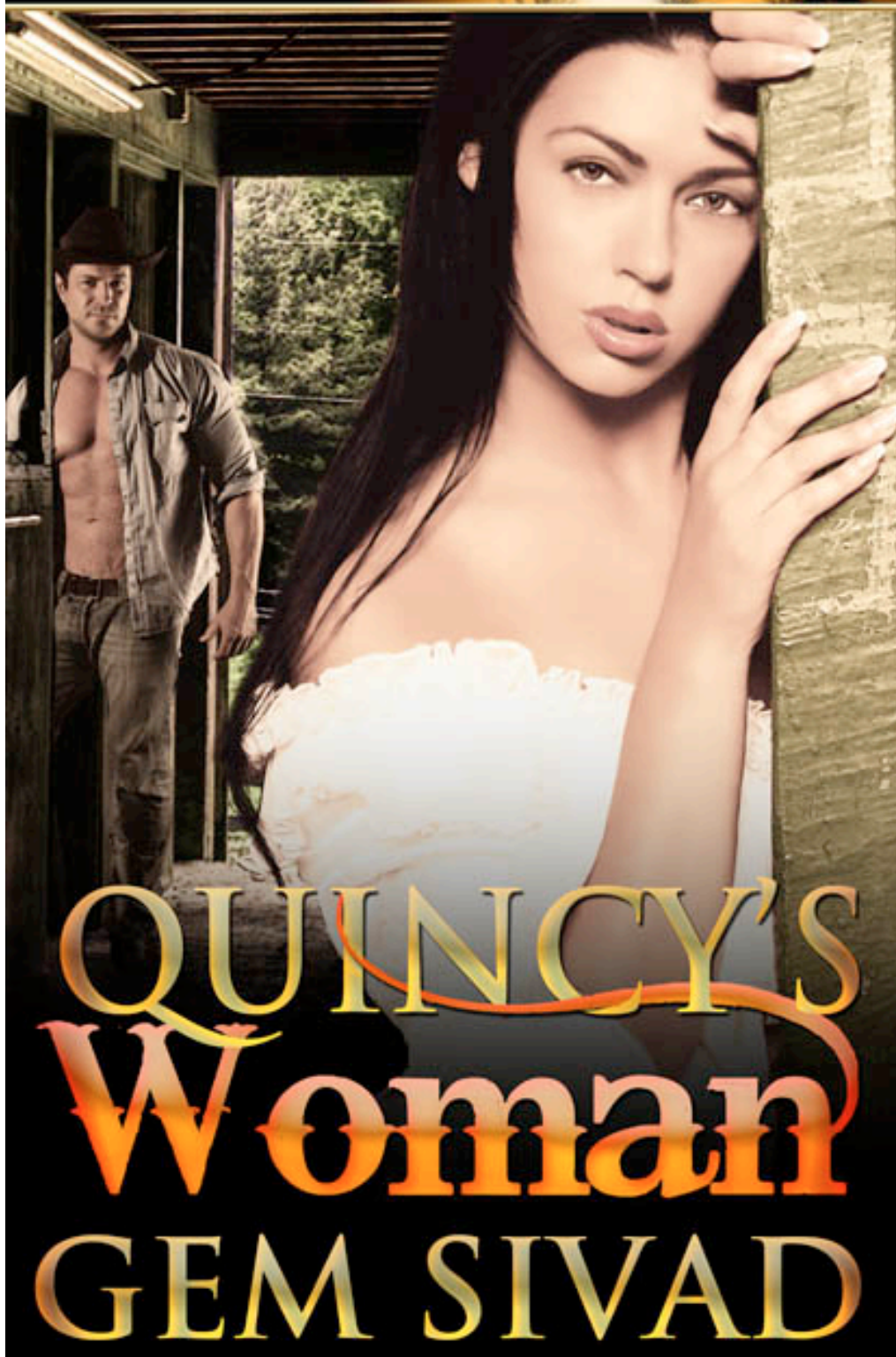


ELLORA'S CAVE **LAWLESS**



Quincy's Woman

Gem Sivad

Fresh from the post-Civil War salons and drawing rooms of Boston, Lucy McKenna considers herself a sophisticated young woman. But when she meets Texas rancher Ambrose Quince, she turns into a flustered girl. He's too old, war roughened and unrefined – and she has no idea how to deal with the sensual hunger he inspires.

Ambrose falls fast and hard for the innocent debutante visiting Eclipse, Texas. Persuading Lucy to accept his pursuit becomes a duel of wits and passion as he awakens her desire.

Lucy leaves Boston and childhood behind when she becomes Mrs. Ambrose Quince. Her lonely days on the Double-Q ranch are filled with work and frustration. But the nights are spent in her husband's arms, learning carnal awareness...one molten caress at a time.

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Quincy's Woman

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QUINCY'S WOMAN

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Prologue

Lucille McKenna

Boston, Massachusetts

Sunday, April 8, 1866

Dear Diary,

It is my birthday and my father's gift is this journal. The War Between the States is at an end, and Papa says it is now safe for us to travel to Texas.

We leave Boston tomorrow and he suggested that I use this book to keep a record of our journey. It is his dream to raise horses on our own land in that faraway place.

I will note the things of interest as a history of my adventure – at least until I fill these pages. I smile at how self-important I sound.

It will be for my eyes alone.

Signed,

Lucy McKenna, on the occasion of my birthday – 1866.

Chapter One

May 4, 1866. Dear Diary, we are arriving in Eclipse, Texas, tomorrow. The train was uncomfortable, the stagecoach barbaric. I must remember not to think things can't get worse – each time I do, fate proves me wrong.

I stared out the window at the desolate landscape speeding by and dodged a chunk of rock kicked up by the stage as we lurched toward our destination. I could either close the rough fabric curtain and sit in an airless coach or suffer flying debris. For the moment, I chose the view, such as it was.

A tilted sign painted on a wooden arrow promised the end of our journey. “Eclipse,” Father said eagerly, leaning around me to point at the name carved in the rough wood. When the earthen path sprouted rickety buildings on both sides of the coach, he announced happily, “We’re here.”

The conveyance we rode in, no more than a cumbersome box on wheels, creaked to a stop. Papa flung open the door, departing the stage before quickly handing me down as he heaped praise on the driver for our safe arrival. I shook out the folds of my skirts, delicately shuddering as the stagecoach driver unloaded the baggage by roughly tossing it to the ground. The thoroughfare I stood on consisted of packed dirt fronting an unpromising hotel entrance.

Papa called to me, “Come, Lucia, don’t frown so.” He coaxed a smile from me, using his pet name, adding with enthusiasm, “We’ve things to do, places to see, horses to find.”

The challenge of starting this new life quickened his spirits at the same time mine were depressed. Eclipse—I thought gloomily—definitely darkness that cloaks my future. Even the name of the town seemed to portend disaster. This land was so

different from the green lawns and graceful houses in Boston. Everything here seemed comprised of dust and wind and I hated it already.

How can Father think of moving us here? My father seemed determined to begin a new life away from all we'd known in the East. I was equally resolved to convince him to return to Boston. I groaned, remembering the missed spring debutante balls. At home, I would be readying for Miss Elise Anderson's coming-out party. Boston was agog with end-of-war celebrations and high spirits but my father preferred to miss the revelry.

So many men he had known in the war had lost their lives. At home he had languished, troubled and alone. I had worried about his waning spirits but his zest for life had increased as we'd distanced ourselves from Boston until now he fairly bounced with energy. How that was possible after days of travel mystified me. He waved his hand impatiently and repeated, "Come along, Lucy."

In spite of my father's urging, I hesitated, reluctant to tread the boarded walkway, as though stepping there committed me to a life in Texas. I studied the building in wonder. The unimaginative sign, "Eclipse Hotel", was displayed proudly in bold red letters against the rough wooden exterior. Mentally, I compared its inauspicious face to the stone edifice and elegant pillared entrance of the Tremont Hotel in Boston.

My gaze continued down the street, settling on two men dismounting from horses. They wore pistols strapped to their hips and guns bristled from the rifle boot on each saddle. One of the men turned as if sensing my stare and I was caught gawking. He returned my rude assessment with his own and when our eyes met, he stiffened, taking a step in our direction. I tensed, ready to flee from the local savage, but his companion said something and the rough man turned away with a shrug, walking toward the building in front of him.

As I stood looking, a brown scrubby plant landed against my foot, propelled there by the dust-laden wind. It was a good distraction. "What is that thing?" I asked sharply.

"Sagebrush," the coach driver grunted, ignoring the blowing debris. The errant foliage served as incentive, driving me into the relative civilization of the hotel.

Father led the way into the foyer and across the bare wooden floor to the desk, then spoke to the bespectacled clerk who stood watching with no offer of help in fetching the bags. "We will need rooms and I anticipate a prolonged stay."

As though assessing Papa's ability to pay, the hotel employee studied both Father and me before answering. "The best suite is unoccupied, but it will cost you a pretty penny. Money up-front before I give you the keys."

I was appalled by his surly behavior, but Papa nodded pleasantly and counted out cash to secure the rooms. He gave the clerk no more than a cursory smile before he issued his orders. "We will want to bathe and rid ourselves of travel dust. Also, a meal is to be procured and delivered to our rooms." At the clerk's mutinous expression, Papa added, "I'll speak to the manager and arrange payment for our continued stay after we decide if this establishment is habitable." He handed the hotel employee a generous amount and explained, "This should cover the cost of our meals and delivery. Keep the remainder for yourself."

I smiled inside at the clerk's transformation from belligerent to fawning as Papa escorted me to the rooms he had obtained.

The "best suite in the establishment" turned out to be a tiny sitting room flanked by two smaller bedrooms. I retreated to my room to bathe in a tub delivered by the hotel staff. When I saw the tin bath and buckets of water provided, I complained of the inelegant bathing arrangement. "Papa, this place is uncivilized. I hope it soon loses its charm for you."

My father frowned, chiding me, "Simplify, Daughter. Water and soap serve bathing as well in Texas tin as Boston copper."

Father was as pleased as I was appalled. He insisted on touring the premises outside and left me wrestling with the buckets of water delivered to the room. After pouring the hot liquid in the tub followed by enough cold to make the temperature bearable, I shed my clothes and relaxed in the tepid mix.

Closing my eyes, I leaned against the rim of the ugly contraption and admitted Papa was right. Though our home back East boasted a water closet and bathing room modeled after the English Queen, Victoria's, the Eclipse soap and water felt just as heavenly as any I'd ever experienced in Boston.

I reviewed all I'd seen since our journey began and my flitting thoughts called forth the image of the rough cowboy earlier in the day. Sinking lower in the lukewarm water, I absently stroked the sponge up and down my body, illicit excitement cascading through me as I pictured the Texan with whom I'd exchanged glances.

I shivered from nervous excitement.

* * * * *

May 11, 1866. I met a man today. His name is Ambrose Quince.

We had been in Eclipse for a week, exploring the town and its people. I had no idea why Papa was impressed with Eclipse. His excitement grew each day and he seemed determined to continue his purchase of a local property.

Father had made an appointment with the bank president the day before and as we waited for the Eclipse Bank to open, he insisted I accompany him to the town's only store. I wore my pink dress, aware that it was unlike the plainer attire of the Texas women, but unwilling to sacrifice style for conformity.

The local shop was a pathetic attempt at commerce, being housed in a run-down shack with a tiny wooden sign stating Kelly's Mercantile hanging on the front door. I tried to keep my skirts from brushing across the dirty floorboards, but it was a hopeless enterprise.

The proprietor was an old man who shuffled beside us, pointing out his wares as I studied them doubtfully. A few pieces of furniture were rather good quality. When I said as much, stopping to admire a cherrywood vanity, he said eagerly, "I have catalogs

you can order from, missy. If you and your pa set up housekeeping here, you can get whatever you want shipped in."

I clenched my jaw, afraid of the rude remark I might make at such a suggestion. Set up housekeeping here? Never!

I murmured a tepid response and focused instead on two roughly dressed cowboys entering the front door. I found that a ludicrous term for the men who were so named, for whatever these two were, they were not boys.

They were similar in appearance—tall, with stern features and dark hair. As I watched, the store owner hurried to them and said something to the taller of the men, causing him to turn toward where my father and I stood. I was caught looking at him and experienced an unexpected jolt of recognition when his gaze met mine. It was the man I'd locked eyes with on our first day in Eclipse.

Unaware of the exchange, Papa put aside the riding equipage he was admiring and said, "The bank should be open now, Lucy. We'll return here another day."

I gladly accompanied him from the mercantile, hurrying across the dirt street to the Eclipse Bank and what seemed a safe haven. I was aware of the cowboy's eyes following my progress, feeling the heat of his gaze as I retreated.

By comparison, the bank was ornate. It was a dignified building with as much pomp and circumstance as this land appeared to be able to offer. Nevertheless, it was no more than a small building with three tellers at the counter and a business office in the rear.

As soon as we entered, a man approached with outstretched hand. "I'm Stephen Pauley," he introduced himself. "I hope you're finding your stay in Eclipse enjoyable."

I resisted the impulse to fan myself, both to stir the air and to dispel the heavy scent the banker wore. *Enjoyable*. I think not!

Hiding my displeasure, I waited patiently as Papa had conversation with the bank manager. I had to admit, Mr. Pauley seemed a gentleman, deferring to my father at the same time he was discreetly cordial to me. I could see the interest in his eyes and, more

from boredom than reciprocation, I sought clever words to say, vying with Papa to hold his attention.

I set out to practice the art of flirtation, readying for the day I might use it once we returned home to Boston. It was difficult paying attention to the banker since his discourse seemed both pretentious and sycophantic.

"Let me make you both more comfortable." Mr. Pauley invited us to his office but my father waved that away and continued the discussion where we stood. "I've spent my life in offices, Pauley. We'll stand here among the Eclipse populace as we speak."

I was accustomed to my father's rather autocratic ways and my interest drifted away from Papa and the banker, who were eagerly discussing available land for sale.

The cowboy I'd been gawking at earlier entered the premises looking directly at me as if I were his purpose for visiting the bank. A blush tinged my cheeks and although I should have jerked my gaze from his, he paced toward where we stood before I could look away.

His sinuous stride covered the distance between us in a manner different from any man's walk I'd ever witnessed. He was lean and obviously strong, with muscled arms outlined by the cotton shirt he wore. His appearance caused a visceral reaction deep inside me, as if I viewed the approach of a wild beast.

Exuding male heat and power, he arrived, looming above me. Feeling dwarfed by his great height and muscular torso, I cautiously inched backward, almost panicked by the man's proximity and eager to let my father handle the stranger.

As Mr. Pauley had done earlier, the cowboy didn't wait for an introduction. Holding out his hand to Father, he said, "I'm Ambrose Quince. My spread's the Double-Q, west of town. I heard you were looking for a herd of mustang."

With those words, Mr. Quince had Papa's full attention and Mr. Pauley was left standing unattended. Father had earlier admonished me to be fair in my judgment of Texas citizens. So far I had seen none worth comparing to the young Bostonians in my circle of friends. However, Mr. Quince both stirred my interest and flustered my senses.

I was acutely aware of my damp dress clinging to my corset and trickles of perspiration coursing down my spine. Afraid my face might be shiny from the oppressive heat, I ducked my head and smiled at Mr. Pauley, rather than look at the man next to me. As I retreated, the stranger followed, keeping the distance between us the same. Unexplainably agitated, my senses rioted in response to him.

Having been caught staring at him twice, I felt quite foolish and gladly began a conversation with the bank president. His formal business attire was reassuring, and although Mr. Pauley's suit was not of the latest cut and quality seen in Boston, he was still a happy reminder of civilization.

I discreetly studied the two gentlemen Papa spoke with—although I am not sure Mr. Quince fit into that category. Civilized was not a word I equated with him. It was more than his casual attire, dressed as he was in denims and a work shirt.

His calloused hands were those of a day laborer but his attitude reflected assured authority. Father seemed as fascinated as I. The contrast between the banker and Mr. Quince was startling. I edged away from the rancher and closer to Mr. Pauley, filling the void of conversation left by Papa's defection. Father smiled at my giddy chatter but steered me from my attempts at coquetry, introducing me to Mr. Quince.

"This young lady is my daughter, Lucille." Father emphasized the word lady, reminding me to maintain respectable behavior. My father's objective seemed to be in furthering our acquaintance with Mr. Quince, having greater interest in his knowledge of ranching than in the banker's litany of land parcels for sale.

Mr. Quince, on the other hand, seemed much more intent on furthering his social contact with me. I giggled to myself at his obvious interest. Since I felt disheveled from the oppressive heat and was clearly not presenting my best appearance, his notice was very flattering.

"Miss McKenna, with your father's permission, I'd be pleased to introduce you to the sights in town." He offered his escort in a deep, gravelly voice that sent nervous

skitters through me. Back home, I had engaged in a few minor flirtations with boys my age. Mr. Quince, however, was a man.

I floundered for a suitable response, not wishing to offend but appalled at the idea of spending time alone with the big man. Before I answered, I edged closer to Father, automatically seeking protection. “I believe I’ve met the clerks and managers already, having been escorted by Papa to all of the town’s establishments—except the saloon, of course.”

Father politely redirected the conversation without comment either way, and invited the two men to join us for a late supper at the hotel. Mr. Pauley accepted immediately.

“Nope, I’ve got work that can’t be neglected,” Mr. Quince declined and once again exchanged handshakes with Father before taking my hand in his. Reluctantly, I stared up at him as he squeezed my palm. In spite of my glove separating our flesh, his touch brought a flush of awareness surging through my body.

The deep timbre of his voice disturbed me as much as his words when he drawled, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss McKenna. I hope to further our acquaintance during your stay here in Eclipse.”

I was relieved when he released my hand and walked away. I frowned at his back, telling myself I preferred Mr. Pauley, a reasonable facsimile of a Boston gentleman. Ambrose Quince was unlike any man I’d ever met.

And yet after inhaling the flowery aroma of the banker’s cologne and shaking his well-manicured hand goodbye, I found it was Mr. Quince’s clean, male scent and firm grip that I remembered. I was both relieved and disappointed he had turned down Father’s invitation.

