loving hands. Her Stetson wasn't nearly as battered as his and did little to hide her startling green eyes and flawless complexion.

His eyes settled on her unfettered breasts, their fullness clearly visible beneath her buckskin jacket and silk shirt. His eyes narrowed in surprise when he noted that she was packing guns and looked as if she knew how to use them. He heard her take in a noisy breath, then expel it with a loud sigh, and he suspected he had frightened her. It would serve her right, he thought. She shouldn't have come up on him like that without warning. She could have gotten herself killed.

"Yeah, I'm Desperado Jones. What can I do for

you?" He knew what he'd like to do and wondered if the lady would object. He knew instinctively that she would. Half-breed Apache Indians weren't all that popular in these parts.

"I wondered if you knew you'd just made an enemy," the woman said. "The man you just shot is Tate Talbot. His father is Calvin Talbot, a land speculator and mayor of Trouble Creek. He's also a land-grabbing, money-hungry scoundrel who uses underhanded, often illegal, methods to purchase valuable land holdings from unsuspecting ranchers. And his son," she said bitterly, "is a despicable bas . . . Well, let's just leave it at that."

"You don't say," Desperado muttered, more interested in the woman's attributes than her words.

"Why are you telling me this, Miss . . ."

"Sommers, Chloe Sommers, I own the Ralston spread north of town."

Desperado went still. His face took on a hardedged remoteness and his dark eyes glittered dangerously. Those were the only outward signs that he recognized the name. His mind went back in time to the day his widowed father brought home a new wife. Norie Sommers had hated twelve-yearold Logan Ralston on sight. Not only did she despise his dark skin but she hated it that he was Ted Ralston's son from his union with Dancing Star, an Apache woman Ted had married despite the disapproval of his friends and neighbors.

Desperado remembered his mother as a gentle, loving woman who adored her husband and lavished special attention upon her son. Her death had been a terrible blow to both young Logan and

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his father. For a time they had managed alone, until Ted Ralston grew lonely and began courting a widow visiting from another city. They had married after a brief courtship.

Young Logan had always known his stepmother didn't want him around. But it wasn't until Norie became pregnant that he learned the depth of her hatred.

Chloe Sommers tipped her head up and searched Desperado's face, puzzled by his sudden stillness. His fierce expression and dark features betraved his Indian heritage. His face was all sharp angles. jutting cheekbones and black, slanting eyebrows. His mouth was wide, with a generous lower lip. His face was set in cold, sardonic lines that destroyed any hint of gentleness. There was an innate pride in his bearing, handed down, she supposed, from his proud forebears, there for all to see . . . and to fear. But it was Desperado's eyes that intrigued Chloe. A person could fall into those fathomless black depths and become lost. She bit her lip, wondering where that thought had come from. But Chloe wasn't about to let this formidable gunslinger frighten her. She needed him too badly.

Desperado said something, bringing Chloe's wandering attention back. "What did you say?"

"I said I'm not afraid of the Talbots."

"I didn't think you were," Chloe said, eyeing him with renewed interest. "Would you happen to be looking for a job, Mr. Jones? I'm looking to hire a gunman. I'm taking my herd to the railhead at Dodge soon and I need a gunman to make sure my beeves arrive safely. If I fail, my ranch will be sold

to pay the back taxes, leaving the way open for Calvin Talbot to gobble up my holdings, and I can't let that happen."

One eyebrow arched sardonically as he studied her with unabashed sexual speculation. "Are you running the ranch by yourself?"

Chloe's chin lifted. "For the past two years, I have. My stepfather left the ranch to my mother. We ran it together until she died." She searched his face, as if looking for something familiar. "Are you from around here, Mr. Jones?"

"Just passing through," Desperado rasped. His next sentence came unbidden to his tongue. "Did your stepfather die without heirs?"

Chloe stared into the distance, as if trying to recall something from her memory. "There was a son, Logan Ralston, but he died a long time ago. I never knew him because I didn't arrive at the ranch until after he'd left. All I recall is that my stepfather was sad a very long time after his death." She blinked away the memory. "Let's get back to the question at hand. About that job, Mr. Jones. I need your gun and I'm willing to pay for it."

Desperado knew he had acquired the reputation of being a ruthless killer. He had worked hard to achieve that reputation; it was the way he wanted to be seen by the world. He'd been hired countless times to do exactly what Chloe Sommers had asked of him, but never by a woman. Having a woman boss didn't appeal to him. Never had, never would.

"Sorry, Miss Sommers," Desperado drawled. "I don't work for women. They're too flighty and unpredictable."

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