

~ My Midnight Muses: The Wistful West

~

by Red Hope

Disclaimers

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

Subtext: Oh yes.

Violence: Not in this piece.

Summary: The cowgirl, Landen Morrison, decided to remain in Paris, Texas so that she could get to know Ranger Raleigh Baylor more. Ranger Baylor learns the most intimate details about the cowgirl as they spend time together and apart.

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Chapter 1

Landen tugged on Stargazer's reins. "Com'on, girl." She guided her mare out of the stable and just as she came around the inn's corner she was greeted by the mounted ranger.

"Good afternoon, Landen," warmly greeted the Texas Ranger.

The cowgirl smiled at her friend once she had her head tilted back far enough. "How are ya?" She could already tell the ranger was in excellent spirits by how her eyes matched the blue sky.

"Ridin' high," answered the ranger. "How about yew?"

Landen couldn't help a small chuckle at the Texan's dialect so she decided on something quite southern. "I'm fine as frogs' hair."

Raleigh had heard that saying once or twice but it made her laugh. She observed the small blond easily mounting the mare then she edged her chestnut mare closer to Landen. "It's a fine day for ridin'."

"I reckon so," agreed the cowgirl, who was scanning the beautiful skies. She then met another beautiful blue sky and she smiled. "Ya lead the way."

Raleigh nodded then steered her mare off to the right. She made have seemed calm as she remained astride her horse yet inside her stomach knotted and twisted. When she glanced over at the cowgirl she couldn't hide her smile.

Landen returned the smile; she said nothing because she was nervous. This type of

nervousness she'd never experienced. It wasn't the type that made her want to drag out her cigarettes but it was the kind that made her excited.

Once they were out of Paris, Raleigh broke them out into a full gallop. She was pleased with the cowgirl's response to ride at her side. Raleigh could tell that Landen immersed in the sensations of being at a full gallop much like she did when she rode.

It was about a half an hour later that Raleigh slowed her horse down into a trot then eventually into a fast walk. She turned her head to the southern cowgirl. "Nice ridin'."

"I reckon ya ain't half bad yaself," teased Landen.

The ranger chuckled as she settled into her saddle. "I've been ridin' since I could walk."

"That's uh mighty long time." Landen had a wide grin that wouldn't leave her.

The Texas Ranger adjusted her dark brown hat that'd shifted during the riding. "A horse and I can speak to one another." She patted her mare's neck. "Right, girl?"

The chestnut mare huffed and threw her head up and down.

Landen softly laughed at the display. "What's her name?"

Raleigh studied her horse's head but replied, "Her full name is Classic Touch but I'll call her Classic for short." She then directed at the cowgirl's horse. "She's uh Morgan horse?"

"Sure is," agreed the cowgirl. She smiled at her mare then returned her focus to the ranger. "Stargazer is her name."

Raleigh's head bobbed but more to the motions of her horse. "Sometimes Classic here get's all swole up and that's when I call her Sir Kicks-a-Lot."

Landen bent forward and laughed at the image of the ranger fussing with her horse when the horse is in a mood.

Raleigh enjoyed the laughter coming from her new friend. When Landen calmed she and the southerner went into a peaceful silence. Raleigh did detect that the cowgirl was growing anxious or uneasy.

Landen had unknowingly started to wrap her reins around her right hand tightly; just toying with them. She hadn't really noticed it because she had her black work gloves on so she didn't feel it. Her gaze remained fixed ahead.

"Yew feelin' tighter than bark on a tree?" questioned the ranger.

Landen broke her musing and focused on the tall, dark beauty riding close to her. Her cheeks flushed but it wasn't too noticeable. "I'm sorry. I reckon I am feeling like uh long-tailed cat in uh room full of rocking chairs."

"Well I ain't no rockin' chair," promised the ranger. She then turned her head away and signaled with her chin. "We're almost there... just over in through there."

The southern cowgirl's nose crinkled up and she asked, "What?"

Raleigh sighed but her grin wouldn't stay away. "Just follow me."

That's exactly what Landen did as she was guided through the grassy terrain. They came pass a winter wheat field and Landen leaned off to her left side as her mare passed it. Her left, gloved hand stretched down, swept over the wheat heads, and she easily ripped a piece of wheat free.

Raleigh curiously watched and chuckled when the southerner placed the stalk end of the wheat in her mouth. She led the way around the field and eventually they climbed a tall hill but once they were at the crest of it, she stopped.

Landen halted her horse at the top and she scanned the vast beauty before her. Her breath caught.

The ranger had seen this area on many occasions but it never stopped amazing her. "Beautiful ain't it?"

"Gorgeous," agreed the southerner.

"Let's take a break." Raleigh swung her leg over then dismounted.

The cowgirl forced herself to break away from observing the beautiful valley below. She dismounted her mare then set out to take the harness tack off the horse for better freedom. She removed her right glove, tucked it under her right arm, and ran her hand down Stargazer's long nose.

Stargazer huffed but enjoyed her master's touch.

Landen smiled then scratched a spot behind the horse's left ear.

Raleigh just finished setting her horse's tack down in the grass. She then hunted for something out of her saddlebags.

Landen moved away from her horse after setting the tack down and took a few steps closer to the ridge of the hill. She peacefully watched the clouds' shadows roll over the hilly, grassy terrain. The breeze picked up and the tall grass down in the valley waved in the motions.

Raleigh stepped up to the small woman and studied the natural beauty too. She then glanced at Landen's profile and knew she'd selected the right place. "Come here." She took a few steps down the hillside then in her arms she opened up a blanket.

