

~ My Midnight Muses: A Woman's Wild West ~

by Red Hope

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

Subtext: Oh yes.

Violence: Not in this piece.

Summary: It's the late nineteenth century when the wild is slowly fading out of the west. A lonely, wandering cowgirl finds her way into the small town of Paris, Texas where she's looking for some work as a cattle driver. She expects her visit to be short lived in the small town yet her plans change for the better.

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Chapter 1

"Goddamn it!" hotly complained the small blond when she spilled the hot water from the kettle and it got on her bare feet. "Damn it," she snapped again but she got the kettle set down on the nearby log. She sighed and studied the top of her foot, which seemed to be alright after all. She instead switched her irate gaze to that kettle. "Damn thing... I reckon I need tuh pick up another." She then grunted at her own words because she knew that wouldn't be happening anytime soon.

Instead the young woman gingerly picked it up and poured the still steaming contents into her metal mug nearby until it was full. Once she had it full, she sat down on the log with her hands wrapped around the warm mug. She drank the tea and it rushed down into her stomach then warmed her up with pleasant ease. She remained still for some time, mug cupped in her lap, and her lightening green eyes staring into her campfire.

The night air was cool; a gentle bite to it thanks to the open skies that not only allowed for the stars but the earlier sun's heat to filter away. The stars were more vivid tonight than most nights because of the crispness. The surrounding lands were rather bare except for the sprouting cacti here and there along with lower brush sprinkled about on the rocky terrain. Far off in the distance there was a low coyote cry, which didn't disturb the woman but it drew a quiet whine from the horse.

The blond broke from her wandering thoughts and turned her head to her mare. "What's it, girl?" She heard the coyote's cry again and she hushed the nervous horse by saying, "It ain't near, girl... ya know it too."

The horse huffed at her master then shook her head, which caused her mane to flay.

She settled down though and lowered her head again then gradually her eyes started to close.

The woman sniffed then went back to drinking her tea before she stretched out her sore legs. She was still getting use to her new fangled pants she'd recently purchased in San Francisco, California. She figured if they were good enough for miners to use as rugged wear then they'd suit her fine when riding her mare. She just hoped they'd last her a long while considering the hefty price tag of three dollars that came with them.

The young yet weathered woman ran her hand through her sun shade hair that was short and straight. She'd adopted the new hairstyle not long ago when she realized it'd serve her a better purpose when riding horseback and doing work. The only occasional issue she had with it or rather from it were some people mistook her for a young fella but she found that quite easy to correct.

The tea had finally gone chilled so she threw it over her shoulder then with a splash of water from the kettle she cleaned it out. Finally she climbed up to her bare feet and cautiously made her way over to her sleeping roll and sat on it. Before she could get any sleep, she unhooked her loose belt from her waist that had two holsters. The holsters themselves kept a pair of Colt Peacemakers snapped in at all times for the owner of them. The Peacemakers flashed in the firelight as they were dangling in the air before they met the cold ground.

The blond kept her revolvers close to her hands incase she needed them at any notice. She then unclipped her sheathed hunting knife from her side and placed it by her revolvers. She wiggled under the heavy fur and blankets and a groan sounded from her lips at the wonderful feel of settling down for the night. With any luck, she'd make her destination tomorrow and god she really hoped so too since she needed some work real soon.

Despite the woman's worn features she was only a few shy of the age of twenty-five and she'd known much of her time alone with few responsibilities. She was free of any family since she was an only child and her parents had passed away some time ago. She was raised by her aunt and uncle, who have since followed in her parents' wake. Since the age of nineteen she'd been making her own way through this world and she felt fairly content with it. She had her mare, her skills, and her intelligence that many people in these parts seemed to lack. She held plenty of self pride.

The morning sun eventually arrived but the woman refused to rise to greet the overbearing sun so instead she reached above her head. Her fingers curled around her black Stetson hat and in a ritual fashion, she placed her hat over her face and the sun was gone. "Blazin' sun," she grumbled before drifting off again.

It was another hour before the too hot sun got the small, gruff woman moving in her blankets. She started her morning by making another cup of tea as well as pulling out some jerky for breakfast along with an apple. After she ate, she continued her morning like she would most her mornings by pulling out her leather-bound journal. Today she didn't have too much to write about other than her travels from California, through the Arizona Territory, and just by the western border of Texas. So after a paragraph in the journal she decided to scribe a poem about the local terrains she'd been passing

through during her ride.

Once she felt satisfied with her poem, she dipped her quill's tip into the small ink jar then she carefully signed her name at the bottom like she did all her entries and poems. With set precision the quill's strokes spelled: Landen Morrison.

