

The Redhead at Cottonmouth Run

By

Lynn Forest

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Chapter One

Ray Landon was nearly home. A few more miles, and he would be able to sleep in his own bed for the first time in ten days. It mattered little to him that his home was nothing more than a two-room shack, built onto the back of his office in the town of Copper Springs, Missouri, thirty years before he had taken the job.

Nor did it matter to him that the structure he called home was also occupied by anyone that his deputy had locked up in one of the two jail cells in his absence, and that he frequently went to sleep, separated from the occasional prisoners by one wall. Such was the life of a United States Marshal.

The familiarity of the dusty dirt road could have tempted him to let down his guard in his state of fatigue. After all, he had grown up near Copper Springs, and he had roamed that area as a boy during barefoot adventures with friends.

Those were days of innocence. Before he had left on his assignment to escort the leader of a band of train robbing thieves to trial in a federal court room, he had received reports of bandits in the area who had accosted a couple of travelers along that road. And one thing that could put a halt to a town's growth was to have word get around that it wasn't safe to travel there. He was dedicated to Copper Springs and the surrounding territory, where he worked hard to keep law and order. He had traveled some in the past when he couldn't avoid it, but he really had no desire to be anywhere else than that part of Missouri.

To add to his weariness, was the fact that there had been little sleep in the past three days. Passing through a nearby town, and stopping to pay a courtesy call to the town sheriff, he had arrived just as a search party was being assembled to hunt for the man suspected of breaking into the home of a beloved Civil War veteran and killing him, while searching the house for money and gold. Ray was under no legal obligation to help, but he wanted to do what he hoped peace officers would do if the situation was reversed.

It took two hard days of searching through the hilly countryside, but the man was finally found, with the assistance of the young lawman. A shootout broke out, and the hunted man was killed. Ray declined the offer to spend the night with the grateful sheriff and his family, instead, sleeping for a couple of hours along the way, next to a campfire with his Colt revolver in his hand at his side.

He woke up stiff and sore, although at age thirty, he was one of the youngest United States Marshals, having spent just three years as a deputy before his mentor retired. Of course, when he took the job, he knew that it was not an occupation characterized by comfort and safety. As he stood up and stretched, he reminded himself that he was still, at least, strong, tall and healthy, his hair still coal black, giving him hope that he would live to be as old as his father, who had succumbed to a fever at the age of fifty-five.

He pulled some biscuits and dried beef from his saddlebag, then mounted his horse and looked out over the rolling countryside. Hoping that more rest was at hand, he gave the reins to his horse a flick and began the final stretch of his ride home. Off in the distance, he could see the narrow blue ribbon of Cottonmouth Run, a stream whose name was a warning and avoided by the local residents, in spite of the large brown trout that shared the water with those more dangerous inhabitants. As much as he liked to swim and fish in his youth, he never questioned his parents' warnings to stay out of that particular body of water. They often spoke of a young cousin of his in Arkansas, who had died as the result of a venomous snake bite, and the young Ray sometimes had nightmares of being in a river and being chased out by a snake.

He came to a bend in the stream, exercising caution because a thick stand of trees at that point along the water shielded the nearby bank from view, providing a good place for an ambush. But when he went around the concealing trees, he brought his horse to a halt, for there was a Conestoga wagon pulled up next to the bank, a pair of horses tethered to a small tree.

Ray began to ride faster, assuming that a traveler had stopped there, who was most likely unaware of the dangers of simply being at the edge of the creek, let alone in the water. As he approached, he could see no one, at first, and the wagon was blocking a portion of his view. That was when he dismounted and tied his horse to one of the wagon wheels and walked around it.

He stopped, in stunned amazement, at the scene that greeted him. Out in the middle of the stream stood a young woman, flowing red hair floating around her shoulders and neck as she slowly turned back and forth in the cool, clear water. Slowly, she turned further toward the bank and saw Ray, then she screamed and went under the surface. When her head appeared above the water again, she was holding her arms across her chest. She was also holding a small rock so that he could see it.

She extended her arm and pointed a finger at him, "Whoever you are, please go away now. I need some privacy."

Ray put his hands up, then pointed to the pile of clothing a few feet from him. "Miss, I'm a United States Marshal. Now I'm going to turn my back while you get out of that stream and get your clothes back on."

She continued to hold the rock above the surface of the water, then nervously replied, "I-I see your badge, but you could've taken that from a real marshal you may have killed. Now just go away, and leave me alone."

Ray was feeling a sense of amusement, along with the curiosity brought on by finding such a pretty young woman in such circumstances. "Miss, I need for you to understand. You need to get out, right now. And why are you holding that rock?"

