



# CONSTANCE O'BANYON

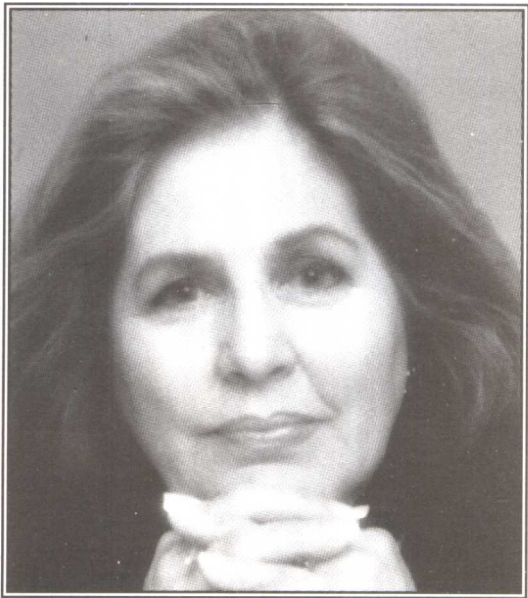
Author of over  
8 million books in print!

# TEXAS PROUD

"Constance O'Banyon returns to her Western roots with a romance full of passion, excitement and adventure."—Bobbi Smith, Bestselling Author of *Half-Breed's Lady*

TEXAS  
PROUD





## CONSTANCE O'BANYON

Constance is a native Texan who makes her home in San Antonio with her husband, Jim and their son, Jason. Her books range from historical to contemporary and include several novellas. Many of her books have been published in trade paperback. Her books have been published in Canada, England, Australia, Africa, Spain, China, Germany, Italy, Russia and France. Among her many awards, she is the recipient of the 1996 *Romantic Times* Career Achievement Award. There are eight million copies of her books in print.

"I have always loved history, and I loved storytelling—it was only natural that I would one day put them both together. I must have lived in another life and time, because when I write, I can almost feel I was there. My favorite part of writing is the research. Whenever possible, I will go to the place I am writing about to walk the land and smell the air."

Readers can E-mail Constance at [jgee@texas.net](mailto:jgee@texas.net), and visit her website at <http://www.romcom.com/o'banyon>.

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*When you were born, you brought such joy into my life. I held you so tightly, reluctant to let you go, but knowing that you had to try your wings. Now, your gentle, loving hands help bring new life into the world. With your kind commitment to others, I can imagine the comfort you bring to so many new mothers. You are my real heroine, my daughter, Kim.*

*To Todd Melton, who saw a precious jewel, and took her for his wife. (Hfo)*



*Lenore Ambergis, thank you for allowing me to use your beautiful poem. Poetry shared is a precious gift.*





In the sultry heat  
our bodies play.  
He wants my happiness  
above all else.  
My God . . . He loves me.

—Lenore Ambergis



## *Prologue*

*Texas, 1867*

The rifle rose slowly and a feminine hand lightly touched the stock to take deadly aim at the man the woman intended to kill. With lethal accuracy, Rachel Rutledge swung the barrel downward until it was dead center on Noble Vincente's heart. The rifle followed him as he dismounted and led his horse to the creek to drink. Her finger touched the trigger as hatred burned within her, almost cutting off her breath. She silently shifted her position so she could steady her aim, all the while watching Noble's every move. There was no hurry. She had waited five years for this moment; a little while longer wouldn't make any difference.

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Her lip curled in anger. Noble Vincente was only a trigger away from being the last Spanish grandee of Casa del Sol.

Noble Vincente pulled the brim of his black hat lower across his forehead to shade his eyes against the sun's glare. But there was no escape from the heat that beat down upon the parched land like fire on an anvil. He untied his neckerchief, dipped it in the water and wiped his face. His gaze swept across muddy Deep Creek past a clump of mesquite trees to the craggy cliffs that looked as if they had been forcefully rammed through the earth by a long-ago earthquake. The land had no continuity; there was an intermingling of canyons, shallow gullies, mesas and long stretches of flatland. The never-ceasing wind rippled through the straw-colored grass, giving the appearance of waves upon an ocean, while a lone hawk circled widely in the blue sky, riding the wind currents, its eyes ever watchful for prey.

A rattlesnake slithered among the cactus and coiled on a rock to bask in the sun. With its violent beauty, Texas was a harsh, inhospitable land and not for the faint of heart. It was a land of contradictions, the merging of cultures: Indian, white, Mexican, Spanish, all interwoven like a patchwork quilt—yet united in one respect. They all loved Texas.

