

Candice is running from a husband. Kitty is looking for true love. The ills of saloon life in the late 1800s have trapped them. Young and strong-willed, they set off to tame the West their way.

Bodie or Bust

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Debbie Madison

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Chapter 1

“Are you or ain’t you with me?” Candice whispered, tucking tight her masculine physique and wiping the pelting rain from her view.

Kitty hurried to the open saloon window. Numbing rain slapped her face as her young, deep-green darting eyes peered into the darkness. “Where are we going?” she yelled, tightening her hands over her head as frigid rain stole her warmth.

“I don’t know!” Candice replied. “All I know is I hate this place. Let’s get while we can!”

Kitty’s thin frame disappeared from Candice’s sight. All she could see now was the thick, splintery windowsill.

Kitty’s pale arms strained to lift a heavy valise. Without hesitation she threw it out the open window, her eyes widening as she watched it fall.

“Hurry up... Jump!” Candice hollered in a panicky voice. “We’ve got to get.” Heart pounding, she screamed, “Now!”

Kitty slowed then twisted toward familiar footsteps. A soft knock sounded on her door, then grew louder. “Open up, Kitty. Men are waiting. Open this door now!”

Heart racing, Kitty’s wet body shook as roaring laughter and the pungent smells of male suitors tore through the saloon and her consciousness.

Hurrying, but studying the ground below her first-story window, with a full grin Kitty tucked, legs dangling, and jumped. Her body plummeted as splintery wood tore at her clothes and silk stockings.

“I will find you!” A strong voice shouted from above. “You can’t get away from me... I own you!”

Both young women glanced upwards, then hollered in unison, “Get up!”

A team of horses bolted, sending their wooden buckboard jumping. Both women grabbed at the buckboard's wet, slippery seat.

"What the heck are we doing?" Kitty cried as she shared a fast glance--and then a giggle-- with Candice.

Kitty looked up and screamed, "So what do we do now?"

Candace's eyes fell, as she barked, "Wasn't this your idea?"

A deep scowl formed on Candice's tired face as her left hand kept grabbing underneath their swaying wooden seat. "I borrowed this from the livery," she yelled. "Here-- put it on." Her thick, masculine arms tossed a moth-ridden, heavy wool blanket at Kitty, while her deep blue eyes focused on their surroundings.

Straightening her aching back, Kitty's thoughts raced as nature teased, lifting and sailing her newfound warmth upwards.

"Why did you treat him like that?" Candice barked, catching Kitty's attention.

"Wouldn't you?" Kitty snapped, her voice quivering.

"Never!" Candice yelled, throwing Kitty an uppity look. "Especially as good as I saw him taking care of you."

"Was I wrong?" Kitty's head fell forward. She sighed. "All I ever wanted was true love.

Thoughts growing, her young eyes tightened. She screamed, "I hate it out here! He was just a man." Nature toyed with her swaying body as she mumbled, "Men don't want wives. All they want is our flesh! I hate them all!"

Wind screamed, muffling the slap of the heavy, frigid rain that pulled at the women's comforts. Thunderbolts of light shot across the horizon, briefly exposing their darkened surroundings, ripping across the sky, exposing the muddy path and slowing their horses.

"Where are we going? I can't stand the cold! Let's go back!" Kitty screamed, her dainty head falling, her scantily dressed body shuddering.

Candice's thoughts were on Jack. She knew her husband wouldn't let her go. His comfortable smile and hard hand drove her onward. Head tipping, slowly falling on Kitty's shoulders, she softly yelled to the horses, "Get up!"

Mud flew, grabbing hard, slowing their buckboard. Leaning tight, teeth chattering, both women stilled as their buckboard carried them far away from familiar comforts.

“Is that a light?” Candice’s cried. Hands shaking, she pulled back on the slippery leather reins.

Both women cautiously peered into the distance. When their horses caught a glimpse of the light, the buckboard jerked abruptly to the left. Heart leaping, Kitty’s back straightened as her thick, stubby fingers grabbed at the jumping reins. Lowering her voice without a sign of panic, she calmly hollered, “WHOA!”

“Where the heck did you get these horses from?” Kitty barked, her fingernails digging deep into the soaked wooden seat.

“I borrowed them from the livery,” Candice hollered back, tucking her body for warmth.

“We need to get farther away!” Kitty screamed, slapping wildly at Candice. “Turn them back...towards the road...now!”

The horses picked up speed. Their panicky, high-pitched voices screamed. Rocks flew. The wagon leaped

“I hate y--!” Kitty’s words ended abruptly as mud pelted her fair, delicate skin. Raising an eyebrow, she cried, “This is all your fault!”

“My fault?” Candice shouted as her thick physique repeatedly jumped, slapping hard on the soaked wooden seat as they hurled over the rocky terrain. Voice rising, she screamed, “You think you can do better? Here.” She threw the slippery reins at Kitty, her eyes following the snaking leather.

“I don’t do horses!” Kitty snapped, slapping wildly at Candice. Ducking and leaning, Candice’s growing laughter erupted, echoing off the narrowing canyon walls as Kitty’s waving arms missed their mark. Lights of comfort grew in the distance.

Wood and screaming metal teased their buckboard. Their horses leaped, shooting both women upwards as their buckboard flew over a downed tree.

Kitty’s thin frame twisted, flying up and backwards above her seat.

Candice’s thick, heavy body fell, slamming, curling onto the buckboard’s shaking floor. Head dangling dangerously close to their

horses' thundering back legs, a musty odor gnawed at her senses. Heart racing, she wildly grabbed at the flying reins.

"Whoa!" a deep, heavy voice hollered, drawing both women's attention away from their racing hearts.

A man lifted his weathered face to numbing rain, a sizeable man who cautiously glanced up at his gloomy surroundings while scratching hard at his thinning, wiry beard. Hands shaking, he grabbed wildly at the slippery leather and hollered, "WHOA!" Peering deep into the slowing wagon, he demanded, "What the heck are you two doing out in this weather?"

Their soaked linens exposing their physical attributes, Kitty and Candice lifted their spinning heads as their frigid, shaking bodies inched upwards.

Eyes staring long at young flesh and then glancing guiltily about, the man Josh, quickly led their horses forward into his rickety, leaning barn. An unnatural wide grin filled his face, as did a twinkle in his eyes.

"Who are they?" a high-pitched feminine voice hollered over a fierce wind. Slowing her movements, swaying body tucking, she pushed forward, grabbing wildly at the shaking barn doors.

"I'll take care of the horses!" her husband shouted, his voice deepening. "Get back in the house!"

Kitty moaned, grabbing Josh's attention. Wind screamed, shaking and threatening his barn's very existence, seizing his thoughts.

His callused, weathered hands trembled as he touched the women's creamy flesh, in ungentlemanly ways. His focus didn't falter. Neither woman stirred. His heavy eyes widened as he lifted Kitty's skirt.