The cowgirl was pleasantly surprised and she let the ranger organize the blanket while she played with her wheat straw in her mouth. She soon had both her gloves off but clenched in her left hand. She took her open seat on the blanket beside the ranger. She gently tossed her gloves off to her left, into the low grass.

Raleigh had her long legs stretched out over the grey blanket, her boots in the grass but her hands were behind her and they kept her propped up.

Landen didn't want her dirty boots on the blanket so she sat somewhat diagonal. Her boots just off the left edge of the blanket but she remained sitting up right. She rolled the wheat straw around in her mouth with her tongue. "This is beautiful, Raleigh. Thank you."

The ranger kept observing the breathtaking landscape. "Yew welcome. I don't often get out here." She sighed sadly then she reached up to remove her hat. She set it off to her right in the grass. "I figured yew appreciate this."

"I do," agreed the cowgirl. "I've seen uh lot in my travels but this is beautiful."

Raleigh was hoping for another surprise but only if nature was willing so she'd have to keep her hopes up for later. "Yew sound like yew traveled a lot, Landen."

"I reckon so," agreed the cowgirl. She decided to remove her cowboy hat too. Once she hat it set beside her gloves, she combed her hair with her fingers. "I've spent most my life in southern California but I know Nevada and the Arizona Territory pretty well."

"I ain't been out of Texas," sadly confessed the ranger.

"Really?" The cowgirl glanced at her friend surprisingly. "Ya missing uh lot."

The Texas Ranger brushed her own hair back from the breeze ruffling it. Her bangs though fell back on her forehead. "I hope someday ta do some travelin'." She turned her head to Landen. "So yew from California?"

"Not exactly." The southern cowgirl met her friend's gaze. "I was born in Charleston but my folks decided tuh move out west... back during the Gold Rush." After Raleigh's nod, she continued to speak. "It was ackshully my father and uncle that wanted to move to California. My mother and aunt weren't too keen on it but I reckon they ain't had uh choice. So we moved to San Francisco."

"I take it yew ain't close to yew family?" tried the ranger.

The cowgirl turned her head away and studied the landscape again. "I was close to 'em."

Raleigh's eyes dropped and she turned away too. "I'm sorry, Landen." She understood the tense of her friend's words.

"It's alright... ya didn't know," argued the cowgirl. "My folks died when the cholera disease spread in San Francisco." She shrugged. "I really don't recall much cause I was youngen but my aunt and uncle took care of me. My uncle wised up... bought uh farm south of San Francisco."

Now Raleigh understood why the small southerner had retained her native accent to

South Carolina. Most likely being away from the influences of San Francisco and under the house of her aunt and uncle may have left her with her southern dialect. "So what about yew aunt and uncle?"

Landen remained passive yet her emotions were never far from the surface. "They died when I was nineteen." She felt the ranger fixed on her. She shrugged then casually mentioned, "I've been on my own since then."

The ranger realized just how lonely Landen must be and yet she admired the cowgirl for being so strong. She could only imagine what other history Landen had behind her. "Yew ain't ever thought of settlin' down?"

Landen chuckled and shook her head. "No... it ain't for me. How about you?"

The Texas Ranger grew smug and her voice husked easily. "No man wants to marry a woman that wears thuh pants."

The cowgirl laughed because she completely understood. "I reckon ya're right." She grinned at the other woman's smug face. "I reckon ain't neither of us getting married anytime soon."

The ranger nodded a few times. "I've got plans to be thuh next captain."

"That's what I be hearing from Mr. McNally." Landen tilted her head to the side. "Ya reckon you'll get it?"

"I'm fixin' ta get it," replied the ranger.

Landen smiled at this because she was sure that the ranger would be the next captain. She could tell that Raleigh was the type of woman that once she set her mind to accomplish something that she made it happen. "How about yer family?"

Raleigh crossed her legs at her ankles, her top right foot rhythmically swayed. "It's just me and my mother. I had uh younger sister when I was young but she died from disease at thuh age of three."

"What of ya father?" inquired the southerner.

Raleigh shook her head and her gaze was downcast. "He was uh stagecoach robber... thuh damn fool got himself killed when he robbed thuh wrong carriage."

Landen bit her lower lip at hearing Raleigh's clear disgust for her father and his history. It explained to her why the older woman was now a Texas Ranger and took a lot of pride in the job. "Your mother must be proud of ya though."

Raleigh finally smiled. "She is that." Then something down in the valley made her sit up. Her earlier hopes were now successfully answered and she was grateful.

Landen straightened up more and her face became shocked. "My Lord...."

The ranger's earlier smile was brighter. "I don't get to see many of 'em but they're

beautiful."

The cowgirl tried not to move too much since she was already worried she'd frighten the herd of bison. "I ain't realized that there were still bison in Texas."

"Very few," murmured the ranger. "Yew usually seem 'em up in northern Texas."

"This is amazing, Raleigh." Landen was fixated by the munching herd far down in the valley. "This is one for my journal," she murmured without thinking about what she'd said aloud.

Raleigh blinked from her reverie. "Yew read and write?"

Landen was slightly uneasy but she honestly replied, "Yes'sum I do." She swept back her sunlight hair. "I ain't ignernt like most cowboys."

Raleigh kept her shock well hidden because it was rare for any cowboy to read and write. She knew only a handful of people in Paris that could read and write, herself included in that bunch. "I apologize," she finally responded, "I ain't mean to refer-"

"It's okay," cut off the cowgirl. She flashed a warm smile. "I know most cowboys don't so that's the natural assumption." She shrugged and joked, "I ain't like most."

"Yew ain't," agreed the ranger. "Yew write often?"