Shortly after, the woman prepared for the day by first getting her feet into her tall boots. She jerked her denim waist overalls over the boots to hide them then she picked up her black leather chaps and adjusted those until they were comfortable. Next her loose belt with her Colt .45's that had her father's name engraved on them. Her bowie knife to her side and finally she sighed contently once her black Stetson was on her head.

It didn't take long to gather up her campsite and loaded her saddlebags onto her now tacked horse in a quick fashion. She was far too use to this habit. She slipped her pointed boot into one stirrup then with support from the saddle horn she was up into the saddle. She decided to leave her deerskin gloves in her saddlebags for today since she really only needed them for work. Instead she checked her Winchester rifle that was lashed to the left of the horse in a diagonal fashion. She patted the rifle's buttstock then gathered up the horse's reins. "You ready, Stargazer?"

The Cremello Morgan horse followed the rein's signal to go to the right, away from the campsite, and she started off in a fast walk. The horse knew it wouldn't be long before her master ordered a trot then eventually a gallop.

Landen Morrison's passive features were broken by a grin from the excitement of going at a full gallop when she squeezed her mare's sides. She checked to make sure her hat would stay then she enjoyed her ride towards her destination: Allen, Texas.

Chapter 2

Landen slowed her white horse down just outside of the small town, which wasn't where she wanted to be tonight but it was doable. She read the small wood sign that told her she was in Paris, Texas then at the bottom it said the town was once called Pinhook. She sniffed the air and detected the smell of cattle so she knew it was a large farming town. She slyly grinned because just maybe this town would work out anyway.

When she first entered the town, she heard in the low backdrop the sounds of a whistling train. She noted that but kept focused on the townspeople in the main street. She easily swayed side to side with Stargazer's motions but she finally found her destination.

Landen pulled her mare to a halt in front of the wood post, which stood from the dirt ground directly in front of the small saloon. Her boots connected to the ground and her clothes made a clank noise from the abrupt movement. She took her horse's reins and tied them to the post after she stole a quick glance into the bucket hanging from the post. There was plenty of water for her mare so she patted her horse's side. "I won't be long, girl," she murmured.

Landen climbed the wood steps of the saloon; her boots echoed and caught other people's attention. She tipped her hat back and mutely greeted some of the men sitting on the porch of the saloon. She entered the building, which stunk of cigar smoke and cigarettes then there was the lingering scent of liquor that always came. She ignored the snapped heads in her direction and just crossed the distance to the bar.

The bartender finished wiping his counter when the odd looking cowboy came up to his counter. "What can I get ya, fella?"

Landen tipped her Stetson back and smirked at the bartender. She yanked a stool out and hauled herself up into the seat.

The bartender ruefully smiled then corrected himself. "What ya need, ma'am?"

"Whiskey," clipped Landen.

The bartender nodded then requested, "Ten cents," then walked off to fill the order.

Landen fished around for the change in her pocket. She finally came up with a silver dime and tossed it on the bar. She soon received her shot, the money gone, and her throat and belly received a nice burn from the liquor. She shoved the empty shot glass aside then turned her head sidelong because she sensed something.

Landen's green eyes honed in on the very blatant stare coming from another woman seated at a round table with a group of men. She noted the woman was playing cards and she didn't seem too interested in the poker game but more in Landen.

The woman had raven hair that flowed over her shoulders. Her eyes were chipped blue that seemed to read into Landen. From what Landen could observe of the seated woman, she had on a white button-up blouse then a dark brown leather vest overtop. Her hat was a matching color to the vest but the brim of the hat was straighter without the curled edges like Landen's. What captured Landen's attention most was the star emblem that was pinned to the woman's vest jacket.

Landen decided to ignore the woman by twisting around in her stool; she now faced the saloon customers. She scanned over the people, who were mostly men other than a few women that mingled with alluring smiles. Landen leaned back against the bar, her elbows on the edge of the bar, and her mid back touching the edge.

"Ya need anythin' else?" questioned the bartender.

Landen twisted her head around then answered, "Where's uh good place to stay?"

The bartender eyed the strange woman for a moment. "Yew want thuh inn across thuh street, pardner."

"I appreciate it," replied Landen.

The bartender grunted but went back to work as he dealt with his other customers at the bar.

Landen remained in the saloon for awhile bit longer then she decided it was time to leave. She stepped off the stool then exited the busy saloon without a glance back. She found her mare waiting for her so she collected the horse's reins then began the slow trek across the dusty road to the inn.

The owner was sitting outside in a rocking chair and working on a smoking pipe. "Howdy, miss."

Landen tipped her hat back and smiled in appreciation that the man recognized her gender so easily. "Ya got some room in yer establishment?"

"How long yew need it for?"

Landen considered the question then answered, "I reckon no more than two days."