"Huh?" Kitty's mind stirred as she felt his weight pressing down. Her stomach turned as she caught a whiff of his rancid breath. Boots still on, Kitty screamed, "No!" In a blur, she wildly slapped at her surroundings. Josh's eyes fell as he pulled and pushed hard on her tiny frame.

"Is it family?" an excited voice hollered. Josh's wife challenged nature, hurrying back to the shaking barn doors.

Silence set his wife's mind racing. Fist rising, pounding on the shaking barn doors, she loudly yelled, "Josh, can you hear me?"

“Don’t come in!” Josh hollered weakly, heart racing, catching his breath. Sweat pooling, dripping, his shaking hands grabbed, Kitty’s thin linen skirt. Thoughts exploding, he hurried as he heard his wife’s voice deepen. Lowering his head, he cautiously opened the heavy, trembling barn doors.

His wife’s short, thick stature didn’t slow her. Soaked, her eyes widened as she excitedly asked, “Is it your family or mine?”

Her husband’s slow response and reddened face set her mind racing. She pushed him aside as she peered inside the buckboard. She calmly said, “It’s not family. They need to get.”

Josh’s back straightened and his eyes widened. “No, no one can survive out there! They can stay until mornin’.” His voice grew louder. “They can stay until this storm passes.”

“No!” Head lowering submissively, his wife cried, “If it ain’t family, they need to get!”

When Josh didn’t respond, she screamed, “So what are you waiting for? Open those doors!”

When Josh hesitated his wife frowned. Calm and lightly in tone she said, “Josh, we have enough to care for. It’s not our business.”

Wind screamed, shaking their barn’s very existence, grabbing their thoughts.

Breath slowing, shoulders dropping, Josh pulled hard at his shaking heavy barn doors. Numbing rain slapped his face. He hesitated. His wife leaned forward, focusing on the closeness of their house.

Kitty slowly rose, closing her spread legs. Tears pooled in her green eyes as she straightened her clothes. A scowl grew on her face. Head wobbling, her back tightened. She barked, “Where the heck am I?”

Josh turned, as did his wife, and with shame in his eyes he slowly replied, “Nevada.”

“Stop...or I’ll shoot.” Gun cocked, Kitty’s tiny hands shook, focusing on the man and woman. Eyes darting, she heard Candice moan. Thoughts growing, she screamed, “Now you get, before I shoot you!”

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Josh scratched his head, focusing on his wife's thick physique, immediately shielding her. He stared, his thoughts confused. Announcing its presence, the wind demanded attention, teasing, growing.... Tucking, he grabbed his wife's heavy waist, sheltering her, moving quickly.

Kitty's body teetered as her knees buckled, sending her downwards. Her hands kept fully extended, the gun still raised and aimed. Candice's head lifted, watching Kitty.

Eyes darting, Candice's stomach turned as she caught a glimpse of the rancher's head disappearing into the darkness. "Is that Jack?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Kitty lowered her quivering arms.

"Give me the gun!" Candice demanded, grabbing at Kitty's hands. "I'll kill him this time."

"Is he alone?" Candice asked. "How the heck did he find us?" Mind racing, adrenaline rushed, awakening every inch of her wet, shuddering, fatigued body.

Chapter 2

“Wake up!” Huddling, curled like kittens, Candice quietly whispered, “We need to get.” Voice softening while stroking Kitty’s thick blond curls, she said, “Kitty...Wake up...we need to ge--. Her words dropped as strong, angry voices sliced through the opening barn doors.

Heart jumping, Candice took in her surroundings.

“No, I’m not that kind of girl,” Kitty softly replied.

“Huh?” Candice’s eyes darted as she grabbed at shadows, feeling for the gun.

Their horses stirred.

“Wake up!” Candice cried. “Jack’s back...and he brought friends.”

“I might...” Kitty said giggling. “Where did you say that spread is?”

“Are you sick?” Candice snapped, rocking Kitty back and forth. “Can’t you hear them? They’re coming! Get up!”

Sunlight pierced the openings of the dilapidated barn. Candice welcomed its warmth.

Her red, untidy hair fell forward, blocking her view as her hands found the gun. Cocking it, she studied her surroundings. Kitty’s slow movements grabbed hard at her thoughts.

“Don’t shoot!” a strong, deep voice shouted. “We’re comin’ in.”

“Kitty, get up!” Candice whispered, her voice deepening. “Jack’s here!”

Kitty raised her arms and her fingers danced in the air. She mumbled, “Why, I declare. Is all that money yours?” Eyes still closed, a smile widened on her face.

“I hate you!” Candice snapped, slapping at Kitty while tossing her thick blonde locks backwards.

Barn doors slowly opened. Light engulfed the barn, grabbing at the women's shadowy surroundings.

Candice's eyes, caught in blinding light, saw glimpses of thick moving physiques.

Their horses' necks jumped, shaking the buckboard. Throwing Kitty a quick glance, Candice's voice deepened. She yelled, "Hang on!"

"Haah, Haah!" The team bolted, jerking the light buckboard as Candice kept slapping the reins. Her gun hand tightened on the shiny metal.

"Whoa! W-H-O-A!" deep strong voices hollered as masculine arms waved at the team.

"Get up!" Candice yelled as the team slowed. "I'll shoot!" she screamed, her voice cracking. "Get out of my way!"

"Grab 'em."

"No!" Candice aimed and squeezed the trigger. The explosion startled the horses.

Bodies flew, dashing for cover. Kitty raised her spinning head and yelled, "Why, thank you, gentlemen. We had a lovely time."

Men still sprawled in the dust were drawn in by Kitty's soft voice and the tease of her golden hair. Kitty threw them a kiss, waving goodbye.

Weaving and crawling into the buckboard's front seat, Kitty calmly said, "Candice, you really have to work on your short temper. Are you trying to get us killed?"

"My temper!" A scowl deepened between Candice's widening light blue eyes.

"That was Jack." Her loud, testy retort lingered.

"See, you're doing it again," Kitty calmly said, nonchalantly dusting off her weathered dress while fussing with her hair.

"I'm dumping you off at the next saloon!" Candice snapped as she urged the team faster.

"Smell that? I'm hungry. Let's go back," Kitty cried, grabbing at the snaking reins.

"Are you crazy?" Candice's head shook. She pulled her arms as far from Kitty's as the reins would let her.

“That wasn’t Jack.” Kitty raised an eyebrow. “That was the rancher and his cowhands.”

“No it wasn’t,” Candice hastily replied. “It was Jack.”

“No it wasn’t. Why... I can smell that hog farmer from a mile away.” She shook her head. “It wasn’t him.”

“You don’t think I know what my husband looks like?” Candice’s voice tightened.