"Yes, almost every day," replied the southerner. "I enjoy reading too when I can afford uh good book." She shifted some on the blanket then further mentioned, "I've been meaning to pick up uhnother journal so I can write my stories."

The Texas Ranger was smiling and she wasn't sure if it was because of Landen's confessions or the idea of Landen being a writer. "Have yew written any stories?"

"No." Landen kept watching the moving bison in the valley. "Got 'em all up here though." She tapped her head. "I do write some poetry though."

Raleigh was amazed by the younger woman and she admired her. She even felt somewhat lacking in comparison to Landen's obvious skills despite she could do much of what Landen could do. It was an odd feeling for Raleigh because she was use to besting everybody else. It was easy to achieve more than the women because she never restrained herself like most women and she bested men easily when she set out to do it. Landen though was different compared to any woman or man because Landen felt more like her equal; she wasn't a challenge like everybody else.

"What ya thinking about?" murmured Landen.

The Texas Ranger's train of thought derailed and she focused on the present again. "Yew eat lunch yet?"

Landen turned her head to the right and she showed skepticism at Raleigh's response to her question. "No, I ain't had any supper."

"Perfect," muttered the ranger. She climbed to her feet and went to her grass munching horse.

Landen shook her head but went back to watching the bison. In the background she listened to her friend going through her saddlebags. For a beat, she played with her wheat straw but stopped when Raleigh came back over with an armload. She laughed and asked, "Ya need some hep, partner?"

"I'm fine," replied the Texan, who settled the food items on the blanket between them. Once she had it all out, she sat and smirked at Landen's obvious appreciation for the food. "By thuh way, it's pardner."

The southerner's nose crinkled and her green eyes lightened from amusement. "My apologies... pardner." She then took in all the food that Raleigh had thought to bring for them. She felt her chest tightened from her emotions; she'd never met somebody this considerate.

Raleigh paused in the middle of organizing things. She read the adoration in Landen's misty eyes, which shaped a crooked smile on Raleigh's usually hard face. "Com'on... eat up."

Landen didn't require a second invite so she first rid of her wheat straw then she and Raleigh dove into the tasteful food. The pair ate happily and in comfortable silence, Landen also kept watch on the bison. Raleigh watched them as well and made her wonder why so many people were senselessly killing these animals. She knew the truth despite she disliked it. It was Landen's word ignorant that came to her mind about the people that sported to kill the bison and assumed it was Native American's only means for food.

"Ya're thinking hard," remarked the southern cowgirl. She'd caught the stress lines creasing the ranger's brow.

Raleigh broke a piece of cornbread free and popped it into her mouth. She stole that time to compose her thoughts better then after she had the food swallowed she explained them. "We kill thuh bison cuz we think thuh Indians will go hungry."

Landen's lips puckered but her view held the small herd. "It's ignernt, ain't it?" She sighed and shook her head. "I've seen it... seen 'em killed for pure sport."

"The rangers ain't all that innocent," brought up Raleigh. "Yew know why a ranger is?"

Landen tilted her head to show her curiosity but she had no answer.

"Thuh rangers were started back in 1823 when thuh Indians were attackin' thuh Texan settlers." The ranger sighed then mentioned, "That's been our main purpose ever since. It's only been recently that we've become thuh law."

"I hear some ain't too honorable," carefully brought up the cowgirl.

"Some ain't," agreed the ranger. "Yew hear of Captain Leander McNelly?" When she

saw Landen shake her head Raleigh let out a sigh. "He ain't uh pleasant fella. Thuh Las Cuevas War was only uh couple of years ago... a fight over damn cattle that thuh Mexicans stole. Thuh U.S. Army won and ordered McNelly to stand down but he disobeyed cuz thuh cattle weren't returned. He crossed into Mexico, kidnapped thuh captain at thuh customs gate, and hauled 'im back to Texas."

"What happened?" urged the southern cowgirl.

"Oh McNelly got thuh cattle back to Texas once he threatened to kill thuh customs captain." Raleigh ate the last of her cornbread then mentioned, "McNelly was uh hero but he died not long after." She brushed her hands to get the cornbread off but muttered, "Tuberculosis."

Landen huffed. "Figures." She then pointed at the star emblem on the ranger's chest. "That makes ya the law?"

The ranger chuckled and her grin was back. "Sorta." She leaned back onto her left arm and slightly twisted to face her friend. "Thuh government ain't gonna pay for our badges. We get 'em custom made at thuh gunsmith."

"I reckon not everybody knows the ranger symbol though," argued the petite blond.

Raleigh nodded then her right hand went behind her back, she was digging in her right pocket. "Thuh Adjutant General's Office gave us authority however that can be hard to prove." She brought her hand forward and between her fingers was a folded piece of paper. She gingerly opened it then turned it around for Landen to see.

The cowgirl was sitting up right but she leaned over and read the words. The slip of paper was a detailed description of Raleigh Baylor's authority as a performing ranger along with her physical description, age, residency, and her enlistment. At the bottom there was the Adjutant General's signature, the captain's, and the seal of Texas. Landen exhaled deeply. "Wow."

Raleigh folded up the warrant of authority paper and tucked it back away. "Thuh badge is useless without that authority paper."

"I reckon so," softly agreed the southerner. Landen realized that her friend was every bit comparable to a sheriff; she was part of the law in Texas.

Raleigh straightened up and cleared up the mess. "Yew thirsty?" she asked while going over to her mare to put things away.

Landen messed with her short hair out of nervousness. She steadied herself and pushed past what she'd seen earlier. "I reckon I am," she finally answered.

Raleigh sat back down with a canteen that was covered by leather and a strap. She held out the canteen to her friend for the first draw.