"Fine," agreed the innkeeper. "Stable back behind thuh inn."

Landen nodded then led her mare that way around the inn. She spotted the small stable and when she entered she found it quite decent. "Alright, girl." She opened a stall, guided her horse in, and finally started to untack her. When all was settled, she gathered up her saddlebags and rifle then aimed for the front of the inn. Landen paused by the bent steps of the inn when she sensed the newcomer at the top of the steps. She instantly recognized the woman from the saloon but it didn't bother Landen as she easily ascended the steps.

The woman was leaning against the wood column at the top of the steps. She idly watched the stranger with the saddlebags come up. She tilted her head when the small blond faced her. "Howdy," she politely greeted.

Landen tipped her head respectfully then assessed the woman, who was quite tall. She noted that the woman's pants were thin, light brown canvas and she had brown boots to match her vest and hat. Around the woman's waist was a bullet belt completely stocked then a holster with a revolver's handle protruding. From the small pocket of the vest came a silver chain and Landen assumed it connected to a pocket watch.

The tall woman shifted and she slightly moved her rifle in her right hand, which had the buttstock against the porch floor.

Landen now had a better view of the star emblem, which she realized was made from a Mexican five-pesco coin. This woman was a proud Texas Ranger and that made her stomach twist nervously. "How are ya?" she politely questioned.

The Texas Ranger revealed a grin from under her hat's brim. "I'm walkin' in tall cotton. Yewself, miss?"

Landen Morrison's hard expression slightly softened because of the amusement in her eyes at the ranger's dialect. "I reckon I'm alright."

The ranger fully turned to the smaller woman and in the process she put her rifle into her left hand as her right came up. "Welcome to Paris. The name's Raleigh Baylor."

Landen adjusted her saddlebags and rifle in her left arm but brought out her right hand for the shake. "Landen Morrison, ma'am."

"It's nice to meet yew," replied the ranger then she released the small, callused hand. "Where yew from?"

"I'm afraid I ain't no Texan... from South Carolina originally." Landen watched Raleigh's eyes for any danger but she felt fairly comfortable with her. "How about yerself?"

Raleigh's loose grin spread wider. "Never ask a woman if she's from Texas. If she is, she'll tell you on her own. If she ain't, no need to embarrass her."

Landen couldn't help a small laugh then she replied, "I apologize."

"No harm meant," answered the ranger. "Yew know we don't get many female squaddies in these parts. What brings yew here?"

The female squaddie or rather cowgirl had a proud smile as she spoke again. "Just fixin' to get uh job... hopeful somebody is lookin' for some hep."

Raleigh nodded once then she went stoic. "Yew do cattle drivin'?"

"I reckon that's what I'm best at," agreed the cowgirl.

The ranger lifted her rifle once then tapped the buttstock against a floor board. "Yew wanna see Old Man Thomas jus' out side of town. He's got a good ranch out dere."

"I mighty appreciate it," agreed Landen.

Raleigh sensed that the woman wanted to go so she tipped her hat down politely and offered, "Have a goodnight, miss." She then hefted her rifle and her heavy boots shook the steps as she descended the inn.

The southerner briefly watched the Texas Ranger leave then she shook her head. She entered the inn to find the innkeeper waiting for her. As she paid the man, he decided to make some idle conversation.

"That was Raleigh Baylor... only female ranger in Texas," informed the innkeeper.

Landen smirked at this while she worked to get out her money to pay him. "I reckon I ain't ever heard of a female ranger."

"Yew ain't ever gonna hear about uhnother," promised the innkeeper. "She's been elected to be thuh next captain."

Landen grew curious. "Who's the current captain?"

"Captain Junius Peak... he goes by thuh name June." The innkeeper took his customer's money then hunted for the skeleton key behind his counter. As his

fingertips slowly grazed across the dangling keys he spoke, "If Baylor takes over as captain she'll be happy as uh gopher in dirt."

Laden chuckled then smiled when she received her room key. "Thanks. What's yer name?"

The innkeeper returned the smile. "John McNally."

"I'm Landen Morrison. Pleased tuh meet ya." Landen dipped her hat in her usual habit.

"Yew have a goodnight now, miss."

"I reckon so," softly agreed the cowgirl, who strolled down the hallway with her belongings.

"Room Three," called the innkeeper over the counter.

Landen discovered her room, which she twisted the knob then booted the door open more. She waltzed in and over the rim of her saddlebags she smiled at the bed. "Now I really reckon I'm tard." She kicked the door closed. She went over, tossed the bags onto the foot of the soft bed, propped her rifle against the wall but near the bed, and proceeded to light up the room by way of the candle from the table. She made sure to first get the oil lamps that hung beside the bed posts on the wall. After checking out the bathroom facilities she was dumbstruck to see there was a pot inside her room since typically she was use to running to an outhouse.