“See, you’re doing it again.” Kitty threw Candice uppity looks, slowly saying, “Did you bring the champagne? My head hurts. I need a drink.”

“That was Jack,” Candice insisted angrily. “And what does a pig farmer smell like?” Expecting an argument, Candice glared at Kitty.

Kitty’s eyes filled, as she softly replied, “Like pigs. That wasn’t Jack.”

“Yes it was.”

“When’s the last time you smelled a pig farmer?”

“When was the last time you saw a pig?”

Thundering hooves silenced their argument.

“Where the heck are we goin’?” Candice asked as her voice softened.

“I don’t know,” Kitty quickly replied, still gloating from her last remark.

“Then why the heck are we headed south?” Candice snapped.

Kitty studied her green surroundings and took in a deep breath, a twinkle growing in her eyes she said, “Matt said to head to California. He promised me, I’ll be rich... overnight!”

“And you believed him?” Candice laughed, shaking her head in disagreement. “You should have married Smitty. He was an honest man.”

“I’m not a farm girl,” Kitty screamed. “I can read and write...he was....” Unable to find words, she settled the matter by saying, “I didn’t love him.”

“Love? What do you know about love?” Candice screamed angrily, noticing her friend’s tears pooling, head falling.

Softening her voice, she gingerly asked, “So... what will make us rich in California?”

Kitty's head inched upwards as she wiped wildly at the tears pooling in her alluring deep green eyes. A glow and smile Candice had missed seeing on her friends face grew. "Everything!" Kitty screamed. "Gold, silver, saloons... and...the best champagne in the entire world... all the way from Paris."

Kitty's excitement lightened the pensive lines on Candice's sagging face. Her tiny voice strengthened. "He promised I wouldn't have to do any more men pleasuring. He...." Her voice calmed as a light in her eyes grew. "He said he would marry me."

"All right," Candice replied, still watching their back. "How far is it to California, then?"

"We have to head south ...and then east...and...." Kitty's young eyes lifted, floating. "I'm not sure after that," she admitted. "But we'll get rich. Throw them reins at me," Kitty demanded...confusing Candice. "I reckon you're tired. You sleep...I'll head us good."

Candice nodded in agreement, dropped the reins, and Kitty took them. "Why is everything out here dusty?" she yelled. "Don't you know how bad dirt tastes?"

A bird appeared from nowhere, crossing her path. "Where are you going?" Kitty softly asked, eyes following it. Its wing caught the edge of their flying buckboard. The bird crashed and fell under her wooden seat.

"We need to get," she whispered, glancing down at the flailing baby bird. "Don't die. I'll take care of you," she promised.

Pockets of sunlight piercing through dense branches of mature pine trees danced across their shadowed path, offering a taste of warmth.

Kitty glanced at Candice.

"Where did you say...we're going?" Candice asked drowsily.

"I told you!" Kitty replied, rubbing her forehead. "California!"

"Is it far?" Candice asked, her heavy eyes drooping.

Kitty didn't answer.

Clouds lifted and sunshine teased... grabbing, drinking in moisture from everything it touched. Musty, lingering odors blanketed their drenched surroundings.

The passing storm had left its mark, uprooting, twisting, and spinning everything it had touched.

Slowing the team and glancing downwards, Kitty's left hand grabbed at the stilled, tiny bird. "I'll name you...I'll name you Lucky." Color slowly returned to her pale face. Nodding, she exclaimed, "Yes...Lucky. That's a good name."

"Oh!" Kitty's eyes jumped as the baby bird began to wobble. "Don't you fret. I'll take care of you."

Delicately scooping it up into her hands while spreading her pleated skirt, she laid the bird alongside of her left thigh, offering it warmth. The chick curled, pressing against Kitty's leg. Carefully folding a piece of her thin silk skirt upwards, blanketing the bird and leaving only its tiny head exposed, she excitedly shouted, "I've always wanted a bird. I love you, Lucky."

Loud explosions of rapid gunfire ripped across the landscape, spooking their team. Bolting, ears perking, blindly running, Kitty hollered, "Hold on Lucky," her hands grabbing at their jumping wagon.

"Candice, wake up!" Kitty screamed. The horses took off at a dead run. Pushing Candice's leaning body away, her small delicate fingers tightening on the reins, she shouted, "I don't do horses! Wake up!"

"Huh?" Candice's neck flew backwards, jolting her senses. "Why are you running the team this fast?" she muttered, her head bobbing. Yawning, wiping sleep from her hollow eyes, Candice shot a fast glance at Kitty. "What the heck are you doing?" Candice's heart jumped as her eyes focused on Kitty's leaning body that was sheltering the flopping baby bird.

Adrenaline flowing, Candice's hands shot at the flying reins. "Are you crazy?" she screamed. "Help me...grab the reins!"

Kitty's didn't budge or offer help. Her swaying body demanded her attention as she focused on the safety of the baby bird.

Gunfire erupted again, this time within throwing distance. Their horses' thick necks jumped, ears pricking, legs slowing.

"What the heck's wrong with you? I knew I oughtn't have brought you." Candice's eyes fell on a small log cabin in the distance.

Adrenaline flowing, her body leaning dangerously low, and her fingers grabbing in all directions, snapping at the slowing reins, she

hollered, “Don’t shoot! Your gunfire frightened our horses. Whoa,” she shouted at the horses.

“Stay inside,” a tall shadow of a man shouted, his shotgun aimed at the fast-approaching buckboard.

“I smell food. STOP!” Kitty popped up. “Give me those reins,” she snapped, almost knocking Candice’s round physique out of the slowing wagon.

“Don’t shoot!” Candice screamed. “My friend is sick. Don’t shoot.”

“I’m not sick,” Kitty shouted, pulling hard at the reins, using all the strength her petite frame could muster. “I’m hungry.” In a screeching high voice she added, “S-T-O-P!” The horses’ ears turned. Following the command, they stopped in their tracks, surprising and shooting both women forward.

“Hold on, Lucky!” Kitty cried.

“Huh?” Candice’s foothold gave way and her arms flew over the front of the buckboard. She landed belly down on the back of the horse directly in front of her.

“What are you doing?” Kitty calmly asked, watching her friend fly forward. “Why...that’s dangerous. That’s not how to stop a horse.”

“I’m going to kill yo--,” Candice’s words fell, her face dropping.

Casually tidying her golden locks, ignoring heavy footsteps and deep voices closing in, Kitty yawned, stretching her pale, thin arms. “Oh,” she softly cried, “I almost forgot about you, Lucky. Are you dead?”

Footsteps rushed to Candice’s sprawled body. “How do you know she’s dead?” an immature male voice asked, poking Candice’s dangling legs.

“How sick was she?” a deep voice asked, stepping closer. “She sure has red hair. I ain’t ever seen a girl with red hair.” Cautiously stretching his left hand out to touch it, his right hand fidgeted above his unbuckled gun.

