

# THE IRON WAGON

RETURN OF THE STRANGER → BOOK THREE ←

AL & JOANNA  
LACY



*John “the Stranger” Brockman returns,  
fighting for law and order in the American Old West*

The American frontier was often a wild place where ruthless outlaws reigned supreme. However, as westward expansion continued, the settlers demanded law and order. Marshals and sheriffs were in high demand in some of the most lawless settlements as well as in the numerous mining camps that dotted the west.

For years, John Brockman was known simply as “the Stranger.” Stories circulated all over the West about his generosity, justice, and honor, as well as his skill with a Colt .45. Now a chief U.S. marshal in Colorado, John’s adventures are far from over.

The romantic tale of John and Breanna Brockman continues amid a series of gunfights, fistfights, and showdowns. The Return of the Stranger Series promises explosive Western action, callous desperadoes, heroic lawmen, and strong family ties.

Well-known storyteller Al Lacy began writing Christian historical adventures more than sixteen years ago. His beloved wife, JoAnna, became his coauthor eleven years ago. While Al chronicles history and biblical truth from one heart-pounding novel to the next, JoAnna weaves in romantic elements and family values.

Together, they invite you to come along and experience a glimpse of the past—a time when outlaws and marshals rivaled each other and a place that evokes the simplicity of the Old West while revealing the complexity of human nature in light of eternal truth.



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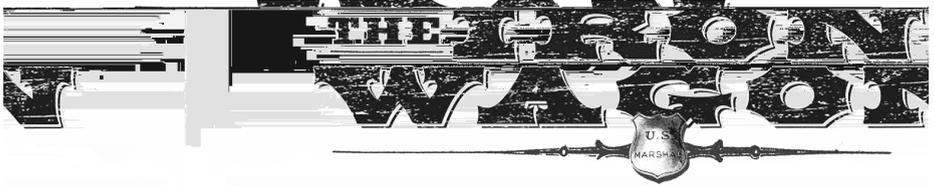
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THE ←

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AL & JOANN  
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*We dedicate this book to our dear friends  
Jerry and Linda Weddle  
(whom Al had the joy of personally leading to the Lord),  
who have been such a blessing to us.*

*We love you!  
Al and JoAnna  
Hebrews 13:20–21*

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## FOREWORD

**T**he Return of the Stranger trilogy is a follow-up to the Journeys of the Stranger Series and Angel of Mercy Series written for Multnomah Books by Al Lacy between 1994 and 1997.

In 1997, Multnomah's president hired JoAnna Lacy as coauthor with her husband, and they began the Hannah of Fort Bridger Series that same year. Since then, JoAnna has coauthored every book with her husband that has been published by Multnomah Books and the new WaterBrook Multnomah Publishing Group.

Since Al ended the Journeys of the Stranger and Angel of Mercy Series, which centered on John "the Stranger" Brockman and Breanna Baylor, who married in the second series, Al and JoAnna as well as the publisher have received repeated letters, e-mails, and calls asking that Al write another Stranger series. This trilogy is in pleasant response to those welcome requests.

Al and JoAnna hope that fans of the Stranger will enjoy this new trilogy and that many new Stranger fans will as well.

## ONE



On Monday, August 20, 1888, Meggie Brockman’s birthday party was held as planned at the Brockman home. Dr. Matthew Carroll and his wife, Dottie—Breanna’s sister—were there, as well as the Brockmans’ close friends deputy U.S. marshal Whip Langford and his wife, Annabeth, and Pastor Robert Bayless and his wife, Mary. When dinner was over, it was time to go to the parlor for the party.

“John,” Breanna asked, loud enough for everyone to hear, “would you take me up to the master bedroom so I can rest a little bit?”

As John took hold of the handles on the back of the wheelchair, Meggie turned to her mother. “I’ll wait to open my presents, Mama, until you get some rest and come back down to the parlor.”

When John wheeled Breanna out of the dining room, everyone went to the parlor and sat down, with Meggie sitting by a stack of brightly wrapped birthday presents. A short while later, everyone was pleased when they heard John call from the hall that he and Breanna were back.

All eyes went to the parlor door and widened quickly when Breanna entered the room—*walking!* She held a cane in one hand, and John steadied her by holding her other hand.