* * * * *

In spite of his “too busy” declaration earlier in the day, the ranch owner appeared at our evening meal. I sat across from Papa with Mr. Pauley on my left. When Father’s

lips curved into a welcoming smile and he gestured, beckoning someone behind me to join us, the hair on the back of my neck stirred and I knew without looking Mr. Quince approached from the rear.

I felt rather like a mouse hiding under a leaf, as though any moment the rancher might pounce on me. It was a disquieting response to a stranger. I deliberately focused my attention on Mr. Pauley, who seemed full of his own importance. It was easy to practice insipid conversation, entertaining him with mindless chatter while listening to Papa and Mr. Quince discuss more interesting fare—horses—a passion of both Father's and mine.

It was Mr. Quince who brought me into their conversation when he asked Papa, "Does Miss McKenna share your interest in wild mustangs?"

I left poor Mr. Pauley in the middle of a story about the Winter Ball and answered before my father could. "I will enjoy viewing them. I imagine they are more primitive and less intelligent than blooded stock."

Too late, I realized I had taken his lure. Mr. Quince's eyes gleamed satisfaction and his mouth curved in a smile, as though he had known I was listening.

He said, "Primitive, you call it. I call it untainted raw power on the hoof. As for intelligence—it takes some smarts to survive and stay free."

Emanating the same kind of raw power he ascribed to the mustangs, Mr. Quince raked me with his glance, sending a cascade of heat through my body. Mouselike, I froze as if facing a predator and mumbled, "Of course." Withdrawing from all conversation, I stared at my plate and nibbled at the roasted beef and potatoes.

What is wrong with me? For the life of me, I couldn't tear my gaze from the overcooked meat for fear I might look up and lock gazes with Mr. Quince again.

Mr. Pauley entered the conversation as it turned to land purchases and ranching. Although the banker spoke knowledgably about property acquisition, it was Mr. Quince's opinions Father seemed to favor.

Mr. Quince said mildly, "Best be wary of some of those pieces the banker's trotting out for you to consider. There's a reason most of the ranchers on them went belly-up."

Mr. Pauley, looking both uncomfortable and irritated, subsided from further land offers. I admired Papa's adept maneuvering back to his real interest. "I'll see the horses first, then decide if my idea is worthy of developing. Ambrose, I've heard about the mustangs. Will there be an opportunity for me to view them?"

I found it disconcerting when Papa addressed the rancher by his first name. It was a distinction not accorded Mr. Pauley. *How odd that Father treats Mr. Quince as a business equal at the same time he's indifferent to the stature of the bank president.*

Mr. Quince assured Papa there were herds of mustang horses running wild on his ranch. I listened closely to the conversation, trying to fathom what made this man so appealing. He was rough in dress and crude in his speech, and yet carried an air of confidence that belied his presentation.

I could tell Papa was very impressed. I decided he must be rich. Evidently the Double-Q encompassed a great amount of property owned by Ambrose and his brother Hamilton.

Chapter Two

May 16, 1866. For all of his busy ranch business, Ambrose Quince has found time to join Father and me for our evening meal each night. More often than not, Mr. Pauley also finds his way to our dining table.

I began playing a nightly game in order to quell the boredom of interminable male business conversations. I compared our dinner companions with those I had known in Boston.

Mr. Pauley was easy to assess. He was simply one more midlevel associate of Father's craving his approval. The banker's dress imitated his betters. His hands were manicured and well-tended, showing his refinement. His clothes were cut appropriate to his status, his shirt collar high and starched, but the linen fabric of a poorer quality than I would have advised. He was clearly a man seeking to impress those who had more than he did.

I understood perfectly that Mr. Pauley cultivated my company in order to gain access to Father. But he listened to me as well when I said, "I believe the latest fashion is for a wider necktie, Mr. Pauley. Some of Father's associates in Boston have also begun contriving a knot held with a stickpin."

I considered it a mark of his intelligence that he curried my favor and secretly smiled, waiting to see if he would sport a different tie on his next meal with us. I spent time teasing the banker with snippets of Boston news and fashion because he and I were so frequently left to our own devices. At first, I thought Papa commandeered the rancher's attention but came to understand it was Ambrose managing each conversation.

I did not find Mr. Quince so easy to analyze—he fell in no category of my experience. He certainly wasn't like the other men Papa did business with. As for fashion, the cotton shirt that stretched across his broad shoulders was clean but threadbare. His denim trousers were sometimes patched and often frayed. And his boots were too scuffed to judge the quality of the leather.

I reevaluated my earlier assumption—Mr. Quince could not be rich. Nobody with affluence would dress so poorly. And yet, the very way he carried himself in the rough clothing attested to his power and confidence.

I moderated my glances, confining my quick peeks to moments he and Father engaged in deep conversation. At those times, I studied him closely. His hands were scarred, his knuckles often marred with fresh cuts and scratches. His nails were clipped, clean and short.

My gaze was fixed on his tanned fingers, cupping a mug of coffee with one hand and with the other mapping the acreage of his land, using the condiments as markers. He raised his cup to sip his after-dinner coffee and I followed the path and met his eyes over the rim. Mr. Quince drawled, "You find my hands interesting, Miss McKenna?"

My behavior was inquisitive and unpolished and I felt a ruddy flush creep from my neck to my cheeks. His eyebrow arched and his lids lowered to half slits, the sun lines wrinkling in humor as he returned my stare, challenging me to say something.

"I...I beg your pardon," I murmured, desperately seeking a lucid response. "Your hands are very large." I could have kicked myself for such an inane remark.

He snorted at the comment and then said, "I'm a big man, Miss McKenna. My hands are just a small part of the overall."

I stammered into incoherency and turned quickly away to reengage the banker in conversation, feeling that Mr. Pauley was a safe haven compared to the rancher.

Mr. Quince often appeared quite rude, contradicting my father or interrupting my attempted flirtations with the bank president to pull me into his own conversation. At those times, he treated Mr. Pauley indifferently, ignoring his ferocious glare.

It was exhilarating having grown men vie for my attentions. Mr. Pauley was obviously older than I, although the way he teetered on his heels and gesticulated wildly, he sometimes seemed younger.

I couldn't determine Mr. Quince's age—but his weary strength bespoke experiences far beyond mine. I was certain he was at least twenty-five and learned he was recently returned from the war when he came to the table favoring his right leg one evening.

"Twisted it wrestling a steer today," he explained. "It's the leg I caught a bullet in at Shiloh."

Papa had been part of the Federal War Department overseeing the placement of supplies and troops. The loss of so many soldiers who would never come home weighed heavily on him. Although he and Mr. Quince had served on opposite sides in the war, they spoke to each other with respect and staunchly avoided revisiting the horror, concentrating on horse and land discussions, instead.

Mr. Quince studied me with open appraisal as he answered my father's questions. His gaze made my stomach clench in something akin to fear. It was one thing to exchange a mild teasing flirtation—quite another to show such apparent interest. Mr. Quince appeared ready to have me for his evening meal.

Mr. Quince's presence, sharing our dining time, doomed each of my days to endless worry about the evening encounter. If Ambrose sat next to me, I could avoid meeting his glance, but his arm brushed mine and the space we shared became too intimate. If he sat across from me, I was mesmerized—drawn to the stern expression that softened when he looked at me. His eyelids crinkled at the corners and his mouth curved slightly as if the sight of me gave him pleasure. Just as quickly, his eyes chilled when I talked to Mr. Pauley.

Nevertheless—or maybe because I drew such a response—I availed myself of the opportunity for discreet coquetry, flirting with both Mr. Pauley and Mr. Quince. Ruthlessly I practiced my art, afraid that by the time I convinced Father to return to Boston, I'd appear little better than a rube.

My father seemed very indulgent of the rancher's interest in me. "I believe Mr. Quince has taken a fancy to you, Lucy."

"Papa," I responded swiftly. "I would never marry someone from Texas, not even a man like Mr. Pauley, who resembles the men in Boston."

"Pauley's a jumped-up bank teller, Lucy. He has no more means than a junior clerk in a small bank. Quince is a big rancher in these parts. You would do well to take these things into consideration as you plan your future."

I was horrified. My father actually contemplated staying here, tethering me to the state by way of a husband. I wanted to go home. I quaked inside at his enthusiasm. He was eager to explore this vast land and showed no interest in returning to Boston soon, or at all.

"Papa, it's hot here. Don't you long for the cool breeze we could find next to the ocean this time of year?"

He frowned at me and said flatly, "No."

I answered grimly, "Then I'll sit in the hotel salon drinking tea and waiting for the day you forgo this nonsense to return home."

Regardless of my doubts, my father continued our association with Ambrose Quince, and during our conversations, Mr. Quince encouraged my father's pursuit of the mustangs.

Not quite two weeks after our first meeting, he invited us to ride over to his ranch to view the wild horses. I thought it a silly plan and said so. "We have perfectly good animals to be purchased from reputable stock dealers in Boston if you're really determined to raise horses, Papa. Why must we look for what is already available?"

Papa waved aside my protest and accepted the invitation for both of us. "We look forward to it, Ambrose," he said with excitement. Since he'd been angling for an invitation since their first meeting, I knew Father couldn't be dissuaded.

I, on the other hand, had no desire to visit the Quince ranch the next day. "I would hate to slow you down in your travel. I'll stay at the hotel," I told Papa, attempting to avoid the excursion.

"Travel will go as fast or slow as you need it to, Miss McKenna." Mr. Quince included me in the journey, leaving me no way of politely declining.

Papa chided me later. "You were ill-mannered, Lucy, lingering too long in your response to Mr. Quince's invitation. You made it seem that you didn't wish to be a guest of Ambrose for a day on the Double-Q."

"Papa," I said with exasperation, "I don't wish to visit the Quince ranch with you." I responded to my father's frown, saying grimly, "Since I don't want to accompany you into the wilds of Texas, I wish you stubborn males would leave me alone and let me sulk in boredom at the hotel."

Papa responded to my petulance saying sharply, "Lucy, we are on a pilgrimage in this strange land, learning the ways of this world. You cannot embrace new ideas and customs from the comfort of our hotel suite."

I knew my father was upset with me but I couldn't refrain from one more attempt at dissuasion. "Papa, why are you so determined to pursue scrub animals with no lineage, breeding or known bloodlines? In Boston we have access to the finest horses ever bred."

My voice broke, my frustration rising to the surface. I put my hands behind my back to hide their fisted state. "What does this rough place offer us that we don't already have?"

"Freedom." Papa uttered the one word quietly. He brushed his hand across his eyes and sighed, shaking his head. "I'm afraid the war has left me ill-equipped to resume my former life, Lucy. I can no longer shut myself inside an office and pretend nothing else matters."

His expression was so sad I felt shame at challenging our new circumstances. "I'm sorry, Papa. I'll try to see this place with less critical eyes." And I vowed to be more

accepting. But that didn't include encouraging Mr. Quince's attentions. I crossed my fingers on that part, lest I tell a lie.

As though reading my thoughts, Papa said, "Please remember—Mr. Quince is a business associate I trust. I depend upon you to be courteous when he shares his valuable time with us."

I went to sleep disturbed from Papa's reprimand. Why should I have to worry about Mr. Quince's feelings? As Father had pointed out, the rancher was no more than a business acquaintance, not a personal friend of our family. As for Texas customs—I had yet to witness any I found worthy of aping.

* * * * *

We rode across the Double-Q ranch the next day and Mr. Quince asked me to call him by his given name, Ambrose. We three rode abreast, I in the middle. I waited for Father to intercede, but although I knew he heard the exchange, he ignored the request, leaving the decision to me.

I wasn't sure I wished to be so familiar with the Texas rancher. Lowering the sun veil on my riding hat, I murmured deliberately, "Mr. Quince, I find this land too barbaric for my taste." I hoped that would end his interest in furthering our acquaintance.

It didn't. I remained quiet as Ambrose and Father discussed the importance of good watering holes. I almost nodded to sleep I was so bored with their conversation. To wake myself and get better purchase, I shifted the weight of my heavy riding skirts, leaning away from their downward pull. Mr. Quince noted my actions and leveled his next personal assault—this time criticism of my riding equipage.

"A lady's sidesaddle is a foolish contraption and a death wish. This terrain's too rough for that nonsense."

I started out loftily enough, saying, "I will maintain civilized decorum regardless of these brutal environs."

His quick rejoinder, "Silly vanity will get you killed out here," brought about my indignant reply.

"Ambrose Quince, a lady would never straddle an animal."

He laughed aloud and my father's face turned red at my inelegant words. Ambrose replied, "I'm just saying, ladylike or not, if you'd let me fix you up with a real saddle instead of that scrap you cling to sideways, you'd be a mite more secure in your seat."

I am afraid I embarrassed Father greatly when I reprimanded Mr. Quince. "It is very rude to harass me about my riding seat and laugh at my words when it wasn't my intent to entertain."

Father was tight-lipped until Ambrose brushed aside my scold, drawling as sternly as my father ever had, "Common sense trumps fun, Miss McKenna. Like I said before, stupid mistakes make for bad outcomes."

Now I am stupid. With great satisfaction, I declined to accompany them a second day. But my refusal did not keep my errant thoughts from dwelling on Mr. Quince. I wanted to flee his presence and avoid his company at the same time my mind refused to quit its interminable pondering of every word he'd spoken to me. Memories of the accidental brush of his shoulder against mine and the heat from his body as he sat next to me during our evening meals stirred restless feelings inside I didn't understand.

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Papa left with Mr. Quince early on Saturday. The hours stretched out before me, waiting for a distraction to show itself. Mr. Pauley arrived at the hotel and invited me to join him on a picnic.

"Oh, how wonderful that sounds," I assured him. Pacing the floor of the hotel room had lost its appeal hours before.

Mr. Pauley stood at the door ready to whisk me away and I grabbed at the opportunity. I was relatively sure it was an outing my father would approve—after all, the man took his nightly meals with us and he was the president of a bank.

I asked him to wait in the lobby while I readied for the occasion, donning my favorite pale silk day dress adorned with lace trim. At the last minute I added my mother's necklace of jet to the costume, admiring the black polished stones against the material.

I snapped the matching parasol open and closed, tilting it over my head and savoring the feel of sophistication that filled me. I was ready to escape my prison of boredom. When I joined Mr. Pauley in the hotel foyer, he murmured, "You look lovely, Miss McKenna."

Twirling my sunshade with enthusiasm as the banker escorted me across the street toward his buggy, I congratulated myself for remaining firm in my conviction to avoid visits to the Double-Q.

Ambrose Quince is too rough and abrasive for my taste and I will tell Papa that in no uncertain terms. I had avoided the topic the evening before since Father admired Ambrose so greatly, but after the rancher's mockery on our last outing, I had decided to cut him from my social acquaintance.

As Mr. Pauley walked me to the buggy, a cadre of riders galloped down the street, shouting and causing a commotion as they herded untethered horses out of Eclipse. The animals were wild-eyed—wheeling and kicking as they churned the dirt into whirling dust and flying clods of earth. The cowboys waved guns as though their silly weapons could deter such frenzy.

Suddenly, the sound of shots fired into the air sent the horses veering toward me and my escort. With concern for no one but himself, the banker dropped my arm and dived in a different direction, sending me sprawling on the ground.

"Oh merciful heavens," I groaned as I scrambled to safety on my own and saw Mr. Quince and my father returning to the hotel. It was obvious they'd been in time to see the banker abandon my well-being as well as my indecorous tumble. I was more concerned about the undignified fall they'd witnessed than the wild horses racing by the hitching post I crouched behind.

Ambrose plowed through the animals, hazing them out of his way as he rode across the street. Quickly he dismounted and gathered me close, lifting me high in his embrace.

I said breathlessly, "I'm fine, Mr. Quince. You can put me down now." He ignored my words, carrying me to the far walkway. Even after the horses had disappeared in a cloud of dust, he didn't release me from his arms.

Papa quickly joined us and instead of directing Mr. Quince to unhand me, delivered a scold, chastising me for making plans without his approval. Worse, he reprimanded Mr. Pauley and sent him on his way as though I were a schoolchild my escort had contrived to abduct.

"My daughter does not go unchaperoned on a trip with a young man, Mr. Pauley. I trust you understand this is not to happen again."

I squirmed in embarrassment trying to get free, but Mr. Quince grimly watched my humiliation without comment. I didn't want to look at him, but held as I was in his arms, I couldn't ignore his stern gaze.

Shivering in spite of the unrelenting sun, I pressed my hand against his chest in a hard nudge to indicate he should release me. I could feel his heart pounding under my insistent prod and when he complied and set me on my feet, I hastily focused on the destruction wrought upon my skirts instead of the two glowering men. "I hope the laundress can salvage my once lovely dress from the dirt coating it," I said inanely.

"Lucky it was just your dress, Lucy," Ambrose assured me harshly. I was incensed to hear Mr. Quince use my given name so casually and without reprimand from Father. I bit my lip to keep back my own sharp words as I stood trembling, held from fleeing by the rancher's grip.

* * * * *

June 1, 1866. Father is enthralled with the wild horses...

Papa saw a stallion and made plans to catch the animal and further our stay in Texas. After the picnic fiasco, he was determined that I accompany him on all his trips into the wilderness. Ambrose was always our escort and persisted in calling me Lucy, just as I stubbornly called him Mr. Quince.

Papa stayed out of our verbal war, refraining from correcting him, even as he frowned when Mr. Pauley assumed the same liberty. It was a disturbing situation. My father seemed intent on thrusting me into the company of the ranch owner and away from the banker, who had little of interest to offer other than escape from trips into the wilderness.

One day, as Father looked through his spyglass at the herd of mustangs, I stood apart, watching the wild horses from the crest of the bluff above where they grazed. From a distance, they seemed a motley group. Nothing distinguished them but the red stallion leading the herd. He arched his neck and trumpeted a challenge as though he knew we watched. Then he snorted and circled his mares, urging them into a gallop as they fled.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Mr. Quince stood behind me, close enough so that I could feel the heat of his body.

