

~ My Midnight Muses: The Double Dog Dare ~

by Red Hope

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Copyright: I own some of these characters and others are real but long gone.

Subtext: Oh yes.

Violence: Yes, there's finally some gun-slinging.

Summary: The Bass Wars continue and Ranger Baylor's lucky wild card may just pay off as the Sam Bass Gang goes on the run. The rangers follow behind the outlaws into southern Texas to the town of Round Rock where the gang plans to rob a bank. Will Jim Murphy tip off the rangers in time?

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Chapter 1

"Com'on," Arkansas Johnson bellowed.

Seaborn Barnes had dark brown eyes that were drilling into his comrade. "Shut up."

"Chicken shit," Arkansas further tormented, and he spun his revolver in his right hand. He then turned on his boot heels and centered his attention on the compact cowgirl, who sat on a rock outside a cavern mouth. "How about yew, Triple L?"

Landen had her head down; her cowboy hat's brim covered her face. In her right hand she had a lit cigarette. "I pass, Arkansas." In her lap sat her rifle and her new bullet belt was quite shiny.

Arkansas grumbled and turned back to the small fenced in chickens that were racing around in the pen. "If I get two in one shot?" He glanced at Seaborn.

Seaborn toyed with his mustache then he tilted his head back so he could see beyond his brim. "Three."

Arkansas's eyes slotted. "Two."

"Three, yew chicken shit."

Arkansas suddenly smirked. "Alright." He spun his gun then carefully took aim with his gun. He lined his sights up and waited for the perfect second to shoot. He knew he'd have to wait until three chickens lined up for him to get all three. He bit the inside of his lower lip however his trigger finger was unsteady. His shot echoed.

Landen lifted her head just as she removed her cigarette from her lips. She smoke went past her face then she focused on the one dead chicken in the pen. She grunted.

Arkansas cursed, yet he heard Landen's laugh from behind him. "Yew can do better?"

The cowgirl took her last draw from her cigarette. "Nope." She flicked the cigarette away, stretched out her legs, and merely grinned up at the two outlaws.

Seaborn put his hands on his hips, and he partially turned to the southerner. "Com'on, Landen ain't yew gonna prove yew speed ta us?"

Landen sniffed and shrugged. "Nope."

"I dare yew," Arkansas challenged. He really wanted to see the cowgirl in action after all the rumors.

"Nope," the southerner remarked back.

Seaborn took a step closer, and he tapped his left boot against the sole of the cowgirl's. "I bet yew a gold piece that yew can't shoot four at once."

Landen tilted her head back until her sparkling eyes met the outlaw's. "Nope."

Seaborn's eyes slotted but slowly a grin caressed his lips. "I double dog dare yew, Landen Morrison."

The cowgirl lowered her head until her face was hidden. Very slowly, she stood up and after a spin of her rifle she slammed it into Arkansas's chest. "Hold that."

Seaborn chuckled because he knew the southerner couldn't refuse a double dog dare since it was a stake of honor for southerners. He knew if he really wanted to call her out he'd used a triple dog dare however that was much more risky business in comparison to a double. "One gun," he reminded.

Landen slipped between the outlaws, and she tilted her head at the pen of about fifteen chickens minus the currently dead one. She knew the gang would eat all the dead ones tonight anyway so it wasn't a waste. She listened to the chickens clucking amongst each other, and she watched their movements.

"Com'on, Triple L," Arkansas taunted in a husky tone.

The southerner ignored him. Unexpectedly Landen mimicked the clucking of the chickens.

The chickens all stopped then gathered to the point closest to Landen. Then they all scattered at once when there was a loud bang but four chickens didn't move from the wire fence.

Landen lowered her gun; the last bit of smoke lingering from her Peacemaker's barrel. She turned back to the men and removed her rifle from the stunned Arkansas.

Seaborn blinked out of his reverie. He hadn't even seen Landen go for her gun. He hastily fished around in his pant pocket and then placed the gold coin into the female outlaw's waiting hand.

The cool southerner took the coin and walked between the men back to her rock. She commented, "Clean up the chickens for dinner."

"Damn," Arkansas muttered. He decided to follow Landen's order even though she wasn't the boss. His respect was higher now. He took a step, but he stopped when he heard something.

Landen stood in front of the rock she'd been sitting on earlier. She stopped too then slowly turned around and her eyes tried to pinpoint what she was hearing.

Seaborn took a step forward next to his comrade.

Arkansas was confused but mentioned, "It must be Sam."

Landen came up beside the men, but she had slotted eyes. Then she heard that familiar sound again; it was gunshots. "Shit. Arkansas, get in the cave and tell the boys we got company." She spun her rifle by its lever trigger guard. "Hurry."

Arkansas removed his revolver from his gun belt and turned.

Seaborn joined Landen's side. He then quietly mentioned, "Glad ta have yew here, Landen."

"Shoot now, talk later," Landen clipped, and she took off at a run.

Seaborn's head bobbed while a grin creased his lips. "My kinda gal." He pulled out his gun then followed behind the other outlaw.

Landen sprinted ahead with her rifle diagonal to her body. She called back, "They coming from Hackberry Grove. I'm gonna take uh tree." Just ahead there were only a handful of trees meshed together in the very barren lands. She heard them getting closer so she hastily hauled up into the tree with her rifle. She was quite effective at tree climbing with her rifle since she'd been doing it for so long.

Seaborn decided to move several yards away so he wouldn't call attention to the cowgirl. He cocked his gun and aimed at the galloping horses and riders.

Landen hefted her rifle and lined up her view on the chased and chasers. Her trigger finger steadied on the rifle. Now she waited for her targets to come closer.

"Hurry up," Arkansas barked, who was racing out of the cave and decided it was best to ready the horses in the corral. Three other gang members flowed out of the cave after him; their guns shining in the late sunlight.

Landen Morrison bent her knees a bit more. Her body was slightly rotating to the right as she followed the approaching chase. She closed her left eye and lined her sights up

on the leading Texas Ranger. She didn't recognize the ranger, but she didn't care either. Her finger went back on the trigger.

Sam Bass twisted in his saddle and threw his left arm back at the rangers. He took a shot. His aim wasn't true at all, yet he laughed when Captain Lee Hall took a bullet in the shoulder.

The captain painfully hollered, but he was a persistent man and didn't fall off his horse. Instead he cocked his gun and aimed at the leader of the gang.

Raleigh Baylor was just behind the captain, and she knew Sam Bass hadn't struck the captain. She first had to shake her dark hair out of her face since she no longer had her hat. Then she stole a glance around her surroundings, and a flash of sun against steel caught her eye. She realized there was a gang member up in a tree who was trying to pick them off. She knew exactly who it had to be so she veered away from her group.

Landen lowered her rifle when she saw Ranger Baylor break away from the chase. She realized the ranger was headed directly for her, and she didn't much like it. She lifted her rifle at the ranger and hastily pumped the lever for her next bullet.

Raleigh stretched out her right arm, her black Colt slowly steadied.

The cowgirl murmured unknown words then she held her breath as her trigger finger drew back.

Classic Touch whined loudly when a bullet nearly struck her left front hoof but it bounced off the ground. She huffed and tried to steady her ride for her master.

Raleigh pulled back on her trigger after she felt confident.