The southerner gratefully took a swallow of the cool water then returned it. "Thank you, Raleigh." She smiled warmly and mentioned, "I ain't ever had uh amazing day like this."

The Texas Ranger sadly smiled then mentioned, "I'm glad yew enjoyed it." She took a drink then close up the canteen but set it aside by her hat. "It ain't often I get to enjoy mahsef... especially with somebody like yew."

Landen chuckled and teased, "Ya mean a squaddie?"

Raleigh laughed but she shook her head; her smile was still there. She sincerely replied, "Naw I mean somebody as beautiful as yew."

Landen centered on her friend and she coyly smiled. "It's mutual," she murmured.

Raleigh leaned in closer to the smaller woman. She lifted her right hand, but hesitated. She then cautiously touched Landen's right cheek.

Landen's smile broadened and her right hand came up to rest over Raleigh's. Her eyes drifted shut. She enjoyed the sensations flowing through her body and silenced her thoughts.

Raleigh leaned in closer until her lips grazed over Landen's. She heard the low whimper from the smaller woman so she calmed it by pressing harder. She moaned at the pleasant feel of Landen's lips against hers. Then she was encouraged by Landen inviting her to deepen the kiss. Her earlier fears about doing this dissipated and she entered Landen's mouth.

Both women released moans and Landen's hand found its way into Raleigh's midnight hair. They continued the kiss until they both were breathing heavy and they stopped for a second. Landen leaned back in again to begin the next kiss that she yearned for much like Raleigh. The women shifted on the blanket but their kissing didn't stop.

Raleigh withdrew for some needed air, the back of her head meeting the blanket. She grinned at how the southerner took the advantage since Landen now straddled Raleigh's hips.

Landen remained hovering over the ranger and her hands pressed into the blanket on either side. She lowered her head again for another kiss, which burned her desires stronger. She then felt Raleigh's longer fingers at the top of her shirt and worked the buttons. She pulled back slightly, her breathing heavy, and she worriedly murmured, "Is this uh safe place to be doing this?"

Raleigh paused and lifted her head so that she could place an assuring kiss to the smaller woman's lips. "Yes," she softly promised, "there ain't anybody around for miles."

"Good," was all Landen could manage. Her body hotly craved Raleigh and Landen succumbed to it with every pleasure.

It was hours later that Raleigh found herself well spent with Landen neatly tucked in her arms. She'd ended up pulling the blanket over their nude forms since their skin was cooling off from the breeze. She was worn like Landen and it didn't take her long to drift off to sleep but not without placing a kiss to Landen's temple.

Raleigh was first to wake up to the low western sun. She glanced over her shoulder, down to the valley and saw the bison were well gone. She wondered if maybe her earlier scream had sent them off running. She chuckled at the thought, which wakened her smaller lover.

Landen nuzzled the warm neck in front of her then she lifted her head from the warmth surrounding her. "What time is it?"

The ranger obliged by reaching up over her head. Her long fingers managed to reach her vest and she wiggled out her pocket watch. She twisted her head back and read the time upside down. "It's near five."

Landen sighed but didn't make any effort to move yet. "I reckon we need to get back before it gets any later." She swallowed back a yawn that threatened her. "Ya wo me out, Raleigh." Her frame shook when Raleigh laughed in response.

"I'm glad I could help," teased the ranger.

Landen smiled and lifted her head. Her smile grew at seeing Raleigh's happy features. "Ya know I ain't usually like this."

"Like how?" muttered Raleigh, who was brushing back stray blond hairs.

"Just jump in the sack type of gal." Landen softly laughed and shook her head. "There's just somethin' about ya, Raleigh Baylor."

The Texas Ranger understood the words and she gave a brief kiss to the warm lips above her. She settled back down into the blanket. "I want to see yew again."

Landen lowered her head and her golden hair fell around her face. "I wanna see ya again too." She took Raleigh's irresistible lips.

Chapter 2

Landen Morrison pulled the short cigarette end from her lips with her fingers and thumb. She glanced at the end of it then with her gloved left hand she smothered the burning end. She flicked the butt into the air, which soared high over the steps of the McNally Inn then silently landed into the rustic dirt below. Landen sighed contently and leaned her right shoulder against the wood post of the inn. She merely watched the traffic filter through the small yet busy town but her memories conjured up her night last night.

Raleigh and Landen had ridden out of town for about ten miles then made camp in a desolate, beautiful location. They'd built a fire and ate a dinner that Raleigh's mother had kindly supplied. Then late into the night the couple shared pleasures under the starry sky. Landen quickly realized that last night had been better than the first time together; there were fewer fears and less awkward moments. It was a beautiful night for Landen as her body today still felt Raleigh's touch on her and in her. That silly

smile shaped Landen's soft face at the thought of her night.

This morning the southern cowgirl had taken a quick ride out to Old Man Thomas's ranch and was informed that the three hundred fifty mile drive would take place. Landen had given her answer so she had three days left with Raleigh before she disappeared for about a month. She figured the time away from the ranger would be good for her so she could separate and analyze her feelings much like Raleigh needed to do.

Despite the intensity of her physical relationship with Raleigh, Landen knew their chances for a future were slim to nothing. It was hard enough seeking out a same-sex partner for companionship let alone developing and keeping a relationship. Landen knew ultimately it would be too risky, especially for Raleigh, who was aiming to become the next ranger captain. It could only be a passing fancy, Landen had concluded.