Landen finally stripped of her clothes and climbed into the comfortable bed that awaited her. She made sure to dim the oil lamps and closed the shutters most of the way. As she started to doze off she promised herself that first thing tomorrow she'd get a needed bath.

Chapter 3

By the late morning the following day, Landen Morrison found herself astride her horse and swayed to the calming motions. She was quite polished up since after her bath she cleaned her boots, guns, rifle, and even her belt buckle. She'd received directions from the innkeeper on how to find Old Man Thomas's ranch and she was glad it was a short ride. She patted Stargazer's neck while saying, "There it be, girl." She pulled her horse to a halt.

The cowgirl stared down into the small valley where there was a large ranch nestled into the crook of it. She spotted the main house then a barn and plenty of longhorns that awaited a good drive to either the markets or cattle trains. "Com'on," she ordered her mare.

Landen urged Stargazer down the dirt road that was cut into the surrounding meadows and led to the home and barn. It wasn't long before she was spotted by an older man coming out of the barn. "Ho," she called to her mare and she effectively dismounted then took the reins.

The man approached the nearing stranger and his features tightened once he realized it was a woman. "Howdy."

Landen offered a smile to the lanky man that had a small belly. "Mornin', sir. I'm Landen Morrison and I'm lookin' for Mr. Thomas."

The man stepped forward with his hand coming out. "I'm he. Thomas B. Jones, miss." He shook the small woman's hand then placed both his hands on his large belt. "What can I help yew with?"

"I'm fixin' to get uh job. I hear yer lookin' for some cattle herders...?"

Thomas Jones gave the small woman a once over but skeptically questioned, "Yew ever done this, miss?"

"I reckon plenty of times," answered the cowgirl.

The rancher decided the woman seemed to have the required means to be a cattle herder by her dress and equipment such as the lariat and rifle on the horse's sides. "Well," he started, "I've got a few drives to do. My first one is uh small one about fifty miles away."

Landen mentally calculated that'd take roughly three to five days at the most. "When y'all leave?"

Thomas noted the woman's southern accent, which wasn't customary to Texas. "Tuhmorrow actually... I could use uhnother hand." He nodded once then stated, "Be here tomorrow at eight."

Landen's thin smile developed. "Thank you, sir."

Thomas only gave a faint dip of his head then turned and went back to his work.

Landen came back to her mare with excitement showing through. She mounted the horse then directed her mare back to town. After she stabled her horse, she came strolling out of the stable with her rifle's barrel in her right hand. She decided she needed a nice supper since her breakfast had been fairly meager today. She eventually found her way into a small restaurant that was serving meals already at noon high. Landen took a small two-person table back in the corner, her chair leaned back and her body pressing against the wall.

As proper as ever, Landen removed her Stetson hat and placed it under the table so that it rested on her right knee. She combed her fair, short hair with her fingers, which revealed her silver hoop earrings that she'd grown fond of lately. Just after she was comfortable a waitress came up and took her order for food and drink.

Landen quietly ate when her meal came; the chicken was moist and the meat neatly tore apart when she ate it. However she was soon disturbed by somebody she'd noticed earlier in the restaurant. It was a young woman and she'd decided to take Landen's other seat at the table.

"Howdy, miss," greeted the stranger, a smile on her round face. Her dark brown, long hair was pulled back and hidden under her hat. The black feathers of the brown hat were wavering over her brow. She wore a frilly white blouse with a tightly fit black jacket over top, all buttoned up. Her long white dress cascaded down to her ankles but her heeled boots showed when she crossed her legs.

Landen set her chicken thigh down and tilted her head at the brass woman.
"Afternoon, ma'am. Can I hep ya?"

"I just noticed yew are new in town."

"I reckon so," conceded Landen.

The cheeky woman flashed a smile then stretched out her right hand. "My apologies. The name's Belle Reed, miss."

The cowgirl wiped her hand on her denim overalls then took the soft hand into hers.
"Landen Morrison."

"Unusual name," granted Belle after the handshake. "So what brings yew to Paris?"

"Just looking for uh job," answered the southerner.

Belle leaned back in her chair and openly observed the newcomer. "Yew must be a squaddie," she concluded by the way Landen was dressed.

"I prefer cowgirl," argued the petite blond.

Belle chuckled and relaxed back into her chair. "Where yew from, Landen?"

"Uhways," answered the cowgirl, "South Carolina originally."

Belle Reed folded her hands in her lap and continued to admire the younger woman.
"How yew like Texas so far?"

"I ain't been here long enough to decide."

Belle nodded once then curiously inquired, "Yew find a job already?"

"Yes'sum... Old Man Thomas is gonna give me uh try 'morrow."