Landen already knew what was about to happen. She yelled and suddenly leapt up from her spot on the thick tree branch. Her rifle left her hands and went tumbling to the ground below. She flew several feet up into the air until her hands wrapped around the thick tree branch above her head. She dangled in midair.

There was a loud ping when Raleigh's bullet bit away a thick piece of bark from the tree branch Landen had originally occupied.

"Woo," Ranger Baylor called and when Classic Touch stopped a few yards from the tree she lifted her revolver up at the dangling outlaw. She cocked her hammer.

Landen's eyes narrowed then her right hand left the tree branch and shot down to her right Colt.

The ranger pulled back on her trigger but then suddenly her gun flew from her hands. She shockingly stared at her revolver that skittered across the dusty ground and stopped. She then went for her rifle from her mare's side.

Landen fell to the below tree branch while her quick left hand ripped out her other Colt. She pulled back both hammers when her boots met the branch. "Don't," she hotly ordered.

Raleigh had her left hand on the buttstock of her rifle, but she made no further movements. "Alright." She straightened up with her hands up. "What yew gonna do?"

The cowgirl's chest rose and fell quickly and her eyes were dark enough to match the tree leaves. "Ya stay right there."

The ranger swallowed, and she secretly tensed her leg muscles. Suddenly she gave a piercing cry and bolted into the air from her saddle.

The outlaw's eyes widened in amazement as the tall ranger flew through the air. When she came around and tried to take aim at the somersaulting ranger it was far too late.

Raleigh landed on the branch next to her opponent, and she gave a swift kick at Landen's hands. In satisfaction, she watched the silver Colts go airborne and land far away. She lifted her hands and laughed while she swayed up and down on the branch.

The cowgirl bent her knees and raised her hands up too. "Now where did ya learn that fine trick?"

"Let me show yew another," the ranger hissed and lunged for the small outlaw.

Landen hastily ducked when a punch came at her face. She then sprung up and gave a high kick towards Raleigh's chest.

The ranger's nimble hands caught the boot by the top and heel. She held tightly and smirked at the smaller woman.

Landen growled when she saw Raleigh's next pending move.

Raleigh swiftly tried to twist the cowgirl's leg.

Landen yelped and yet her instincts followed the motion as she spun in midair, brought her left foot around, struck the ranger in the face, and she went airborne and fell. She couldn't control her decent and landed harshly on her back in a cloud of dust.

Raleigh was hunched over, eyes closed, and shoving the pain down. She opened her eyes and below she saw the groaning cowgirl trying to get up.

Landen slowly made it to her feet, but she tensed when Raleigh landed beside her. She saw Raleigh had a bloody nose now and was none too happy about it. She grew smug and taunted, "Ya don't know when tuh quit."

"Neither do yew." Raleigh reached behind and removed her bowie knife.

Landen's features darkened, and she mentally prepared to take on the stronger woman. She stepped back once, her boots scraping over the gritty dirt.

Raleigh advanced as she raised the knife. "Yew give up now and this'll stop."

"I ain't gonna," the cowgirl whispered.

"Why yew doing this?" the ranger urged, who was delaying fate. "I know yew wrote that note."

Landen stepped back once again. "Ya deluded ranger."

"Big word for an outlaw," Raleigh taunted and advanced another step closer.

The cowgirl sneered then shot back, "Even bigger for yer small mind." She expected the ranger to come at her, and she was rewarded by it. She suddenly ducked in time, spun away, and her lightening hands swept up her rifle from behind. She lifted her horizontal rifle up and put it behind her back just when the blade came at her back.

Raleigh grew excited at the challenge. She drew back her hand with her knife and gave another powerful kick.

Landen squatted down as the kick breezed her head. She spun around to face her opponent. She raised her rifle up diagonal when another kick came at her face. She affectively blocked the attack then she went on offense by swinging her buttstock at the ranger.

Raleigh jumped back when the end of the buttstock grazed her chest. She jumped forward and swept her knife at the outlaw.

Landen lifted her rifle, holding it at either end, and she stopped the blade with the barrel. She gave a hasty jerk and took the bowie knife out of Raleigh's hand. Her victory was short lived because her Winchester was kicked sky high out of her hands and landed fifty feet away or so.

Raleigh knew that Landen most likely still had her knife, and she was prepared for it. She surged the outlaw and rammed her arm across Landen's chest then pressed her hard.

Landen couldn't stop the stronger woman. She was slammed against the trunk of the tree behind her. The back of her head snapped against the tree's trunk and a low groan left her. Her left hand moved quickly to her belt.

The ranger was faster. She took Landen's wrists effectively into her right hand. She pinned the small woman's wrists against the tree and held her completely so she wouldn't go for the bowie knife again. "Yew betrayed me, Landen."

Landen's fiery green eyes met the ranger's. "I never lied tuh ya."

"Thuh Hell yew did," Raleigh hotly argued.

"What?" the cowgirl snapped. She shoved against the stronger woman then growled, "It never worked, Raleigh... ya are deluded if ya think it would have." Her body pulsed with her anger. "What'd ya expect huh?"

Raleigh eyes leveled with the cowgirl when she lowered her head closer. She murmured, "Somethin' a little more than a fuck." When Landen closed her eyes and

turned her head away, she furthered it by adding, "Seein' as that's all yew are capable of then there ain't much else ta discuss here." She then lifted her head when she heard the familiar sound of a gun cocking off to her right. "They don't care about yew, remember that," she uttered then released the cowgirl.

Landen lowered her arms after being released, and she gratefully peered up at Arkansas on the horse.

"Nice ta see yew, Ranger Baylor." Arkansas kept his gun aimed at the ranger. "Hurry up, Triple L."

Landen was frozen and her cold stare centered on the tense ranger. She suddenly lunged for the ranger in a rage.

Raleigh took the blow when the fist met her left cheek. She slightly bent forward then stepped back so she could contain her anger. She met Landen's gaze and read the pure ferocity flowing off the cowgirl.

The southern cowgirl kept her hands fisted at her side and remained rooted.

"Landen," Arkansas hotly called, "we gotta go!"

The female outlaw snapped out of it, and she hastily collected her weapons then she went to Arkansas.

The outlaw waited until Landen was in the saddle behind him then he urged his horse into a gallop.

Ranger Baylor touched her cheek as she watched the two outlaws take off at an incredible speed. She stepped near her mare, spit out a mouthful of blood, and took her horse's reins.

Classic Touch twisted her head and huffed at her master.

"What?" Raleigh asked.

The horse sighed then shook her head and lowered it.

"Now don't be actin' like that," Raleigh told the horse, and she went to collect her weapons too. When she mounted her horse, she spotted her comrades coming to a stop when the gang took their escape. She ordered her Tennessee Walked into a canter, and she joined her group.

Sam Bass led the gang away while he yelled out, "Hell boys, they've hit me at last! Let's get out of here." He and his gang were gone at a gallop. He'd merely been struck at his cartilage belt without injury.

Landen had jumped onto Stargazer, who'd been readied for her by one of the outlaws. She took the back end of the group, her rifle in her left hand, and she pumped the levered once by spinning it. She glanced over her shoulder and stared at the still rangers on horseback.

Arkansas rode beside her, and he shot his gun straight up in the air while giving a cry. He shot his gun again.

"Ain't we goin' after 'em?" George Herold hotly yelled at the injured captain.