I moved away, putting space between us and he said, "Hot out here for a woman with such delicate skin. I imagine you'd like to shuck some of those fancy clothes right now." He made statements like that often, not seeming to understand the inappropriateness of his personal observations.

As for my fancy clothes, I'd worn my Boston riding livery, certainly not as elegant as my hunt dress. Mr. Quince's remarks irritated me almost as much as the hot sun beating down on the heavy dark material. I was perspiring beneath it and miserably aware of the damp material clinging to my body. I ached to return to the shade of the hotel.

But I refused to admit my state of discomfort to the rancher. "I'm perfectly fine, Mr. Quince, but thank you for your concern."

He shrugged and walked to where Papa stood, still following the progress of the horses. "There's a cave hidden in the rock formation behind us. Would it be all right if I show it to Lucy? It's a lot cooler inside than out here." He asked permission from Papa without even suggesting it to me. I would have declined immediately had I been given the choice.

Papa waved vaguely in my direction and said, "Go along, Daughter. I suspect you're bored and I expect Ambrose is right. The shade will be a pleasant respite for you."

Mr. Quince looked smug and took my arm before I could make excuses. The cave was dark until Ambrose lit a torch by the entrance. I immediately experienced the drop in temperature, shivering in delight at the balm of cool air. Once inside, we stood in a pool of flickering light. I gazed around the massive cavern, pretending interest in the rocks rather than look at him.

He stepped closer and turned me to face him. Later when I recalled the event, I experienced the same trembling ache his next actions wrought. Ambrose Quince kissed me. Without my consent, he brushed his lips across mine. When I didn't respond, not really knowing how, he draped my arms around his neck and pulled me closer.

A different kind of heat seized me. My internal temperature soared as my body brushed against his. My womb tightened, clenching as a shudder rippled across my flesh and I looked up breathlessly.

Mr. Quince's stature being much greater than my own, he seemed to engulf me in the embrace as he molded my body against his. I later assured myself that had he not kept claim to my mouth and held me secured against his frame, I would have fled his intimate conduct.

But he held me fast, and I didn't struggle for release when he continued the kiss. He savored my lips and murmured sounds that vibrated across my nerve endings. At first, I felt the barest stroke of his tongue—a not unpleasant sensation of wet heat touching

my bottom lip. Nudging against the seam of my closed mouth, he muttered, "Open for me."

Heat pulsed through me and I leaned into his kiss, obeying his order. It was as if I had no will of my own and must comply. He slid his tongue with shocking smoothness through the narrow space I allowed. My whimpered distress didn't deter his intent. He tasted me, stroking my tongue with his in the most startling fashion.

"Kiss me back, Lucy," he said against my lips.

It frightened me how easily he invaded my person, mastering my will. I melted against him, enjoying the feel of his tongue tangling with mine. It was intoxicating, making me heady and weak. Clutching the back of his shirt in my hand, I clung to him, needing to anchor myself lest I swoon.

When he tipped my head even farther back and arched my body over his arm, my breasts pressed against my dress, creating friction. I had the terrible urge to move against his chest and purr like a tabby cat, stretching and rubbing on him.

At last releasing my mouth, he stepped away from me and I almost fell. I had been so enthralled by his attentions my limbs seemed turned to liquid.

He drew me back in his arms but refrained from a second kiss. "You taste so sweet," he growled in a voice even deeper than usual.

"You take liberties you shouldn't," I whispered, stepping away and putting distance between us. My breath was constricted and I almost panted the words.

Ambrose closed the distance I'd gained and covered my mouth with his again. This time, the kiss was a feathery stroke that ended up a nibble as he pressed his lips along my chin and up to my ear.

He nuzzled the sensitive lobe and murmured, "Shouldn't I?" Brushing his mouth across mine again, he sought to make me recant my words. He delivered soft caresses to my face and neck, all the time emitting a low rumbling sound.

I swayed on my feet, completely undone and speechless until he growled, "Your skin is as soft as a kitten's belly."

The image of Ambrose Quince caressing my stomach popped into my head and finally I wrenched free, backing toward the cave entrance as though the devil stood before me. His image, outlined by the flickering torch, strengthened the comparison and I whispered desperately, "I do not favor your attentions, Mr. Quince. Please desist from further pursuit."

When we left the cavern, my lips were numb, swollen from his kisses and my own excessive response. I prayed Father wouldn't notice. I need not have worried. Papa was so elated by the stallion he'd marked for his possession he spoke only to Ambrose.

Chapter Three

June 4, 1866. Thank God, Mr. Quince cannot escort us again until the first of next week.

Father was ecstatic at the thought of possessing the mustang stallion. For once Ambrose did not encourage Papa's enthusiasm, declining to escort Father or immediately organize a hunting party to capture the wild creature. Work was the reason he cited. "I've got cattle to round up and feed to haul. I can't be running after a band of mustangs this time of year."

It was more evidence of his independent nature when Ambrose didn't bow to my father's persuasions. It was unusual, since most of my father's business associates in the past had deferred to Alexander McKenna's requests. Papa was impatient. I was relieved.

I needed to think about the interlude in the cave and wanted distance from Ambrose. I feared it was the man's habit to take without asking. I flushed, embarrassed and disbelieving, each time I remembered the encounter and my own unfathomable complicity.

My father's admiration of the man was boundless. I wondered if he would be so enthusiastic if he knew the claims upon my person Mr. Quince had made when we were alone. I soon found out.

"Papa," I told him after he had extolled Mr. Quince's virtues once too often. "The man you admire so much kissed me when we were alone in the cave that day."

I waited for Father's roared denunciation of the rancher. Instead, he cocked his head to one side and looked speculatively at me. "And did you find the experience unpleasant?" I was shocked at his question. Where was the righteous indignation he'd exhibited when poor Mr. Pauley had ventured to accompany me on a picnic?

"You approve of his actions?" I skirted the question of pleasure, blushing as I remembered the courting need filling me that day.

"I don't approve, Lucy. But I understand." Papa crossed the room and cupped my face between his hands. "You look very much like your mother. It doesn't surprise me that Ambrose is enthralled. He has spoken to me of his delight in you. I can assure you his intentions are honorable, my dear."

I wished I'd never mentioned the kiss. I counted aloud the reasons Father should find the rancher's attentions unwelcome. "Mr. Quince isn't of our social class. He is unrefined and unlike any of the men we knew in Boston. These people are crude." I denounced the whole state of Texas and Mr. Quince in particular when I cried, "Papa, how can you overlook his barbaric behavior?"

"Lucia," he murmured almost sadly. "You are a young woman now. You will soon have a whole line of men queuing up to court you. Don't judge a man's worth by the cut of his clothes or the drawl in his accent. Texans are hardy and independent souls who will make our nation strong. You would do well to remember that when it is time to choose your husband."

Choose a husband? It made me more than a little uneasy to find Father so willing to consider the possibility. I wanted to attend parties, flirt with young men, dance the night away – marriage had no place in my immediate plans.

* * * * *

It pleased me mightily when the independence Papa admired kept him from his goal. Mr. Quince was both a blessing and a curse.

I thought we would be rid of his attentions for a time. He wouldn't take Father to hunt the wild horses. But he continued to join us when we dined.

That evening, while he and Father discussed Texas and ranching, I took the opportunity to study Ambrose. Oh, I wish I had not.

Evidently he felt my gaze upon him as I noted his wrinkled shirt and the rough stubble of whiskers lining his jaw. It was more evidence of his unacceptable status. I was secure in my decision to avoid future contact with him.

Later, I admitted my folly. I arched a brow in disapproval at the way he mopped his plate clean of gravy as he finished his meal. Instead of desisting from the ill-bred practice, Mr. Quince ate the biscuit, holding my gaze as he swallowed and then licked his lips.

I gasped, suddenly transported back to the cave where he had tasted my lips in just such a manner. My hand jerked to cover my mouth, as if protecting myself from another encounter. I inadvertently knocked over my glass of water, causing a disruption of the conversation and bringing Papa's attention to my unusual behavior.

"Lucia," my father called me by his pet name. "You must be tired, Daughter. Perhaps you'd like to retire."

Mr. Quince quickly volunteered to walk me to our suite of rooms. Father, of course, agreed. Ambrose held my arm lightly, nodding at the clerk as he escorted me up the stairs. I was too aware of the heat of his hand through my dress.

When we reached the room, I hurried with the key, unwilling to exchange even remotely polite pleasantries with him. Not one to accept my silent rebuff, he took the key from my fingers and unlocked the room, then turned me to face him as we stood in the door.

"So you think you want me to stop my pursuit," he said, staring down into my eyes.

"Yes, that will be best," I agreed hastily, ready to slam the door and hide.

"Why?"

His gruff question left me flummoxed. How did I answer this man who spoke with no artifice and took everything I said seriously but the word no?

"I prefer men who wear suits," I told him weakly.

He grunted. "Do you, now? You think if I put on my Sunday best you'd like me better?"

It was a silly question and we both knew it. I felt prickles of anger wash over me and cast aside any qualms about insulting the man.

"You aren't from my world. You're socially inept, you work like a day laborer and you're too old for me."

I should have known better than to expect my list of his faults to go unchallenged. He waved away my complaints as minor problems. "Sometimes differences give life a little more spice, Lucy. As for being part of society, you've got enough connections for both of us."

Then his voice deepened and he focused on our age disparity, saying in his Texas drawl, "I expect I'm a mite older than what you had in mind. But you're a filly with a strong will and I figure once you get the bit in your teeth you'll need a steady hand on the reins."

I must have gaped at him, because he tapped my chin with his finger, snapping my lips closed before he again brushed his mouth across mine. Then he straightened, saying as he nudged me through the door, "Think about that, Miss McKenna, when you curl up in bed tonight."

I retreated to the suite, bested in our ongoing battle and disturbed by the aching desire Ambrose Quince aroused in me. The memory of the rancher's words and the heated intent in his eyes kept me awake. I cupped my breasts, enjoying the exquisite drag of the soft lawn nightgown against my turgid peaks. Experimentally, I plucked one stiff nipple and gasped as the sensation radiated all the way to my core.

In the darkened room, my fingers trailed from breasts to belly and stopped as I whimpered at the coil of heat pulsing ever lower in my womb. Why did this man send shivers coursing through me? Why did my body ache for his touch? I licked lips that felt swollen, remembering the feel of his mouth brushing against mine.

Hunger to experience more of his caresses warred with my staunch determination to escape his pursuit. The blasted man had the power to corrupt my thoughts with impure ideas even as I fled his presence.

I plumped the pillow grumpily when sleep eluded me, reminding myself of the rancher's unflattering description—a strong-willed filly, indeed. *Mr. Quince, you haven't even caught a glimpse of my determination yet.*

Our possible future skirmishes brought a smile to my face and I drifted into restless slumber thinking about Ambrose Quince and the many ways I would deflect his attentions.

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Mr. Quince showed himself to be truly diabolical the next night. Instead of his usual waving away the banker's thoughts on available ranches, Ambrose refocused Father's attentions on land acquisition. "You've seen the horse you want. Now you need a place to set up your ranch and give him a home."

Papa took the bait with alacrity, and had it not been for Mr. Quince's smug look of satisfaction directed my way, I could have believed he was just following the path of simple logic. But his glance said clearly his interest in Father's ranch revolved around my staying in Texas.

I parried that saber thrust when next I participated in the conversation, calling the banker by his first name. Smiling sweetly, I said, "Stephen, if Papa and I are to stay in Eclipse, we will need to meet those of society who reside here. Perhaps you can aid us by suggesting the right people and sponsoring our introductions."

Mr. Pauley beamed at me, Papa looked mildly irritated. Ambrose frowned mightily, making my heart race and my own smile turn to smug satisfaction until Mr. Quince took his leave abruptly, not looking at me again.

When we returned to our suite, Father was openly critical of my behavior. "You're a silly chit to think you can tease a man like Ambrose Quince. Addressing the banker by

his given name was poorly done, Lucille." Papa only called me by that formal address when I made him angry.

I was defensive and embarrassed at the same time when I answered. "Mr. Pauley is no more than a diversion until we return home. He is closer to my age and certainly more socially fitting."

My father laughed harshly, no real mirth in the sound. "Daughter, as far as I'm concerned, this is our home. I have no desire to return to Boston. I've made my decision. I intend to buy a ranch and experiment with mixing mustang bloodlines with Morgan stock we import from the East. I will spend the rest of my life in Texas."

I stared at him, appalled. He'd made his decision. What about my decision? I had goaded Father into committing to a future I didn't want.

Papa cautioned me, "I hope for your sake your disinterest in Ambrose is real, Lucy, and not a silly child's game. You can't trifle with a busy man like Ambrose Quince. I suspect the only reason he shared his valuable time was in an effort to become better acquainted with you."

He shook his head, frowning at me and continued his lecture. "As to the two men you are toying with, my dear, they are the same age. While Pauley sat out the war, making money on other people's misery, Ambrose put aside personal commitments and answered the call of his country. I won't ever favor an alliance with a man such as the banker."

Well, neither would I, so on that we agreed. I was stunned, wrestling with Papa's announcement at the same time I tried to comprehend that Stephen and Mr. Quince were the same age. Ambrose was so much more—I stalled in my thoughts and then admitted—*everything*.

* * * * *

Mr. Quince didn't appear the next evening for our nightly meals, making it an insipid affair that bored me into regretting my earlier words. Lacking the spice of Ambrose, both Stephen and the food became unpalatable.

Without Mr. Quince to temper his enthusiasm, Mr. Pauley spent the entire meal discussing possible ranches my father might be interested in purchasing.

Father listened, made notes, but no commitments. "I'll speak to Ambrose when we meet again and get his thoughts on these parcels, Pauley." He continued to address Stephen as if he were an underling, something that didn't appear to bother the banker as long as he had Father's ear.

"There's a spread west of town going up for sale soon. You might want to ride out and take a look at it..." Stephen droned on and I tuned him out as I picked at the limp vegetables, wishing for the presence of Ambrose at the table.

I had a terrible sinking feeling I'd made a mistake. I excused myself from the discussion and retired early.

Papa returned to our rooms afterward, waking me from slumber to tell me his morning plans. "Don't be alarmed if I don't return until late tomorrow, Lucy. I'm going to ride out and look at one of the land parcels the banker mentioned."

As he kissed me good night, he cautioned me to stay within the hotel and reminded me that an unchaperoned day trip with Mr. Pauley would be ill-advised. After he retired, I grumbled, "That's easy for Papa to decide. He's not the one stuck here all day with nothing to do."

The next morning I woke up unexpectedly early with a sense of urgency. I grabbed my robe and hurried to the sitting room, hoping that my father had not left. He laughed when he saw my mad rush into the room. "Have you decided to accompany me today, Lucy?"

Good Lord! That was the last thing on my mind. I grimaced at him and gave him a mock glare. "Papa, I'd rather chew on broken glass."

Settling his hat on his head, he snorted and asked, "To what do I owe your early morning company, then, my dear?"

I was suddenly aware of my disheveled state; the importance of catching Papa had been too great to pause even long enough to comb my hair. I blurted, "I want to go shopping at the Mercantile today."

His thoughtful frown gradually changed into a teasing smile. "Lucia, you'd find something to spend money on in the middle of a desert."

"Papa, we are in the middle of a desert as far as I can see." I pouted prettily and coaxed, "Please don't confine me to this tiny space with nothing to do. I've written in my diary so much it's turning into an opus. At least let me visit the Eclipse shops while you are gone."

I paused and added cagily, "When you find an appropriate home for us, we will need furnishings." I couldn't imagine decorating a house from the meager inventory of the Eclipse store but my ploy worked.

Papa nodded and rubbed his hands together. "At last—you're getting into the spirit of this adventure." He went to the writing desk and dashed off a note, blotted it carefully and turned to me, saying with playful formality, "Here you go, my dear."

He held the missive above my head just out of my eager reach. "This gives you access to my funds. I'll leave a note with the hotel clerk to be delivered to the bank when it opens. Pauley can come over this morning and walk you to the shop." He continued to withhold the letter, waving it above my head as he reminded me sternly, "No picnics or excursions anywhere but to the Mercantile and back. Agreed?"

I grinned at him mischievously and crossed my heart. "I swear there will be absolutely no luncheons, soirées, afternoon teas or trips to the Eclipse art gallery."

"Lucy," he warned gruffly. Papa knew my penchant for finding loopholes in our agreements.

"All right," I agreed hastily, "one shopping excursion to the magnificent emporium, and a walk to and from the store on the town's lovely scenic boardwalk."

Papa's expression softened into a smile and he handed me my ticket to freedom and a day of fun. He was right of course. I loved to shop and my brief visit to the Mercantile had revealed a few treasures I wished to consider more carefully and at leisure.

He hugged me close for a moment and then resumed his preparations for departure. "I hope to find land soon with a dwelling suitable for our occupation. Consider what you discover today your contribution to our future comfort."

My spirits could not be dampened even by the reminder of Papa's grand plan. He took his leave and I hurriedly dressed and descended to fortify myself with breakfast, prepared for a day of shopping. I took a seat at a table next to the window, impatiently waiting for the bank to show signs of activity. As I watched, the businesses in town bustled to life but the Eclipse Bank remained closed until midmorning. I was reminded of one of Ambrose's derisive comments when he'd referred to Stephen's business schedule.

"Most folks don't keep bankers' hours, Pauley. You might want to remember that when you're deciding when to open the vault. A rancher buying feed and supplies can't wait around 'til midday for you to approve his draft."

The discussion hadn't been something I wished to give my attentions, but I'd noted Papa's approval as he'd studied Ambrose and how his expression had changed to a frown when he'd looked at Stephen.

Today's early morning rise was testimony that Papa had been reinvigorated by the industrious nature of the Texas populace. Thoughts of one particular citizen filled my mind as I watched the bank from my hotel window. The rancher had left my company abruptly after I'd favored Stephen with the intimacy of using his first name. At the moment, I had been exhilarated, more intent on scoring points in my battle of words with Ambrose than in furthering my acquaintance with the banker. It seemed my actions had been interpreted otherwise by Mr. Quince.