Belle knew the rancher fairly well as he sometimes brought some of his smaller herds here and shipped them out by train but that was rare. She then curiously inquired,
"Yew get paid well for been uh squ... cowgirl?"

Landen faintly grinned at how the woman corrected herself. "If its good pay then I get 'bout forty dollars uh month." She pushed her plate aside after deciding she didn't feel like eating anymore. "What you do, Miss Reed?"

"Mrs. Reed," supplied Belle and she further added, "Call me Belle please." Landen's

tension slightly wavered because of her words and she returned to answering the original question. "My husband owns uh small farm just outside of town."

That was answer enough for Landen Morrison to figure out what Belle spent most of her days doing. It was one lifestyle Landen was happy to leave behind her since her childhood. "It sounds pleasant," she falsely remarked.

Belle Reed was an intelligent woman and she chuckled. "It's boring, honestly." She then went silent as she interpreted the other woman. She leaned forward and innocently asked, "How are yew with yer guns, miss?"

Landen straightened up at this line of questioning; her right hand's grip tightened on her chaps on her thigh. "I reckon I ain't half bad. Why ya ask?"

Belle chuckled and held up her right hand to ease the cowgirl. "It ain't nottin' to get all worked up about." Her palm now rested flat on the table. "My husband, Jim Reed, he always needs a helpin' hand."

Landen instantly guessed what kind of hand Belle Reed was referring to and it made her tense up. Her voice soured into a curt pitch. "I ain't that kinda cowgirl, Mrs. Reed. I reckon ya outta look somewhere else."

"Now don't go be havin' a fit and steppin' in it." Belle Reed waited to see if Landen would settle down but it wasn't happening yet. "This is friendly, Miss Landen." She was glad at seeing the cowgirl slightly calm down. "I'm just sayin' if yew ever want better money than what cattle herding fetches yew then my husband can help yew out."

The southerner steadied herself to be level headed as she calmly replied, "I appreciate the offer, Miss Belle. I reckon I'll keep it in mind."

Belle smiled warmly then decided it was time to take leave. She stood up but leaned over the table towards the smaller woman. Her next words came out in a hush. "Yew keep it in mind... especially after yew get yer pay from cheap Old Man Thomas." She straightened up and politely stated, "Have uh good day, Miss Morrison." She turned and slowly sifted through the restaurant but greeting some other folks briefly.

Landen cursed under her breath about the abrasive woman that almost ruined her supper. She grabbed up her hat, put it on, and fished out the money she needed to cover her meal and tip. She slammed the change loudly on her table and popped out of the seat. She snatched her rifle up then finally made her way out of the restaurant.

It wasn't long before the cowgirl took the steps up to the inn. She decided not to enter yet as she needed a minute to relax after meeting Belle Reed. She took a leaning stand against a post at the top of the steps. She reached into her right shirt pocket where she kept her small, rolled cigarettes for moments such as this.

Landen freed one cigarette then tucked the rest back in her pocket for safeguard. She put the cigarette's end into the corner of her mouth then hunted around in her back pocket for her matches. She rarely smoked unless she was in a social gathering or at moments like this when she felt riled up.

After getting the cigarette lit, Landen slowly took draws from it and her nerves started to calm back down. Horses' clopping hoofs grabbed her attention and she gazed off to her left when three riders slowly entered town. Landen reached up with her fingers to the cigarette and removed it. As the smoke between her lips filtered past her vision, she honed in on the front rider of the small group; it was the Ranger Raleigh Baylor.

Raleigh Baylor spotted the newcomer on the porch of the McNally Inn so she said something to her partners. She gave them a brief wave then broke away from them and trotted over to the inn.

Landen remained poised at the top of the steps; nonchalant as the ranger approached her. "Afternoon, Miss Baylor."

The ranger smiled and stopped her horse right at the base of the steps. "Howdy, Miss Morrison. Yew have any luck with Old Man Thomas?"

"I reckon so," answered back the southerner. "I appreciate the hep."

"Thayure weren't much to it." Raleigh Baylor kept her smile despite the cowgirl's calmer mannerism. "When yew start?"

Landen finished another draw from her cigarette before replying. "Morrow at eight."

Raleigh moved her head in understanding but when she tilted her head back more her bright blue eyes showed in the sunlight better. "Well I'm sure Old Man Thomas will be taken to yew. Thuh man don't say much but he gets thuh job done."

"I reckon I'll find out," agreed the cowgirl.

Raleigh shifted in her saddle; not sure what else to say to the withdrawn woman but she wanted to keep talking. She couldn't find much else to keep the conversation going so she tipped her head politely and remarked, "I hope to see yew around, Miss Morrison." That's when she finally received that smile from Landen that was there last night briefly.