The southerner decided it was time for her lunch. She took off her gloves as she straightened up from the post. She shoved her gloves into the back of her light tan canvas pant pockets. She'd washed some of her clothes this morning and so had to switch to her worn canvas pants. Her heavy boots stomped down the inn's steps and she adjusted her cowboy hat as she ambled down the main street. She entered the local restaurant that she'd first gone to when she came to Paris.

When Landen entered the restaurant she didn't receive as many strange looks as she did the first time. She figured locals were growing accustomed to her. She took a two-person table that was by a window. She stretched her short, chap covered legs under the table and removed her hat. She noted the restaurant was fairly quiet today but it'd probably be busy later tonight since it was Saturday. When the server came over, she gave her order then relaxed back in her chair with her legs sprawled and her eyes searching the restaurant.

Then from the corner of her eye she spotted a familiar face. She inwardly sighed and prayed the woman would not come over to her table. Her hidden tension mounted as Belle Reed gravitated to her then finally approached her.

"Good afternoon, Miss Morrison."

The cowgirl dipped her head then politely replied, "How are ya, Mrs. Reed?"

"I'm ridin' high," replied the farmer.

Landen disliked the taste of the phrase coming from Belle's lips compared to her lover's. "What can I hep ya with, Mrs. Reed?"

"Yew mind if I sit with yew?" Belle could tell her request was seriously being considered by the cowgirl.

"I prefer to eat alone," remarked Landen; her tone clipped.

Belle Reed reacted with a grin and she stepped closer to the stranger. "Listen, Miss Morrison I came to talk to yew in a friendly manner. There ain't no reason to get into a

fit."

Landen's dark eyes rose to the woman and locked on her. "I ain't got anything to discuss with ya, Mrs. Reed."

Belle Reed stepped even closer and now loomed over the sitting cowgirl. She leaned over until her lips were in close proximity of Landen's. "I know who yew are," she breathed, "They call yew the Triple L for short."

Landen bared her teeth at the threatening woman in her space. "Then ya know what the Hell I can do, Mrs. Reed."

Belle's brown eyes glowed into an amber shade. "That's what I'm countin' on." She smirked at the cowgirl's wrath. "Now, Miss Morrison yew don't want to cause a scene here." She chuckled then further mentioned, "Especially when yew are so... close ta Ranger Baylor."

Landen's hands clenched in her lap because she was resisting every old urge to pull her guns out. Her icy voice asked, "What ya want?"

"To talk, Miss Morrison cuz I have a lifetime proposition for yew." Belle's smile went more innocent and she jarred Landen further. "So, yew mind if I sit with yew?"

The cowgirl's jaw flexed according to her flared temper. She held out her right hand to the open chair and coldly offered, "Join me, Mrs. Reed."

Belle Reed finally straightened up and in her louder voice she claimed, "Yew are too kind." She took the seat and crossed her legs with her flowing dress cascading around her.

Landen's meal arrived not long after and she felt as if she ate indigestion instead of food while she spoke with Belle Reed. When her quiet conversation with Belle Reed ended her great morning mood had been well sabotaged. Landen ended the conversation by giving Belle a handshake for guarantee of both their words. The cowgirl collected her Stetson hat, put it on, and left the smug woman. With each step Landen took back towards the inn her resolve hardened and she sent out a prayer to God.

Landen returned to her room where she paced for some unknown time. She tried to map out the best way to handle her new predicament but there were too many dead ends or possible deaths. Just maybe she could wing this out and come out at the end with better expectations than she was having right now. She sighed, ripped her black cowboy hat off, and threw it onto the table by her saddlebags. "Shit," she cursed and shook her head. "Ya knew ya couldn't escape it," she hotly reminded herself aloud. She covered her face with her hands. "There ain't ever going to be any peace for me."

Landen Morrison concluded she had to just accept her fate. She had to make the best of it. And whether this was a curse or a blessing she would never truly decide.

The cowgirl turned her dark gaze to her Winchester rifle and decided she needed something familiar right now. She went to her saddlebags that rested next to her rifle.

She pulled out her cleaning supplies and picked up her rifle from the table. When she sat beside the table, she began her methodical habit of taking her rifle apart and cleaning it followed by her Colt Peacemakers.

Just after she slammed the Colt's chamber she heard a quiet knock at her bedroom door. She spun the chamber and the gun clicked as the cowgirl rose up to her feet. Landen's other revolver was in her right holster. She kept her .45 in her left hand while she approached her door. She slowly opened the door and there stood the dark beauty, who could command every one of Landen's passions.

"Howdy," murmured the smiling ranger. She tipped her hat slightly by the brim.

Landen faintly smiled then stepped aside and after her lover entered, she closed the door.

The Texas Ranger took note of the cleaning supplies on the table by the saddlebags. She'd never seen a Winchester rifle shine like Landen's rifle. She slowly turned and saw the reflecting Colt in the southerner's hand. "How are yew?" She could already read the tension lines on Landen's face.

The cowgirl stepped closer after she closed the door and she tilted her head back. "I'm ridin' high," she teased then her right hand stretched up. She pulled Raleigh's head down for a tender kiss.

Raleigh grinned at the end of the kiss.

Landen withdrew slightly and mirrored that cat grin she adored from Raleigh. She lifted her left hand with the Colt then with impressive speed she spun it in a blur and it disappeared into her waiting holster.

Raleigh glanced down then raised an eyebrow at her lover.

The cowgirl smirked then brought her hands behind Raleigh's neck where her fingers linked together. "I reckon though ya know how to take me higher."

The ranger chuckled. "Is that so?" She lowered her head closer but paused. "Landen, we ain't gonna do this here."

The southern cowgirl grew confident and her voice deepened. "I reckon that's uh challenge."

"Yew can't be quiet," softly reminded the ranger.