"Shut up, George," Raleigh snapped. "We need ta get thuh captain back ta a doctor."

The captain was slightly hunched over his saddlehorn, but he kept his dignity. "Murphy ain't got much longer." Lee inhaled sharply then tugged on his horse's left rein. "Let's get back ta Mesquite." He straightened out his shoulders and ignored the pain in his one.

Chapter 2

"Goddamn it," Seaborn growled, and he flopped onto a log. He ripped off his hat and threw it at his feet. He went silent like the rest of the gang except for the campfire's crackle.

Landen sat on the other end of the log. She was hunched over and her face down and covered by her hands.

Sam Bass stood beside the fire, and he kicked dirt into it.

"What now?" Jim Murphy asked the boss.

The leader walked away from his gang and considered the next move. "We keep going," he decided.

"Arkansas was just killed!" Sam Pipes reminded who was the most shaken by this afternoon's events.

The gang had been in a small town and they were doing their usual thing at the saloon. The liquor flowed heavily, the cards on the table, and the cloud of cigarette smoke hung above their heads. They took on a healthy tab with the barkeeper and after they paid him they all stumbled out into the late afternoon street. It seemed their reputation had caught up to them in the northern towns in Texas since it was now late June. Several townspeople had recognized them when they first came to town and a posse secretly formed then confronted the gang just outside the saloon.

The town echoed with gunshots between the posse and the Sam Bass Gang. Arkansas was killed in the process; a bullet to his stomach and afterwards Henry Underwood ran off without looking back at the gang. The only reason the gang made it out was because of Sam Bass's swift thinking for escape and Landen's backup on the rear with her sharp shooting. The gang had now slimmed down to Sam Bass, Seaborn Barnes, Landen Morrison, Sam Pipes, and amazingly Jim Murphy still tagged behind them. The rest of the gang had either bowed out with their money or just silently disappeared one night.

Sam Bass stood on the edge of the camp; his back to his gang. "We'll go to Round Rock."

"What tuh Hell is there?" Jim questioned.

"It's more southern," Seaborn agreed. "Maybe nobody there will recognize us."

The boss nodded then turned around to face his men. "There's a bank I wanna hit there."

Landen Morrison lifted her head and lowered her bloody hands to her lap. She still hadn't cleaned them when she tried to save Arkansas's life but it'd been a futile attempt on her part. "Banks now?"

Sam Bass folded his arms across his chest; he met nobody's gaze. "We'll check it out first then hit it."

Jim Murphy was shaking his head but kept his silence.

Landen Morrison climbed to her feet after picking up her rifle from the ground. She walked away to her horse just outside the campfire's light.

It was late Sunday night on July 14, 1878 when the thinned Sam Bass Gang road into Round Rock and they first took a hotel room after one night of camping just outside of town. It wasn't until Monday morning that they got up and went deeper into town but the men decided first to get a shave at the local barber's. Landen stood outside the barber's shop and waited for the gang. She used the time to smoke a cigarette and merely watched the traffic in the street. She replayed the earlier debate between her fellow gang members. Sam Bass and Seaborn wanted to steal local horses and rob the bank then ride out of town. Landen was none too surprised when Jim Murphy argued and said if they stole the horses that it'd only raise suspicions in the town. Landen actually agreed.

Sam Bass finally planned that they would case the bank this week then on Saturday they would rob it. That plan allowed their horses to have several days of rest after all the hard riding. Landen liked it because it gave her time to clean her clothes along with getting a bath in too. She planned to do that this evening in the hotel after they cased the bank. She also wouldn't mind a haircut considering the summer heat. Her black chaps, denim overalls, and boots never kept her cool. She'd started to roll up her long sleeves in hopes it'd help her somewhat. Her brow was already coated in sweat yet luckily there was a breeze.

Once the gang finished their shaves, they all gathered and strolled through Round Rock until they got into the section known as New Town. There they spotted their targeted bank and did some reconnaissance work.

Friday came very quickly and the gang decided to case the bank one last time. Everybody, except for Jim Murphy, left the hotel in the late morning and started down the streets. They rode their horses mostly but when they came to the corner of Lampasas they hitched their horses and took to walking into town. They were slightly apprehensive since their last incident in a town, however they mostly stayed cool

headed. At one point, they passed one man that seemed rather familiar and Landen was especially bothered by the man, and yet she couldn't place it.

Sam Bass took the front as usual and Seaborn was beside him. Behind him were Landen and Sam Pipes. The gang decided first they'd quickly stop in a general store so they could pick up some needed tobacco as both Landen and Seaborn were almost out. The gang came to a stop on the sidewalk and faced Kopperal's General Store on the opposite side but they waited for the traffic to pass.

When the traffic slowed, the outlaws strolled across and they actually caught a passing bystander's attention too. They didn't realize it though and quickly filed into the general store.

The deputy sheriff had stopped halfway in the street then turned to his partner. "Yew see that, Grimes?"

Deputy Sherriff Grimes had thin lips from his thoughts. He pivoted on his feet and did an about face. "They all had more than one pistol. Com'on, Morris."

The two deputy sheriffs didn't like it when people disobeyed the Round Rock law that stated a man was only allowed to carry one pistol. They tailed the four men into the general store after a minute. Deputy Morris Moore decided to wait outside the store while his partner checked on the suspicious men.

Landen finished paying for her smoking tobacco. She had it tucked away into her back pocket as she turned around. The door bell rang over the wood door when it opened, and she spied the deputy entering the store. Her back straightened up when the deputy bee lined for them. "We got uh problem," she murmured to the whoever heard her.

Deputy Grimes rested his hands on his bullet belt and stepped up to the four men. He opened his mouth to speak but hesitated when he spotted he was wrong in his assessment of four men. He realized it was three men and a woman, particularly a female squaddie. His confused eyes landed on Sam Bass. "Do you have a pistol?"

Sam Bass's jaw was set. He hastily went for his gun and answered, "Yes, I'll let you have it."

Seaborn, Sam Pipes, and Sam Bass all opened fired at once and each took two shots at Deputy Grimes.

Deputy Moore jumped at the gun fire, and he bolted into the general store. He took aim at the outlaws and shot at them.

Sam Bass dropped his gun when his hand was struck by a bullet. He cried in pain.

Landen Morrison had jumped behind a counter and in midair she removed her guns. She took desperate shots at the second deputy.

Sam Pipes gave a true shot; his bullet struck the deputy in the chest.

Deputy Moore fell to the floor and his blood pooled onto the wood board floor. He

closed his head and tried to steady his breathing but his lung had been pierced.

"Com'on, boys!" hollered Sam Bass. He picked up his gun with his good hand and held his injured hand out while running for the door.

Landen Morrison turned her head to the store owner behind the counter with her. She tipped her hat at him then politely stated, "Have uh good day, sir." She hopped back over the counter and followed the gang. She instantly regretted going outside because it was pure chaos.

There was Ranger Dick Ware, firing his gun, and his face covered in lather because he'd been getting a shave. He was the man Landen had recognized earlier. Beside him was an army official, Major John B. Jones, who was firing at the outlaws too. They were down the street for several yards but came after the gang.

Sam Bass, Seaborn, and Sam were already taking fire but missing each time.

"We gotta get tuh the horses," Landen hollered, and she aimed her guns at the ranger and major.

"How thuh Hell did they get here?" Sam Bass demanded angrily.

