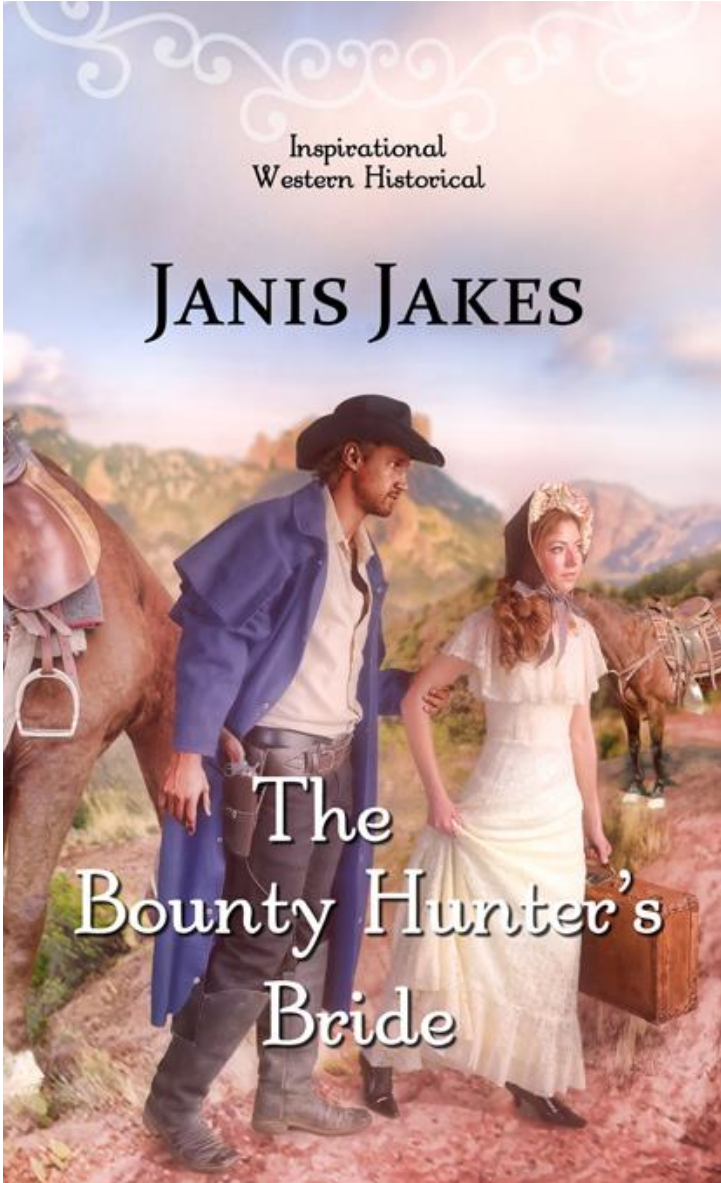


Inspirational
Western Historical

JANIS JAKES



The
Bounty Hunter's
Bride

The Bounty
Hunter's Bride

Janis Jakes

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Dedication

To my Lord, with gratitude for His never-ending
kindness.

1

Sweat dotted Luke's brow, trickling down his temples in a ragged trail. If there'd been a hotter day in West Texas, he couldn't recall when. His swollen tongue clung to the roof of his mouth. Sticky granules of sand peppered his cheeks. Not a single tree in sight and only one watering hole for miles—the perfect place to capture a criminal.

Looked like a kid off in the distance but “wanted dead or alive” let Luke know to keep his guard up. Pistol in hand, he watched the lone figure—wondering what the kid would do next. Predicting the mind of an outlaw wasn't easy, especially one who was likely hotheaded.

The young man rested on his knees at the water's edge. He cupped his hands, bent to drink, and pulled off his hat. Copper hair tumbled down in a thick braid, stopping an inch or so above a slender waist.

Luke blinked.

The outlaw turned sideways, revealing curves.