"I reckon ya will," promised the cowgirl.

Raleigh nodded but politely offered, "Thuh ranger office is just down thuh street if yew ever wanna stop in."

Landen kept her smile, which was genuine thanks to Raleigh's words. "That's mighty kind, Miss Baylor. I appreciate that."

Raleigh steered her chestnut Tennessee Walker back towards the main street while calling, "Take care, Miss Morrison."

Landen dropped the small remainder of her cigarette then snubbed it with her boot tip. She briefly watched the ranger travel down the wide, dirt road until she was too far to see. Landen picked up her Winchester rifle then disappeared into the inn; she felt rather calm now and less so from the cigarette compared to the brief visitor.

Chapter 4

Landen hastened to gather her things into the saddlebags with the exception of her white blouse for today. She removed her spurs from the bags because she'd certainly need them today between Stargazer and the herding. She had on a cotton-light u-shirt that was sleeveless and many people wouldn't suspect her makeshift girdle underneath the thin shirt that helped support and protect her breasts and thighs especially during riding.

Landen finally had her items packed up. She came over to the foot of her recently made bed and she picked up her blouse. She put it on hastily then buttoned it with ease. She unbuttoned her pants a ways then hastily tucked her blouse in neatly before buttoning up her pants again.

The southerner came to the last of her attire: black chaps, guns belt on, and her black Stetson hat. She marched out of the room with her belongings. She returned the key to the innkeeper but mentioned she may be back in a few days after the cattle drive.

Stargazer reared up a few feet when she saw her master coming into the stall. She was excited because it was rare for Landen to be up before sunrise. It wasn't long before Stargazer had all her tack on then being led out of the stables. Once outside, her master mounted her and urged her into a fast trot for the main road and to get out of town.

Thomas Jones peered down at the face of his pocket watch. He read the time, snapped the small door shut, and slipped his watch into his jacket pocket. He honed his eyes on the quickly walking horse and the rider that was coming to his ranch. "Howdy, Miss Morrison."

"Mornin', Mr. Jones." Landen tipped her hat's brim at him.

"Let's get started," ordered the rancher.

It was only in a matter of two hours that Landen Morrison was swaying to Stargazer's motions. She leaned forward in her saddle to get more comfortable then settled back down but her eyes were fixed on the longhorn steers that stayed clumped together in rows of three. She glanced across the roaming steer and studied the man on the other side; another cowboy. Ahead of the herd was the boss, Mr. Jones, and he guided the group to the destination.

Landen observed the open fields around them and she felt a smile touch her. God she loved this lifestyle more than anything as she felt so free. Although she admitted sometimes the food could use the help and with a quick glance back at the chuckwagon she could only guess how the cook would be tonight.

Close to sunset, Thomas Jones led the group slightly west to Cooper Lake and they made camp there. Landen received second watch for the cattle so it wasn't until several hours after her pleasant dinner that she took her vigil. She'd taken a post up in

a tree so that she could have a clear view of the steers around the marshy lake.

Landen briefly watched the men move about in the camp but she focused back on her job. She was seated comfortably in the nook of a large branch, her legs stretched out, and her hat tipped forward to cover her face mostly. Her loaded rifle rested in her lap in case of any problems. At her right side her lasso was tied but she hoped she didn't have to jump down and wrangle up any stray steers. She figured she wouldn't considering the steers seemed fairly spent from the long day of traveling. Before taking her post, Landen made sure to don her long, black canvas jacket that stopped near her ankles. It was quite effective at keeping her warm.

The cowgirl watched the night sky and basked in the beauty of it; the lake rippled the stars' reflections. She inhaled the scents surrounding her, which were a mix of marshy smells and steer; she didn't mind it at all. Her green eyes glowed from the moonlight reflecting in them and she truly admired nature like this.

Eventually the southerner closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the tree. She didn't sleep as her ears kept watch for anything. Her thoughts however were far from her post in the tree. She kept thinking about the dark, beautiful Texas Ranger back in Paris town. It wasn't often that Landen was taken with a woman or man but that ranger was hard to miss being the looker that she was. Landen wrote it off as her surfacing desires that she'd have to correct soon if they didn't subdue on their own.

A few hours from when Landen started her post, something caught her ear and she straightened up. Landen had been hearing the low cries far off in the distance from the coyotes, they stopped, and started only an hour ago but closer this time. Landen silently climbed to her feet and remained hunched beside the tree trunk, her right hand balancing her. Her eyes darted around but she couldn't figure out what'd prickled her senses earlier. Then finally she spotted what'd bothered her; a damn coyote pack was trying to sneak into the herd.