Fifteen-year-old Paul, thirteen-year-old Ginny, and ten-year-old Meggie rushed to their mother, smiling broadly, their arms wide open

to hug her. One at a time, they each gave her a delicate, heartfelt hug as their father continued to steady her by holding her hand.

Tears misted Breanna's eyes as she was being hugged. Everyone else jumped to their feet, staring in stunned silence, hardly able to believe their eyes.

Meggie looked toward heaven. "Thank You, Lord Jesus! I know I will like all these presents in the packages, but this is my favorite birthday present. *My mama is walking!*"

Breanna sat on a soft chair with John's help. More tears were shed as Meggie leaned over carefully and wrapped her arms around Breanna's neck, sobbing joyfully. "I love you, Mama! I love you so much! I'm so happy you can walk again!"

As Meggie eased back and smiled at her mother, Breanna looked lovingly at her little adopted daughter, her own cheeks shining with tears, then embraced her. "Oh, sweetie, I love you so much too!"

John Brockman, the Carrolls, the Baylesses, and the Langfords all smiled through their tears as they observed the scene.

Tall, dark-haired Paul now stood in front of his mother's chair with Ginny beside him, and they both poured out words of love to her as they wiped their tears, saying how happy they were that her legs had regained so much strength.

Ginny and Paul bent down and embraced their mother. Breanna's tears flowed freely down her cheeks as she told Paul and Ginny how very much she loved them.

A small frown creased Meggie's brow. "Why didn't you tell us you were able to walk again?"

Breanna smoothed a hand over Meggie's blond curls, then

clasped her hands in her own. “Just because I was getting feeling back into my feet and legs, Papa and I weren’t sure it would mean I could walk. It’s been a hard and sometimes discouraging struggle...and well, we didn’t want to disappoint everyone if the attempt to get me walking again wasn’t successful. So every night after you children were in your beds, Papa and I went to work on the therapy recommended by your uncle Matt.”

Breanna released Meggie’s hands. “Honey, I’ve been doing some small exercises on my own when Papa was at work and you, Ginny, and Paul weren’t home.” She looked at her ruggedly handsome husband as he stroked his well-trimmed mustache. “Papa and I really wanted to surprise everyone once we knew God had healed me and helped me get to this point. I still have a long way to go, but thankfully, the Lord indeed *has* healed me and given me the grace and strength to come this far.”

Meggie gently wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck again and held her for a few seconds. A crooked smile lit up Meggie’s face. “I guess it’s okay you kept this secret as long as you did, but now that we all know, we can help you with your therapy, and maybe you can get all well quicker.”

Breanna tenderly placed her palms on Meggie’s cheeks and smiled. “Maybe so, sweet one, but I can only do so much exercise in a day!”

Meggie giggled. “Okay, Mama, we’ll do it your way. Just give a holler when you want our help.”

“I’ll just do that, Meg. Now, I think you need to put your attention on these birthday gifts that have been sitting here waiting for you to open them.”

“Oh my, yes!” Meggie squealed, her dimples flashing as she moved to where the brightly wrapped presents were stacked.

As Meggie opened her presents, one after another, her eyes widened with joy. When she had finished, she went to each and every person at the party, hugged them, and thanked them for her gifts.

Meggie then positioned herself before her family and the guests. “Oh, this has been such a wonderful birthday party!”

John stepped over to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Well, my sweet, you’ve got a long line of birthday parties in the future.”

Meggie looked up and smiled. “But this one will always be extra special, Papa, because God answered my prayers and made it so Mama could walk again!”

“Amens” were spoken by everybody.

Meggie glanced at her family and choked up a bit as she said, “Papa, Mama, Paul, Ginny...thank you for taking me into your home and giving me the happiness I’ve had ever since I was adopted. I love you!”

John hugged Meggie; then Paul did the same, followed by Ginny. Breanna opened her arms, and Meggie went back to her. They kissed each other’s cheeks, then embraced for a long moment.

Realizing it was time for the guests to leave, Pastor Bayless said, “Well, since the party is almost over, let’s bow our heads and thank the Lord for Breanna’s healing and that Meggie has had such a happy birthday.”

Heads were bowed instantly, and the pastor led them in prayer.