Confusion overtook Luke's rational thoughts. He rubbed his eyes with his free hand. Maybe the desert heat was playing tricks on him. He looked again. Had the figure disappeared? He glanced toward the ground, rubbing his eyes once more.

The whirr of a bullet sliced through the air, knocking Luke's hat from his head. He leaped from his horse, taking cover behind a boulder. On instinct, his horse followed, partially hidden by the rock mounds surrounding his lookout position.

She fit the description—the trousers and shirt, the horse, everything. He tried to recall the face in the wanted poster. It had looked feminine, but he'd thought that was because of the age. Twenty-two years old and fresh-faced, but no mention of the word *woman*.

The name on the poster was Billie Batson, but he'd just assumed the variant spelling meant a man. He'd been duped. Bringing any woman in for justice wasn't something he intended to do. It was a silent code among those in his profession. Bounty hunters marked women as off-limits, though right this second, he wasn't sure why.

He squinted over the rock, holding his hand up to shield his eyes. His ears still rang from the bullet that almost took off his head. There was no sign of her. He squatted back down, unsure what to do next.

Get your wits together, man.

Luke inched upward once more. She was still gone. Vanished. As if she'd never existed.

A lump rose to his throat, momentarily cutting off his air. Had she been a mirage? He was hot. Parched. Tired. He'd heard of people seeing images that didn't exist in the desert. Maybe that's what happened.

"Drop your gun." A voice sounded behind him, feminine and ominously close.

He turned and his stomach clenched. A heavy groan slipped between his lips. How'd he let this happen? He could see the newspaper headline now: *Veteran Bounty Hunter Shot Dead by Woman.*

He could even picture the smirk on Laurence Magellan's face. The man already loved to write and publish crass stories about him—called him a barbarian, among other things. He'd probably devote the entire front page to bragging about how Luke Lancaster finally got what he deserved—and by a female, no less, which Laurence would point out made it doubly fitting.

Instead of dropping his gun, Luke's grip tightened. He held his weapon steady.

She dipped her chin downward. She was a pretty thing. If he was to be shot by a woman—

"Mister, you'd better drop that gun right now. I know you think you can outshoot me, but my trigger's cocked and ready. All I have to do is squeeze."

"True," he said, keeping his calm. This wasn't the first time he'd stood in front of someone holding a gun. "But if I'm dying anyway, I might as well die trying."

"No one will die," she said, her voice cool and smooth. "Least not if you do what I say."

"You're a criminal. Am I supposed to believe your word?"

"You got a choice?"

"Yeah. I can try to shoot you first as I already said."

She rolled her eyes. "And they say women like to argue." She took a step toward him, her blue eyes

turning cold. "Drop the stupid gun. Right now."

"All right, all right." He dropped the gun, hoping he hadn't made the biggest mistake of his life.

"Who are you anyway?" she said. "Why are you following me? Did Caldwell send you?"

"Who?"

"Clovis Caldwell."

He dropped his hand at his side, wondering why she sounded so annoyed. If anything, she should feel kind of smug right now. Maybe even smile or giggle for outsmarting a professional hunter like himself. Instead, she was spitting bull nettles and angry at who knew what.

"I never heard of the man," he said. "I'm here with the Littleton And Clark Detective Agency out of El Paso, Texas."

"Bounty hunter?"

He didn't want to answer.

Her cheeks turned flaming red. "That lying, conniving, murdering, greedy—" She muttered a few more words he couldn't hear. "Now he has bounty hunters believing him. I've had it. Cooked goose. Done."

He held still. Would she take her anger out on him? Could he get his gun before she shot him? Why had he ever thought he wanted to bounty hunt?

She stopped in the middle of her tirade—her stare boring into his own. "Take off your holster."

"A bounty hunter never—"

"Now!"

He unbuckled his holster, holding still as the

leather fell in a loose heap at his feet. He felt naked and silly to boot. If he survived, he might change his mind about taking in a woman. This woman deserved to face the judge and jury.