Since the evening before, when the dining hour ticked by without a visit from him, I had become anxious. Uneasily I wondered if I'd done permanent injury to our burgeoning, if reluctant, friendship.

I was relieved from such thoughts when I witnessed the bank's opening. As I expected, the hotel clerk made a hasty visit there and was joined by Stephen on his return. I set aside ruminations about Ambrose Quince and prepared to enjoy the day, thankful both the clerk and banker were eager to please Papa and do his bidding.

Mr. Kelly, the owner of the Mercantile, was very obliging in his assistance. I'd worn a dark walking dress, cognizant of the less than pristine condition of the store, and held a kerchief close while inspecting the wares, protecting my nose from the dust motes that filled the air. He shuffled beside me, pointing me in the direction of the furnishings and material. I drifted to the saddle equipage, interested in inspecting the western saddles that Mr. Quince recommended.

Somehow the image of my straddling the leather seat brought heated confusion to my body and my lower regions clenched in response. I added that to the list of offenses I tallied against the now elusive rancher. Even in his absence, his words continued to haunt me.

Stephen was most helpful, arranging payment for the cross-stitched picture and ribbons I purchased. I lingered over the cherrywood vanity again, admiring its elegant lines amid the store's squalor. But I did not acquire it, feeling that it would be a commitment to this life I certainly didn't intend.

Once back at the hotel, I read until my eyes ached and then napped, waking to discover the afternoon had become evening and Father had not yet returned. I devised scolds in my mind, preparing to chastise him for staying away so long.

By nightfall, I had abandoned my teasing script for true concern. I watched the livery stable from the seclusion of my room, skipping the evening meal, too worried to eat.

Papa didn't come back to our suite that night. I paced the room, terrified at the awful possibilities. Early the next morning, regardless of Father's edict to remain cloistered in my room, I made frantic haste to the sheriff's office and asked for his help. After much reluctance on his part, I convinced him to send a deputy to look for Papa.

Unwilling to trust the lawman at his word, I asked the hotel clerk to send a message to Mr. Quince. It was midmorning when he and his brother rode to town and after Ambrose visited my room, both Quinces joined the hunt.

I wanted the rancher to reassure me that Papa was fine. But his expression was grim as he questioned me. "Did he tell you where he intended to ride?"

I hugged my arms around my frame and whimpered, remembering that my only concern in my last conversation with Papa had been my confinement to the hotel room and my day of shopping. I shuddered, overwhelmed by guilt. "He said he intended to look at a parcel of land Mr. Pauley mentioned."

Ambrose took my hand in his. "Hamilton and I will look 'til we find him, Lucy." I was grateful for his strength as he held my arm and escorted me to the hotel foyer. Filled with fear, I watched the Quince brothers ride out of town.

"Hope your pa didn't travel toward Buffalo Creek." The clerk hovering behind me imparted even more disturbing information.

"Why? Surely any town would offer safety and guidance," I answered swiftly, relieved to know Papa might be lost but in a nearby town.

"Well, as to that. There's a strip of desert between here and there. Wouldn't be good if he followed the wrong trail," the clerk said, frowning and shaking his head.

Chapter Four

June 10, 1866. What kind of terrible place is this? My father is dead. I cannot bear the pain.

The clerk's words soon seemed prophetic. Three days later, they brought Father back to me, his poor flesh so violated I could only look at him once.

The sheriff studied his body and said with disgust, "Tenderfoot—shouldn't have tried to ride alone in this country. Looks like the rattlesnakes got him." It seemed Papa had fallen from his horse into a viper's nest.

I was surrounded by people I didn't know when they spoke of arrangements and led a man named Mr. Perkins to my side. "You'll have to bury him fast, miss. This heat you know..."

I stared at him appalled. Bury him fast? Heat? I didn't want my father interred in this miserable place. But all I could do was stand speechless and nod.

Papa was laid to rest the next day. Ambrose came early to the hotel and accompanied me to the undertaker's parlor. The casket was closed to shield me and keep the curious from peering at him. We knew no one in Eclipse but the banker and the Quince brothers, but many of the town's people attended the funeral as if it was a great event.

Horried, I lowered the black veil I'd attached to my hat, hiding my grief and tears from those who watched. Ambrose accompanied me to the plot of ground where Father was to be buried. The Quince brothers stood on each side of me as I watched in shock at the dirt spattering across the rough coffin in which Father lay. Papa had gotten his wish—he would forever remain in Texas.

As Ambrose escorted me to my room, I held myself stiff and silent and tried to remain distant from the rabble, repressing my sobs for fear I'd start to wail.

I was too numb to attend his words but he murmured to me steadily as we walked. I caught one phrase he repeated in his gruff tones. "You're not alone, Lucy. Remember that." Not alone? I was very much alone, having just witnessed the burial of my only relative. I shuddered and clamped my jaw tight to still a babble of grief and panic.

When we reached the hotel suite, Ambrose took the key from my useless grip. My hands trembled so violently I couldn't master the locked door. He patted my shoulder awkwardly and added a final consideration. "If you need anything, sweetheart, send word to the Double-Q. I'll come."

His familiar address, naming me sweetheart, didn't register until later. Then it was a tiny piece of comfort in a world that had gone mad.

I remember little about the next few days except my endless pacing of the floor. I couldn't weep another tear, but my mind screamed in anguish as I strode back and forth in the hotel room, replaying the days leading up to my father's death.

Steeped in sorrow, I was rudely interrupted when the bank president visited my rooms. I thought he had come to offer his condolences. Instead, he wished to discuss the settlement of Papa's estate.

He seemed most eager to discuss my inheritance. I was less than agreeable to a conversation concerning my finances. My father was gone only days and Mr. Pauley seemed inconsiderate in his insistence that we speak of business matters.

I listened closely, mimicking Papa's method of taking notes when he displayed the paperwork. I didn't understand what the banker disclosed but refused to reveal my ignorance. I wrote down the amount and his investment suggestions, tucking them away with the paper he'd brought for me to sign before I informed him of my intentions. "I'll discuss this with Mr. Quince and see what he advises."

Mr. Pauley flinched at my words and stammered, "Do you have an understanding with Quince?"

I claimed no such alliance but assured the banker, "Ambrose is a trusted friend. I'm sure he will be a willing mentor."

Papa hadn't discussed matters of commerce with me. I had only to ask and he made funds available for all of my purchases. Now it seemed I'd be expected to manage my own affairs.

I was daunted. How would I engage in running a household and pay for the expenses myself? I yearned for Boston. I needed only to buy a ticket on the stage to start my journey home.

Then I remembered—I had no domestic help waiting for my arrival and no home to return to. Papa had sold our house in Boston before we left. His money—now mine—was in the Eclipse Bank.

I hid my apprehension from Mr. Pauley and ushered him to the door before I collapsed in despair.

* * * * *

I was weeping like a child when another visitor knocked. I was reluctant to see who stood in the hall, fearing more confusion lurked outside the door. My face was surely blotched and red but I remained too despondent to do more than hastily brush the tears away. It was Ambrose Quince.

He looked at my tear-streaked face and said, "Ah, Lucy, I'm so sorry..."

He got no more words out than that before I launched myself into his arms and resumed the cataclysmic weeping of before. When I finally hiccupped to a stop, I found myself seated next to Ambrose on the settee. His arm cradled my shoulders as I pressed my face against his chest.

I willed myself to sit up straight, leaving the comfort of his arms and apologizing for my indelicate behavior. "Forgive my manners, Mr. Quince. I'm afraid I'm no better than a watering pot today." I sniffed back an imminent sob and tried to put distance between us.

"It's hard to lose your pa like that. I understand how you want to stomp and squall at the unfairness of it." He pulled me back under the wing of his arm, continuing his words. "Your daddy have feelings for your mama?"

"Of course," I answered quickly, remembering Papa's pain when Mama had died.

"My ma and pa had strong feelings for each other too. Ma passed on while Ham and I were at war. Pa held on long enough to see us home and in control of the Double-Q. Then he up and said one night, 'Reckon I'm ready to join your ma now.' It wasn't more than a week after when he died in his sleep."

I looked at him, startled by the tender story coming from such a hard man. I nodded at Mr. Quince and said shyly, "Thank you, Ambrose. There's comfort to be had in the thought of Papa and Mama being reunited."

He hugged me, then cleared his throat and said gruffly, "That's what I want for us, Lucy. A cleaving together that makes us incomplete without each other."

With those old-fashioned words, Ambrose declared himself and asked for my hand in marriage. He held me in his arms and for the first time since Papa died, I felt safe. I wanted to crawl onto his lap and be sheltered like a child because Mr. Quince offered me his protection.

Instead, I sat up straighter and tried to think of the right answer. I'd received my first offer of marriage and had no one to share it with but the man who tendered the offer. I was overwhelmed at that thought and started to cry again.

"Here, now." Ambrose pulled me against his chest and let me weep. "I never asked a woman to marry me before. Guess I'd cry too at the thought of hitching myself to me," he joked awkwardly.

"Oh, Mr. Quince," I hiccupped into coherency. "It's not your offer that has me in such a tizzy. I am beleaguered by decisions I don't know how to make." I skirted around the proposal and asked, "Could you look at something for me?"

He tipped my face up and kissed me on the temple, brushing his lips lightly in an affectionate gesture. "Lucy, I'll take a look at whatever you've got."

I showed him my banking notations and asked him to speak to Mr. Pauley on my behalf, hastening to assure him I wasn't light-brained but rather untutored in the art of banking. "It's not that I'm stupid, Mr. Quince. I someday soon will be able to assume my own management. But the haste in which Mr. Pauley wishes me to make decisions is beyond my grasp at the moment." I explained the business the banker had insisted needed attention and showed him the power of attorney Mr. Pauley had brought along for my signature.

Ambrose didn't hide his disgust when he said, "I'll take care of things for you." He frowned at my notations and then said, "If these figures are right, Lucy, you'll soon find yourself besieged by vultures. I want you to know, when you've a mind to handle your own money, every penny will be waiting in the Eclipse Bank for you."

His words calmed a place inside me that cowered in fear. I didn't explore why I trusted Mr. Quince enough to discuss my personal finances. I knew it was all right to do so, since Papa had considered his advice sound.

Ambrose's former stern countenance seemed a thing of the past and though the memory of our earlier intimacy still left me shaken, it also made me feel as though I could depend on him to protect me.

When he left, I felt the ache of fear and loneliness settle over me again. I had too much to contemplate and no answers that pleased me. I didn't know what to do. I wanted my father back.

* * * * *

The hotel manager visited me the next day. He was ever courteous, but asked if I would be continuing to occupy my suite of rooms. It was an appalling reminder that my dwelling was temporary and decisions about my future had to be made. My head ached from sorrow and all of my contemplations.

I rested on my bed most of the day, reluctant to leave the room for fear I'd return and find the hotelier had let it to someone new. My entire life seemed anchored to the

world by a thread. I waited 'til evening to open the heavy drapery at the windows and stare at the street below. It was empty, the shops closed and the citizenry at home with their families.

If Papa were here, we would have a cup of chocolate and a late-night hand of two-player bid whist. Instead, I sat alone and wrote in my journal.

* * * * *

Mr. Quince came to my rooms late the following morning to check on my well-being. Though it was midday, Ambrose had left his ranch work to visit me. He knocked on the entrance to the hotel suite and interrupted a morning of numb sorrow. As soon as I opened the door and saw him standing there, my mood lightened.

I knew he waited for an answer to his proposal. I had not made a decision. I felt safe with the rancher until I remembered his kisses. Then my temporary feelings of security changed to quivering panic.

I didn't entertain him in my suite since he was covered with the red dust that blew everywhere in the wind. Once in the hall though, I couldn't resist brushing it from his shirt before we walked to the dining salon. I liked the feel of his strong shoulders as I patted loose the offensive dirt. He was affected by my touch and stepped closer so my hand pressed against his chest.

There, by the door of my room, he cupped my face in his hands and murmured gruffly, "Are you going to marry me, Lucille McKenna?"

My heart beat with such violence I feared he could see it. And then the strangest thing happened. I looked into Ambrose's eyes and saw the tenderness I yearned for. He brushed his thumb across my cheek and waited.

Inhaling deeply, as if readying to take a giant leap, I answered softly, "Yes."

We remained locked in each other's gazes as he studied my face and I did his.

"I'll always take care of you, Lucy," he promised. Then he brushed his lips across mine before he hugged me.

I stood with my cheek pressed against his chest and listened to the sound of his heart racing. It made me smile. Ambrose Quince was not secure in all things. As if he knew I sensed his weakness, he stepped back and took my arm. "We have things to see to in order to make this happen by Sunday."

Sunday? The rest of the afternoon he invested in escorting me from one official to another with a final stop in the local church. I remained silent throughout as Ambrose arranged for our wedding to take place in three days. The minister protested the haste and pointed out my state of mourning.

Ambrose brushed aside his concerns and said, "Lucy has no family back East. She'll be protected as my wife. She's better married and safe than living on her own alone."

The minister, not asking my opinion, deferred to Ambrose. Had I not been so grateful for Ambrose's care, I would have agreed that our wedding should wait until I had maintained a six-month period of mourning. But the thought of being alone for half of a year made me shudder in panic.

June 15, 1866. I am a married woman.

Ambrose made me his bride on June 15, 1866. I missed my father. He should have been the man giving me away, but I was secure knowing Papa would have approved my choice. Hamilton Quince, my new brother-in-law, scowled through the ceremony.

The whole time I repeated the words that made me a married woman, I thought about being a wife by tomorrow morning. Ambrose spoke of making me his. I didn't know what that meant and trembled nervously.

June 16, 1866. I blush to write these words. I did not know, I did not know. Should girls not be told how their bodies are to be used?

Last night, I bathed, donned a nightgown and sat brushing my hair in front of the tiny mirror on the side table. Instead of the nervous tremors that filled my stomach, I focused on how I would decorate his bedroom, no — our bedroom.

Ambrose bathed before he joined me. He was barefoot and wearing only denims. I tried not to stare at him but I had never seen a shirtless man before. A pelt of hair on his muscled chest caught my attention. Drops of water glistened there, as though he'd been eager to join me and hurried through his ablutions. His hair curled wetly and I urged him over so that I could blot the excess from his head.

He squatted in front of me and laid his forehead against my neck, kissing my shoulder while I dried him. I felt an unexpected tenderness and relaxed under the glide of his mouth as he nibbled and teased my flesh.

He untied the ribbon that held my peignoir closed and brushed his lips across the rounded swell of my bosom.

"You mustn't," I told him.

"Today you became my wife, Lucy. Tonight, I will make you my woman."

I did not know if I wanted to be his woman. The way Ambrose looked at me made me question his intentions. His eyes were burning with an emotion I didn't recognize and his usual calm demeanor was replaced by an excitement that frightened me. He wouldn't let me retreat.

"Please," I asked him. "Could we talk for a minute?" My voice was husky with both fear and anticipation.

In answer, he buried his face between my breasts at the same time he rolled the straps of my nightgown down my shoulders. My arms were held captive as he explored my flesh.

I was shocked when his mouth closed over my nipple, even more so when he suckled, using his tongue and teeth to elicit stirrings within my body.

"You talk," he growled—it was the sound of a beast and it brought forth prickles of awareness I'd not felt before. He recaptured my breast, biting the peak gently, while mumbling around it, "I'll listen."

It was his ability to make me laugh that was my undoing. I had rarely seen Ambrose smile in the days of our acquaintance—his one-sided courtship.

But I giggled at the decadent brush of his words across my turgid peaks. "Your buds are sweeter than a sugar cookie." He nibbled and tasted as though I were indeed a delicious dessert. Then he cupped my breasts and pressed them together, that he might suckle one and then the other. The double attention made my back arch, reaching for the strong pull of his mouth.

Ambrose smiled and hummed with satisfaction. It amazed me to watch him enjoy himself pleasuring me—because it was pure bliss that he gave. He coaxed me away from shyness.

"Nothing between a husband and wife is wrong, Lucy, as long as it gives pleasure."

I caught glimpses of him in the mirror as his tongue stroked first one peak and then the other. He cupped my breasts in his hands as if they were precious jewels and nibbled a trail inward, teasing me with want before he took my nipple again.

Ambrose made a rumbling sound and rose abruptly, pulling me to my feet, leading me without pause to the bed. He urged me on to the mattress, dropping his pants to the floor before joining me. I tried not to look at his naked frame as he resumed his attentions to my breasts, sending my rioting senses a-kilter again.

I stared down at him as he engulfed one nub, pulling on it with deep sucking draws, firming his lips so they almost pinched as he tongued and teased the stiff peak. I couldn't help myself and writhed upward, pushing my flesh deeper into the wet heat of his mouth.

I was so mesmerized by that sensation I didn't notice his hand until I felt its weight against my mons. I jerked, frantically trying to withdraw. "Don't do that," I whimpered, sure that he would desist.

Instead, he slid his fingers through the curls on my mound and abandoned my breast to take my mouth again. He came over me, his arms braced on each side of my waist and said, "When a man and woman marry, they become one flesh. I'm going to make that happen for us now, Lucy."

Slashes of red marked his cheeks and when he spoke, his voice was a deep gravelly pitch.

"I don't understand," I whispered, trying to gain time with conversation.

"I know," he grunted. "It's up to your husband to teach you the way. Part your legs for me, Lucy."

"Ambrose Quince, that's not nice," I protested, ready to argue at the suggestion.

"I'll make it real nice," he assured me and then lowered his weight 'til his chest rested against my breasts and he covered me, cupping my face with one hand while he kissed me deeply.

Again, I lost track of his other hand, and I soon discovered he was still intent on fondling my most private parts. I was humiliated as I felt wet heat trickle from inside me. He stroked through my liquid emission, growling in my ear, "Good, you're wet for me," as though he approved the weeping state of my lower regions.

I squirmed to get away from the exploring hand but his fingers tweaked the sensitive bud hidden inside my folds and I cried out at the sensation. It was as though lightning jolted through my body. He grunted in satisfaction, parting my legs with his knee and settling his body between my thighs.