“Did her sickness make her head red?” The young one asked, thinking out loud. Everyone within hearing distance slowed their pace, a few stepping backwards.

Kitty sighed, staring at her tiny bird's red breast. With a puzzled expression, she quietly replied, "Maybe."

Whispers flew. "Then you need to get on yer way." A double-barreled shotgun focused on them. Cocking the barrel, a short, limping old-timer rapidly approached.

Everyone within his gun's spraying distance scattered. "Them two are real handsome. I wonder where they're goin'. I wonder how much they charge?"

"Hey, Andy," a stout drink of water whispered. "Don't them horses look familiar?"

"Jake," Andy roared, "You ain't seen a woman in so long you called them horses, not whores."

"Huh?" Jake's ey brows lifted as he said, "If them are mares ..." he scratched his head, then his hairy neck, his eyes jumping, purposely working the men, "I'll take this one." He loudly chuckled. His laughter was contagious. The camp's men fell in line, following him, circling the buckboard, staring.

"We have our own problems," the old-timer shouted as a familiar yearning grew in the young men's eyes. Hands shaking, sweat pooled and slowly trickled, falling into deep folds of weathered skin. "These women are sick." Head spinning, his eyes followed the moving men his gun still focused on Kitty. "You heard her. You want to die, red?"

Candice moaned, surprising nervous gun hands.

"Look!" Kitty's back straightened as her cheeks reddened. "Lucky is alive. I didn't kill him."

"I hate you," Candice's yelled, shocking and confusing her captive audience as her spinning head rose.

"Ma'am, can I help you?" Dashing forward, a young gent with thick black hair pushed a few men aside, extending his bulky arms toward her.

"No, let me help. I'll make ya feel right t' home," another gent shouted, slapping clouds of dust off his faded, striped shirt.

"No! Pick me. I'm tellin' you, I'm older; I'm first." Arms rose, swinging wildly in all directions.

Taken aback, Kitty's lips tightened, watching all the men fussing over Candice.

Stretching while slowly standing and dusting off her skirt, sunlight pierced Kitty's layered clothing, exposing her feminine attributes. Heads turned abruptly as men lifted their hats, staring. Voices froze and eyes widened as the men gazed at Kitty's silken golden locks playfully catching the sunlight.

Mesmerized, the men's numbers grew. Using a well-rehearsed line, Kitty daintily said, "We haven't eaten for days. We don't mean to be a bother." Eyes closing, with a dramatic exit, Kitty faked a fall. Her body became limp. Men flew to her rescue, arms grabbing and pushing.

"What do we do?" most mumbled, entranced by Kitty's youthful beauty.

"Feed em'," a stout prospector shouted.

"What fer?" a gruff, raspy voice bellowed. "We need our food. Let's just have our way with 'em and then send 'em on their way."

Smiles appeared on the dingy bunch's faces, some chuckling and most nodding in agreement.

"I take this one." Big Jake's slow deep voice drew attention as he lifted Candice off of the back of the horse like she was a feather. Men's eyes followed, guns hesitant.

"That ain't no horse," Andy shouted, his eyes focusing on Candice. "Put her down. It's a woman."

Big Jake's huge body slowed.

"Put her down!" Andy demanded again, his gun aimed. He was concentrating hard on not shooting the woman. Andy's gun fired, creasing Big Jake's bulging arm. Men leaped for safety.

"You ain't taking my friend," Kitty sprang up, hands pulling a loaded derringer out of a hidden pocket in her skirt. It exploded, adding to a growing ringing noise in her ears.

Blood darkened on Andy's face, his eyes stilling, falling.

"Get away!" Kitty yelled, eyes darting, the gun pointing wildly.

"She's mine!" Big Jake stepped forward. "You all get." The men stepped back, minds racing as a skeleton of a woman challenged them.

“That’s my only friend!” Kitty cried, the gun falling from her shaking hands. “I’m not good at this... I’m just hungry. Oh why don’t men want wives?” she screamed, stomping and losing her composure.

Big Jake’s head turned. “I’ll marry you,” he said, still carrying Candice like a piece of meat over his back.

Jumping out of the wagon, her fancy shoes sticking, and lifting her skirt over the muddy ground, Kitty said, “Okay...but can I eat first?”

Abruptly turning, she ran back to the buckboard and grabbed her gun.

Men erupted in laughter watching Kitty’s unfeminine steps as she chased after Big Jake.

“I bet she kills him,” a shaky voice shouted.

“How much?” Voices exploded and gold dust flew while changing hands.

“What about Andy?” a strong, serious voice demanded. “Are we gonna let a girl get away with that?” Voices settled and the betting slowed as the men resumed scratching and pulling on overgrown facial hair.

“She’s mighty handsome,” an old-timer said. “I’d regret killing something that handsome.”

“I ain’t got money, but the last tomcat that tried to tame me... missed.

“Did you win that bet?” a loud voice asked, laughing quietly.

“What bet?” Amusement rippled through the men, as did the enticements of spring.

“What you got?” a keen-eyed younger miner loudly asked.

“Two mules...but I ain’t bettin’ them both. How do I get my money if I win?”

The men stirred, bets increasing.

“She’s a girl,” a loud voice chuckled.

“I’ll bet ten to one!” Old-timers shared glances.

“What the heck are you bettin’ on?”

Heads raised and eyes locked.

“We thought you were dead!” an unsure, voice replied.

“You were buried,” another miner, added. “I saw it myself.”

“What’s all the ruckus about?” Men’s eyes darted and heads turned.

“Big Jake’s got a girl runnin’ after him.”

“No!” a deep voice shouted. “He’s got *two* girls. One to marry and one to shoot.”

“I change my bet!” an excited voice hollered. “I’m betting on Big Jake.”

“What fer? She ain’t big enough to kill him.”

“But she’s purty enough to.” A man chuckled.

Betting resumed with fervor.

Hips dipping with each slow step, the man studied the crowd. “Where’s my brother?”

Voices froze... eyes cautiously lifted.

Gun unbuckled, right hand twitching, he commanded, “Where’s Andy?”

Men moved, blood flowing to their trigger hands. “We didn’t kill him,” an old-timer shouted. “The whore did.”

“Where is she?” he demanded.

“She’s with Big Jake.”

Heads turned, pointing down the muddy path leading to Big Jake’s fortress.

“Nobody gets away with killin’ my brother.” His face darkened with angry blood. He spat disgustedly into the street saying aloud, “I’ll kill them both.”

“Don’t kill them both. They’s purty whores. Leave us one.”

“You’re buttin’ yer nose into his business,” a crusty voice shouted.

Men around him nodded in agreement, lining both sides of a muddy path following Andy’s brother.

“I saw you go into the tunnel,” someone said. The miners collectively asked, “How did you get out?”