She began to grin at him. "So I can throw it at you, if you don't go away like I have so politely asked."

Ray rubbed his chin for a moment. "Miss, how do you feel about poisonous snakes?"

Her eyes widened, and then her expression returned to one of impatience, "I'm scared of them, of course, as would anyone be."

Ray could not prevent himself from laughing, "Then why are you skinny-dipping in a stream called Cottonmouth Run? Do I need to tell you that it's named that for a reason? Now please, Miss, I'll turn around, and you come on out."

The young woman took a deep breath, and then shook her head. "First of all, I'm not skinny-dipping. I am bathing, something that a lady likes to do in private. And for that matter, I can decide for myself about my own safety. Now just run along, Marshal, if that's who you really are. I will be fine, and I certainly don't need your help, although, I'm certain that you would like nothing more than to watch me come out of the water."

He moaned to himself. "And just what are you doing on this road by yourself?"

She looked at him with a look of impatience, "I am on my way to Copper Springs. Do you know Dr. Ryan?"

He nodded and smiled. "I know him quite well."

"Well, I'm his new nurse. So please, run along, and leave me alone."

Ray began to rub his chin, trying to decide what to do next. "Miss, I need for you to understand. A couple of people have died, after being bitten by cottonmouths in there, before anyone could get them to the doctor. You need to get out, right now."

A smile came across her face that Ray found both bewitching and irritating, "Please, Marshal. I just don't believe that you are really going to keep your back turned if I walk out. I think you're just trying to trick me. I haven't seen any snakes."

Ray exhaled a deep breath, his amusement exchanged for frustration and a building anger. He tossed his hat aside, unbuckled his gun belt and laid it on the ground, and sat down and began to pull off his boots.

Suddenly, the young woman was, once again, yelling at him, this time in a high-pitched voice, "What are you doing...I want you to leave...right now."

Ray stood up and placed his hands on his hips. "There are cottonmouths everywhere in that creek. Now, I'm going to come in there and get you to safety, hopefully, before either one of us is treated to a pair of fangs and a large dose of venom."

Suddenly, she was holding the rock higher in the air, a daring smile still on her face, "I told you...I want you to leave, and I can take care of myself."

The exasperated lawman took a step toward the water, and there was suddenly a rock flying toward him, and the dirt a few feet from his right foot flew upward. Ray stood for a moment, in shock that the young woman had actually thrown it in his direction. He placed his hands on his hips and gestured with his head toward where the rock had landed. He could not help but allow a smile on his face. "Miss, that wasn't even close."

She called back to him, "I was just trying to warn you. Please, go away." She dove beneath the surface, and when she came back up, she was holding another rock. A mischievous grin spread across her face. "The next time, I may be really aiming for you."

Any hint of humor had suddenly left him. Even from twenty feet away, the young redhead could see his clenched teeth as he took another step into the stream. Then there was another rock coming his way that whizzed three feet past his left leg and thudded against the trunk of a fallen tree five feet behind him. Then he heard her giggling, and he was furious. He watched in frustration, as she once again went beneath the surface and came back up with yet another rock that she held proudly over her head.

She put her hand to her mouth and called out to him once again. "Closer that time, wasn't it? Time to leave now."

Ray took yet another step, and she laughed as she threw the third rock. This time, however, Ray ducked, but not enough that it did not graze his scalp. He put his hand to his head,

and when he brought it back down there was blood on his fingertips. He looked at the young woman with an angry scowl, only to see that she had her fingertips over her mouth, shaking her head back and forth. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Marshal, I didn't mean to actually hit you. I was just trying to scare you away, sorry...sorry...sorry...so sorry."

The water was not much over four feet deep, which worked out well for the petite young woman whose shoulders were barely visible. But the water was clear, and as the infuriated Ray approached, she began to scream as she leaned forward slightly, holding one arm across her breasts and her other hand just below her waist. As she found herself suddenly looking up at the tall young marshal, she realized that there was no place for her to go, and she began to scream hopelessly.

Her screaming intensified as she found herself being effortlessly and embarrassingly lifted from the water and tossed over the strong man's shoulder. It did not take very many steps before Ray and the dripping, naked young woman were back up on the bank, where she remained over his shoulder while she swore at him and pounded him on the back in anger and humiliation.

He stopped at the edge of the bank, his back to the water so that she could see where she had entered the stream. "Now, do you see any place where the grass is worn down from people getting in and out of the stream? No, you do not, because the water is full of dangerous snakes."

She continued to scream, but Ray held her tightly in place. "Let me down and leave this minute. I think you just made that up about the cottonmouths, because I think you just wanted to see me naked. So now you've had your fun, and I want you to put me down and let me go."