The guests all spoke their joy to Breanna again concerning her regaining the use of her legs, wished Meggie “Happy Birthday” once more, and then left. As they were walking out the door, Breanna said, “Pastor, I’m planning to be at church Sunday morning.”

Pastor Bayless paused and smiled. “Great! It will be good to have you.”

After John closed the door behind them, he turned to his family and smiled. “Before we all head for our bedrooms, let’s pray together. I want to just thank the Lord together once more for making your mama well enough to walk again.”

The family joined hands in a circle, bowed their heads, and John said, “Dear Lord, my mind goes to verses 6 and 7 in Psalm 28 as David wrote: ‘Blessed be the LORD, because he hath heard the voice of my supplications. The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him.’”

By this time, tears flowed from the closed eyes of the parents and the children, and a few sniffles were heard.

John went on. “Dear Lord, we can all say with David in that seventh verse, ‘my heart trusted in him, and I am helped.’” And this makes me think, heavenly Father, of the psalmist’s words in Psalm 121:2: ‘My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.’ Thank You, precious Lord, for healing these

children's wonderful mother and my wonderful wife. Thank You that she is indeed walking again!"

There was a chorus of "amens," which were repeated when John closed off his prayer in Jesus' name.

Paul, Ginny, and Meggie hugged both parents before mounting the stairs to the second floor of the ranch house. John lifted Breanna into his strong arms. "Sweetheart, I'll carry you up the stairs for a while yet before you try climbing them on your own."

Breanna kissed his lips and smiled. "I just love being carried by you, darling. Maybe I'll just let you carry me up the stairs from now on."

Laughter burst forth from the top of the stairs; then Paul called down, "What about when Papa isn't here, Mama?"

Breanna giggled and looked up at her three children. "Well, I guess I'll have to climb up there on my own. But don't tell your father. I want *him* to carry me up these stairs when he's home for as long as I can get away with it."

John laughed as he started up the stairs with Breanna in his arms. "Sweetheart, you can *always* get away with it!"

During lunch at the Brockman home on Wednesday afternoon two days later, Breanna, Dottie, Ginny, Meggie, and Paul sat at the table.

"Aunt Dottie," Paul said as he rubbed his stomach, "I really appreciate your being here so often to help my sisters with the cooking."

Dottie smiled at him. "It's my pleasure."

Paul put a heckling grin on his lips and looked at his sisters. "Well, Aunt Dottie, if it had been left up to Ginny and Meggie, we'd probably all be malnourished by now!"

Ginny glared back at Paul in a teasing way, her sky blue eyes sparkling. "Now, wait a minute, big brother. Meggie and I are right good cooks." Still grinning, she looked at her mother. "Aren't we, Mama?"

"Well, you both *should* be good cooks. Remember who taught you!" Breanna pointed a finger at herself.

This drew laughter from around the table.

"I was just kidding and having a little fun with my sisters, Mama." Then Paul looked at his aunt. "I really do want to thank you *so much* for all your help and encouragement to us, and especially to Mama."

Dottie ran her twinkling gaze around the table. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Mama," Paul said, "since school will be starting in just over two weeks, I want to ride to town later this afternoon and buy myself some new clothes."

Breanna nodded. "That's fine, son."

Paul smiled. "Okay, Mama. Just before five o'clock, I'll go to Papa's office so I can ride home with him."

"Well, that will make your papa very happy."

"Tell you what. I'll ride Papa's aging horse Chance to town today and give the old boy a little exercise."

Breanna chuckled. "I guarantee you that will make Papa very happy also."

“It sure will,” Ginny piped up. “Papa still loves to see Chance ridden now and then.”

When lunch was over, Paul excused himself, saying he had some work to do at the barn, as Aunt Dottie and his sisters prepared to wash and dry the dishes.

Just after three o’clock, Paul swung into the saddle on Chance’s back and waved at his mother, his sisters, and his aunt on the front porch. He trotted the black stallion up the lane toward the road, then guided Chance toward Denver from the west. Twice Paul met up with neighboring ranchers returning from town and stopped to chat with them for a few minutes.

As he was drawing closer to Denver, Paul guided Chance to the bank of the Platte River. After letting him take a good drink, he put the horse back to a trot. Exactly six weeks from today, Paul would turn sixteen. He couldn’t wait until he turned twenty-one so he could become one of his father’s deputies, fulfilling the strong desire he’d had ever since he was a child to become a lawman.