Landen moved her body until it pressed against Raleigh's. "That's apart of the fun."

Raleigh had her hands on the smaller woman's hips. She lifted her right and brushed back Landen's short hair.

Landen leaned into the touch then she turned her head until her lips brushed over her lover's long fingers. She parted her lips and gently grazed her teeth over the tip of Raleigh's index finger. She heard Raleigh's sharp inhale and she grinned up at the

ranger. She grasped Raleigh's large belt buckle and gave a rough jerk. "Raleigh, I want this... I need this tonight." She placed her left hand behind Raleigh's head and her tone softened into a hidden plea. "Give me tonight with ya."

Landen's request sunk deep into Raleigh's mind yet she followed her desire to please her lover. She sealed the promise tonight.

It was only a couple hours before dawn that Landen remained on her back, staring up at the dimly candlelit ceiling, and her thoughts were far away. All about her were a tangle of white sheets that wrapped around her legs, stomach, and her lover's backside.

Landen turned her head to the left and sadly smiled at her worn out lover's sprawled, nude form.

Raleigh breathed heavily and she rested on her stomach, her body slightly diagonal in the bed. On the night stand just near her head was her bullet belt and her revolver in the holster. Her clothes, like Landen's, were sprinkled about the room's floor.

Landen brushed her sticky bangs back from her warm forehead. She could still taste the air that held their recent lovemaking. Her eyes closed as her recent memories from tonight whispered back to her. She quietly groaned between how amazing it'd been and how much she'd miss this.

The cowgirl rolled to her left finally and her smooth skin melted into Raleigh's.

The ranger moaned when warm skin met hers. She was weary but she felt a kiss placed to her exposed right cheek then onto her muscular shoulder. A small hand glided down her right arm until small fingers laced through hers. She tightened her hold on Landen's hand then Landen's warmth lulled her back to sleep.

Landen settled her body against her lover's. She lowered her head just between Raleigh's shoulder blades with her left ear pressed into the hot skin. Raleigh's faint heartbeat pulsed through her body and echoed into Landen's ear, which calmed Landen but she would not sleep this night.

The Texas Ranger, Raleigh Baylor, covered her face with her hand when the light struck her in the eye. She groaned in annoyance at the sun in her eye but she lifted her head and approached her new day. Her eyebrows met when she sensed something very wrong. She sat up in a rush when the bed felt so empty. Her sleepiness instantly vanished and her heart waited a beat when her mind processed what her eyes saw.

The room contained nothing of Landen's belongings let alone the cowgirl.

"Landen?" she called softly. Her heart loudly pounded and she threw the covers off her nude body. She jumped to her feet then stared in horror at the cleared room except for her clothes folded on top of the table. Now she knew she hadn't just dreamt her night or the previous days; Landen hadn't been a ghost. How could she have missed hearing Landen's movements in the room then leaving?

Raleigh hastily went to her clothes and threw them on, rammed her feet into her boots,

and she yanked her bullet belt off the nightstand. She swiftly fitted it on her waist and as she went to the door she snatched her hat off the doorknob where Landen must have placed it. She was a wreck but she didn't care and went to the front desk.

"Good mornin', Ranger Baylor."

"Mr. McNally, where's Miss Morrison?"

The innkeeper was seated at his stool and his earlier smile was lost. "Miss Morrison left several hours ago, Miss Baylor." He shook his head at observing the ranger's distraught features. "What is-"

"She say where she went?" cut off the ranger.

John McNally's jaw snapped shut and he considered his brief conversation with Miss Morrison. "Naw... she ain't say a word. I asked if she'd be returnin' later cuz I thought she was going to Old Man Thomas's."

"The drive ain't for another two days," murmured the confused, worried woman.

The innkeeper bit his lower lip then mentioned, "She told me she ain't returnin'." He tilted his head. "She didn't tell yew?"

The Texas Ranger tried to recover and she worked her fingers through her tangled hair. "She talked about leavin' early for the drive." At the innkeeper's nod, she took a step away. "Thanks, Mr. McNally."

"Yew welcome, Ranger Baylor."

Raleigh left the inn then stopped on the porch and she thoughtlessly placed her dark hat on her head. She scanned the main street as if she'd find Landen waiting for her. Her racing thoughts suddenly silenced and in a daze she went down each step one by one then she stopped when her boots were on the ground. She blankly stared at the movements of the small townspeople and the faces were blank to her. Then mindlessly she walked behind the inn and wandered into the stable of the inn. Her boots scrapped across the floor as she passed the empty stalls and she was never greeted by Stargazer.

When Raleigh finally stumbled out of the stables, she pressed her back against the doorframe, and dropped her head against the hard wood. Her hat tipped back, almost falling off but she ripped the hat off and her eyes stung. Raleigh slid down the doorframe until she sat in the dirt and her head fell forward to hide her face. She argued with her emotions then she suddenly silenced them all with a furious growl. She roughly put her hat on and her face lifted with an iron expression.

Raleigh forced her body to stand up despite the wavering weakness. She adjusted her hat right then jerked her open vest forward and buttoned it up so that she looked slightly more becoming of a ranger. She filled her six feet with pride and she stepped forward to go face the public eye. The sunlight shined against the lonely tear that rode down her flushed cheek and Raleigh simply ignored it.

Chapter 3

Ranger Baylor dismounted her chestnut mare and guided her up to the wood post in front of the house but she stopped. She thoughtfully considered her horse and quietly asked, "Yew wanna go in the corral, girl?"

Classic Touch whined and her head went up and down. She then yanked on the reins by jerking her head to the left.