"Who cares? Get thuh Hell outta here." Seaborn was taking a run across the street but tried to return fire.

Landen followed behind, but she hesitated halfway across when she saw who joined Ranger Ware and Major Jones. Her eyes locked with the beautiful blue ones of Ranger Raleigh Baylor. She refocused and returned fire to the lawmen across the street. She ducked when she sensed Ranger Ware's shot coming at her.

"There's that damn female ranger again," Seaborn growled, and he lifted his gun to aim at her.

"No time for that, Seaborn." Sam Bass grabbed his arm and hauled him off. "Cover us, Landen."

Landen obliged as she followed the gang down the streets towards the alley where their horses awaited. She tried to keep the following lawmen at bay. Her shots slowed them down but her aim was far from true because of the blood pounding in her ears. She never much liked being caught by surprise.

Ranger Raleigh Baylor ducked around the corner of the building when the outlaws went into the alley. She poked her head around the corner and opened fire. She then glanced over at Ranger Ware, who nodded his head so Raleigh opened her revolver's chamber. The empty shells fell out all at once. Beside her she finally sensed Ranger George Herold joining them for the pursuit. "About time, George."

"Sorry about that," George murmured, but he went around Raleigh so he could open fire at the outlaws.

Landen kept shooting at the lawmen while the gang mounted their horses. She took

back steps to Stargazer because she hoped to get her loaded rifle. She sensed Sam Pipes beside her.

Sam Pipes lifted his revolver and joined Landen in the open fire of the lawmen.

"Get on yer horse," Landen snapped.

Sam ignored the cowgirl's words and kept admirably holding off the lawmen with Landen.

Sam Bass was just able to haul up into his saddle with his injured hand. He hung over the saddle horn and gasped for air.

Seaborn pulled out his revolver then turned his horse around. He looked to Sam Bass. "Get out of here, Sam. We gotta yew covered."

Sam Bass nodded then he adjusted in the saddle. His hesitation landed him with a bullet in his lower back, and he slumped over his horse. He straightened up with gritted teeth but said nothing and kicked his horse's sides.

Sam Pipes saw Landen was almost out of bullets. He stepped in front of her and instructed, "Get, Landen." He took on the lawmen again.

Landen didn't argue, and she raced to her mare. She hopped into the saddle then turned her horse horizontally in the alleyway. She gazed over her right shoulder at the lawmen that hid behind the building at the end.

Seaborn glanced at Landen. "We'll catch up... help Sam."

"What about ya'll?"

"We got it," Seaborn replied. He then took aim at Major Jones, who tried to fire at them.

Landen had her left gun holstered but her right was still in her hand. She knew she had a bullet left, which wasn't much so she tapped her white mare's sides to hurry down the other end of the alley. Her skin crawled though, and she stopped her horse. She turned around in her saddle.

Seaborn lined his sights up on Raleigh Baylor's forehead. He grinned wildly at the thought of getting the damn female ranger finally. He held his breath then suddenly in the midst of the loud gun shooting he heard nothing and his world went black.

The cowgirl lowered her smoking gun after firing her last bullet into the back of Seaborn Barnes's head. When Seaborn toppled off his horse, her gaze met Raleigh Baylor's for a brief instant. She broke the eye contact and gave Stargazer orders to ride off at a gallop to safety. She sent a prayer for Sam Pipes's life. She chased out of Old Town and followed in the direction she knew Sam Bass would go. She came upon the Round Rock Cemetery where they made camp the first night.

Sam Bass was just by the gates of the cemetery, and he clung for dear life. His blood

coated the saddle and saddle horn completely from his wounds. He sadly smiled when the Triple L rode up to him; he was surprised the cowgirl would return to the meeting spot they'd chosen in case of an incident like this. "Landen," he gasped.

The southerner stopped Stargazer beside Sam's large bay. She saw the trail of blood coming down from Sam's back. "Ya got shot in the back?"

Sam merely nodded.

Landen cursed, yet she hastily refilled her Colts with bullets from her newly acquired bullet belt. She slammed her Peacemaker's chamber shut and spun it just as Sam Pipes joined them.

Sam Bass tried to straighten up. "Where's Seaborn?"

Sam Pipes shook his head, glanced at Landen, and back to the boss. "He's dead." He then spotted Sam Bass's injuries. "We gotta get yew outta here, boss." He moved his horse in front of Sam Bass's. He grabbed the horse's reins.

"I got our backs," Landen promised.

Sam Pipes nodded then led the group away from the cemetery and took them down a lane into woodland. He kept a fast pace but it was hurting Sam Bass too much. "Landen, yew have any medical supplies?"

"Not anthin' that'll hep," Landen sadly answered. She glanced back over her shoulder to check. She gazed about the forest. There was no way Sam Bass would live, she decided.

Sam Bass fell over his saddle horn then tried to lift his weakened body up. "Stop." His throat was choked up with something wet. "Stop, Sammy."

Sam Pipes halted the group then turned in his saddle. "What, boss?"

"I can't... I ain't fit ta ride," the leader murmured. "Just go over... there." He waved to a spot off the side of the road.

Sam Pipes exchanged worried looks with Landen. He relented and led them off the road into the woods just a ways. He dismounted when he saw Sam Bass was basically falling from his saddle.

Landen had dismounted so she and Sam Pipes caught the gang leader before he fell off. Landen leaned Sam Bass against a tree then knelt beside him. "Ya want somethin' tuh dull the pain?"

"Yew got somethin', Landen?"

"Sure do," Landen replied and went to her saddlebags.

Sam Bass saw Sam Pipes' very concerned features, and he mentioned, "Yawl have ta keep going without me."

Landen knelt back beside the leader. She handed Sam Bass her beat up metal flask of whiskey. "Sam-"

"No," Sam Bass cut through. "I can't ride."

Sam Pipes walked away for a few steps.

The cowgirl glanced at Sam Pipe's back then turned back to Sam Bass. "We can get ya tuh the next town. Get ya uh doctor."

Sam Bass took a swig of the whiskey. He lowered the flask into his lap. "No." He then lifted his glossy eyes to Sam Pipe's back. "Sammy, I want yew ta take my horse."

Sam Pipe's shoulders tensed up, but he turned around. "I can't take him."

"Yes." Sam Bass then pulled out his remaining gold pieces. "Split this yew two." He placed the coins into Landen's hand.

Landen swallowed and stared at the stolen money in her cupped hands. She sadly peered up at Sam Pipes. She and Sam Pipes quickly broke into an argument with Sam Bass and they couldn't convince the leader to come with them. Landen soon found herself splitting the money with Sam Pipes then sitting beside Sam Bass.

Sam Pipes had taken his stuff from his older horse and placed them on Sam Bass's bay. He'd finally agreed to take the horse after all the arguing. He then knelt beside the boss and Landen. "Sam, we can't...."

Sam Bass shook his head. "They'll be along soon... lookin' for me." He took another drink of the whiskey, which did ease his pain. "Just think of me on Sunday." He tapped the flask with his freehand. "It'll be my twenty-seventh birthday." He sadly smiled then bit his lower lip. "Maybe I'll see tuh day." He lifted his right arm and wiped away his tears before they went into his mustache.

Sam Pipes was choked up, and he spied that Landen had a few tears coming down her cheeks. "Thank yew, Sam."