"Just so you know, I never stole anything, and I never killed anyone." She waved her gun at the ground. "It was all Caldwell's doing."

How many times had he heard this familiar tune? Every outlaw he brought in was as innocent as a baby, to listen to them tell it. Still, he knew better than to act as if he didn't believe her. "Who is Caldwell?"

She snapped back to the present, her eyes narrowing. "Kick your holster over here. At my feet."

"If you're innocent, then why not come back? Clear your name." He was trying to buy time, but there was more than that. He wanted to know the answer. He'd never heard of a bounty on a woman dead or alive. She must've done something awful.

"You really don't know who Caldwell is, do you?" she asked.

A gunshot ripped through the air, crashing past his ear and into the rock with a thunderous boom. Shards of rock flew into the air, followed by faint white particles of dust.

Luke's gaze darted to his gun. He glanced at the woman. Fear riddled her face as she took off, stumbling over her own feet as she scrambled for cover.

Which way were the bullets coming from? He wasn't sure. One ricocheted off the rock near his head, zipping past his ear. Another zinged near his feet,

slicing off into the distance. The idiots, whoever they were, couldn't hit a barn on a clear day and would probably kill him right along with the woman.

Her horse took off, disappearing into a trail of dust with reins flapping. Luke's horse bucked, stomped, and then bucked again.

He had to get out of here. If memory served him right, there was a cavern only a half a mile away, hidden in the rocks. The Comanche used it for a lookout while hunting buffalo. If he could get there, he'd be safe.

Luke grabbed his holster and buckled it back on, dropping his gun into place. He stuffed his hat on his head and then slid his foot into the stirrup as another bullet whizzed by, disappearing into the endless desert. From the sound of the discharge, the shooters were moving closer. He pulled up into the saddle, crouching down low. "OK, boy, let's get out of here—"

His horse bucked and pivoted, turning toward the rocky hillside as if knowing where to go. He loosened his hold on the reins just in time to hear a faint voice call out.

"Wait!"

Luke shifted. The woman sat between two rocks with knees bent, her right hand on her upper left arm. Blood seeped between her clenched fingers, darkening her shirt with a crimson stain.

"Don't leave me." Then, more faintly, "They'll kill me."

I can't take you. They'll kill us both.

She seemed to sense his hesitation. "I'm innocent."

He frowned. The last time he'd decided to be a Good Samaritan it had cost him more than he could bear. The wound in his heart had yet to heal—never would. The thought of helping a woman who'd threatened to shoot him moments ago was insane. Downright foolish.

"Hope you get the chance to prove it..." Luke said.

"Mister, please—"

His chest tightened, but something else happened, too—a sharp prick, like the thorns on a rose, snagged one of the few soft places left in his heart.

He could almost see his mother's face, kind and tender with faint wrinkles and golden ringlets hanging past porcelain features. Though she never spoke the words, he heard her as clearly as if she'd whispered right into his ear. *Is that the way I raised you? You're not a savage. You're a child of God.*

Luke yelled from the darkest recess of his soul—a guttural sound that did not come close to expressing his frustration. He jumped from his horse and rushed toward the woman. If he died, he'd die pleasing the one person on earth who'd ever shown him unconditional love. He used a boulder as a shield and glanced to where the woman sat only seconds before. There was no sign of her—only the smear of blood upon a large stone.

"Billie!" He yelled, hoping that was her name.

From only a few feet away, a pale hand slipped upward above the rocks and waved as if greeting a passing friend. She must've toppled over onto the dirt,

which wasn't such a bad idea. It might have saved her life.

He ducked and swerved, feeling the heat of the bullets zipping past him. This had to be the most daring and most stupid thing he'd ever done. If God still cared about him, and he wouldn't blame Him if He didn't, now would be a pretty good time to let him know.