At a small cabin on Denver’s east side, aging widower Chad Marks sat on the sofa in his parlor, just resting after mopping the kitchen floor. The silver-haired man had his head laid back with his eyes closed when he heard the sound of horse’s hoofs approach the front of the house and stop. Seconds later, footsteps sounded on the front porch, followed by a knock at the door.

With effort, Chad made his way off the sofa and moved

slowly out of the parlor. Before he reached the door, there was another knock.

“Uncle Chad! You in there?”

Drawing up to the door, Chad thought, *Oh no! It's that nephew of mine, Kail Gatlin.*

Kail, in his early forties, was well known as a gunfighter in Nebraska. Chad hadn't seen Kail since Chad and his wife, Martha, had moved to Denver from North Platte, Nebraska, some six years previously.

Bracing himself and knowing he must show himself friendly toward his violent nephew, Chad opened the door. He managed a smile. “Well, howdy, Kail. I thought it was your voice I was hearing, but I wasn't sure.”

“Howdy, yourself, Uncle Chad.”

Chad swung the door wide. “C'mon in.”

Kail extended his hand as he stepped into the cabin, and Chad grasped it in a weak handshake. He led his nephew into the parlor and sat on the sofa. Kail eased onto an overstuffed chair, facing his uncle from some six feet away. “Are you still having heart problems?”

Chad nodded. “I am, but I have a good doctor here in Denver who so far has kept me alive.”

“I'm glad for that.”

Chad sat in silence, thinking about his situation. Even though his heart was declining almost daily, he was still able to live alone in his quiet, peaceful cabin at the edge of town. His wants and needs were small, and he enjoyed awaking each morning, knowing he had made it through another night. The

medicine the doctor gave him did help some, and his sedate lifestyle added to his stability.

Chad had always been a farmer, but recently he had sold off his acreage, along with his house and barn, and now lived in this small cabin, which was just the right size for him since his beloved Martha had died nearly two years ago.

Because of this surprise by his wayward nephew, Chad sat on the sofa feeling some stabbing pains in his chest and became aware of some shortness of breath. After nearly five minutes of silence, Kail took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Uncle Chad, I have something to tell you.”

Chad looked at him and nodded. “All right.”

“I didn’t really come here to see *you*, but since I was coming to Denver anyway, I thought I’d stop by. When I got into town, I asked around and was told where you lived.”

Chad frowned. “So, why did you come here?”

Kail cleared his throat and adjusted himself on the chair. “Remember how the man called the Stranger killed my brother, Kent, in a quick-draw shootout over twenty years ago on Main Street in Grand Island, Nebraska?”

Chad took a deep breath and rubbed his chest. “I remember it well. I know Kent had been a successful gunfighter for a few years, but he *never* should have challenged the Stranger, who was well known for his exceptional drawing speed and accuracy with his gun.”

Kail shrugged. “Well, Kent was only trying to make a name for himself by taking out the legendary John Stranger.”

The old man shook his head, once again rubbing his chest.

“Kent only played the fool by challenging him. Everyone who knew about John Stranger also knew that whenever he was challenged to a fast-draw shootout on a busy street in town, he would shoot to kill—because if all he did was wound a challenger, the challenger’s gun could go off and hit one of the spectators.”

Kail sighed. “Yeah, I know. But he still killed my brother.”

Chad’s brow wrinkled with another frown. “Why have you brought up that incident of Kent challenging the Stranger?”

Kail scooted forward a bit on the overstuffed chair and looked his uncle square in the eye. “I just learned a few weeks ago that the Stranger is now chief U.S. marshal John Brockman, whose office is here in Denver.” He pulled a paper from his shirt pocket, unfolded it, and waved it before his uncle’s eyes. “See this?”

Chad squinted, focusing on the image. “Yes. It’s the front page from the *North Platte Daily News*.”

“Right. As you can see, there are two photographs of Chief Brockman on this page, along with an article about him.”

Chad nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

“Well, the article is about what they call his tremendous work as head of the federal office in Denver, which makes him the top U.S. marshal of the Western District. As you can see, one photograph is of Brockman standing in front of Denver’s federal office building downtown on Broadway.”

“That’s right.”