Raleigh softly smiled at her communicating horse. "I guess so." She led her horse away from the house and tracked over to the small corral that had three other horses prancing around in excitement. They were horses that Raleigh continually trained and would soon be selling for a fair profit. It was her side job when she wasn't busy being a ranger plus it was a nice means of money for her mother.

The ranger removed her mare's tack and set the saddle first on the fencing then tossed the face tack beside it. She opened the small gate and urged her horse to enter.

Classic Touch hurried in and met the other horses with pure excitement.

Raleigh closed the gate but her hand remained on it. She watched her Tennessee Walker play with the young mares in the corral then she decided it was time to see her mother. She first yanked her rifle free from its holster where it was attached to the saddle. She leaned the barrel against her right shoulder while she crossed the short distance back to her mother's house.

Jane Baylor lifted her head when her daughter entered her small home. She warmly smiled but she easily read her child's worn features. "Howdy," she greeted and halted her stitching.

Raleigh returned the smile after setting her rifle by the door then came over to her mother. She bent over the seated woman and placed a kiss to her right cheek. "Howdy, ma. How are yew?"

"Well," replied the mother. "How are yew?"

Raleigh had a mute answer by a nod. She then arched an eyebrow at the stitching work in her mother's lap. "That ain't for me, is it?"

Jane sighed then eyed her dubious child. "So what if it is?" She held out her left hand at the stitched item in her lap. "Winter is still here and yew need a blanket for thuh cool nights."

The ranger straightened up and shook her head. "Keep it for yewself, ma." She walked away and went into a small side room that was the kitchen.

Jane sighed while she shook her head. She carefully folded the partially completed blanket that was in patch work style. She set it beside the rocking chair she was in then she got up. Her plain brown skirt fell around her until it brushed her ankles. She

made her way to the kitchen while she fussed with her dark brown hair. "How's thuh office?"

"Quiet," remarked the ranger, who was busying with eating an orange at the small table.

Jane neared her daughter. "Yew want me ta make yew somethin', sweetie?"

"I'm alright," brushed off the ranger. She worked her nails through the orange's skin; her full focus on the fruit. "How's yew day?"

The mother shrugged. She ambled over to the beat up iron stove. "It's been quiet." She set her worn kettle onto the still warm stove. She bent over, checked the amount of burning wood in the stove, and closed up the heavy door. She wiped her hands on her apron then came over to the table. She took the seat next to Raleigh's right. "How yew been feelin'?"

Raleigh kept her head down. She pulled the now skinned orange in half then removed a slice. "Fine, ma."

Jane slowly exhaled because she never liked seeing her child act this way. It was rare for Raleigh to be this cold around her but she understood the cause of it. "Yew haven't heard anythin'?"

The Texas Ranger grunted and shook her head. "I ain't gonna, ma." She popped an orange slice into her mouth and enjoyed the tangy liquid. She pulled off another slice but hesitated from eating it yet. "I saw Old Man Thomas this mornin'." She slipped the orange slice between her full lips but didn't offer any other news for now.

Jane frowned then got to her feet when she decided she needed something to snack on too. She went back to the stove where she kept a bowl of fruit. She pulled out an apple and picked up her paring knife then returned to her seat.

"He was sending out a small shipment of cattle," mentioned the ranger. Her next orange slice remained poised in midair by her fingertips. "He ain't seen Landen... I suspect he ain't gonna." She slipped the slice into her mouth.

Jane had carefully listened to her daughter. She wiggled out her cut apple slice from the whole piece. "Its strange how she up and left without explanation."

The Texas Ranger stared straight ahead and she roughly yanked another wedge free. "Naw... it ain't, ma. She's hidin' somethin'."

"How can yew be sure?" argued the mother.

"There ain't no reason to be disappearin' like that." Raleigh pulled apart the last two pieces. "She's runnin' from somethin'."

"Maybe she's got a past or somethin', sweetie." Jane could tell she wasn't going to sooth her child's anger today. She knew it was anger on the surface but deeper still she knew it all stemmed from Raleigh's pain.

"Maybe so," murmured Raleigh, "A past hidden in thuh basement like uh crazy aunt."

The mother shook her head at her child's venomous words. She reached over and patted Raleigh's right hand. Her kettle then sounded out so she got up, leaving her half eaten apple behind with the knife. "Yew want any Arbuckle?"

The ranger considered it after she ate her last orange piece. "Yes'sum, ma." In a short moment she received her warm mug and the coffee wafted up to her. "Thanks."

Jane smiled but she decided to eat her apple first before drinking her Arbuckle coffee. While she sliced another piece, she watched how her child brooded over the past several days that'd caused a lot of pain. It would seem somehow this stranger had greatly affected her child and she didn't much like the effects thus far. "Sweetie, yew gotta let it go."

The ranger sipped on her hot coffee then set the mug down. Her hands were wrapped around the mug but she was considering her mother's words. "I will, ma... when I'm ready."

Jane kept her head down while she planned out her next words carefully. She used her paring to keep her busy. She cleared her throat quietly then mentioned, "Maybe thuh girl knew it weren't gonna work out for yawl."

Raleigh was staring into her dark mug but now her eyes locked on her mother. "What?"

Jane pulled the apple slice free from the apple then her child's gaze. "Yew heard me." She pointed her apple slice at her child. "I ain't no fool, Raleigh... I knew what yawl were up to." She popped the fruit into her mouth.

Raleigh stared in disbelief at her mother. "How did..." She shook her head and freed a hand. She combed her bangs back but they all fell back on her forehead. She realized there wasn't any fooling her mother and she couldn't guess for how long her mother knew.