Sam Bass nodded. "I ain't ever met a more loyal man than yew, Sammy." He then grinned at the cowgirl. "Landen, it was a pleasure." He held up his freehand.

Landen gently took the clammy hand and shook it. "Thank ya, Sam. I reckon I ain't ever gonna have another experience like this one."

Sam released the petite hand, and he chuckled. "Beats tuh cattle hearin' huh?"

Landen faintly grinned and tipped her Stetson back. "I reckon so." She leaned in then surprisingly placed a kiss to his cheek. "See ya next time, Sam," She murmured in his ear then stood up.

Sam Pipes wiped at his wet cheeks then hugged his boss. When he withdrew, he softly promised, "I swear I'll find out how this happened."

Sam Bass leaned closer then whispered so Landen wouldn't hear. "Murphy." He then leaned back against the tree and chuckled at Sam Pipe's angry expression.

"Son of a bitch," Sam Pipes muttered. He patted Sam Bass's knee then softly urged, "Stay well, boss." He stood up and went to Sam Bass's large horse. Once he was mounted, he joined Landen on the road.

The two mounted outlaws gave a final wave to Sam Bass then rode off into the thick woods. Sam Bass would remain all night against the tree until he would be discovered by a passerby.

Landen swallowed back her emotions. She glanced over at Sam Pipes. "What now, Sammy?"

"I ain't sure," the saddened outlaw confessed. He glanced at Landen but turned his gaze away. "Will yew stay in Teksus?"

Landen Morrison adjusted her black cowboy hat then murmured, "I don't reckon so." She considered it for awhile bit longer then mentioned, "Go back tuh the Arizona Territory."

"What's there?" Sam questioned.

"Ain't much," the cowgirl confessed, "but I reckon it's safer than staying here." She tilted her head and questioned, "What will ya do, Sammy?"

Sam Pipes had a flash of Sam Bass dying back by the tree. He shook his head. "I've had enough of this... time ta settle down."

"I hear ranching is uh good means of life," Landen mentioned. She then mirrored the smile that Sam showed her.

"Yew gonna be mah squaddie?"

Landen laughed despite the situation. She sighed though and her head was hung. "I don't reckon so, Sammy." She lifted her head. "I ain't into settling down."

"Someday yew will," Sam argued.

The southerner shrugged as she considered her future. "Not anytime soon though."

Sam Pipes studied the cowgirl then softly reminded, "Don't give up, Triple L."

Chapter 3

Landen patted her white mare's side and smiled at Stargazer, who had her head twisted around. "Good apple, girl?"

Stargazer threw up her head.

"Gonna be uhwhile before ya get anymore." The cowgirl patted her horse's side one last time. Then she approached the horse and cupped the sides of the horse's head. She lifted onto her tip toes and kissed her horse on the head. "Get some sleep, girl." She rubbed the spot she'd kissed then she broke away.

The lonely cowgirl went back to the worn log beside her campfire. She sat down and picked up her journal that she'd barely had a chance to write in since her adventures with the Sam Bass Gang. She had no idea what'd become of the gang leader but she'd parted ways with Sam Pipes only a day later. Now she was headed north and made sure to stay away from any towns less she wanted to be caught.

Landen set her quill down in the crease of her journal. She checked her rifle, which leaned against the log beside her. She picked up her metal mug of tea and took a long sip. She set it down then paused and stared into the campfire that was her only light tonight.

The southern cowgirl finished her journal entry within another hour. She set her leather bound journal, quill, and small ink jar on the log to her right then took her tea back up. Her tea was only slightly warm so she took one last sip then tossed the rest over her shoulder in a ritual habit. Landen set her mug down on the ground, and she raised her head until her chin rested in her palms. She didn't stare into the fire this time but far into the shadowy, isolated lands that surrounded her.

Stargazer whined quietly, lifted her head, and settled back down again.

Landen released a deep sigh that contained a lot of emotions. Her oldest, sweetest memories about Raleigh Baylor came back to her then her senses prickled erratically. She bit her lower lip and shook her head. "Damn," she muttered then dropped her head from her hands. She ran her fingers through her short hair; her Stetson sat beside her bedroll. She lifted her head again after combing her hair back again, which caused her earrings to flash the firelight. She muttered, "That damn ranger." She grinned bitter sweetly because she knew that ranger better than most.

The cowgirl suddenly stood up, grabbed her rifle, and walked around her campfire when her prickled senses didn't leave her. She held her Winchester diagonal to her body while she stood with the campfire just to her back. "Com'on out," she hollered.

Stargazer glanced over at her master then twisted her head more when she was none surprised to sense another presence. She shook her head and her mane flayed.

Landen's grip tightened on her Winchester when a tall, dark form slowly shaped in the darkness. She lifted her chin when Ranger Raleigh Baylor stepped into the campfire's circle of light. She could count the steps it'd take to be upon the ranger. "Ya been following me for three days now."

The ranger rested her right hand on her holstered revolver. She was impressed that the outlaw knew she'd been following her but then again she shouldn't put it past the cowgirl.

"Obviously if ya were lookin' tuh run me in ya'd done it by now," Landen commented. "So what ya want?"

The ranger carefully eased her hand off her revolver's hilt then politely answered, "I came ta talk ta yew."

"We ain't got nothin' tuh discuss." Landen features showed she was angry and defensive. "Go back tuh Paris."

"Not 'til we talk," Raleigh urged. Her right hand came back to her gun slowly. She unhooked it.

Landen instantly lifted her rifle and aimed. "Ya ain't this lucky."

Raleigh was slow and steady as she lifted her gun from her holster using her fingertips. She held the revolver by its handle's end then she dropped the gun at her feet.

Landen slightly lowered her rifle but stopped.

The ranger lifted her hands to her left chest. "I wanna talk ta yew... as a friend." She unclipped her ranger badge then threw it on top of her revolver with a low clank.

The cowgirl gradually lowered her rifle to her side and oddly stared at the ranger.

"Please, Landen," the ranger begged. "I know about Belle Reed now."

Landen shook her head. "Ya don't know the half of it."

"Then tell me what I'm missin'," Raleigh desperately urged.

The small southerner tapped her rifle against her right leg then she turned around while saying, "Ya want some tea?"

Raleigh sighed in relief then cautiously followed after she stepped over her gun and badge. "That'd be nice." She took the signaled seat on the log. She noted the closed journal and quill with ink jar on top of it which made her believe that Landen had written that note from so many months ago. She was grateful they were able to use Jim Murphy to surprise the Sam Bass Gang.

Landen hung her kettle back over the fire then she came over to Raleigh. She picked up her journal and writing equipment; she set them on the ground and placed her rifle beside them. She sat near the ranger but there was plenty of space between them.

Raleigh leaned forward until her elbows met her knees. "I was gonna keep followin' yew until yew got into some jam."

Landen grunted, yet she wouldn't look at the other woman. "There ain't nothin' I can't get mahself out of."

"Except for yew deal with Belle Reed," Raleigh brought up.

Landen glanced at the ranger once then turned back to the campfire. "Right now yer kinda screwing it up."

The ranger smirked but sobered. "Belle Reed has been chased outta town." She sensed the curiosity filling the outlaw so she explained, "Her husband got killed from his failed stagecoach robbery. So she disappeared outta town once we heard what she and her husband were doin'."