Staring long, trying to keep his thinking unclouded, he pressed forward in total silence. Big Jake was the kind of man you wanted on your side. He wasn’t challenged much, but memories of his last tangle still lingered. The men resisted the warmth of Big Jake’s log cabin, even in the freeze of winter. He was not the sort to be reckoned with.

Mud grabbed at his boots, adding to his limp. “How the heck did you let a whore kill you?” His rounded shoulders lifted, his rage returning. “Pa would be ashamed!”

Leaning wide, balancing his busted body with each step, he slowed. With fluid motions, his hands flashed to his holster.

Miners froze, their minds racing. Eyes dropped, hands fidgeting around their waistbands.

“You think he’ll shoot us first?” they said.

“What fer?” the crusty old-timer barked. “He’s gonna need the shots he’s got left to kill Big Jake.

“Which whore you reckon he’ll kill first?” a betting man asked.

“I hope it’s the short one,” one replied, eyes growing, scratching hard. “I’d give my last year’s diggin’s for that golden one. She’s sure handsome. I ain’t never touched gold hair.”

A slow-speaking man supposed, “You reckon she’s from around here?” Not used to companionship, he agreed with himself, saying, “I bet she came all the way from California.”

“Ya reckon she’ll marry Big Jake? I ain’t ever been to a weddin’. I hear there’s good vittles...and you don’t need to pay in gold dust.”

“I been to my sister’s weddin’.” Eyes slowing and fingers less jumpy, the miners grabbed at the thought.

“Is it true?” Men straightened their backs, ears yearning for more.

“Was she handsome?” Deep lines shot across foreheads, eyes narrowing, caught as they were in thinking.

The young one calmly replied, “Yep.”

Thoughts drifting, the men’s faces eased. Squinting, grabbing at comforting rays, smiles crept upwards as they looked forward to the fight.

Chapter 3

Heart jumping, Kitty screamed, "I'll shoot!" With her shoes sliding, sinking into the mud, her steps slowed. Ears still ringing and gasping for breath, she asked, "You said you would marry me. So where are you taking my friend Candice?"

Big Jake's powerful legs plowed a deep, wide path through the mud, his feet never slowing.

Stopping, breathless, face reddening, Kitty screamed, "Are ya or ain't ya gonna marry me?"

As Big Jake froze, his thick neck twisting, his eyes settling on Kitty's face, the miners' movements also slowed.

Kitty caught Big Jake's eyes. They were cold, granite hard. His massive features and emotionless gape set her mind racing. Years of whoring had taught her how to sum up a man with just a quick glance, but Big Jake's hooded, beady eyes were hard to call.

Stomping in place, flinging mud all the way up to her neck, she demanded, "Big Jake, you just let Candice go!"

In one fluid motion Big Jake heaved Candice off of his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Her body slapped the hard, soggy ground, slowly sinking.

Laughter erupted as the miners cautiously approached.

"Are you the whore that killed my brother?" The miner's eyes darted, trigger fingers itchy.

"Huh?" Kitty slowed, her slender physique twisting. Her eyes widened as she gulped hard. Muscles tightening, she screamed, "I hate it here!" She hoped for a quick distraction. Grabbing for her hidden derringer, she lost her balance, her body flying backwards, splashing bottom first in the mud.

"I'm bettin' on Big Jake," a gruff voice hollered.

“Give her a real gun. She ain’t never gonna kill him with that pea shooter.”

Quiet laughter grew to guffaws as the betting men’s arms flew. Agreeing with quick handshakes, they listened nervously. Nodding, then disagreeing, they changed their bets.

“No girl can kill Big Jake.” The clarity and certainty in the man’s voice rang out, grabbing the other men’s thoughts.

“Get up, whore!” Andy’s brother Robert yelled while grabbing at Kitty’s golden locks, paying no mind to Big Jake’s close proximity.

Slapping wildly at Robert’s hands, Kitty screamed, “I was just hungry! Let me go!”

Big Jake’s thick shoulders straightened, catching the miner’s attention. Betting slowed as voices stilled. He threw a hard look at Robert. “Let go o’ my wife,” he demanded, his voice hard as stones.

Old-timers stepped a few paces back. Younger men in ragged work clothes cautiously crept closer, hands poised next to their loaded gun belts.

Bad luck, which had set in for one of the younger betting fellows, offered a speck of change. “She’s a feisty one,” he shouted. “I’m still bettin’ good about her killin’ him first.”

“No,” an old-timer drawled, eyeing the situation. “I think she’s gonna marry him.”

“What fer?” Somebody yelled back.

“You asking me?” A smile crept onto his weathered face, “Cuz...she’s a girl, o’course.”

His quick response caused the men to scratch their heads, most nodding at the thought.

“You git!” Big Jake’s slow, deep voice assaulted every ear within hearing distance. Eyes darted left, then right, jumping from Robert to Big Jake.

“Those ladies are mine. You git now!” he shouted.

Robert held his ground, his face darkening with rage. “She killed my kin! She can’t git. I don’t have a fight with you. You can have the other one, but this one’s mine.”

Miners scattered as they ducked for cover, their eyes widening, faces tightening.

Candice stirred, moaning. Kitty's eyes fell from the men's faces to Candice.

"I... don'..." words came slow, "like... guns." Big Jake's simple response instilled confidence in Robert. He drew, aiming dead center at Kitty. He figured he had a second or two before Big Jake could reach him, and he had plenty of bullets.

Big Jake sprang like a wildcat, flattening Robert, his gun drawn.

A gunshot exploded.

Big Jake's body rocked as Robert kicked, pushing Big Jake's enormous body away.

Men cautiously rose. "Is he dead?" a crusty old-timer asked.

"He can't be," another one insisted. "That's Big Jake. You could shoot him to ribbons and he'd just walk away."

Men drew closer, their minds awlirl.

Candice's eyes slowly opened. She surveyed her mud-laden clothes. Confused, she cringed at all the approaching lusting eyes. With her voice quivering she asked, "How far is California?"

Kitty heard her and giggled softly, her gun still raised.

Big Jake shook, frightening the women. Men stepped back.

Kitty cocked her gun, watching Robert drop to his right knee.

Robert aimed and shot, the bullet buzzing by Kitty's left shoulder. She fired, hitting him in the chest. He dropped to both knees and fell backwards, his eyes stilling.

Big Jake sat up, caked in layers of gray mud. Blood stained his red plaid shirt, trickling down his left arm.

"He didn't kill him," the betting man announced. "He's still alive!"

What about Andy's brother, Robert?" another old-timer asked, "Did he kill the girl first?"

"Is Andy's brother dead? Who killed who first?"

The miners congregated like bees to honey, swarming amongst themselves, all insisting they'd won their bets. They paid little mind to Big Jake, Kitty, or Candice who were still plopped a few feet apart, layered in mud.