I could feel the stiff prod of his manhood pressing against the soft flesh of my woman's place. He held his engorged shaft, rubbing it up and down in my liquid heat, pressing it against that tingling nub again.

I wanted to scream at him to stop, to do more, to end the aching need he caused inside me.

"Bend your knees and take me, Lucy." His order was whispered against my lips. In spite of my conscious reluctance, my body followed his will and I opened for him, arching up, rubbing my body against the instrument of my torture.

When he fit the stiff rod against my opening, I froze, terrified and wanton at the same time. Ambrose leaned up, holding my gaze as he said, "Look at me, sweetheart. I want to see your eyes when I make you mine."

I could have looked nowhere else. With one quick, hard thrust, Ambrose penetrated my body. I felt a stab of pain then an impossible fullness as he slowly inched through flesh never touched before.

Tenderly, he embraced me, murmuring silly compliments in my ear as I wrestled with the new sensation. "You fit me like a pair of tight boots with velvet lining," he whispered.

He made me giggle at the strange flattery. It was clear to me my new husband was not adept at courtly phrases. We stared into each other's eyes and his lips quirked into an unusual grin when I said in half wonder, half scold, "You're inside of me."

"That I am, Lucy. Inside of you so deep we're the same as one." He nudged me with his manhood, inching even farther into my channel until I felt so full I could not breathe.

"You're too big," I panted.

"It's meant to be a mite snug," he assured me. Then he grunted and said, "Now I'll show you the good part."

Good part? A man I barely knew hovered above me as he impaled himself in my flesh. I closed my eyes and clamped my mouth shut, refusing to participate in Ambrose's show.

He nuzzled my ear and chuckled, his chest hair tickling me at the same time he nudged deeper inside my body. I was stretched beyond fullness and suddenly wanted nothing more than to end an experience that had become unpleasant.

I pushed against his shoulders, saying, "Let me up. I don't want to do this anymore."

Instead of heeding my demand, Ambrose murmured words meant to soothe, much as I would to a skittish horse. That made me even more determined to rid myself of his weight and penetration. I shoved, pushing hard upward with hands and rolling my hips in an attempt to unseat him.

The movement only served to join us more fully and I moaned aloud as his hard length pressed into the deepest part of my channel. Involuntarily my inner muscles flexed around him, sending shivers of a new sensation through me.

Panic, fear, I couldn't say later what overcame me then. I hissed at him, "Get off me. You're too big."

Ambrose held himself above me, waiting, it seemed, for something. Again, he stroked the sensitive nub at my apex. A riot of sensations shot through me and I found myself gasping out accusations through tears, even as my body responded to his.

"You could have taken my father land hunting. If he'd been with you, he'd be alive." The words came from nowhere. It was a thought I'd given no life to consciously.

"No, I couldn't ramrod your pa's activities, nor did he expect it." Ambrose spoke in grunts, kissing away my tears, his expression tender as he began moving inside me. The feel of his manhood withdrawing made me writhe in half pleasure, half pain. He matched my efforts to unseat him with clever hip swivels that caught me each time until our bodies seemed to dance in synchronicity.

Emotions blossomed inside me—despair, sorrow, anger and finally carnal desire—until I matched his thrusts with my own and lost every thought but the need to find some kind of release from the mounting pressure inside.

"Wrap your legs around me, sweetheart," Ambrose growled.

Almost exasperated, I threw my legs around his waist and arched into each of his strokes, ready to do anything that would end my frustration. He pressed the sensitive

button inside my slick folds, overloading my senses until I shattered—my spirit escaping to another place, my body left behind.

Ambrose responded with a growl, making a low rough sound as his muscles bunched and he found his own release. My husband slumped heavily upon me until I whispered, “Ambrose, you’re squashing me.”

Rolling to the mattress beside me, as drained as I had been moments before, he rested his head against my shoulder as he panted for breath.

Smug that I had called such passion from my new husband, I rubbed his sweat-drenched shoulders and breathed in his scent, leisurely stroking his back. “If I am yours, now, Ambrose Quince, does this make you mine?”

There was no laughter in his eyes when he rose above me, held my gaze and answered. “Always, Lucy. I’m yours forever from this day forth.”

He shifted me to the other side of the bed, the mattress beneath us being too damp from our exuberance to be fit for sleeping. After he cleansed my body with a damp cloth, Ambrose curled around me, hugging me to his chest, and I slept.

Chapter Five

June 24, 1866. What have I done? In the hours I am alone in the ranch house there are too many silent moments leaving me time to contemplate my rushed decisions. I find this land less appealing each day.

The first week as Ambrose Quince's wife I was shocked by the duties I was expected to perform. The hours of darkness were spent learning new ways to find pleasure in the marriage bed and that was most appealing.

If all things had been so serendipitous, my life would have been wonderful. Alas, daylight on the Double-Q ranch was not so joyful. After my night of first passion, Ambrose woke me for breakfast the next morning.

I was mortified to learn that he expected me to cook it. I didn't know how.

Breakfast was a disaster. Ambrose suggested I make coffee while he went to the barn. He left me in the kitchen, expecting that I would concoct a meal. I had no culinary skills but I did recognize the smell of coffee beans when I sorted through the sacks in the pantry.

Suffice it to say, I had no knowledge of quantity to use or amount of water to add. I was pleased when the aroma of coffee scented the kitchen, convinced that I had mastered this simple task.

The bread fell into the fire when I attempted to toast it and the fried eggs Ambrose had suggested looked thin and runny in the skillet. I burned my hand while retrieving the burned toast and suffered that hurt while I tried to prepare the meal.

Ambrose and his brother came in from the barn and took their seats at the kitchen table. Clearly, I was expected to serve the meal as well as cook it. Assembling the food

on two plates, I set it before them. Then I poured each man a cup of the coffee and waited.

Ambrose sipped his and grimaced before swallowing. "Hot." He cast a look my way to explain his expression. Hamilton Quince snickered at his brother's effort to shield my feelings. I poured my own cup and sampled the coffee. It was tasteless, barely more than hot water. I burst into tears and fled the horrible place, angry at my own incompetence and the rude men who expected more from me than I knew how to give.

Ambrose followed me to our bedroom. "Things'll be a mite strange to you at first, sweetheart. You'll hit your stride and find your way around the kitchen soon enough." He patted my shoulder as he spoke, calling forth images of a mare galloping around the cooking implements and table below. I shooed him away, declaring I'd be fine when I knew it wasn't so.

After Ambrose and his brother left, I returned to the kitchen pantry, sniffing over my limitations and staring at the mysterious sacks of ingredients stored beside rows of canned beans. I heard the back door open and close and hastily wiped away my tears.

"Lucy?" It was Ambrose returning. "I told Hamilton to go on. I wanted to make sure you're all right."

I mopped my eyes and tried to look happy before calling out. "I'm in here."

The door opened before I could return to the kitchen. Ambrose stepped into the tiny room, his big frame so large he had to stoop to keep his head from bumping the ceiling.

"Ah, sweetheart, don't hide in here and cry. You're beautiful, smart and more woman than a broken-down cowboy like me deserves. As to your cookin', Ham and I have been doin' for ourselves since we got home from the war. Any meal you put before us will be more than what we'd fix for ourselves. We've been livin' on canned beans. Your eggs this morning were a rare treat."

I almost laughed at the idea of my runny eggs being a fine meal. Pulling me into his arms, he hugged me close, murmuring sweet assurances. My foolish weeping was forgotten as I leaned against his body, reveling in my husband's obvious concern. I wrapped my arms around his neck, eager to reward him with a kiss.

Unskilled as I was, I hesitantly tasted his lips with my tongue and when he opened for me, I invaded his mouth as he had done mine. He groaned, rocking me side-to-side in a tight embrace that pressed his swollen member against my mound. Heat flooded my loins and I felt the dampening of my drawers as his touch called forth a wanton response.

Ambrose cupped my bottom, urging me even closer 'til we were plastered against each other, feverishly reliving the prior night's experience. "Are you too tender today?" He lifted my skirts and delved inside my drawers even as he asked his question.

His fingers feathered through the triangle of hair at the apex of my thighs, removing my inhibitions. This part of our marriage I eagerly embraced, both because I wanted to again experience the wonderful release his touch had given me the night before and also because coupling appeared to be the only thing I did right. I rubbed my hand against the hard ridge of his manhood, urging him on with my action and words. "Please me, Ambrose. I want you to send me flying to the heavens again."

He needed no other invitation. Quickly he unbuckled his pants and opened them, withdrawing his engorged staff. I looked away, still embarrassed by the male display. Chuckling at my shy response, he pushed my lacy pantalettes to my knees and turned me to face the shelves. "Hold on," he told me.

Not knowing what to expect, I did as he instructed, grasping the wooden board before me. Startled, I felt his calloused palm smooth across my rump and then fall lower to part my legs. "Husband?" It wasn't the manner in which we had joined the preceding night and I found it awkward as I stood with his chest pressed against my back.

"Trust me," he growled. Pulling my hips back toward him, he prodded the entrance to my channel with his shaft. As he entered me I winced, tender from our earlier coupling. He reached in front of me and began to fondle my feminine folds, concentrating his attentions on the sensitive button that pulsed with need.

"Yes," I whimpered, already feeling the liquid emissions that made me slick and ready for his thrust.

"God, yes," he agreed. Sinking his manhood into my passage, he began stroking in and out at the same time he teased the nub of my sex. At first his thrusts were gentle, inching partway before withdrawing to enter me again. But soon he gave himself up to passion and wrapped his arm around my waist, tilting me at an angle so that each drive carried him closer to my core.

My breath was a harsh pant in the small room. I couldn't grasp the pleasure I'd captured the night before and my frustrations were emitted in a mewling cry of need. He increased the fervor of his joining, rotating his groin against my rump and pressing his fingers against the sensitive bud within my plump, moist folds.

I was filled to the brim with my husband's manhood when he pinched my nub of pleasure and I cried out, claiming ecstasy at last. My flesh squeezed his shaft as pulsating bliss rippled through me.

"Only for you," he growled in my ear as he came, pumping in and out of me so hard and fast every thrust carried me upward as he spilled his seed in my depths.

As he had the night before, he slumped against me when he was spent and gasping for breath. The fervor of our coupling had left me standing on unsteady legs and I braced against the shelves to hold myself upright.

Our combined weight was apparently too much for the old board, which cracked under the strain, breaking and sending a tin of flour and cans of beans tumbling to the floor.

Embarrassed, I hid my face in my hands, trying to stifle my laughter. Not so inhibited, my husband caressed my rump, than smacked it sassily. "Hold your dress up and I'll get a washcloth to clean you."

I waited, grinning idiotically at our decadent behavior 'til he returned to gently cleanse the emissions from my now very tender lower regions before pulling up my drawers and dropping my skirts.

The smile left my face when I turned to find him holding a broom ready for my use. "Made quite a mess," he said, pointing at the white powder he'd tracked from the pantry into the other room.

He exited wearing a smug smile and I held the broom, not sure whether to sweep the flour from the floor or use the tool as a club to smack my husband in the head. I was still deciding when I heard the outside door open. "We'll be back for supper, sweetheart. Have a good day." The door closed with a resounding thump as he left.

I went to the kitchen and watched from the window as Ambrose rode from the ranch yard. I wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed and sleep for the rest of the day. Instead, I swept the flour from the floor, grimacing in distaste at the dirt I collected too. Then I explored my new home.

It was adequate but ill-tended. In all rooms save the kitchen and our bedroom, dust coated the sparse furniture and floors. It was clear we needed a housekeeper. When I suggested it to Ambrose that night, he chuckled and said, "Got one of those when I married you, Lucy." I hoped he was teasing but soon learned he was not.

* * * * *

The second day, I did the washing. *How can any woman endure this drudgery?* The washboard Ambrose provided was ancient and after I worked all morning, struggling to get the ranch denims clean, I had to pin them to a thin rope in the backyard. The clothesline fell down and the wet clothes were coated in red mud. I had to rewash the clothes after I retied the inadequate line.

Ambrose said the housework was mine to do. I had no experience with household tasks any more than with cooking. But I did know how to manage a domestic and I had money in the Eclipse Bank.

After the fiasco with the laundry, before we went to bed, I again spoke to my husband about hiring a servant. "I believe it would be wise for me to employ a housekeeper."

This time he did not rebut my suggestion with humor. "What in hell would we waste money on that for?" He looked as if I had suggested a trip to China. "Lucy, tending the house is your job."

I was appalled at his attitude. When he sought marital affections, I turned him away. My shoulders were stiff and sore from my labors and I said petulantly, "I am tired from all those labors you've decreed I must oblige you with. Good night, Mr. Quince."

Lying awake and filled with resentment at my lot as a ranch wife, my heart ached for the life I'd lost, even as I savored Ambrose's calloused palm resting on my hip, anchoring me to Texas as he slept.

* * * * *

July 5, 1866. I am giddy this morning. Not even a glowering Hamilton Quince sitting at the breakfast table could dispel my good mood. We went to a party yesterday. It was wonderful. The town of Eclipse celebrated Independence Day with an all-day picnic that ended in a dance.

I dressed with care for the outing, wearing a lavender gown. Although the color befitted my state of mourning, I loved the silk dress with its opaque inset. As I came downstairs, Ambrose appeared awestruck by my appearance. He met me at the foot of the steps and said, "Lucy, you do me proud. You're a beautiful woman." I preened under his attentions, glad that I had pleased him at last.

But then he noticed the thin covering that filmed the top of my breasts and insisted I add something to hide my bosom. It was not worth the disagreement. I fetched a scarf, to be easily laid aside—or lost, if later I so desired.

The women in the town of Eclipse were as I remembered, drab and disagreeable. I recognized the envy in their eyes when they looked at my fine silk and compared it to their own plain muslins.

I had not brought a cake or an offering of food. Ambrose said it was of no import. Hamilton indicated their mother, Cordelia Quince, would have been scandalized at such remiss—I had begun to find tedious my brother-in-law's every constant belittling.

In spite of those low moments, the day unfolded delightfully. While my husband busied himself talking about ranching with our neighbors, I enjoyed a stroll through the Mercantile to study again the furnishings for sale. The Double-Q lacked seating of quality. The couch was threadbare and the tables roughly hewn and plain in design.

Ambrose was quite proud of the town's merchandise and promised me I would enjoy my shopping while he was occupied. The establishment was gloomy, still dust-covered and unimaginative in its method of display, but I was transported anyway by the opportunity to shop.

"Pick out some ribbons or a gewgaw you might want," he urged me before he left. Gewgaw? Ambrose frequently made my possessions seem frivolous.

I soon forgot my irritation as the old gentleman who owned the store let me look through his catalog so I might view a full selection. He assured me his prices were very modest in comparison to other businesses in Texas. I nodded my head as though I believed him, although it is more apparent each day I know very little about cost and commerce.

I found a lovely blue sofa and matching chair with solid mahogany side tables to complete the set. I was not so foolish that I did not wait to consult Ambrose. When I walked across the street carrying my parasol unfurled, I received many admiring

glances. I basked in his approval as my husband studied my approach, his countenance filled with pride.

He was not so happy when I spoke to him of the furniture in the catalog. At his frown, I waved away the topic. The day was too fine to waste on argument. He insisted on buying me a bride gift and escorted me back to the Mercantile to see my choice. We encountered Stephen Pauley on our walk and I took that opportunity to gain a small piece of freedom. *I admit it, diary, I feel the pinch of my husband's rule.*

I said to Ambrose, "I will buy you a gift too. You must have something from me as a wedding commemorative."

Ambrose looked very pleased until I asked him to assist me in opening an account at the Eclipse Mercantile. "Since Mr. Pauley is here, Ambrose, he can assure the store owner of payment from my money in the town's bank."

Ambrose frowned but did not disagree. Mr. Pauley seemed reluctant to let me have access to my own funds. That irritated my husband and worked in my favor. The account was established and I paid for Ambrose's Stetson hat with money of my own. It was a small triumph but set the course for the day.

Ambrose held my arm and kept me close when cowboys and ruffians jostled us in the crowd. There were a plentiful number of speeches to hear, but later I couldn't remember one man's name who spoke.

The afternoon was very hot and the day became tiring. Perhaps I was fretful—no doubt I was. Ambrose asked his brother to obtain a room in the hotel to rest through the heat of the day.

My brother-in-law was a bad-tempered lout. He swore at Ambrose, "You're a damned fool, brother. We can ill-afford..."

Ambrose hushed him and sent him on his way. The rooms were already let for the day, so it was needless discord.

My spirits were revived by lemonade and whimsy. An industrious family had set up a stall of sorts where iced drinks could be obtained. An artist sat nearby with an easel and canvas sketching those who wanted their portraits made.

I teased Ambrose until he agreed to have our pictures drawn. I told him they would look fine over our mantle, much like my parents' portraits had hung in my Boston home.

Afterward, I joined other Eclipse ladies in a room of the hotel to refresh for the evening entertainment. It was exciting being with women, even if many were as rough as their husbands and obviously not of my status in society.

My dress caused much admiration and some petty remarks. One woman rubbed the cloth between her fingers and declared it useless for ranch life. "Good thing you only have to wear this for dress-up."

"It's silk," I informed her. "All my dresses are as finely sewn." Perhaps I should have been less abrupt. But it made me shudder to contemplate clothing myself in the horrid muslin contrivance the other woman wore to such a festive event.

Several of the more fashionable ladies invited me to join them for afternoon tea whenever I might visit Eclipse again. I could not wait for this adventure. Papa was very strict concerning with whom I might associate and those I might know. As a married woman, I would be able to move about with far fewer restrictions.

Before I left the hotel, I introduced my new acquaintances to my husband. He seemed pleased that I had found women who might become my friends. I was encouraged and it seemed he wouldn't deny me their company in the future.

Ambrose escorted me to the dance. Though the music at first seemed raucous and the steps unfamiliar, I soon found the revelry appealing. My husband chose a slow melody and I relaxed in his arms. "We should not be dancing. Papa..." I whispered my concern to Ambrose even as I swayed against him.