The cowgirl cleared her throat then mentioned, "My deal ain't ended then if she's still alive." She got up when her kettle sounded to her.

Raleigh was thoughtful because she didn't know the finer details of the deal between the two outlaws, but she knew it was enough to control Landen's latest choices. She welcomed the hot cup of tea when it was handed to her.

Landen didn't bother to have another cup and returned to her spot.

"So what was this deal?" The ranger arched an eyebrow.

"I reckon it don't matter now," Landen muttered. She stretched out her legs then leaned back some. "The last day we were tuhgether she approached me. She knew I was an outlaw... it seems she has uh network."

"She does," Raleigh confirmed then she sipped her tea.

Landen nodded once. "She was helping Sam Bass gather his gang and she wanted me tuh join up."

"Yew refused?"

"I did," Landen honestly answered, "however she's uh conniving bitch." She turned her head to the ranger. "She first threatened tuh turn me intuh ya if I didn't join." She shrugged. "I told her tuh go ahead."

Raleigh peered over the brim of the tea mug. "How'd she win yew over?"

The cowgirl sighed first then replied, "She threatened tuh have ya murdered."

The ranger didn't expect the response, and she lowered the mug into her lap.

Landen nodded once and after she bit her lower lip she explained, "I agreed."

"She musta been gettin' a cut of thuh money," Raleigh decided.

"I reckon so." Landen stared at her boot tips.

"Yew didn't think I was gonna chase after thuh gang anyway?"

Landen turned her head to the ranger. "I asked Belle the same thing so she promised that she'd mention tuh Sam Bass that he had tuh listen tuh me if I ever told him

something. It was part of this agreement wit Belle along with the money for having mah hep."

Raleigh processed the news and it occurred to her the moment in the cave when Jim Murphy tried to rape her. She hadn't expected Sam Bass to agree to Landen's demand but now it made sense. She came out of her thoughts and asked, "Yew wrote that note, didn't yew?"

Landen combed her left hand through her hair. "I did." She waited a beat and inhaled deeply. "I didn't want the gang tuh know I could read or write." She shrugged. "I tried tuh keep uh low profile."

Raleigh chuckled at this concept. "Seein' how yew are thuh Triple L?"

Landen faintly grinned but seriously replied, "Triple L or not that don't tell nobody whether or not I got brains. It's easy when everybody thinks yer just uh dimwitted gunslinger."

The Texas Ranger understood the cowgirl's point; a thin smile on her lips. She sipped her tea while she put together her next thoughts. "Sam Bass is dead," she casually mentioned.

Landen huffed and shook her head. "What uh fool." She scraped her boot's heel through the dirt. "He was smart but he had no common sense. Sam Pipes and I left him by the road."

Raleigh nodded because that's where he was found, not far from the town cemetery. "He died on that Sunday."

The cowgirl's head snapped around, and she solemnly murmured, "It was his birthday then." She lowered her head, and she frowned at the irony.

The ranger finished her tea. She knew it'd been the gang leader's birthday too when he died. She set her empty mug down on the ground just off to her left side. She turned back to Landen. "Yew saved mah life." She was met by open green eyes. "Why?"

Landen quickly looked away. "Because it was either Seaborn or you... I chose him." She stood up and took her earlier mug plus Raleigh's. She stole some quiet time by cleaning out the mugs with water from the kettle. She shook off the water then let the mugs sit upside down on the cloth beside the fire. "I have something of yours." Her voice was low but clear enough as she went to her saddlebags by her bedroll.

The Texas Ranger tilted her head and watched the compact blond root through her bags. She then arched an eyebrow at seeing her long missing hat and black Colt that was a mate to her spare.

The cowgirl approached the sitting woman and held out the items in either hand. "I picked up yer hat uhwhile back." After Raleigh took the items back, she further mentioned, "Sam Pipes had yer revolver."

"Why'd he give it ta yew?"

Landen took her seat and watched the ranger set the items down on the ground carefully. "He gave me the gun the day we parted ways. I told him I didn't want it but he refused tuh keep it." She softly grunted then sarcastically mentioned, "It was like he knew I'd been seeing ya uhgain."

"Maybe so," Raleigh murmured. She then cautiously brought up what she knew would be a hard topic. "What happened ta yew aunt and uncle?"

Landen's jaw flexed a few times, yet she was mostly calm because Raleigh's demeanor was welcoming this time. She could do this. "They were murdered," she angrily confided, "but not by me." She turned her head away, leaned over her propped up knees, and she leaned forward. "I was nineteen."

Raleigh's head tilted and her glowing blue eyes rested on the blond's fire glowing profile. She kept her words silent and waited to hear what the cowgirl had to say to her.

"My uncle's farm was just south of uh small town. Unca Terry had some major fight wit the local shurf one day." Landen waited a beat. She kept staring at the campfire; her angry memories swept through her. "Uh couple of days later, my unca and I were practicing my lassoing... he was trying tuh teach me 'cause he was planning tuh start uh small ranch." She briefly showed a dark smile. "Anyway." She shook her head then continued her story. "We were outside and my unca musta known 'cause he told me tuh go inside the house when these six men rode up. I told my aunt what was happening."

Raleigh was tempted to touch the smaller woman; she sensed the hurt flowing off the cowgirl.

"My aunt was no slouch with uh rifle. She grabbed her Winchester." Landen stopped and pointed at her rifle beside her. "So my aunt and unca confronted the men but I reckon they had their mind set." Landen finally turned her head to Raleigh. "It wasn't long before I heard gunshots... screams. I peered out the window and saw 'em dying. I was scared, but I did what my uncle taught me tuh do in such uh situation. I gathered up my father's hidden Colts and snuck out the back. I just made it out."

Raleigh couldn't control her need anymore. She stretched out her right hand and brushed back some of Landen's loose blond hair. She let her hand go back to her lap, and she softly asked, "What happened after that?"

Landen's eyes had closed when she sensed Raleigh's gentle touch. She kept them close and her low voice filled the air again. "I hid for uh day. I didn't know what tuh do at first. I then eventually made it tuh town but I was careful and went at night." Her eyes fluttered open and they were cold. "I thought I was gonna find hep... instead I found my face on wanted posters all over town."

"Thuh sheriff," Raleigh muttered.

"Mmmm," the cowgirl agreed. Her head bobbed a few times. "That's why I don't trust any lawmen."

The ranger didn't debate it but instead understood the cowgirl's history. "How'd yew become thuh Triple L?"

"Mostly by accident," Landen answered, and she opened her eyes to Raleigh's compassionate face. "I didn't have no money and nobody tuh depend on... it was just me. All I had were my father's Colts and some bullets. I knew how tuh ride, lasso, and shoot the Colts but no rancher could have hired... took me seriously since I had none of the equipment."

"So yew took 'em," Raleigh concluded.

"Yes." Landen inhaled and slowly let it out. "I held up stagecoaches and people tuh get money." She then signaled her Cremello Morgan with her chin. "Stargazer is the only thing I ain't stolen. She stayed with me after I freed her from uh hunter's trap."

The horse must have known she was being talked about since she flicked her tail at the pair.

Landen stared at her hands. "I've killed." Then she gazed at Raleigh again. "Only other outlaws or in defense though... ain't ever killed an innocent person." She shrugged. "After awhile people knew who I was 'cause I could pull my guns faster than anybody that tried tuh match me." She slightly smirked. "Plenty of outlaws have called me out and I've bested 'em all. It's just uh skill, I reckon." She then suddenly got up while saying, "And that's my life in uh nutshell."