Landen hoisted her rifle up then steeled her mind as she focused her aim. All she needed to do was kill the front coyote then the rest would scurry and hopefully not return. Landen's index finger tightened on the trigger as her sight lined up on the animal. She inhaled slowly then gave the remaining squeeze required. Her shot rang out through the marsh.

Chaos instantly broke out as steers whined loudly and raced from the danger of the small coyote pack. Next the eerie sound of the injured coyote painfully howled but his pack raced off before they were shot next.

"What tuh Hell was that?" barked Mr. Jones.

"Uh ci-yote," called back Landen. "I reckon he's still alive."

Mr. Thomas was sitting up in his bedroll but he looked to the other cowboy standing near the fire. "Take care of it, Jerry."

"Yes'um," answered the cowboy. He unhooked his revolver then crossed the distance to the other side where he suspected the injured creature to be.

Landen gazed down at the steers below her and saw they were calming again. She did a hasty head count but found all of them still clustered together. Her head jerked up when Jerry shot the coyote several yards away.

The coyote cried briefly then all went silent.

The southerner cleared her throat from the cool air in her lungs. She sat back down on the branch but this time with her feet dangling on either side. She settled her repeating rifle across her lap then worked to get a cigarette out.

Jerry passed under the tree but called up, "Nice shot, Morrison... yew got 'im in thuh chest."

Landen didn't comment back; she just wanted to focus on her cigarette to calm her nerves. Out of habit, she started to swing her right leg in the air then when she was finished her rolled cigarette she snubbed it on the branch and let it fall. She removed her hat then hooked it to a nearby branch to let it dangle there. Landen fussed with her short hair for a moment then rested her head back against the branch. The rest of her night shift was quiet and the coyotes sadly howled but far way from the humans and steers.

The rest of the trip down south was uneventful for the cattle herders. The boss guided them each day and he kept checking his pocket watch at regular intervals. Landen figured the rancher must have a certain schedule to keep to for his contract. By the fourth day, they were twenty miles south of Sulphur Springs and the boss told her and Jerry they were closing in on the rancher, who purchased Mr. Jones's hundred steers.

That late afternoon around six o'clock, the cowgirl found herself receiving a much needed pay from the boss. She then was given an invite from Thomas Jones to join him for his larger cattle drive that would take them just west of Dallas. Landen made no promises but said she'd most likely join up.

Landen separated from Mr. Jones and Jerry since she knew Jerry was headed in another direction while Mr. Jones would be awhile before heading up north to Paris again. Landen decided to get a small start and took a two hour ride north where she entered Sulphur Springs. She took a room at an inn that included a small tavern down stairs however the handful of rooms were upstairs.

While she ate her dinner in the corner of the tavern, Landen overheard a few men at another table talking and whispering about this or that. What she heard wasn't something she much liked considering the men were discussing their amazing train robbery they accomplished just outside of Dallas.

Landen kept her attention away from them as she pretended to be in her own world. Her head was tilted slightly so she could hear the conversation about their next plans for another train robbery. She sighed inwardly; it was none of her business to get involved because she knew, from past experience, where she'd end up.

Just as the southerner got up to leave her table and empty plate, she glimpsed at the men at the other table. She assumed the young fella that was rather clean cut and had a mustache was the leader of the bunch. Landen adjusted her black hat as she walked

past the group but she caught a name finally; Sam Bass. Landen recorded the name into her memory however she continued her way back to her room upstairs.

The next day, Landen arrived back in Paris much to her satisfaction. She'd gotten an early start this morning, which had been hard for her considering she preferred to sleep in every day. She was pleased to get another room from John McNally for an unlimited amount of nights. The afternoon was growing late but Landen decided to take a shot at fate so she found herself strolling down the main street to the other side of town.

Raleigh Baylor heard two sets of footfall come into the building; her head remained down though. She knew the one footfall so she asked, "What is it, George?"

"Yew got company, Baylor." George Herold walked off and went into another room.

Raleigh lifted her head finally and smiled at seeing the southern cowgirl standing in front of her. "I see yew made it back."

Landen nodded then slipped her thumbs behind her belt so that her hands framed her shiny buckle. "It was a good drive."

Raleigh leaned back in her chair and crossed her long legs under the desk. "Are yew interested in a supper?"

Landen remained calm but she was inwardly pleased by the invite. "I reckon so." She then absorbed the warm smile that she was given from the ranger.

"Have yew been to Cooper's?"

"I ain't been there," answered the compact blond.

Raleigh straightened up then stood until she filled out her full six feet. "It's just over yonder."

The cowgirl lowered her hands to her side then held out her hand to the open doorway. "Ya lead the way, ma'am."

The ranger stopped beside the other woman and casually mentioned, "Call me Raleigh."

The southerner tipped her head back until her sharp green eyes met the blue ones above her. "If ya call me Landen?"