He hugged me closer than was decent and smiled down at me saying, "This is our wedding dance. We didn't get to celebrate on the occasion. The gossips can allow us this one."

I bowed to his knowledge of Texas society and enjoyed the feel of his arms guiding me through the steps.

I was too tired to ride my horse when the evening ended. Ambrose seated me in front of him, holding me across his thighs. He was deliciously warm and safe and I snuggled in his arms on the way home.

I woke the next morning to the smell of coffee brewing. Ambrose let me sleep in and rest from the previous day's entertainment.

I am amazed as I write this, Dear Diary. I feel great affection for my husband though I have known him such a brief time.

Chapter Six

July 10, 1866. I write today because I have no one to speak to but you, Dear Diary. Ambrose and Hamilton are gone from the house and I will clean the floors and beat the rugs. The men are at a camp in the foothills, rounding up strays and herding them to the closest water. It has been a dry summer –

I practiced each day speaking like a ranch wife. Ambrose said I needed to converse more about Texas and how the climate and the customs affected our livelihood. I preferred thinking about redecorating our very plain house. My father had been gone for a month and although his loss filled me with sorrow, I tried to put aside sadness and instead dreamed about making my new surroundings as elegant as my Boston home.

I made a list of items that I needed for appropriate décor and determined to purchase them as soon as possible. When my husband and his brother departed the morning meal on Wednesday, I put my sidesaddle on one of Ambrose's horses and rode to Eclipse.

He came home while I was away. When I returned from an afternoon of pleasant conversation with the ladies of Eclipse society, he paced furiously across the barn, raging that my saddle was not fit to be used in such terrain.

"Have I not told you that contraption is a deathtrap? What in tarnation do you think you're doing running into town when there's work to be done here?"

I couldn't decide if it was fear for my safety or anger over my absence from the kitchen that had raised his ire. Whatever caused his rage, he was undone. He threatened to burn my saddle.

"You cannot destroy my possessions," I argued. My afternoon was spoiled and his threat was offensive. I am afraid my own fury was raised.

We bristled at each other like two hedgehogs. I admit to the desire to throw something at him. He declared, "I can and I will if you leave this ranch again without permission."

"You are not my father to give or withhold permission," I retorted.

Ambrose was very grim, even threatening when he grunted, "My house, my rules, and you'll obey."

I could not believe he spoke to me in such a fashion. *I am not a child.*

He left in the wagon and didn't come home until hours later. I was relieved to see his return and had been pacing the floor worried about his state of mind when he left.

I thought it most inconsiderate of him to make me fret about his welfare. Surely he understood that I had just lost my father. Then I recalled his own state of anxiety at my unexplained absence and felt a blush of shame spread through me. Nevertheless, I felt he was wrong to have been so hostile.

When we had argued earlier about my social visit off the ranch, I had explained about the household goods at the Mercantile and my intent to use my money at the bank to buy some decent furniture. That had caused a look of consternation and he'd stood clenching his hands in anger, and frankly at the time I had been happy he removed himself from my presence.

Upon his return, Ambrose presented me with the rosewood vanity detailed with carved flowers around the lavish mirror I'd admired so many times. It was a beautiful piece of furniture, with small panels for hidden treasures tucked away and a key that locked the middle drawer. "It's as fine as anything I could have chosen in Boston, Husband," I assured Ambrose.

I did not feel that I had done anything wrong and refused to apologize. Hamilton scowled through supper. After the meal, I hastily cleared the dishes and retreated to the living room, but not before I heard my brother-in-law say as he left, "That's an extravagance we can ill afford. Besides which, you don't reward bad behavior, Brother. Any fool knows that."

Ambrose remained silent until we retired. I was stung by the contempt Hamilton had displayed toward my husband and consumed by guilt that I had caused Ambrose embarrassment. His gift reminded me of how my father spoiled me.

The thought was vaguely disturbing. Later, he lay sprawling naked on the bed, watching me brush my hair. I had arranged my seat in front of the large mirror so that I could see his reflection as I prepared for bedtime.

I lifted one of the bottles of hand cream I now had a place to put and massaged the scent into my arms and neck. Boldly, I stroked lower, rubbing my breasts with the rose-scented balm that soothed my skin. Our eyes met in the mirror. I followed his gaze to my own reflection that revealed nipples peaked and pebbled, making fine points in the fabric of the lawn nightgown.

“Come here.” He called me to join him as he moved to the edge of the bed and sat up with his muscular thighs open and his big feet on the floor. The sight of him stroking his shaft made me catch my breath. His gaze captured mine and he repeated, “Come here.”

Slowly I obeyed, setting the bottle of cream on the rosewood surface carefully. I went to him, stopping between his legs. He lifted my hand and kissed my palm, then bit it lightly. I felt my sex flex and squeeze, desire tightening my belly and lower regions.

“Wrap your hand around it.” Ambrose cupped my palm around his manhood and for the first time, I investigated him. He had taken to leaving a lamp burning when we had marital congress.

I had resisted his attempts to make me familiar with his body, citing what I knew of proper conduct. “A gentleman would not suggest such a thing, Husband.” Now I abandoned my former decorum and looked with interest at his organ. It was silken steel, soft over hard—a paradox in nature.

Ambrose shifted my hand under his, teaching me to stroke him—up and down, up and down.

A white liquid seeped from the slit in the end of his ruby flesh. The bed was bathed in candlelight and I studied his body eagerly.

"What do you call this?" I squeezed his manhood to let him know what I questioned.

"Cock, rod, dick, verge, root..." He groaned under my ministrations, moving my hand lower. "And these are my balls, sac, nuts..." I explored him, gently running a finger along the seam of his—sac? Two nuggets were inside. His cock grew as I rubbed him and gently squeezed.

"Taste me," he ordered. I could not believe what he proposed. Put my mouth on that appendage that spilled fluid?

I tried to back away. But he was inflexible. He put his hand on the back of my neck and brought my mouth to his engorged flesh. I touched the head with the tip of my tongue and felt him shudder wildly. For a moment, Ambrose lost his control.

The thought of ruling Ambrose Quince for even a brief time brought my lips 'round his member, sucking on him as he did upon my nipples. He strained upward, arching into my mouth to give me more. I tentatively tasted the fluid that came forth. He called it his seed. I found it exotic with a musky essence that was not a flavor, but an imprint of Ambrose himself.

I watched my husband as I pleased him with my mouth. For the first time since my father died, I felt in control. This man who had taken over my life now surrendered his will to me.

It was a heady aphrodisiac. I widened my jaw and took more of him, sliding his flesh back tentatively, working my tongue along the bottom, then the side. When I breathed in, he slid deeper and I swallowed, tickling the head of his cock with the back of my throat.

"God damn, Lucy," he moaned. I had made Ambrose Quince whimper. I swallowed again, watching him writhe under the erotic attention. I grasped his hips and shifted my position, sinking to my knees on the floor.

He held my head to him as though afraid that I would stop his torment. I could not. The feel of his flesh in my mouth excited all of me. I pressed against his thighs, pushing against his cock, wanting him farther, deeper, as I breathed around his flesh and took more.

My mouth watered, filling with saliva as his flavor burst upon me. It was my turn to be voracious. I hollowed my cheeks, making a hot tunnel, and was rewarded by the feel of gooseflesh rising on his thighs. One hand stroked him there and I reached down and nudged his legs farther apart.

I buried my face in his flesh and took him into my throat as I pressed closer to his groin. I should have choked, strangled. Instead I urged him deeper—licking, massaging, swallowing.

I loved this feeling of power. I withdrew and he collapsed back on the bed, panting as his cock waved mournfully in the air. I smiled and crawled between his splayed legs, pushing them farther apart to delicately tongue and lick his balls.

Ambrose gasped and froze as I urged his buttocks apart. He trembled and groaned my name aloud, shuddering under my tongue's explorations. When he grabbed me and pulled me upward, I took pity on his waving cock and straddled him, rubbing my sensitive flesh against his cock head before I seated myself with one thrust. I groaned, too full, pinned to him by my own haste. I panted, feeling his hard length making room for itself inside me.

"Ride me, Lucy," he urged. He covered my breasts with his hands and pinched my nipples as I drove my body against his length, taking him deeper with each movement.

Playfully I tightened my thighs and briskly pumped up and down, riding him as though I posted a trot.

The movement enflamed my own passion and I gasped, "You make me want to fly over the highest jumps." I levered higher and then plunged down on his cock with a loud slap before rocking against him and rising again.

His laugh was a guttural sound as he said, "I'll send you flying all night, my sweet lady. Spread your legs and take all of me, Lucy." He pressed his thumb against the sensitive button inside my slick folds and I rocked harder, riding him as though I gripped one of my father's wild mustangs between my thighs.

Passion flared hot and demanding between us as he anchored my hips and followed my rhythm. I squeezed internal muscles, licking him with the walls of my – "What do you call this?" I moved his hand to touch my woman's place.

"Pussy, quim, cunny..." He groaned and then continued flexing his hips so that we seemed to dance as we conversed. He put his thumb on the nub at my apex that screamed for his attention.

I bucked at his touch, taking him deeper so that my pussy lips folded back and my female moisture bathed his groin. He fingered the sensitive button and I jerked under the erotic slide of his calloused thumb across my pulsing flesh. I straightened, clenching my inner walls around his shaft.

He placed my hands on my breasts and directed me. "Let me watch while you play with yourself."

Without hesitation, I pinched the taut peaks, squeezing my nipples as I rotated my hips and clasped his cock high inside me.

He pressed against the sensitive button and said, "That's your pearl, your sweet spot, your nubbin." My hips rotated, following his finger and I ground my flesh against his, hurting inside with painful pleasure.

Ambrose suckled my nipple, pressed on my pearl with his thumb and thrust his cock deep inside me. The slap of groin against mound, guttural moans and cries of passion filled the room as we battled for rule. I came undone as my body clenched around his and waves of pleasure more intense than anything I'd felt before coursed through me. I collapsed on top of Ambrose.

“What have you done to me, Husband?” I lay against his chest and peered up at him. My flesh pulsed with aftershocks and I squeezed my internal muscles around his still-engorged shaft.

He laughed gruffly and turned us so that I lay sprawled beneath him. The plunge of his cock in and out of my pussy caused renewed primal heat, and I joined him in my quest to find that same ecstasy again.

All night he was insatiable, urging me into new carnality. It was as though we fought for control as we coupled passionately—I claiming an independence from tyranny, he demanding obedience. It was dawn when we collapsed, sated—but our issues unresolved.

* * * * *

My relations with my husband were further compromised when I had a terrible argument with his brother. Hamilton Quince was a pigheaded, insulting miscreant and I told him so. He dared criticize my behavior!

It wasn’t bad enough that my husband demanded supervisory rights in my every decision and desire. Now his brother sought to lodge his opinions also.

After Ambrose and I quarreled over my visit to Eclipse and my husband went to the Mercantile for a gift to soothe my hurt feelings, I was ready for all things to return to normal. Ambrose was already on his way to the barn the next morning when Hamilton shared his own views with me.

“You are a silly, muzzle-headed fool. Ambrose needs a wife, not a spend-crazy, spoiled ninny who runs through money like shit through a goose. Hell, if you keep this up, we won’t have to worry about the drought sucking us dry. You’ll put us under without any help from Mother Nature.”

I was disgusted by his coarse words but more startled by his comment concerning the dry weather. Texas had been scorching hot ever since Papa and I arrived. I had no

idea anything existed here but dust, sun and parched land. I would not deign to ask Hamilton what he meant though. Instead I instructed him on the ways of a gentleman.

"Hamilton Quince, your brother is a considerate husband. He understands that I am accustomed to more civilized environs. Thankfully, he knows I am worthy of his efforts to give me a fine home."

"There's nothing wrong with the Double-Q the way it is. It was good enough for our mama, and no woman in Texas or Boston was ever more worthy than her. You're a poor example of a good ranch wife, Lucifer. You've got my brother running all over God's creation trying to please you and you won't even clean the damned house and cook him a decent meal." Hamilton was furious with me.

He had no right to judge my behavior and I said as much. "My husband is satisfied with me and no more is necessary. If you feel I am inadequate, don't tarry here with us."

Hamilton was less than pleased at that sally. When I invited my brother-in-law to leave our home if he found my presence so noxious, he stared at me and snorted, "Unless I miss my guess, I'll be here long after you're gone."

"Ambrose isn't concerned about my lack of domestic ability and it's none of your business."

When I delivered my final remark, Hamilton sneered. "He's addlebrained over you for sure. That will pass soon enough." Then he stomped from the breakfast room and out the door.

I retreated to our bedroom to ponder Hamilton's words. Would Ambrose tire of me because of my weak domestic ability?

Hamilton had taken to calling me after the devil himself when Ambrose was out of hearing distance. I told myself I didn't care what Hamilton Quince thought but his words brought a hot flush of discomfort anyway. I muttered aloud, "I dust the house and beat the rugs and do the laundry. If that's inadequate..."

I had suggested more than once that a housekeeper would be an appropriate addition. My cooking left room for improvement but I could now grind the coffee beans and had learned how to make the coffee each morning. Hamilton's criticism seemed grossly unfair. I was trying to adapt to this new life.

At the moment of the conversation, had it been possible, I would have removed my inadequate self to Boston and never returned. I intended to tell my husband that thought when we were alone that night.

* * * * *

Mr. Quince and I ceased communicating. I was too furious to let words pour forth. I might never stop my recriminations or howls if I gave sound to one note. I had attempted to speak to Ambrose about his obnoxious brother.

"You'll get used to him," my husband assured me. "He's worried about me taking a green girl to wife—someone who knows nothing about ranch life. I know you're young and I rushed you some, but when I saw you the first time, I knew you were the only wife I wanted. Sweetheart, you'll figure things out and we'll be fine."

My ability to adapt to such a rough existence was not the order of our discussion. Although I preened some, learning that I had enthralled my husband when we first met, I needed Ambrose to understand how hurtful his brother's snide remarks were.

"I will never grow accustomed to poking my finger with a needle nor will I learn to endure your brother's sharp jabs. He is rude to me, Husband."

I thought Ambrose would race to discover what injury Hamilton had delivered. Instead, he said, "My brother and I are friends as well as kin, Lucy. He worries about me the same as I fret about him. Hell, we fought our way through the war, watching each other's back. When I went down with a leg wound that should have killed me, Hamilton carried me out of the mess and got me to a doc."

How nice for them – they have each other. I had begun to feel as though my presence was an intrusion in the Quince family.

Instead of the soothing balm of considerate words, my husband chastised me! "I wish you would try harder to get along with Ham, Lucy. He's the only family I have left. And as for making him leave, you don't understand. Hamilton and I own the Double-Q together. I could no more make him leave than he could me."

My husband had the nerve to try to cuddle with me after he delivered his derisory message. I rolled from his embrace and put a pillow between us on the bed. I would not forgive Ambrose soon for taking his brother's side in this rift. His words pierced my heart. "*He's the only family I have left.*" Who was I, if not family?

He had chosen to support his brother's continued mockery, even if obliquely. "I think your feelings are too tender, Luce. Hamilton is teasing and you take him too seriously."

Teasing? My husband now addressed me with an abbreviated version of his brother's scathing name. Luce? If I was to be labeled a devil, I decided I would garner some measure of satisfaction from the insult. I resolved to put aside Ambrose's dictates.

It would be my pleasure to watch his consternation when my blue couch and mahogany furniture arrived. On my visit to the Mercantile—a trip that caused such gnashing of teeth and outrage I was appalled—I had ordered, and arranged payment for, the elegant sitting room ensemble. His rage upon my return that afternoon stopped my words when I would have shared my exciting news.

At the moment, as far as I was concerned, my husband could sit on the old threadbare couch with Hamilton and leave my furnishings untouched. I didn't tell him about the purchase. He would see it soon enough when it arrived.

Chapter Seven

July 15, 1866. Sometimes my husband surprises me greatly. I have continued to be out of sorts with him and have withheld my affections to demonstrate my ire.

At our morning meal, Ambrose reminded me, "We've been married a month, today." He took me in his arms and playfully nipped my ear, trying to make me forget my grievances. Though my heart raced at his touch and my body heated against his, I feigned indifference.

He released me and left me to my melancholic brooding, but found reason to visit the ranch house frequently through the day, always with an attempt at appeasement. That afternoon, he coaxed me to a secret interlude with the ploy of showing me a nest of kittens.

"Lucy, come to the barn with me, I want to show you something." Ambrose seemed very pleased with whatever he had planned. I turned up my nose and settled determinedly on the couch, pretending interest in my book.

"It's too hot to come outside, Ambrose. I am afraid I must decline." I was almost disappointed when he gave up so easily. I found that sustaining my anger was difficult as well as fruitless if I gave in to his affections. Instead, I forced myself to ignore him just as he pretended to be oblivious to my mood.

Shortly I heard him banging pans and shifting crockery in the kitchen. I could not resist the lure as my curiosity was piqued. Ambrose stood by the sink, studying first one pan, than another.

"What are you up to, Husband?" I asked him.

"I need something to carry ice in." His expression was guileless but the word ice immediately held my attention.

"Ice?" I inquired.

"From the icehouse—I need to carry some to the barn for a project I've started."

I decided to visit the barn in the hopes of obtaining some of the frozen delight. I refused to ask Ambrose to bring some to the house. Had he been so inclined, he would already have done so. Nothing could induce me into the icehouse. I had visited it once and found its low ceiling and dark interior repugnant. Even for the lovely cool temptation that resided there, I couldn't force my feet to enter. But ice in the barn was another matter.

I accompanied Ambrose and waited outside while he filled two deep pans with the frozen water and carried them to the interior of the barn. I could feel perspiration trickling down my back, even though the barn was considerably cooler than the outside air.

I held the mare steady while he doctored her swollen leg, putting a cold compress around the large pastern. Ambrose murmured endearments to the animal, soothing her as he worked. "She'll throw good colts," he said with satisfaction. He pointed out the conformation that made her such a fine range mount. I rubbed the mare's nose and agreed.