Raleigh straightened up and watched the southerner cross to the other side of the camp.

Landen picked up Raleigh's gun and badge in her left hand. She strolled back over and stood over the ranger. "The talking is over, Raleigh."

The Texas Ranger stood up and easily towered over the compact woman. She bent her head closer to Landen's and questioned, "Where will yew go?"

"North," Landen simply replied. She then put the revolver and badge into the other woman's larger hand. "Time for ya tuh go, Raleigh."

The ranger peered down at her weapon and badge of authority. She then lifted her head until her crisp blue eyes met the amber-green eyes of the cowgirl. "No." She opened her right hand and after the clank of metal she stated, "I ain't leavin'."

Landen grew agitated immediately. "Raleigh, ya don't wanna do this."

"What's that?" Raleigh debated, "Stand my ground?" She lifted her right eyebrow. "Or maybe I should run like yew."

The cowgirl's had slotted eyes; her features grew dark. "Ya ain't got uh clue what I've been through."

"Obviously a lot but yew been runnin' like a dog is after yew... all yew life."

"I ain't runnin'," Landen lowly argued. "I'm surviving."

Raleigh snorted at the perfect word. "No kiddin', Landen and there is a difference between survivin' and livin'."

Landen took a step back then pointed a finger at the ranger. "Ya done stopped preachin' and gone tuh meddlin'." She pointed off to her right. "Now get the Hell outta my camp and go home!"

Raleigh didn't reply but merely folded her muscular arms over her chest. She waited for the next move; tension streaming off her body.

Landen's anger reached the top, and she lunged with her right fist coming up for Raleigh's face.

The ranger expected the wild move. She easily caught the small fist and jerked Landen into her body. She kept a hold of the fist in her right hand then grounded out, "Yew gotta stop runnin' from yew past."

The cowgirl snarled then used her free hand to shove Raleigh away but she was instantly yanked into Raleigh's back stepping body. She found her body pressed against Raleigh's again and cool blue eyes captured her gaze.

"Yew can't face yew past, can yew?"

Landen barred her teeth at the taller woman. "Shut up!"

"Com'on," Raleigh demanded, "say it!" She leaned back when the left fist came at her. She now held both fists in either hand. "Say it, Landen!" She jerked the small woman against her body again. "Say yew can't face yew past." She then lowered her head closer to the seething blond and defiantly whispered, "I double dog dare yew."

Landen Morrison suddenly raged with a furious scream. Her hands broke free from Raleigh's and with her surge of strength she shoved Raleigh back several steps.

Raleigh stood tall and proud, her body tense, and her eyes set on the heavily breathing southerner.

Landen's eyes stung from her rising emotions. She stared coldly at the ranger, her hands fisted at her sides, and she suddenly yelled, "You're right okay? I can't face mah past!" Her tears broke free and trailed down her cheeks. "Ya fuckin' happy tuh hear that now?" Her heavy breathing mixed with the crackle of the fire. "What else ya wanna hear huh? That I am an outlaw? That I have no future or that the next gunfight might kill me... and that every time I hope it does!" Landen clamped down her emotions then turned around. She walked away from Raleigh so that she could gain some control again.

The ranger silently neared the tense cowgirl's back. She cautiously rested her strong hands on Landen's shoulders, and she instantly felt Landen shudder.

Landen brushed back her bangs roughly. She then faced Raleigh, her face red, and her cheeks wet. She stepped into Raleigh's encircling arms and her face buried into Raleigh's neck.

Raleigh tightly held the smaller woman. She lowered her head down until her cheek brushed against Landen's moist one. She murmured, "It's alright." She lifted her head when Landen's quiet sobs settled down. She brushed back Landen's sticky bangs while Landen wiped her tears away.

"Ain't none of this gonna be alright, Raleigh."

The ranger had a half smile to show her confidence. "Com'on, yew don't know that." She kept her arms around the cowgirl's waist and small hands were on her hips. "We can fix what's happened."

Landen's features twisted; she oddly stared at Raleigh. "There ain't no we, Raleigh." She broke away from the ranger and started to walk off. "Ya gone back tuh Paris."

Raleigh's hand shot out and caught the cowgirl's wrist. When Landen turned her head back to her, she confessed, "I was offered thuh position of captain... I refused it."

"Ya dumber than dirt, Raleigh Baylor?" Landen's expression was between angry and surprised. "What were yew thinking? Ya mustn't have been."

Raleigh stepped up to the younger woman. "I'd be dumb as dirt if I stayed in Paris. Why yew think I've been tailin' yew?"

"Go home," Landen snapped and yanked her wrist free.

"Why won't yew take mah help?" Raleigh waited; her breath held.

The cowgirl paused then faced the ranger again. "I don't need nobody's hep... I ain't had any in years and I ain't about tuh start."

"I ain't goin' home, Landen... I ain't meant to be there. I'll keep tailin' yew 'til yew need mah help."

Landen knew it was a guarantee from the ranger. She tried to digest the promise, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it. "There ain't nottin but trouble where I'll be headed."

"I knew that uh long time ago," Raleigh mentioned; a thin smirk played her lips.

The cowgirl shook her head in amazement then she whispered, "Why, Raleigh?"

The ranger neared Landen and quietly answered, "It's cuz we're pardners."

Landen lifted her right hand and her fingertips pressed into Raleigh's chest, over Raleigh's heart. Her head was bent forward, her eyes closed, and her thoughts wild. "We can't be, Raleigh... I'm an outlaw and you're uh lawman. This just ain't meant tuh be."

"I don't care," Raleigh whispered, "I realized yew were tryin' tuh protect me. I didn't see it 'til yew stopped Seaborn. I was wastin' my time bein' angry when I thought yew lied ta me."

"I never lied," Landen desperately pleaded. "I was scared tuh tell ya everything." She lifted her head finally. "I kept telling mahseff that I'd just walk away from ya. Then Belle Reed happened and I couldn't get outta the jam." Her upset emotions showed on her face. "I kept hoping ya'd be scared off."

"Yew knew I wouldn't though."

Landen merely nodded her head. "Please go home, Raleigh... tuh yer mother and job."

The ranger took the small hand from her chest and laced her fingers through Landen's. "It ain't where I'm needed." She softly smiled at Landen's finally broken resolve. "The Lord never closes one door without openin' another one." Raleigh then lowered her head until her lips touched Landen's.

Landen's eyes closed, and she briefly welcomed the wonderful feel of Raleigh's lips again. She then jerked out of the kiss. "Raleigh, no. Too much has happened between us for this."

"Plenty more is gonna happen still, I bet." Raleigh brought out a grin.

"I shot at ya... shot at yer horse," Landen desperately argued. "I tied ya up."

"I attacked yew with a knife." Raleigh shrugged casually. "I shot at yew." She then tilted her head and offhandedly mentioned, "Yew can tie me up again... for other reasons though."

Landen's eyes widened at the innuendo coming from the ranger. She couldn't figure out how Raleigh had so easily let go of the past, yet she wondered if it was completely let go. She realized in fact that Raleigh was trying to let go of it right now by joking about it. "Ralei..." She lost her words to a passionate kiss.