"I think it's for the best," remarked the mother. She caught sight of her daughter's defensive manners rearing up so she took the defense faster. "Think about it, Raleigh... yew are pushing yew luck by being a ranger." She let out a low sigh. "And she's a squaddie?" She returned to cutting another slice. "Yawl are pushin' yew chances as is."

Raleigh dipped her head and felt the steam wash over her face. She closed her eyes when her memories with Landen returned; memories that she missed and loathed all at once. "She still ain't got no right to disappear like that."

"No," softly agreed the mother, "but if it were meant to be then it would."

"I know," murmured the ranger. She lifted her head along with her mug and took a long draw of the warm liquid. She set the mug down but toyed with the worn handle. "Ma, you're not...." She shook her head not sure how to phrase her words properly.

Jane ate her last apple slice. She set the knife aside then brought her mug of coffee closer. "Well I know I probably ain't gonna be gettin' a grandchild anytime soon," teased the mother, who hoped it'd calm her child.

Raleigh though only sighed sadly. "I'm sorry."

Jane stretched out her hand and her long fingers wrapped around Raleigh's nearby wrist. "I always knew yew would be different." She squeezed then softly added, "I'm proud of yew, Raleigh cuz there ain't many women who would dare to do what yew've accomplished."

"I ain't exactly... normal," muttered the irritated daughter.

"Ain't neither of us," agreed the mother. At her child's dubious look she explained, "I'm runnin' this farm on my own... I ain't remarried."

"After father... I wouldn't remarry either." Raleigh's tone was cold.

"And most women are suppose to," sadly reminded the mother. She saw how her daughter was still distraught so she dipped her head lower so she could get a better view of her child's features. "I worry for yew, Raleigh... about people like this Landen girl." She removed her hand and placed her fingertips under Raleigh's chin. She carefully lifted her child's head back up. "I worry what people may do if they find out."

"They ain't gonna," firmed the ranger.

Jane had a bittersweet smile at her child's confidence. "Just promise me that yew'll always be careful...?"

Raleigh slowly nodded her head and took her mother's hand into hers. "I promise, ma."

"Remember, no matter what that I'll always love yew," guaranteed the mother.

Raleigh finally smiled. "I know, ma." She placed a butterfly kiss to her mother's knuckles and squeezed harder. "Thank you."

The next day around the same time Raleigh Baylor was seated behind the main desk at the rangers' office. She was busy reading over some recent news in the local area but she hesitated when she heard boots clanking against the floorboards. She ignored it. Then suddenly a stack of papers were slammed down on her desk that completely covered what she'd been reading. She grew annoyed but peered up.

The ranger, George Herold, smirked at his comrade's irritation. "June is gonna be here shortly."

"What's going on?" clipped Ranger Baylor.

"We got orders from Major John Jones to join up with Pinkerton Agents." Ranger

Herold lowered his hand and pointed his finger at the sketched face on the paper before the other ranger. "That's Sam Bass... he's causin' a lot of trouble."

Raleigh stared at the young man's face on the wanted poster. "I heard about his stagecoach robberies near Dallas."

"Well it seems he's moved onto robbin' trains and we got our orders to stop him."

Raleigh lifted her head to her comrade. "Is it just him?"

Ranger Herold shook his head then moved his hand away. "Thuh next posters are all his members of thuh gang."

"Cute," muttered the female ranger, who was flipping through all the posters. "What's this Sam Bass fella like?"

"They're sayin' yew just don't know what he might do." Ranger Herold reached behind to his back pocket and extracted a rolled up poster he'd been holding onto until Ranger Baylor was finished scanning over the current ones. "Yew might find this interesting... we just got this in when word got around about this outlaw comin' ta Texas."

Raleigh took the wanted poster and unrolled it as she set it down on top of the current stack. Her heart missed a beat yet her expression hardened at seeing Landen Morrison's sketched face staring back at her.

George Herold folded his arms across his chest and enjoyed his comrade's reaction. "They call her the Triple L for short. She's blacker than midnight under uh skillet."

Raleigh slowly set the poster down and her eyes lowered to the crimes. She straightened up when it read that Landen Morrison was wanted for the murders of Mr. and Mrs. Terry Morrison then a smaller list of minor stagecoach robberies and U.S. Mail robberies. "Goddamn it," she hissed, "she was just here!"

Ranger Herold took a step back. "None of us knew, Raleigh."

Raleigh stood up with her chair scraping across the floor. "And she made us look like fools," she hotly hissed. She knew she was the biggest fool out of all the rangers.

George Herold hadn't expected such a furious reaction from the ranger and he started to regret his decision to make fun of the ironic situation. "She's long gone by now, Raleigh... we gotta haul in thuh Sam Bass Gang now."

The female ranger lowered her hands onto the desk and hunched over, her eyes fixed on the wanted poster.

Ranger Herold's shoulders slumped and he mentioned, "June is gonna be here soon so if yew need ta get yew gear then yew better hurry." He then took his leave of the building.

Ranger Baylor's stare burned into the poster of Landen Morrison. If it was something she hated mostly in life it were liars and outlaws, which Landen happened to be both

in Raleigh's conclusion. Since her childhood, Raleigh promised herself she'd help in stopping outlaws so this had led her to being a Texas Ranger. She detested her father's past and now she'd been lied to by an outlaw that'd she'd not only helped but carried on with sexually.

Raleigh grabbed the center of the poster and her long fingers proceeded to claw through the poster until it was nothing but a ball in her hand. She dropped the balled up poster onto the stack and her icy blue eyes stared at Sam Bass's face. "Yew plug-ugly outlaws," she growled then straightened up. She turned, snatched up her rifle, and stomped out of the office.

The End