"Deal," agreed the Texas Ranger then she strolled out of the building with the cowgirl in tow. "So where in South Carolina do yew come from?"

The cowgirl kept her head slightly tipped down, which allowed for her brim to hide her face from Raleigh. "The Charleston area. How about yaself?"

"Oh I was born on a small farm jus' outside of town," replied the ranger. She slipped her hands into her pant pockets as she strolled across the busy main street in the

setting sunlight. She paused after a few paces and let a carriage roll by then she continued for the restaurant. "What really brought yew here to Paris?"

The cowgirl shrugged casually then answered, "I jus' prefer to travel uh lot. I ain't ever been the type of gal to settle down, ya know."

"I think I do," agreed the ranger with a wistful smile. She climbed up the steps to the restaurant and entered first but made sure to hold the door open for the southerner. When they made it into the restaurant, Raleigh found them a comfortable table away from some of the louder crowd. Soon enough they had a nice warm meal set in front of each of them. Raleigh grew warm at seeing the newcomer start to gain trust with her. Raleigh was also appreciative of the fact that Landen removed her Stetson; Raleigh memorized the small cowgirl's soft features, sparkling green eyes, and the short hair was an attractive feature.

Landen laughed at Raleigh's story and tried not to choke on her mouthful of mead. She'd successfully gotten it down then let out a few more laughs. "Now I reckon that took ya months to heal from."

"Nu-uh," argued the ranger, "I just didn't sit... couldn't ride thuh damn horse for awhile." Her soft grin made her glow. "I ain't never turned my back on another bandit even if he is dead."

Landen snickered and tried to stop imagining the Texas Ranger with a bullet lodged in her right butt cheek but it was hopeless. She chuckled again but shook her head to rid of her laughter. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright," soothed the ranger. She leaned contently back in her chair, her mug edged the table. "So how long yew think yew be stayin' in town before you're movin' along?"

"I ain't sure," answered the cowgirl, "but Old Man Thomas offered me to hep cattle drive next time. I reckon I'll be here at least 'til then."

Raleigh smiled yet her emotions showed in her eyes. "I hope to see yew again."

Landen mirrored the same smile then nodded faintly. "I rekcon ya will, Raleigh." Raleigh's happiness seemed to wash over into Landen.

Raleigh unexpectedly sighed; her content mood deflated as she stated, "I outta be gettin' back before thuh boys think I left 'em high and dry."

"I appreciate the company," politely spoke the cowgirl.

The ranger stood up just as the smaller woman did the same. She watched Landen put her black cowboy hat back on and Raleigh finally spoke. "I did too... it ain't easy findin' good company around here."

The southerner peered over her brim at the tall woman.

Raleigh caught the lingering stare from the petite woman but she made her legs carry

her over to the tavern owner. She took care of the tab despite Landen's arguments.

Landen knew that Texas Rangers didn't fetch a fair pay and that their job was mostly based on pride. She made sure to cover the tip for their waitress at least, which Raleigh thanked her for doing. She followed the tall ranger out of the restaurant and walked back to the ranger office across the street.

"Maybe if I get some free time 'morrow," mentioned the ranger, "yew and I could go for a ride." She tilted her head then explained, "I'll show yew thuh area."

The southern cowgirl came to a stop at the base of the steps to the ranger building. "I reckon that'd be jus' fine. I ain't got any plans."

"Well how about around one o'clock." Raleigh rested her hands on her hips. "I'll come by thuh inn."

"That sounds fine," agreed the cowgirl, who took a step backwards. "Thank you again for dinner, Raleigh."

"My pleasure, Landen... yew have a goodnight." The ranger smiled and received one back from Landen then she turned and went into the building.

The cowgirl spun around on her boot's heels, which made her spurs sound. She chuckled and her bouncy walk carried her down the dusty road back to the inn. Tonight at dinner Landen's nerves around the Texas Ranger were subtler because she got to know Raleigh better. This time the cowgirl didn't require her cigarettes to quiet her anxiety.

When Landen entered her room, she stripped her clothes off and only remained in her underwear and her sleeveless, white u-shirt. She sat on her bed, the same room as before, and she wrote in her journal for a solid hour. She recorded her cattle drive for the days then wrote about her supper with Raleigh. Once the long entry was complete, Landen closed her journal and slipped her quill back into its small leather case. She sat there, quiet, and still considering her dinner with the Texas Ranger. She had to secretly admit that the tall, dark ranger was definitely a looker but yet a piece of Landen just wasn't at peace. Landen knew though that tomorrow she'd discover more about this mysterious ranger and that made her smile. It would seem that Paris, Texas would lend to her future being more valuable and Landen felt content to that idea for the first time.

The End