Raleigh pressed her body against Landen's as she pursued the kiss deeper. She knew the cowgirl's deeply ridden pride would break apart against the emotions that bound them. When she pulled back for air, she rasped, "Just let it go, Landen." She then traced Landen's fine jawline. "Make-up sex is one of thuh best, I hear."

Landen couldn't stop her laugh. "Ya sound like ya wanna fight more often...?"

"Tempting," Raleigh muttered then she leaned in for another kiss.

And Landen did finally let go as her arms followed the familiar habit of encircling Raleigh's neck. At the end of the kiss, she saw that Raleigh had a thought. "What is it?"

"My horse." The ranger coyly smiled. "Classic probably thinks I forgot her."

Landen understood so she separated. "Go get 'er." She took a step away but Raleigh's hand on her arm stopped her. She turned her head sidelong. "I'll be here," she promised when she saw the question in the ranger's eyes.

Raleigh squeezed the southerner's arm in confirmation then she quickly disappeared into the blackness.

The cowgirl then glanced over at her campfire and saw the ranger's guns by the log. "Damn it," she snapped and turned around. "Raleigh, yer guns," she hollered.

"I got mah knife," called back the ranger's voice from nowhere.

Landen shook her head and worked her fingers through her hair. "That damn ranger." She set out to organize her camp better and prepare the campfire for the night so they'd be warm enough.

It wasn't long before Stargazer had company much like Landen did again. The outlaw and lawmen stood beside their joined bedrolls and continued the soft kissing. The kissing grew more demanding and heated then the women sunk to their knees on the bedrolls.

Raleigh reached forward, and she effectively unbuttoned the cowgirl's blouse.

Landen helped Raleigh get her blouse off. She was left in her thin, sleeveless u-shirt but her hands went to Raleigh's vest. Landen quickly realized she was nervous because she fumbled with the buttons.

Raleigh noticed and a gentle chuckle broke between her lips at the end of the kiss. Her larger hands helped the smaller ones work the buttons of her vest. She trailed her kisses down Landen's soft neck, which cracked Landen's focus.

It wasn't long before the reunited lovers met skin against skin and shared their emotions from the last months through their touching. Landen instantly realized how cold her life could be without Raleigh by her side. She couldn't understand how it happened or even when Raleigh slipped past her guard. And Raleigh saw nothing but her future held in Landen's bright green eyes so she knew she'd follow Landen anywhere. Her life long goal to become a ranger seemed minute compared to the dreams that she felt around Landen. The bitterness between the lovers from the past months slowly burned out by the time the campfire was dead and they were fast asleep.

Raleigh first woke up to the morning sun. She slightly stretched but not too much so that the small blond against her body wouldn't be disturbed. She shifted the blankets against them to keep them warm until the evening chill was burned off by the hot sun. She knew it wouldn't be long either.

Landen shifted from her dreams from the gentle movements. She lightly ran her nails down Raleigh's back in a pleasing sensation. "Morning."

"Mornin' too," Raleigh murmured and peered into unfocused green eyes.

Landen had a silly smile and confessed, "Waking up like this each morning ain't so bad."

The ranger arched an eyebrow. "Is that an offer?"

Landen traced a design on Raleigh's bare back then softly answered, "It could be." She pulled her head back to get a better view of Raleigh's face. "If we stick tuhgether, Raleigh and people find out who we really are... they'd lynch us."

"They ain't gonna." Raleigh played with Landen's messy hair. "When we're out here there ain't nobody ta see us like this." She then tucked her hand back under the blankets. "But when we're in towns we'll just have ta keep our hands ta ourselves."

Landen chuckled, however she sobered. "What we tell people when they see we ride tuhgether?" She gave a dubious look. "It's odd enough we're female gunslingers... but together too?"

The ranger shrugged. "We're pardners... we stick together and ain't nobody gonna question that."

"I hope not." Landen leaned in and kissed Raleigh's bare shoulder. "Where we go from here?"

"First, back ta Paris so I can take care of some things then we're going ta California."

The southerner shook her head and her amusement shined in her eyes. "I didn't say yes and ya already takeover mah plans."

Raleigh smirked. "Yew can always tell a Texan, but yew can't tell her much."

The cowgirl went on her back and laughed at the joke. She thoroughly agreed. She then smiled up at the ranger, who was propped up over her. She played with Raleigh's midnight hair; she read something in Raleigh's eyes. "What ya thinking?"

"Promise me somethin'."

Landen paused in her playing. "What is it?"

"For now on tell me things sooner instead of hidin' anythin'." Raleigh's tone was gentle in hopes it'd show her need for this to be agreed upon. "Don't be scared ta tell me anythin' next time... no matter what it is."

Very slowly Landen nodded her head. "I promise, Raleigh."

"Thank yew." Raleigh stole a quick kiss then ordered, "Com'on. Get up."

Landen groaned, rolled over to her right, and grabbed her Stetson nearby. She quickly covered her face with it and grumbled, "Check back in an hour."

Raleigh was already getting her clothes on but still ordering her lover around. "There ain't none of that when I'm around." She grabbed the cowboy hat then jumped to her

feet when Landen lunged for her.

"Ya damn ranger!" The cowgirl's eyes dangerously glinted. "Give me mah hat."

"Sorry, squaddie... ain't no squattin' in bed today." Raleigh laughed at Landen's furious expression. She put the small hat on her head then picked up her pants to get them on quickly.

"My Lord," Landen complained, "give me the Sam Bass Gang over this cowshit." She yanked the blanket over her head.

Raleigh still caught sight of that smirk on Landen's face. She knew it was a game so she just ignored the cowgirl because she had a better way to win. She hastily got dressed and threw on her boots. She went to her saddlebags and pulled out some oatmeal then began to work breakfast up for them.

It wasn't long before the lingering smell of food brought the cowgirl wiggling out of the blankets. Landen grudgingly gave in and got dressed then stomped over to her lover's side by the log. She flopped into her seat beside the silent ranger, and she was politely handed a bowl of oatmeal followed by a mug of tea. She then decided waking up like this instead of what she was use to was far better, however she wouldn't admit it aloud to Raleigh.

After the bowls were empty, Raleigh took the cowboy hat off her head then smashed it onto Landen's head. She received a dower face but Raleigh just smirked and decided to clean up camp. Landen was blown away by how fast her lover could move and pack up a camp so efficiently. Landen typically took her sweet time to get ready each morning unless she had to be somewhere by sometime, which was rare anyway.

Raleigh and Landen then were mounting their now saddled horses. Landen checked everything to make sure she had her Colt Peacemakers and her Winchester all at the ready. She didn't like the idea of going to Paris, however Raleigh promised she'd go in alone to take care of some things and leave. Landen would wait a couple of miles away from town until the ranger would return. What really knotted up Landen's stomach above all was that she'd soon be meeting Raleigh's mother, Mrs. Jane Baylor.

Raleigh took Classic Touch's reins into her hands. She signaled her mare to head towards the south where Paris laid only a day's ride or so. "Landen?"

The southern cowgirl was settled in her saddle as she tapped Stargazer's sides. She followed her lover. "Yeah?"

Raleigh turned her head sidelong so that Landen could see her profile. "Don't yew ever shoot at mah horse again."

Landen's eyebrows shot up; she bit her lower lip and softly replied, "Right." She then gently laughed when Raleigh's grin appeared.

The End