"You like horses, don't you?" He wrapped the mare's leg and patted her with affection.

"Yes, Papa and I both looked forward to equine breeding." It pleased me to see Ambrose look slightly shocked at my comment. He too often treated me as a featherbrain. Papa and I had discussed horses all of my life and I knew more than the rudiments of mixing breeds, although, of course, had never actually witnessed an event of copulation.

I added knowledgeably, "I confess I doubted his plan to raise a mix between Morgan and wild mustang. Now I'm not so certain he was wrong." The mare Ambrose ministered to was descended from the horses roaming free. She was stocky, with a deep

chest, wide intelligent eyes and strong legs. I breathed in her scent, responding to the fragrance as if it were the most expensive perfume.

A pan of ice remained untouched when the horse treatment was complete. Ambrose carried it to the horse trough. "Hold this for me Lucy. I need to wash my hands." He lathered his hands with rough barn soap, rinsed them in water and then lifted the ice from my hands.

I had hugged the pan to my bosom, trying to absorb the coolness. The bodice of my dress was wet and trickles of moisture coated my breasts. I frowned and brushed at the stain on the silk material. Before I could utter my dismay, Ambrose held a piece of ice against my rounded swell of flesh on display, pushed above the material by my corset.

"Warm today, isn't it?" he asked innocently. He rubbed the ice across one mound and stopped, letting the melting water trickle through the valley there.

My nipples became hard pebbles and my womb clenched, anticipating what I had denied myself as well as Ambrose over the last nights.

"It's broad daylight, Husband," I protested reluctantly.

"I shut and barred the barn door. Nobody will bother us here." He let go of the piece of ice and it slid downward, lodging between my twin globes. I shivered from both heat and cold.

He held the ice pan and took another piece, brushing it in a similar fashion across the top of my second orb. This time he swirled it round and round, nudging me backward until I leaned against the barn wall. My breasts were swollen, my nipples ached painfully.

Ambrose leaned down and kissed my neck. The shock of his warm lips, nibbling and teasing there at the same time he skated the cold ice lower and lower made me groan and arch against him.

"Do you burn for me, Lucy?" He didn't give time for an answer, fumbling with the clasp at the back of my dress. He opened it, plunging his hand beneath the corset to cup

my naked breast. The ice in his palm turned into an erotic trickle of water on flesh as it melted.

His lips trailed kisses up my neck and lingered there as he cupped my breast and squeezed, then rubbed my nipple with the heel of his palm. I came up on my toes, the sensation causing a hot piercing needle of desire that left me gasping.

When he muttered, "More ice, I think," I barely attended. I was muzzy and fevered, needing more of this exquisite torture.

He took my mouth, first a brush of his lips against mine. His lips were chilled, startling against my own. When his tongue traced its path, I opened for him, eager to savor this penetration. Ambrose delivered a sliver of ice, carried into my mouth on the tip of his tongue.

We played a game, languidly feasting on each other. The frozen shard melted to a smaller size in the heat of our tangling tongues. I grew bold and pushed the ice into his mouth, tasting the inner walls, stroking his tongue with mine. He suckled, pulling in hard draws on my flesh and I cupped his head, at the same time molding my body against his as my tongue retreated and his followed.

During that interlude, I confess my senses were aware only of our tongues dancing in sensual mating. When our kiss ended, both of us panting and groaning with passion, I realized my buttons were undone and my corset strings loosened. Ambrose grinned wickedly at me and pushed my gown to my waist, pulling the strings of my undergarment from their lacings to cast that article of clothing aside.

I pretended shyness, covering my breasts with my hands, and yet, I confess, I splayed my fingers so that the turgid thrust of my nipples poked through. Ambrose gathered more ice and set it against the lower side of my swollen orb. The ice melted from the heat of his hand and my blazing flesh. A trickle of water zigzagged down my ribs to the dress at my waist.

I grasped his hand and brought it boldly up my breast, thrusting against his palm. First he squeezed my nipple, pinching the bud almost painfully. Then he rubbed the ice

across the enflamed tip, bringing moans of pleasure from me. When he set his mouth upon the same flesh, the shock of his mouth's heat following the cold ice made me arch and mewl piteously for relief. "Ambrose, please—you make me burn. Please, Husband, tease me no more."

He turned his attentions to my other breast and I wantonly held his head, thrusting nipple and flesh into the heated cavern of his mouth. The rough scrape of his teeth, then application of cold ice followed by his languid sucking made me wild to kick away my clothes altogether and mount my husband.

I fumbled at the buttons on his shirt to reach his bare chest. I needed to touch his skin, taste his buds, lick his flesh. We wrestled with his clothing 'til he also stood bare from waist to shoulder. Oh, the exquisite feel of his chest hair tickling my thrusting peaks as we embraced.

I pushed my hips forward, sinuously rubbing against his groin. His shaft was engorged, a long ridge outlined by his denims. Unbuckling his belt, I parted the waistband to reach inside. His cock throbbed in my hand as I grasped his length. "I want this inside me, Husband," I told him boldly.

Ambrose laughed and then said gruffly, "Oh, but I'm not done with you, my pretty." In one motion, he shoved my dress free and I stood clad in drawers alone. Those followed quickly, leaving me with nothing but stockings and kidskin shoes. Naked and aroused to a fever pitch, I trembled as Ambrose looked at me with lust in his eyes.

He scooped another piece of ice from the pan and while still crouched, anointed my belly with the frozen water. I flinched from the shock of cold. Ambrose leaned forward and licked the melted dew from my navel. His tongue laved the area with heat before he again circled the place with the sliver of ice.

His trail of kisses followed the exquisite torment. Cold water trickled across my mound, bringing a flood of liquid heat pooling between my thighs. Ambrose rubbed his

face against the soft curls adorning my cunny. "You're hot for me," he growled and touched his tongue lower on the lips of my sex.

The ice – such extraordinary titillation Ambrose wrought with it. A sliver of cold on my inner thigh made me flinch. He kissed the chill away, moving his lips ever higher, nearing the part of me that throbbed for attention.

When I would have fallen, he stood and arched my back over one of his arms while he toyed with my breasts. Pinching and teasing my nipples with ice, rousing the buds to hard peaks that burned and ached for his mouth. When he covered one with his mouth and pinched the other between his fingers, a wave of opulent sensation rolled over me and my inner muscles pulsed in release. Ambrose continued to pull and suck with such power my body came back from satiation to aroused need in moments.

I pulled my husband to my lips and kissed him. "I will taste you now," I told him and felt him shudder at my murmured statement. I fumbled with his pants and shoved them off, much as he had divested me of clothing earlier.

His mouth was divine. I loved the feeling of my husband's lips, so often stern but changed to soft seduction when we coupled. I tasted him, running my tongue across his lower lip, to stop and nibble and sip there. Below, I grasped his cock and slowly pumped my hand up and down the engorged rod. It satisfied a hunger in me to hear my husband's pants of desire.

I trailed wet kisses from chin to jaw, then lower, teasing his nipples into arousal and sucking each as I squeezed his cock between my thighs, rubbing my open cleft up and down his shaft.

"You're playin' with fire, little girl," he groaned.

I laughed. I smiled later, remembering the complete control I had at that moment. Ambrose was ablaze and needed the balm of my lips. I sank to my knees and tasted the mix of our fluids on the tip of his shaft. It excited me, this elixir made from us. Delicately I surrounded the head of his cock and rubbed my tongue there.

I found my own shard of ice and introduced it to his thigh as I slid his shaft into the cavern of my mouth. He flinched from the cold but his erection jerked and I felt its girth increase as I hollowed my cheeks and sucked.

When I would have continued, he lowered me to a blanket he'd thrown down in preparation for his barn seduction. I writhed wantonly against the coarse fabric beneath my buttocks and splayed my thighs, inviting him to join his flesh to mine.

Instead, he straddled my head, presenting his cock at my face as he set his own mouth on the lips of my sex. It was not something we had engaged in before, but I was eager to experience this new pleasure. I could hardly concentrate on the stiffly thrusting staff before my lips. Ambrose tickled the inner folds of my cleft with his tongue and then abruptly penetrated my channel, pressing his face roughly against my tender flesh.

I arched upward and claimed his cock with my mouth, taking as much of his length as I could accommodate. As I writhed beneath his attentions, wrapping my thighs around his head, he brushed the nub of nerves at my apex with his chin and I moaned aloud at the carnal assault. I wrapped my arms around his hips and pulled him deeper into my throat. My tongue laved his hard length and when I swallowed, I tasted his seed and felt a trickle seep down my throat.

Abruptly, he pushed two fingers into my channel, thrusting them in and out as he sucked on my pearl. I came undone, arching up with a cry as my release broke over me.

Ambrose reversed his position. I confess I had neglected his cock during the pulsing waves of my release. He replaced his fingers with his hard staff, penetrating my depths with one thrust. My tunnel was hot, clasping his shaft, squeezing as though to milk more pleasure from it.

My thighs were wide, my feet flat on the blanket as I felt another orgasm begin. I lifted my pelvis against his groin, reaching for something beyond anything I'd known so far. My cunny clenched around Ambrose's rod and our hips pounded together in the same rhythm.

At last I reached the threshold of heaven. I could not keep back my words of triumph, "I'm there, oh God, Husband. Please—please..." My hips jerked demandingly and my pelvis pressed against his groin. His cock grew larger inside me as my inner muscles flexed around him. He shifted, lifting my rump in his hands, and I arched my back to better receive each deep penetration. We came in concert, our cries mingling with the sound of flesh slapping against flesh as we claimed ecstasy together.

Ambrose sprawled on top of me in the aftermath of our play. I enjoyed his weight, feeling an almost primal need to stay connected to him in this way. When he groaned and rolled off, my cunny flexed, woefully empty, as though it needed his shaft inside yet again.

My husband attended me gently, sponging off the emissions from our release and wiping my body free of perspiration—both his and mine. I felt unexpected tenderness deep inside as I studied the man who had made himself a solid thread in the fabric of my life.

When we were again dressed, I asked almost shyly, "What was it you wanted to show me earlier today?"

He escorted me to the tack room where a tabby cat fed her five kittens. Ambrose held me close as I stroked the soft fur and admired the fragile babies. His voice was a deep rumble when he said, "You'll make a good mama, Lucy. Someday I'll watch you nurse my son."

His words caused a flutter in my heart as I recognized their truth.

Chapter Eight

July 22, 1866. I have finally convinced Ambrose we need a housekeeper, but only because my health wanes. I think I have contracted some horrible Texas disease yet to be identified.

It was but a short time after our barn interlude when I became unwell. The first indication of my illness came when Ambrose thought to give me a special treat and made a honey mix to dribble over crushed ice. I anticipated the delightful dessert but when he presented it to me, my stomach rebelled and I cast up my daily fare and retched at the thought of more.

It soon seemed I had formed an aversion to food. I couldn't cook nor tolerate many scents that were once acceptable to my senses. My suggestion that we hire a cook and housekeeper continued to meet with disapproval. I offered to pay the expense from my own funds, but my husband frowned at the notion.

Nevertheless, after I continued retching in misery, he conceded. Before he could change his mind, I accompanied Ambrose to town on Saturday, posting a notice at the Eclipse Mercantile indicating my desire to employ a housekeeper.

It was two weeks before I had a response. Then it was only one and although I did not care for the woman, I immediately employed her as our domestic. She was a widowed older woman Ambrose knew from his youth and she agreed to sleep in a room at the back of the house. Mrs. Carmichael was grim and disapproving, and if I could have found a different choice, I would have hired another.

I wasn't interested in conversation with her. She sniffed disdainfully at me when I entered the kitchen, as though it was her domain. Hamilton proclaimed himself saved and openly mocked my past cooking attempts.

Ambrose shushed him, solicitous of my feelings, but I thought I saw his lips curl in a secret smile. It pleased me when I found the aroma of her food as noxious as my own.

I took perverse satisfaction in knowing my illness prevented my husband from pursuing our nightly marital relations.

My illness persisted and I was very sad and felt the loss of my father greatly. The days were long and Ambrose was rarely home. He and Hamilton spent each day herding cattle, preparing for an event called the Fall Roundup. He was away and didn't appreciate my misery.

At first it was clear he didn't approve of the money spent on the housekeeper. But as my sickness continued, he changed, making her welcome.

After an excessively severe bout of retching Mrs. Carmichael witnessed one day, I wiped my face with my lace handkerchief and questioned her. "Does the town of Eclipse have the services of a trained physician?"

"Doc Pritchard hangs a shingle up but you'd be better off seeing Millie Simms. She's used by most women hereabouts." The housekeeper offered her opinion often and freely with a know-it-all attitude that left me seething.

"Is this Simms woman trained? Did she attend medical school?" The thought of visiting some country woman to consult on my health was repugnant.

The housekeeper snorted loudly, ever insulting. "She knows what she needs to know."

I shuddered, picturing a witchlike woman brewing mysterious concoctions in a large cauldron. "I will speak to my husband about visiting Dr. Pritchard." Wishing to avoid outright disparagement, I tried to appease. "I am sure your local healer is sufficient for those who cannot afford a real physician."

Claiming she knew Ambrose's mother, she chastised me in her name, speaking with disgust. "That husband of yours sure picked a strange wife. You beat a rug like

you're swattin' at flies and don't have a lick of sense. Why, Cordelia Quince must be gasping in disbelief where she watches from heaven."

Her reference to the rug was another example of her insolence. How I performed my tasks shouldn't have concerned her, but she'd left her own work to come outside and supervise mine, pounding the rug to demonstrate the correct way to clean a carpet. I'd left her holding the rug-beater and retreated, simply telling her to finish that task.

It seemed certain that Mrs. Carmichael knew more than I did about Ambrose's mother, and perhaps Cordelia Quince did cringe from above at her son's choice of wife. But be that as it may, I was unwilling to let my housekeeper have the last word. "Since Mother Quince is no longer here to tend her home, I feel certain she would be thankful for my presence. Until Ambrose married me, he and his brother were fending for themselves." I left her to mutter alone in the kitchen, refusing to listen to more slurs.

I didn't dare share her disrespectful words with my husband for fear Ambrose would dismiss Mrs. Carmichael and I would again have no cook.

August 18, 1866. Oh the humiliation!

"Ambrose, Mrs. Carmichael informs me that Eclipse has a physician in practice. I wish to visit his office."

"I don't want Doc Pritchard touching you. There's nothing wrong with Millie Simms. I'll fetch her."

"I will consult with a trained physician. If you wish to have an untaught country woman attend you in your illnesses, so be it. I am amazed this uncivilized country has a doctor and I will certainly make use of him."

After we argued and I became more ill, my insistence prevailed and my husband brought a doctor to the ranch.

It was immediately clear Dr. Pritchard did not accept my opinion that I'd caught some deadly Texas disease. He brushed away my attempts to tell him my symptoms and ordered me to lie on the bed. Ambrose stood beside me, holding my hand.

My protests were swept aside as a strange man who spoke in cultured tones, but smelled of spirits, reached under my skirts and touched my most private parts while engaging in a discussion of farming methodology with Ambrose. I blanch as I remember the affront and admit I grasped my husband's hand in terror during the ordeal. *Is there no dignity to be found in womanhood?*

Ambrose wore a grim expression and talked about the hay crop while the doctor looked at him, at the same time poking and prodding my intimate flesh.

Having finished his examination, Dr. Pritchard washed his hands and advised Ambrose. "Your wife's fine. There's nothing wrong that isn't normal for a young married woman."

How dare these men treat me as though I am not present? They acted as though it had not been I suffering the humiliating inspection of my flesh.

Ambrose squeezed my hand and I remained silent. The doctor delivered his diagnosis and it was revealed why Ambrose accepted my employment of a domestic. I was with child.

* * * * *

I am trapped. There, I've said it.

I had pretended inside that I would return soon to Boston. I had secretly viewed this segment of my life as a time I would look back on with interest, as if it were a dream—now I think, more a nightmare. Being *enceinte* has made me both melancholic and restless.

Oh how my senses fooled my mind and blurred my reality. Now it was too late. My future slammed the door on my past. I was terrified and curled in our bed each day hiding from what would be.

Ambrose believed it was because I was ill. I let him worry about my health while I tried to understand where my path had led.

I am going to have a child. I should have been joyful but instead I thought of freedom lost. I cried at night... It was shameful but I knew I was not ready for this.

Conversely, it seemed I had made Ambrose proud of one of my accomplishments at last—his baby grew inside my belly. I overheard him as he spoke to Hamilton one night. “Lucy will make a good ranch wife yet. You’ll see.”

Why did he feel the need to reassure Hamilton as though defending me? I had done nothing wrong. Remembering his words brought tears to my eyes.

When he said, “This will settle her down,” I felt suffocated. He spoke as though I were one of his cows to be herded, branded – milked.

I shuddered while he rejoiced.

My malaise of depressed misery was interrupted one day when the wagon arrived carrying my furniture from the Eclipse Mercantile. I was so pleased. It lifted my spirits to see the blue couch and chair settled in our front room.

Ambrose came home after the furniture was in place. I had neglected to mention my earlier summer order. So much had transpired since I visited the Mercantile that day, I had almost forgotten the secret purchase. Now all was revealed.

In a surprising reversal of her usual rude ways, Mrs. Carmichael admired the mahogany tables and the elegant sofa, even sitting on it without invitation.

When my husband harrumphed and his face took on the ruddy hue that signaled anger, the housekeeper corrected him. “Don’t be getting your tail in a knot, Ambrose

Quince. Your house needs some decent furniture and now you have it. Why your dearly departed mother, Cordelia Quince, must be smiling at the sight."

It was high praise and stopped my husband's complaint as nothing else would have. Slyly, I offered the tattered discard to my brother-in-law. "Hamilton, when you set up your own house, you will already have your sofa waiting."

After her defense, Mrs. Carmichael and I shared a truce of sorts. When Ambrose was gone, I lingered in the kitchen learning some of the ways of cookery I had never been taught. I wasn't ready to try my hand at meals, and shuddered to think of the loss of my domestic. But it pleased me to prepare desserts, although I took no credit for them. I enjoyed my secret triumph when Hamilton Quince heaped praise on the pies and cakes that appeared, thanking the cook each night.