Head spinning, Candice cried, "Who put me in the mud?" as she wiped the sludge off her blouse. Eyes tightening toward Kitty she screamed, "You did this on purpose...didn't you!"

Scooping a handful of wet mud, she threw it at Kitty. She missed, hurling the goo much farther than she had planned.

Both women watched in horror as the muddy wad landed directly on Big Jake's cheek.

"What the heck did you do that for?" Kitty hollered. "He just saved my life."

"Cuz you put me in the mud!" Candice barked. "It's not funny!"

"Funny?" Kitty laughed, hands scooping, taking aim. "I'll show you fun--" Before she could finish her words, wet mud slammed into the side of her head, knocking her forward.

"What the--?" She turned, facing Big Jake, and got a second bombardment, mud hitting her directly in the face.

Candice howled, grabbing the men's attention. Big Jake roared, shouting, "I like my wife."

"I still win that bet!" a man shouted. "He's gonna marry her just like I told ya."

"She ain't gonna marry him," another shouted.

"How come?" an old-timer asked, scratching his four-day-old beard.

"Cuz..." the miner hesitated, then shouted, "cuz she's too purty!"

Miners turned to size up Kitty's beauty. She looked like a mud-laden tree stump. They roared.

"Which one was the blonde one?" a curious voice asked.

"I know it's not that tall one!" someone shouted, chuckling as the men stared at the three live piles of moving wet mud.

"It's time to work," an anxious voice hollered. "Summer ain't gonna last forever."

With the fun over, the men nodded, heading off toward their claims.

"That's the most fun I had all year," a young, slim miner insisted as the men settled into their backbreaking routines.

"I told you women are trouble," another warned. "Did you forget about Andy and his brother?"

"It's them women's fault. When they show up, men die. We need to warn them away."

Talk slowed to mumbling as the men split off in different directions into the nearby hills.

A miner known for his streak of bad luck stayed, eyeing the situation. A grin crept across his greasy, heavy eyebrowed face as he thought about working women and gold, lots of gold. His back straightened.

“Ma’am, may I assist you?” He offered his arm and said, “My name is James.”

Kitty glanced up at him curiously.

“You must be exhausted,” he said. The sympathy in his words caught her attention.

“I am,” she sobbed, looking him over and smiling a little.

“Ladies,” he insisted, “I have a delightful tent, pitched by a spring, and the softest, cleanest bed in camp.” His eyes narrowed. “I would offer you more if I had it.”

Kitty eased her body from the mud. Stepping closer, the man offered his hand and then his handkerchief saying, “It’s a pity you’ve had to be around these sorts. You deserve the finest of everything.”

His words were music to Kitty’s ears. Holding her head up high, she softly said, “It’s refreshing to find a gentleman in these parts.”

Candice’s rounder figure slowed her escape from the wet muck. Breathless she turned to notice the blood on Big Jake’s arm. “You’re hurt.” Determined, she attempted to stand up, her muscles tightening as her legs shook.

Big Jake, still wallowing, laughing, throwing mud, paid no mind to either woman.

“Where you going?” Candice yelled, watching Kitty’s feminine retreat.

Head lifted, chin pointed, Kitty arrogantly called over her shoulder, “To a gentleman’s tent.”

Chapter 4

“He’s a bad sort!” Candice yelled after Kitty and her, “gentleman.” Big Jake caught her words, eyes blinking, his manner changed. “Where you takin’ my wife?” he growled.

Kitty’s steps didn’t slow.

“I hate you!” Candice screamed, her body floundering as she sank deeper into the muck with each attempt to stand.

“You’re funny.” Big Jake clapped.

“Are you stupid?” Candice angrily shouted at Big Jake.

Her words echoed off of the rocky, mountainous terrain, easing the miners’ boredom. A few slowed, turning sharply. Others listened intently, quietly chuckling as the feminine voices teased them.

“I...Big...Jake...! Wife, come back!” In a swift movement Big Jake stood, his eyes wandering toward Candice.

“I ain’t your wife!” Candice spat. “And she’s my friend.”

Big Jake’s eyes locked onto Candice’s face. Slowly he said, “I’m hungry.”

“So am I,” Candice admitted in a softer voice, her eyes watching the huge man.

Big Jake reached down with his bleeding arm and grabbed onto Candice’s wallowing, thickly muddied body.

“You come, we eat,” he said, throwing Candice onto his back like a slab of beef in one quick, effortless movement.

Her heavy build sent his knees shaking, slowing him down.

“Let me go!” Candice screamed, kicking and squirming. “Kitty’s my friend. I need to go with her. Let me go now!”

Then, eyeing his bloody shoulder, her squirming slowed. “You’re bleeding,” she said, her voice softening. “You’re hurt.”

Kitty’s constant chatter caught more than one miner’s ear.

James purposely walked Kitty in circles, gold dust settling deep into his thoughts. He figured he's just found the mother lode.

"How far is your tent?" Kitty stopped, breathless. "These hills and that thick sun are tiring me."

In a sympathetic voice he replied, "If I had a stronger back, dear lady, I would carry you." Glancing about, he sensed the men's hunger, their eyes tracing her every movement. "It's not much farther. A cool bath and a comfortable bed will..." His carnal thoughts caught the best of him.

Kitty's blush was hidden under layers of mud. Teasingly, she said, "Well, I do declare, you haven't been around a lady in some time, now, have you?"

At a loss for words James cleared his throat. "That's my stake," he told her, pointing toward a tent in the distance.

Picking up his pace, Kitty's arm shook as her thin frame swayed while he pulled her along. Abruptly stopping, he announced, "Madam, welcome to my humble tent."

Winded, Kitty murmured, "Thank you." Her head fell, spinning. "I just need a minut..." she said, voice fading. The next moment found her in a dead faint.

"Don't die on me, whore!" James demanded, turning sharply.

Towering trees cast shade twenty or thirty feet across their path. In the thick of the shadows a tan, simple tarp stood out.

Face darkening, eyes hardening, he yanked, then pulled...and with no response, kicked at Kitty's thin physique.

Stepping back he hollered, "Get up, whore." But then his voice eased as he remembered the miners' close proximity. Kitty didn't move.

Knowing he could drag her a short distance, he wondered if she would wake up. Thinking about her screaming and hollering didn't bother him. He knew his laughter would calm the men's sympathetic thoughts and bring in gold...lots of gold.

Glancing down at Kitty, he slowly pulled out a chaw of tobacco. Darkened fingers slid it inside his right cheek. The comforts of shade and the familiar clench of his jaw occupied his thoughts.

“Where’s the whores?” an angry voice, hollered, ricocheting off the steep canyon walls.

Minds stirring, the men’s labors stopped. “I know she killed Andy,” a voice drawled, “but she’s awful handsome.”