2

Something tight slid over Billie's upper arm, biting into her flesh and squeezing without letting up. She winced in pain but lacked the strength to protest. Strong hands moved under her body and lifted her limp form. Had she been captured? She tried to open her eyes, but the dizziness was too much. Her body was pulled against the warmth of human flesh. If this was death, she welcomed it. A masculine scent moved under her nose.

"Billie, stay with me." The voice sounded vaguely familiar. Then, more urgent. "I'm getting us out of here."

In the next instant, she was tossed like a sack of potatoes upon something hard...a shoulder? More bullets spewed forth—most whirring over her head. She wanted to hide, but there was nowhere to go. A bullet sliced into her hip—barely skimming the flesh but leaving a path of searing pain in its wake. She cried out in agony. More bullets zipped past her. How could she still be alive? Her insides rolled. Nausea swept upward but refused to spill forward. Breaths came in ragged, shallow gasps.

Her body lurched upward, lifted higher, and then

fell across a saddle. She could smell the horsey scent of leather. Her hip burned with unbearable pain. Darkness swept over her like a ferocious wave, pulling her into its depths. She didn't know if she was dying or passing out, but someone had come to help her. Whether she lived or died, she was not alone. She couldn't think of anything worse than dying alone.

~*~

Billie awoke to nightfall, made less ominous from the light of a full moon. The howl of a coyote sounded nearby. Her eyes felt gritty as she peered into the shadows of the Chihuahuan Desert below. She was high on the hillside amongst large rocks and sharply etched overhangs. Contorted shapes of boulders were strewn below the perch. It could not have been easy traversing the maze. Someone must've known the exact path.

Billie reached up, touching her swollen, blood-crusted bottom lip. She'd busted her mouth as she raced for the rocks, stumbling forward when the first bullet hit her in her shoulder. Her hip ached, but not too bad. It was odd that her mouth hurt more than the bullet wounds.

But how did she get in this cave?

Fear began to travel up her spine. Caldwell's men. They'd brought her here. She didn't want to imagine why. She sat up slowly, glancing back over her shoulder.

A lone man squatted nearby. He watched her like

a mountain lion about to pounce on a wounded rabbit. Angular planes etched into handsome features. Broad shoulders. Muscled legs. Hard expression.

The bounty hunter! Her holster and gun lay inches from his feet.

What now?

"Are you cold?" he asked in a flat tone.

She didn't answer.

"I can't start a fire, or they'll find us. If you need a blanket—"

Did he think she would stay here once he went to sleep?

"If you think you can make a run for it, Caldwell's men are still out there. Right where we left them. Waiting for you."

Was he trying to scare her?

"Don't believe me?" He pointed off into the distance. "See that flicker of light?"

Could the man read minds?

"That's their campfire," he said.

She glanced out into the darkness, barely able to detect the faint glow. Words moved up her dry throat. "How do you know it's Caldwell's men? How do you know it's not bounty hunters, like yourself?"

He shifted, a faint snicker parting his lips. The man was bigger than she remembered. Or maybe he only looked bigger because she felt so vulnerable.

"No bounty hunter is that bad of a shot."

"They hit me twice," she said, her voice growing stronger.

"They got lucky." He stood up, walked to his

horse. Dirt clods crunched beneath his feet. He pulled a canteen from the saddlebag and extended the container to her.

Billie took a long swallow, uncaring that water ran down her chin and onto her blood-stained shirt.

“Easy,” he said. “You’ll make yourself sick.”

She took another sip and then handed it back to him. She wasn’t quite ready to say thank you.

“Your wounds need cleaning.” He drank after her then dropped the canteen into his saddlebag. “I’ll take you to someone who can help.”

Exhausted, Billie laid back. Her hip throbbed—the shock easing up and the pain escalating. Even if she did make a run for it, there was no way she’d get far. She glanced at her arm, eyeing the tourniquet still in place.

How had she got to this place in her life? Only a month ago, she’d lived a predictable life—teaching school, attending church, eating dinner with friends, and enjoying the occasional barn raising and quilting bee. Now, she was wearing a disguise, running for her life, and wondering if she’d survive the night.