“And some of Brockman’s deputy marshals are standing with him while Brockman towers over them.”

“Yes, I’ve seen him many times. He is very tall—well over six feet.”

“Yeah,” said Kail. “And this other photograph on the front page shows Brockman at his desk in the Denver office.”

Chad nodded again. “Mm-hmm. Handsome fella, isn’t he?”

Kail gritted his teeth. “He killed my brother. As far as I’m concerned, he’s the ugliest man I’ve ever seen. This article goes on to give a brief history of Brockman. It says how for several years all over the West, the Stranger helped people in various kinds of trouble and also aided the law by bringing many out-laws to justice.”

Chad smiled. “Uh-huh. He’s really a good guy.”

A sudden scowl twisted Kail’s features, and his eyes blazed with wrath. “I don’t care how good a guy Brockman is in the minds of the people of the West. I’m gonna kill him!”

“I warn you, Kail, if you challenge Chief Brockman to a quick draw, you’ll lose.”

Kail sneered. “I know better than to do that, Uncle Chad. I would never make that challenge. I’m gonna find a way to sneak up on Brockman and shoot him in the back. I’ll put a bullet right through his heart.”

The old man turned pale, shaking his head. “Don’t you do it! It was Kent’s fault he got killed.”

Through clenched teeth, Kail hissed, “I *have* to kill him! I’ve got to pay him back for taking my brother from me!”

The old man clutched at the left side of his chest, and he could hardly get a breath at all. His face went white as he gasped, “I—I’ve got to take some of my medicine.”

A worried look framed Kail’s face. “Can I get it for you?”

Struggling to move off the sofa, Chad said weakly, “No. Just help me into the kitchen, please.”

Kail stood and helped his uncle to his feet. He gripped the old man tightly as he staggered toward the kitchen.

“Please, Kail, just leave town and forget about killing John Brockman,” Chad wheezed. By the time they entered the kitchen, the pain in Chad’s chest had increased, and he could hardly get his breath at all.

He pointed to a small cupboard. Kail guided him to it and steadied his uncle as Chad removed a bottle of pills. With shaky hands, he opened the bottle and shook out two white pills into his trembling left hand. He popped them into his mouth, then picked up a water pitcher from the counter, poured a cup about half full, and drank it down.

Kail frowned. “Is it your heart?”

“Oh, just a touch of indigestion. Like a boiling pot in my stomach that’s sending the pain up into my chest. I’ll be all right once those pills get into my system.”

Chad was doing his best to disguise the pain in his chest, not wanting his nephew to know the seriousness of his heart problem.

“Oh. Okay. I just don’t want you keeling over.”

Chad forced a grin. “Not a chance. But...but—”

“But *what?*”

“I really think you should leave town and forget this revenge against Chief Brockman you’ve got in your head.”

Kail frowned fiercely. “Like you just said, Uncle Chad. *Not*

*a chance!*” Then he helped his uncle settle himself back on the parlor sofa.

Several hours later, when the clock on the wall neared four o’clock, Kail got up from the overstuffed chair, woke his uncle, and told him he had to leave.

Chad blinked. “I’ll walk you to the door.” He decided to try one more time. He gripped Kail’s upper arm with a trembling hand. “Please, Kail! Don’t kill Chief Brockman! That’s not going to bring Kent back.”

They drew up to the door. Kail yanked his arm from his uncle’s grip, opened the door, and looked into his tear-filled eyes. “No, killin’ Brockman won’t bring my brother back, but it’ll sure make me feel better!”

As Kail headed toward his big, black-maned, gray-bodied horse tied to the small hitching post in front of the cabin, Chad silently told himself that as soon as Kail rode away, he would go to the nearest neighbor’s house and ask if he could borrow one of his saddle horses. He would take a shortcut, gallop to the federal building, and warn Chief Brockman about Kail’s plans.

Kail swung atop his horse and with bulging eyes stared back at his uncle. “I’ve *got* to do this, Uncle Chad.”

He dare not let Kail suspect that he was going to leave the house at that moment. He gave Kail a dull look, stepped back, and closed the door. He stood there until he heard the horse trot away.

Suddenly Chad clutched his chest, gasped for breath, and collapsed on the floor. He breathed hard for several seconds, then stopped breathing altogether.

He was dead.