Arguments ensued: “Hang her,” a testy voice shouted. “She killed our friends.”

“She’s too handsome to hang!” a miner said as he stared at her stilled body.

“Ain’t we forgettin’ somethin’?” A deep voice heightened as a miner said, “It was a fair fight. You ain’t got no cause to hang her.”

“Yep,” another miner said, “She’s too purty to hang.

A gleam in one miner’s eyes grew. He grinned and said, I reckon she’s the marrying sort.” His hands fidgeted with gold weighing his pockets down.

“You have to pay,” James loudly announced.

“What fer?” miners shouted, their anticipation growing.

“Is she alive?” an anxious man asked.

“How much does it cost if she’s dead?” a crusty old-timer asked, surveying Kitty’s still form.

The men watched as James dragged Kitty toward a nearby stream and then submerged her mud-laden body carefully into the slow-moving water.

The men stared with lust in their eyes as mud disappeared, exposing Kitty’s natural attributes.

“Huh?” Kitty came instantly awake. “Get off of me!” she hissed, her brain still foggy.

Everybody stepped back, their eyes widening. A deep silence set in as leering grins formed on each face.

The cold water teased her, offering instant relief, reminding Kitty of simple pleasures. Goose bumps formed on her skin as shivers shot up and down her bony spine.

With deep... long... sighs...Kitty willingly disrobed.

James’ eyes darted from her to the gaping men, who seemed lost in her beauty. His eyes, too, settled on Kitty’s lovely body.

Refreshed and comfortable and with her eyes half opened, Kitty lightly said, “Thank you.” Then she offered James a tiny smile.

With his heart pounding, his thoughts changed. Slowly he asked, "Ma'am, have you ever been to San Francisco?"

Kitty, filling with anger, screamed, "Turn away! Where are your manners! I thought you were a gentleman."

Holding tight to her exposed breasts, she jumped from the water. "Get away!" she screamed. "You're just like the rest."

Men eased back, keeping their distance.

"I'm not a whore!" she insisted, grabbing her soaked clothes and quickly dressing. With her heart racing, her hands fumbled for her hidden gun. "Back off!"

"You heard the lady. Back off!" James eased the triggers on both barrels of his shotgun. "You can't have her!" he shouted. Lifting the rifle, he challenged any man to touch her.

Kitty enjoyed the protection.

"You men need to get!" he said again. "Take that gold dust with you."

Ugly murmurs grew. Men, heads shaking, stepped away.

His eyes steady on the men, protecting her in a way James never thought possible, he said, "Ma'am, you'll like my soft bed."

Kitty's heart raced. Fatigued, but grateful, she threw a glance and a warm smile at James saying, "I'm grateful for your hospitality and I'd love to marry you."

James studied his surroundings. "Can you cook?" he questioned.

"Kitty placed one hand at her waist and calmly said, "Of course."

James nodded. "I got beans and bacon. Can you cook that?"

"Why..." Kitty's heart leaped as she studied James's fancy clothes and soft hands. "When was the last time you had biscuits?"

James' voice softened as he said, "Back in San Francisco last spring."

"You've been there?" Kitty's eyes suddenly filled with emotion, "Is it as pretty as I've heard?"

James studied her petite figure, nodding. "Rooms have spring beds, and there are more cars than horses on the streets."

"I ain't...I've never seen a car," Kitty corrected her words, eyes swollen with wonder.

Bodie or Bust

“You are the prettiest picture I’ve ever seen. What are you doing way out here?”

“I can’t hold a candle to them city women,” Kitty teased, smiling brightly.

“You’re more beautiful than all of them city folks,” James admitted, blushing.

Their eyes met as he lowered his shotgun. “Can I help you inside?” he offered, and Kitty took his arm.

Chapter 5

With a gleam in her eyes as she daydreamed of big-city comforts, Kitty sighed. “I didn’t mean that thing about marrying you. I’m just hungry and tired.”

James’ voice softened. “I know.”

James was a newcomer in camp. He had settled in last fall. He minded his own business and stayed out of trouble’s way. He trusted no one.

Roads were becoming passable, and after a numbing, backbreaking, fruitless winter he figured that mining was for a different sort. With his supplies almost exhausted, he had planned to move on.

Kitty’s slow step along with her golden locks and whisper of a physique sparked ungentlemanly thoughts. A grin grew on his face and James scooped her up.

“Well!” Kitty, heart racing, staring deep into James’ widening, lustful eyes, calmly said, “I thought you were a gentleman.” Squirring, she barked, “Are you intending to have your way with me? Cuz if you are, then get it over with. I’m tired.”

James slowed, catching Kitty’s radiance. “I can’t protect you here,” he reasoned.

The genuine concern in his voice melted Kitty’s suspicions. Swinging her arms around his neck, she girlishly admitted, “I knew you were the marrying type. Will you take me to San Francisco?”

Mostly James spoke like an educated man, and he wasn’t wearing digging clothes.

James dropped his gaze and simply said, “You need to get out of here. You’re not what I figured.”

“No...No....” Kitty’s embrace tightened, her golden locks falling, covering James’ shoulder. She whispered, “I Love you. Take me with you.”

An angry miner just outside the tent yelled through the tent flap, “We’ve got some talking to do.” He ripped aside the flap and stared at James, his needs showing in his eyes. “We’ll make her feel right t’ home. Now hand her over.”

Face darkening, James gently dropped Kitty behind his back and loudly announced, “I’m gonna marry her.”

“We ain’t seen that sort in a long time,” a voice called out. “You can marry her after we have our turns with her.”

Lifting his shotgun, James dropped to his knees and focused on the growing crowd.

“She’s mine!” he hollered. “Nobody’s touching her! We’re getting married!” he hollered again, his eyes tightening.

“No, I’m marrying her!” Big Jake pushed past the knot of men as though they were flies.

“Oh no!” Kitty cried, watching Big Jake approach. “I didn’t say I would marry him!” she exclaimed.

“Go away!” Big Jake demanded of James. “She’s my wife.”

“Yeah! She’s real trouble,” someone shouted. “I’d bet she’d marry them both if she could.”

“I’ll take that bet.”

“What bet?” a heavy-pocketed miner shouted. “How much?”

Kitty’s back straightened. Face filling with anger and frustration, she barked at Big Jake, “I’m not your wife! And where’s my friend?” she screamed.

“I like her.” Big Jake’s fast response surprised the miners.

“I ain’t seen him move that fast, ever,” a man whispered, cautiously, stepping back.

“Heck,” another man quietly said, “I didn’t even know he could talk.”

“He must be in love.” An old coot laughed. Heads nodded in agreement as the heavy- pocketed miner said, “So who’s gonna win this fight?” Hesitating for a second, he scratched his beard and said, “I’m betting on the big guy.”

“What fer? He ain’t got a gun.”