"Oh, no, not just like that. You just assaulted a United States Marshal. In fact, you tried it three times. That's a pretty serious matter." As his words sank in, she went silent, but she could not see the sly smile on Ray's face. They both remained silent for a moment, the frightened and embarrassed young woman, still staring down at the ground and the long, red, wavy hair hanging down.

Ray made a decision. Suddenly, he began to walk slowly, and while keeping a tight grip on her wrist, he sat down on the fallen tree trunk, stood her up for a moment as she scrambled to cover herself with her hands and arms and then, unceremoniously, pulled her across his knees. Her immediate reaction was to scream, protest and kick, but Ray was holding her tightly with his

left hand around her waist, and his right hand resting menacingly against the center of her bare bottom. Finally, her screams were replaced by a shout of... "You wouldn't dare."

Exasperated and out of patience, Ray spoke slowly in a deep voice, the tone of which gave her chills not due to being naked and wet, "You have a choice of this..." His hand slammed down on the center of her bottom with a fiery smack... "Or you can go to jail for assaulting a peace officer and two extra charges of attempting to assault a peace officer."

He could hear her hissing as she seethed in anger, her fist pounding the ground a few inches from her face, as she was considering how well she would be able to tolerate many more of what she had just received. The warm sting across her bottom made the choice of jail or having the spanking go forth a difficult decision. Finally, she hissed loudly once more and pressed her clenched fists against her temples. "Okay...okay...go ahead, you bully bastard."

She squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her teeth, trying to ignore the pesky and confusing fluttering quivers of anticipation inside her midsection. A moment later, she found her breath taken away when his large hand landed with a loud *wham*. She squealed in a high-pitched voice... "Damn it..." Then...*Wham...wham...wham...*it continued.

She looked back at him, with a glare in her eyes that were filling with tears. "That's enough, you son-of-a-bitch."

The large, calloused hand landed several more times, and now each time there was a resulting squeal. *Wham...* "Don't think you're going to make me cry." The hand continued to rain smacks down on her bottom.

Finally, there were loud sobs, and tears were running freely down the freckled face, when, suddenly, the nearby horses, in unison, began to rear up and whinny loudly. In an instant, there were two loud blasts, and five feet away, two large cottonmouth snakes flew backward as the sobbing young woman slid backward off his lap to find herself kneeling on the ground. Her ears were ringing from the blasts of the gun, and tears were still running down her cheeks. Her mouth was hanging open in shock, as she watched Ray calmly slide his gun back in his holster then look at her with a steely gaze.

As she remained kneeling, she realized that she was trembling, probably from several factors. She, at first, didn't hear that he was speaking to her, "Ray Landon." He leaned closer to her face and continued, "Genuine United States Marshal and slayer of serpents, at your service."

She took several deep breaths to try to get herself under control. "Uh...I'm...Helen Briscoe." She turned her head slowly to look at the slain snakes, wiping tears from her face as she looked slowly back toward Ray, then back at the snakes once again. She, otherwise, remained silent for a moment, then rested her forearms on Ray's knee and lowered her forehead upon it for a moment. Seconds later, she raised her head, blew out a deep breath, and then placed her hands on his right leg to steady herself.

Ray's simple and silent response was to merely point to his right knee. She pushed herself slightly up, and as she shook her head, she slowly placed herself, once again, across his knees. As she lowered herself back into position, she quietly muttered... "I know...I know."

Before he was able to smack her, she turned her head back toward him. "I want you to know...I wasn't trying to kill you. I was aiming for your legs. I was just trying to make it hurt a lot."

The steely gaze he fixed upon her made her quiver once again. "That's quite a coincidence, Miss Briscoe. Because I'm not trying to kill you, either. But I am trying to make this hurt a lot."

When she heard the handsome young marshal chuckling, she didn't know if she should consider it to be endearing or crass and infuriating. In any case, to her own surprise, she felt nothing but acceptance when she felt the fiery sting of his open hand again.

The spanking resumed, but with not nearly as much force used, as had been the case previously. But as she lay nude across his knees, she was thinking back to how she had reacted to his attempt to coax her to safety, let alone trying to hurt him with the rocks. And as his hand slowly and deliberately returned to her upturned bare bottom with rhythmic, stinging smacks, she simply closed her eyes and allowed the tears to flow freely, accompanied by very little verbal response.

She had been on the receiving end of several dozen more sizzling smacks since the spanking had been interrupted. And when it had ended, and she felt herself being helped to stand up, she was grateful for the way that Ray had turned his head away so that she could scamper to where her clothing awaited her. At the same time, Ray could not help but steal a quick glance at her dark red bottom cheeks as she trotted away, wiping her eyes.