Her mother had always said her meddling would get her in trouble one day. Well, that day had arrived. Her mother would not be pleased to know she was right. She would be horrified if she saw her now—dirty, smelly, and bloody.

A lump rose to her throat. She wished she could tell her family she was OK. She wished—Who was she fooling? She wasn’t OK. She was alive, but that was about it. She tried to stay in the present and sort out a

mess that made no sense, "How much are you getting for me?" She couldn't meet his eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

"The bounty. How much are you getting for me?"

A nighttime breeze swirled about the rocks and cacti. The sound of a hoot owl echoed throughout the canyon below. Then a chorus of coyotes yelped in the distance. Sounds that once frightened her now gave her comfort—reminding her she was still alive despite Caldwell's desperate plotting and planning.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" he asked.

She turned to face him.

"I'm taking you to someone who can help. Someone to look after your wounds."

"I don't need looking after." She sounded childish even to her own ears. She needed serious help.

Gazing at him through the misty glow of the moon's rays, she noted the slight smile on his face. High cheekbones. Dark eyes. Ink black hair. And lips just wide and full enough to soften an otherwise stony face. Even still, she didn't trust him. Bounty hunters weren't respectable lawmen. They shot people for greedy gain. As far as she could tell, that made him as bad as Clovis Caldwell. Maybe worse.

"I don't want any part of taking in a woman for bounty."

Billie frowned. Was he only saying words to trick her into lowering her guard? "Why not?"

His furrowed brow showed that he didn't want to answer.

She'd seen that same look on the faces of her

students when she asked them a hard question. And her students were probably worried. Unless Caldwell had convinced the entire town that she was a criminal. Then they'd be hurt that the teacher who professed to care about them had betrayed them all. The thought caused sudden heat to rush to her eyes. She reached up, wiping away the tear before it could fall.

"So, why don't you tell me what happened?" he asked, his voice rumbling deep and drawing. "How'd you end up here, running from the law?"

The law? Anger rose within her chest like flaming hot coals. No way she was telling this man anything.

After several seconds of silence, he walked back toward his horse, loosening the bedroll tied to the back of his saddle. "The desert gets cold at night." He tossed the scratchy wool blanket her way. "Might want to bundle up."

She caught the blanket and then opened her mouth to tell him thank you, but he turned his back before she could muster the words.

He walked to the other side of his horse and laid down.

Silence surrounded her, followed by the faint sound of the bounty hunter's slow breathing. How had he fallen to sleep so easy? Murderous men waited only yards away to kill her, and probably him, too. It made no sense that a soul could curl up in a blanket and rest as if tomorrow didn't matter. He had a very hard conscience or a very clear one.

Billie shifted slightly onto her good hip. Soon enough, she'd know if the bounty hunter was

intending to get help. Would he even care if she were healed, wounded, or outright dead?

Silver stars dotted the blackness of the expansive Texas sky, glimmering beneath a full, white moon.

Had God forgotten her? She'd always believed He would never leave her nor forsake her. Yet she felt lost and forsaken. She'd never pictured this as the end of her days. She'd always believed she'd grow old as a teacher with a husband who farmed the land and a passel of grandchildren to warm her lap in her final days.

Now, she was wanted for the murder of an honorable man, accused of stealing miner's gold, and charged with taking another man's horse. Those who knew her would never believe the lies, but others who didn't, would doubt her innocence—especially when someone as powerful and convincing as Clovis Caldwell made his case with Sheriff McGregor standing beside him.

Trembling fingers reached up and touched her neck. She could almost feel the noose. Tears gathered in her eyes, and her throat cinched. With her hopes dashed and her faith in shreds, Billie pulled her elbow up to her face, muffling the cries that escaped between swollen lips.

~*~

Luke braced himself. Even with his knees bent, his spine stiffened. He'd fallen asleep quick enough, but in his business, he never slept hard.