“Cuz he’s fast, real fast. I saw him take out Andy’s brother.”

“I don’t care!” Kitty angrily hollered, pushing James aside and stepping outside the tent. “You’re stupid,” she screamed! “And where is Candice?” she demanded of Big Jake.

Big Jake leaped, grabbing for her waist. “You’re my wife!”

Kitty dodged left, stepping fast.

Big Jake fell, sliding in the pooling mud.

Grins formed as quiet chuckles exploded into uncontrollable loud laughter.

“I’m bettin on the whore!” someone roared. “She’s a feisty one.”

James cautiously removed himself from the situation. This wasn’t his fight.

“You ain’t gonna catch me!” Kitty hissed, studying Big Jake’s every movement while angrily shouting, “Where’s my friend? What did you do to her?”

Big Jake lunged again and again, mud thickening and sticking with each fall. Kitty’s tiny frame jumped, twisting and dodging his every move. Knowing her small gun couldn’t kill him and tiring fast, she threw a quick glance back toward James. He was nowhere in sight. Rows of miners had her circled and she saw the lust growing in their eyes.

She calmly said to Big Jake, “I’ve got to get out of here. Show me where Candice is and...” she hesitated, catching her breath... “and you can come with us.”

“Big Jake, stay here!” several men shouted at once.

He lunged again, this time catching Kitty’s left arm. In a single swoop he grabbed her, throwing her on his shoulder.

“Put me down!” she demanded, squirming and slapping his brawny shoulders.

“I won that bet,” a miner excitedly hollered. “Pay up.”

“I bet you she would marry him. I didn’t hear any marryin’ words.” Gold dust exchanged hands as voices raised and heads nodded.

“Let ‘im have ‘em both. Them types will just cause us trouble.”

“She’s sure a feisty one,” a stout, dark-bearded miner said out loud, grabbing his pick and shovel. “I’d pay a summer’s diggin’ on that one.”

Most men headed back toward their claims. A few men lingered, grinning, watching Kitty squirm and scream.

“I’m not a piece of meat!” Kitty cried. “Put me down!”

Big Jake’s huge arm had her hogtied. “I’ll shoot you!” she warned, grabbing at the hidden pocket in her skirt. The miners dispersed, and in a winded, tiny voice Kitty asked, “Where are you taking me?”

“I Big Jake...you my wife.” His slow, deep voice demanded attention. Layers of drying mud slowed his movements.

“I hate you!” Kitty screamed. “I’m not your wife.”

“Let her go!” Shotgun aimed and cocked, James sprang from behind a crop of huge boulders.

Kitty’s head spun awkwardly, following Jame’ voice.

“No!” Big Jake’s face reddened, filling with anger. “You git... she’s my wife.”

James wiped sweat from his face as his eyes tightened. “She can’t be your wife. She’s married to me.”

“Huh?” Big Jake abruptly stopped and scratched at his muddy neck. James kept a keen eye on his movements. “Okay,” he simply said, releasing Kitty from his iron grip.

“Wait!” Kitty yelled, grabbing at Big Jake’s clothes, twisting hard and hoping to land legs first.

“Big Jake don’t like you.”

Kitty managed to gain her balance and landed feet first.

“You not nice.” Big Jake’s large hands slapped Kitty’s back, throwing her forward, headfirst in the mud.

“I hate you!” she screamed, sitting up, fist raised, swinging at air.

“Big Jake don’t like guns.” He stared at James, his eyes cold as granite. “Put gun away.”

James took a step backwards saying, “I’ll put this gun down if you walk away.”

Big Jake simply said, “Okay,” continuing on his way.

Their eyes following Big Jake’s steps, both Kitty and James’ movements froze. The musty smell of the gray clay layering Kitty’s

face brought on a fit of sneezing and coughing. James didn't offer a sympathetic eye or word. His face was cold and distant.

Kitty studied James' pensive features. She liked everything she saw. Clearing her voice, with a feminine ring she said, "I didn't know I married you. When did I do that?"

Blushing, turning away, his shotgun falling, James admitted, "When I saw the need in the miner's eyes."

Back straightening, voice filling with excitement, Kitty exclaimed, "Why, I do declare, you are a gentleman."

"I've got your horses fed and ready," James said. "I'll meet you in Bodie."

"Huh? I thought we were going to San Francisco," Kitty balked. "Where the heck is Bodie?"

James' eyes filled with wonder as he said, "It's where gold and silver are plentiful and for the taking."

"You and I will build the grandest saloon California has ever seen," Kitty said, her eyes widening as he basked in the thought.

"But... Wait!" James gently lifted her out of the mud and tenderly said, "It's not safe here. Get while you can."

"I can't." Grabbing onto James' thin arm, she admitted, "I can't."

"What's wrong with you?" James' disposition quickly changed. "Get out of here while you can!"

"No!" Kitty insisted. "Not without Candice."

"Big Jake has her. Forget about her...and get out of here NOW!" James' eyes tightened. "I won't help you again. Get while you can."

"I don't care." Kitty pushed him aside, stepping in Big Jake's plowed path. Her thin legs shook, pulling hard from the sucking mud. James turned and walked away, glancing back time and time again.

Warmth from the sun slowed Kitty's steps. It tightened the mud on her clothes and face.

"I hate it here!" she screamed carelessly, not noticing all the wondering eyes following her every move. "I ain't marrying any man ever!" Stomping through the guck just added to her fury. "Men are pigs!" Raising her voice, she angrily screamed, "Candice...you're right."

A branch snapped, arresting her wandering thoughts. Laboring for breath, she cautiously whispered, "Is that you, James?"

A long silence ensued. Kitty froze, easing her hand into her skirt. "I'll kill you all!" Without hesitation she cocked her gun and fired.

Someone moaned. "I mean it!" she barked, her voice shaking.

"We ain't gonna hurt you," a miner sneered. "We just want your company."

With only one bullet left, Kitty's heart leaped. She fired again, aiming toward the voice. She bolted forward, flying through the mud.

"Get her!" someone shouted. "She's getting away!"

"I'll wing her." A steady arm rose.

"No!" Slapping the gun aside, a crusty, balding miner growled, "You can't shoot her."

"Why not? It'd slow her!" Shaking his head and strongly disagreeing, he bellowed, "Now look what you done! She's gettin' away."

"Open up!" Kitty cried, her fist pounding on Big Jake's door. Grabbing for air, in a puny voice she demanded, "Let me in!"

"Huh?" Big Jake's rocking chair slowed, surprised at the pounding. "Go away!" he said, settling back into his rocking movements. "I'm Big Jake. Go away."

His huge physique slowed as he studied Candice's sprawled, stilled body.

Candice is running from a husband. Kitty is looking for true love. The ills of saloon life in the late 1800s have trapped them. Young and strong-willed, they set off to tame the West their way.

Bodie or Bust

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