Memories, emotions, old hatreds saturated Noble's mind and twisted his heart. Rage was never

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far from the surface, but he controlled it by sheer strength of will. He'd seen so much killing in the war—senseless killing. Many of the dead had been only boys, too young to die. Hell, they hadn't even begun to live.

For two years following the war, Noble had wandered with no particular destination in mind—he knew only that he could not go home. Without any conscious thought in mind, his wandering had taken him to Mexico, where he'd blended in with the vaqueros on a horse ranch. He'd become a faceless, nameless being with no past and no future. In the beginning, he'd forced himself to get up in the mornings, trying to find some reason to go on living. Revenge, perhaps. Hatred, maybe. Two months ago he'd realized that he could never free himself from the tangled past until he came home.

Noble's nostrils flared, and memories unwound in his head as he inhaled the familiar pungent odor of cedar mingled with the fragrance of multicolored wildflowers. There was no use lying to himself—even though he'd sworn never to return to Texas, the land had called him back. This land was in his blood, in every fiber of his being, in every intake of his breath.

Unaware that death stalked him, Noble allowed his gaze to turn westward in the direction of his family's ranch, Casa del Sol. If he rode hard, he'd be home before dark. But even now a part of him

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wanted to mount his horse and ride away and never look back.

No, he thought angrily. This time he would not allow the hatred and suspicion of others to matter. He was going home.

Years of war had honed and shaped Noble; he was no longer the young man who had left five years before. He had come home to erase the tarnish from the Vincente name, and he would not leave until that had been accomplished.

Rachel's aim followed Noble when he bent down and cupped his hands to drink thirstily from the creek. She was attuned to his every move, and her finger was never far from the trigger. The heat left her breathless and jabbed through her like a dagger, perspiration plastered her clothing to her body, and she could taste the dust like grit in her mouth. Every breath scorched her throat. She was so thirsty that her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, and even though her canteen was within reach, she must endure the thirst because any movement on her part might give away her hiding place.

She continued to observe Noble through her gun sight, wondering what he was thinking at that moment. Her gaze moved across his strong jawline. He hadn't changed much; though perhaps he looked a little older than she remembered. His coal black hair curled damply at the nape of his neck, and sweat molded his shirt to his chest and

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emphasized the broadness of his shoulders. He wore black leather Spanish trousers that outlined his long, lean body. She watched him remove his hat, toss it carelessly across his saddle, and brace his back against a cottonwood tree as if he hadn't a care in the world.

Suddenly Noble glanced in her direction, and Rachel could almost feel the heat of those dark eyes. His eyes were what she remembered most about him. When he'd laughed, they seemed to dance with mirth; when he was angry, his eyes became an intense, swirling tide that could consume and burn whomever he chose to single out. She also remembered his silent arrogance, and the way he'd hidden his true feelings behind a mask of indifference.

Rachel suddenly felt faint. With effort she dragged air into her lungs, speculating whether the sensation was caused by dread or expectation. Reverend Robinson had once preached a sermon on how Satan came disguised in beauty, and Noble Vincente was certainly a man created in beauty, and surely Satan's own disciple. There had not been a day since Noble had left that she hadn't thought of him and prayed for his death. Damn him, now she would see her father avenged at last!

Rachel rested her cheek against the stock of her rifle, licked her dry lips, and cocked the hammer. No one would blame her if she killed Noble. Few people from Madragon County would mourn him,



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and most of them would probably thank her if she ended his miserable life.

All she had to do was squeeze the trigger and he would be dead. So why, then, did she hesitate? It was what she wanted to do, had dreamed of doing for years.

Noble continued to stare in her direction. Although Rachel was well hidden, she had the strangest feeling that he could see her. Her hand trembled and she gripped the rifle tightly against her body to steady it.

The jingle of Noble's Spanish spurs jarred her back to reality, and once more she aimed her rifle dead center at his heart. Yet she felt frozen, her fingers stiff, her heart hammering in her chest. Taking a steadying breath, she watched him mount and ride his gelding in the direction of Casa del Sol.

Slowly she lowered the rifle, feeling sick.

It wasn't as easy to kill a man as she'd thought, even Noble Vincente. She would let him live today because only a coward would shoot a man when his back was turned. She had given him the chance he'd never given her flesh and blood. She would force Noble to admit that he'd cravenly shot her father in the back. Then, with him facing her, she would shoot him. She wanted to be the last image he saw before he closed his eyes in death.