* * * * *

October 26, 1866. How exciting! We're having a party.

I feverishly decorated my front room for the guests who would be attending our dance and end-of-season entertainment. Ambrose was busy with his own work and waved away my efforts to engage him in conversation and garner a trip to town.

He said when I coaxed him, "Nope, there's no time now for gallivanting around, Lucy. I've got beef to bring in. And don't even think about traveling to Eclipse alone."

I found a way around his edict! After much coaxing, Mrs. Carmichael hitched the wagon to a buggy horse and we traveled to town without permission. The petty rebellion thrilled me. We shopped together, she choosing the foodstuff needed to replenish the larder and get ready for our fall entertainment, I finding beautiful accessories to complement my new room. I had decided we would speak of it as The Blue Room, and I strove to make it as elegant as the one in my Boston home.

Ambrose was most put out at my display of independence but he didn't chastise me, only scowling sternly when he came home and found us putting away our treasures.

The day of the Fall Roundup arrived and my furniture was a success. Ranchers and their wives began to arrive early in the morning, bringing food and happiness with them. It was exciting to see the men so pleased with the year's work and the women conversing like hens clucking in a chicken coop.

I began to understand what a lonely life it was here for a female. I invited the ladies into my front room and served tea and finger sandwiches that Mrs. Carmichael prepared just for the occasion. She, of course, made herself known to all and engaged in robust conversation while she mingled with my guests.

Mrs. Carmichael regaled them with the story of the furniture's arrival. "I told Ambrose his mother would be proud. That put a stop to his rant." How different things were here in the West. In Boston, a servant would never have dared speak so familiarly. The customs in Texas seemed to assign more worth to those who worked than those who they served. It was an odd social hierarchy that puzzled me.

The sandwiches were a frivolous addition to the groaning tables of food outside. But I think the women enjoyed the genteel environs of my elegant sitting room. Many of them touched the furniture reverently and complimented my décor. I heard one woman say, "Owen would have this pale blue ruined the first time he sat down in his work clothes." But I watched her stroke the fine material of my sofa and saw the look of yearning on her face.

It was difficult to retain femininity in the harsh reality of this savage land. I was proud that my Blue Room had turned out so well—a statement of who we were, women caught and struggling to blossom in a desert life.

My husband had arranged for wagons to carry us all on a hayride over Double-Q land at dusk, and then back to the dance planned after. Nothing I had ever encountered neared the experience. The night air was cold, but Ambrose pulled me under a blanket

and cuddled me as we rode. The heat of his body kept me warm as we gazed at the stars dotting the vast sky. "Happy?" he murmured in my ear.

I could only nod. The wagon passengers sang one song after another, filling the crisp air with harmony and silver notes. It was magic.

* * * * *

I had begun to recover my health and indeed feel interest in my surroundings once again. The holidays were approaching and I dreaded them as well as felt anticipation. At home I would have been fussing over which dress to wear to the Winter Ball. When I thought about that life and all that I would never experience, I was overwhelmed by a sense of loss.

But we were too busy to linger long in depression. The end of November approached and Mrs. Carmichael promised to make our Thanksgiving feast early so she could enjoy her holiday with her son and his family. She left instructions for me in the handling of the turkey—plucked, cleaned and waiting in the icehouse—and fussed at me to make sure I did this or assembled that. We both knew the meal would be a success only if her preparations were in place.

One morning I was practicing cookery when Ambrose made a surprise visit to the kitchen. My ingredients for sugar cookies were only half combined when he discovered me adorned with an apron and covered in flour.

"Who's this pretty lady in my kitchen?" he growled in my ear. I swear he acted a dolt, hanging his head over my shoulder and tasting the thick cookie batter that I stirred in a bowl. "Deeeelicious," he declared, nipping my neck and hugging me from behind.

I rested against his strength, enjoying his embrace as he alternately complimented my culinary skills and rubbed my tummy where our baby rested.

* * * * *

Thanksgiving Day, 1866. My feast was less than perfect.

As per Mrs. Carmichael's directions, I prepared the turkey at dawn and placed it in the oven to roast. I managed to boil and mash potatoes, but the whipped result was a lumpy, sticky mess. I forgot to stuff the turkey with the dressing already made and removed the turkey from the oven before it was completely done.

Hamilton ate the meal without comment. Ambrose pretended all was right. I nibbled the half-burned, half-raw poultry and felt depressed. My doubts about ever mastering culinary skills seemed confirmed.

The meal ended with one of Mrs. Carmichael's pecan pies and Hamilton sighed in relief when I assured him I had no part in its preparation.

I did not feel so bad though, after the meal. Ambrose helped me clear the table and stood companionably beside me at the sink while I washed and he dried the dishes from our feast.

"I'm real proud to have you as my wife, Lucy. I want you to know that." His words were gruff as he escorted me up the stairs to our bedroom.

I watched through half-lowered lashes as my husband yanked off his boots and stripped, revealing his rampant sex, elongated and fully aroused. When I would have donned nightwear, preferring to hide my rounding tummy under the voluminous folds of my gown, Ambrose shook his head. "Nope, tonight they'll be nothing between us. I want to feel every inch of your soft skin rubbing on mine."

He lay on the bed, stretching his long length beside me, trailing his fingers across my stomach before kissing my belly and nibbling his way to my breasts. When he circled the areola with his tongue, I shuddered.

"Like that?" His question was a guttural growl.

I pulled his head closer, pushing my breast against his lips, seeking more of his teasing strokes.

He licked then suckled each turgid peak, making me so hot I felt as though I might burst into flames under his attentions. I grasped his cock, stroking my hand up and down his hardened length.

When I leaned over him, tasting a drop of liquid seeping from the end of his shaft, Ambrose jerked, groaned and pressed me to the mattress. "No more of that, my fine lady. I'll be undone before we start."

I smiled at his words, proud that my husband enjoyed the feel of my mouth on his manhood. I loved his taste and the raw lust my actions unleashed in him. Determinedly he pulled me from my attentions, lifted my knees and parted my thighs, making room for himself as he nudged his sex against my humid opening.

"You like this, don't you, Lucy?" Ambrose was uncharacteristically hesitant.

Rather than use words to proclaim my desire for him and my pleasure in his touch, I lifted my pelvis, sensuously rubbing my wet folds against his rod. It was the catalyst that ignited his passion and destroyed his control.

"God, Lucy," he groaned, penetrating me with one thrust.

It was my turn to moan as I felt the thick rod travel through my snug passage, filling my hollow core. "You're part of me, Husband," I whispered.

Taking his hand, I laid it first on my belly. "You're here."

He nudged deeper and I laughed. Lifting his palm, I placed it on my forehead. "And here." Then I moved it again 'til his hand covered my heart. "And here."

"Am I?" His question was uncertain, as though he wasn't sure of my feelings. Tenderly I smoothed my hands up the contours of his back until they rested on his shoulders. We stared into each other's eyes, joined in both body and spirit.

"Always," I answered him. "You're part of me forever."

My husband and I coupled passionately long into the night, whispering our delight until we lay exhausted in a sated embrace. When I woke in the morning, it was to

discover Ambrose had lingered beside me rather than rising earlier, as was his usual routine. "What is it, Ambrose?"

Almost frowning, he rested on his side, his head pillowed on his arm. "Sometimes I can't figure out how a fool like me managed to get a woman like you for my bride. And now you're giving me a son too. Lucy, I think you've made me the luckiest man alive."

Ambrose was not one for sentimental speech and I smiled sleepily at him, ready to tease him with the possibility I carried a daughter and not the boy he predicted. But his expression was so serious, instead I reassured him of my devotion. "I think I was lucky to find you too, Husband." I sighed, remembering how, silly girl that I'd been, I'd run from his attentions at the same time his spirit had called to me.

He gave me a quick kiss before he left the bed to dress. As he pulled on his pants and shirt, he said, "Sleep in today."

I had no desire to quarrel with his edict and gladly pulled the covers close, snuggling deeper to enjoy the unusual respite from work, comforted in the thought that our disagreements were at an end and I was secure in my future by his side.

* * * * *

Shortly though, my complacent satisfaction with Ambrose was once again abruptly interrupted. His approval lasted for one week. Then I plummeted in his esteem, pulling Mrs. Carmichael into his wrath as well for her involvement in what he called my escapade.

Escapade, bah! I admit I coaxed my housekeeper to town with the promise of holiday shopping. I did in fact want to find a special gift for Ambrose when he wasn't present for the purchase. My husband usually hovered so closely when we visited Eclipse, it was impossible to have a secret moment. Once I had made my purchase, the lure of social discourse set in. After I chose a gift for Hamilton—tempted to make it a lump of coal but unwilling to spoil the coming event—Mrs. Harper found me wandering wistfully through the aisles and invited me to have tea with friends.

I left Mrs. Carmichael browsing the store. "Get along with you, missy. I've got my own buying to do." She shooed me away, eager to peruse the treasures at her leisure, an experience she said was a rare treat for her.

I accompanied Mrs. Harper to the hotel salon where Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Henry were already engaged in conversation. It was such fun to hear their silly gossip and giggle over people and happenings. I had missed the society of women of my station in life and joining their afternoon tea was heady and exhilarating.

After I had lingered long enough for Mrs. Carmichael to have completed her shopping, I prepared to return to the Mercantile. When Mr. Pauley joined us and offered the conversation of a gentleman, I lost track of time.

Later, I writhed in embarrassment as I remembered the next humiliation. My husband found me drinking tea in the salon and chastised me in front of all.

"There's a storm coming in, Lucy. Get your ass in the wagon right now." He swore at me! I thank God I couldn't see the shocked expressions of my friends as they witnessed my mortification. Ambrose clasped my arm and strode across the room. I would have been dragged had I not run to keep up.

That was just the beginning of the ordeal. It had been a perfectly beautiful day when I entered the salon. When he hustled me to the wagon, I felt the chill of the temperature as the wind pelted dust against my face.

"Cover your head and tuck your chin low," my husband ordered me. Ice crystals had already formed inside my nose and I hurried to obey.

After tying his horse to the back of the wagon, Ambrose set me on the seat beside Mrs. Carmichael and took up the reins himself. "Goddammit, woman, do you have no sense?" He whipped the horses into a speed that bounced us on the bench as he growled reprimands during our race for home.

The sky had turned a strange color and I huddled in fear between the two larger bodies as bolts of lightning lit the sky and thunder rumbled above. We were on the path

to the barn when the skies opened and huge chunks of hail rained down, striking us with sharp, cutting blows.

Ambrose protected my head under his arm until we reached the interior of the shelter. Once there, he released me, climbing silently from the wagon to tie the horse. Mrs. Carmichael and I avoided each other's gaze. I had been shamed before friends and help, cursed by a raging savage and exposed to violent elements I'd never seen before. Of course I started to cry.

He lifted me from the wagon without warning and carried me to the tack room. "Get out of those wet clothes and wrap this around you." His offering was a smelly horse blanket but I took it gratefully.

"Goddammit, woman, you'll be lucky if you don't catch pneumonia. Sometimes you don't have a lick of sense." Not satisfied with my speed in disrobing, he pulled at my clothes, stripping me at the same time he rubbed me dry with the blanket.

"Don't you swear at me again, Ambrose Quince." My teeth chattered over the words but I refused to allow my husband one more curse.

"All right," he said, but added in a harsh tone, "you will go nowhere without me in the future." Then he wrapped the blanket around my naked shoulders and said very slowly as if he were speaking to a simpleton, "Do – you – understand?"

"Yes, I understand," I answered. When he dropped his hands and turned away, I added, "But I do not agree."

He whirled back so fast he set me ajar. "You will not defy me in this, Lucille Quince. In case you've forgotten, you're carryin' my son in your belly. You will keep your fancy rump on your fancy settee in your fancy Blue Room and stay put until he's born. Do you understand me?" He fairly breathed fire.

I stepped back before I said defiantly, "Ambrose Quince, I will not be kept hostage in my own home. You are being silly." I admit my protest was delivered in a quavering voice. His expression was so stern I pulled the blanket tighter against his look.

Mrs. Carmichael interrupted our stare-down when she called through the door, "If you two are done fightin', the storm's past."

Ambrose herded me to the house like one of his steers and then abandoned me with orders to Mrs. Carmichael to make me go to bed. *I have been reduced to child status again.*

* * * * *

December 18, 1866 – I was forced to beg help from my husband's brother.

Forbidden to leave the ranch as I was, I asked Hamilton to retrieve my Christmas gift for Ambrose. I admitted to myself I was tempted to throw the boots at my husband rather than see them adorn his feet.

Even after his temper abated on the day of the hailstorm, he remained truculent and brusque for days. One night he even questioned me closely about the presence of Stephen Pauley at the social gathering. His jealous possessiveness seemed ludicrous to me anytime. That I was almost five months with child rendered it nonsense and I told him so.

Chapter Nine

December 24, 1866. Christmas Eve. The house is quiet. I have wrapped my presents and tucked them under the pine tree Ambrose brought in today. He and Hamilton loitered in the room, sometimes offering help with the high branches but more often offering unwanted advice as Mrs. Carmichael and I trimmed the limbs.

“Foolish waste of time,” Ham opined as he ate a slice of my apple cake thinking it was the work of Mrs. Carmichael.

“Excellent, as usual,” he told her, pointing his fork in her direction.

My cook and cohort in stealth snorted, ready to set him straight, but I caught her glance and shook my head.

“What are you up to now?” Ambrose rarely missed anything transpiring around him and it tickled me to be secretly learning my way around the kitchen. I wasn’t doing it to please him and suspected he’d immediately let Mrs. Carmichael go if he discovered I could do her job. For all his tender care, Mr. Quince disapproved of waste and managed the Double-Q finances with a sharp eye.

I had insisted on paying the housekeeper’s salary from my bank account but it was a sore point, one of many, that irked my husband. His desire to control all extended to me—the independence I gained from having my own money bothered him.

When the tree was decorated and the topping put in place, I unwrapped the delicate crystal bird that had adorned each of my Christmas trees since birth. With trembling fingers, I tied it on a tree limb perch. “Papa gave that to Mama for my first Christmas.”

When I stepped back to survey the Christmas tree, I remembered the holiday festivities and tree-trimming parties in Boston and could hardly recognize this event as celebration of the same day.

"Prettiest tree we've ever had," Ambrose declared and put his hat on, preparing to leave.

"Hell, Ambrose, it's the only tree we've had since we were young'uns." Hamilton's grin was unexpected, making me glad I had insisted on starting this tradition.

With face pressed against the windowpane, I watched the men walk to the barn. I lingered there, dreaming of other Christmases when I was young.

* * * * *

December 25th, Christmas Day 1866

Ambrose woke me early and insisted that I come down to open my gift from him. I was surprised he'd even gotten one. He'd remained distant and stern since the hailstorm incident.

I was astonished at my Christmas present. The rough sketches Ambrose had commissioned at the Independence Day celebration were framed and hung over the fireplace mantle. I had not looked upon them since the day they had been wrought. The crackling fire cast shadows across my husband's picture in a strange way, making Ambrose appear predatory, with a hawklike piercing stare under hooded eyes.

His expression was less stern when he gruffly explained his gift. "You said your mama and pa had their likenesses hung above the fireplace in their home. I figured we'd do the same in ours."

Without comment I moved on to my own image, struck by the face of the young bride, an innocent child poised on the brink of discovery. The young lady in the picture was pretty but I looked upon her as though at a stranger.

"It is a very thoughtful gift," I assured Ambrose. Someday I would have them painted in oil. For the moment, this rough presentation fit our décor appropriately enough.

I swallowed away disappointment at the meager offering, feeling shallow at my mental criticism of the gift. "I have something for you also, Mr. Quince."

His look of surprise changed my mood and suddenly I was eager to please him again. I had wrapped the box extravagantly and he seemed like a young boy, tearing the wrappings open to look inside.

"Damn, Lucy," he said gruffly when he pulled his boots from the container. "You spent a pretty penny on these."

His pleasure in the boots outweighed his disapproval and he pulled them on, stomping his foot into them and testing the size.

"I commissioned Hamilton to complete my order," I told him primly.

Ambrose seemed pleased with his gift and I was happy they fit until he removed them and put on the old worn pair he used every day. "No point in messing up something so fine. I'll save them for dress-up."

Since formal occasions were rare, I watched him set aside the boots, knowing they would get little use.

Hamilton's shirt was duly appreciated and then we ate Mrs. Carmichael's Christmas ham before the men left to tend the livestock. I was alone, the cook having gone to family for the day.

I filled a tub of water to treat myself to a leisurely soak while the men were gone. Back sooner than I expected, Ambrose came in and unceremoniously poked his head behind the curtain I'd drawn around my bath. He waited with a towel, rubbing me dry before he slipped my arms into a thick wool dressing gown he surprised me with. "Forgot to give this to you earlier," he said brusquely. Then, as if to explain his gift he added, "Those flimsy things of yours don't keep you warm."

The robe he presented was less than elegant but thoughtfully chosen. I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him close. It was a special day, our first Christmas together. I wanted to remember it later as perfect, not filled with ancient discord.

Ambrose spent most of the day inside, silently sharing whatever room I occupied. When I sliced the cold ham for supper, he set the table and filled our mugs with coffee. Hamilton had disappeared after the morning chores, for once leaving us with a day of privacy and I had indulged myself by remaining in my robe all day.

My belly was beginning to round with the child that grew within. I had recently felt stirrings. When we retired to bed, I felt flutters of life. Ambrose laid his hand on my belly, then his head, rubbing his face against my flesh and kissing the place our baby nestled. He was so happy it made me ashamed at my reluctant acceptance of my condition.

I pretended it was my body's change that disturbed me so greatly. It was true that my nipples were tight buds, so sensitive that even the brush of my nightgown irritated them painfully.

I complained of this and Ambrose quickly offered his solution, whisking away the offending material. "May all things be so easy to fix, my lady," he growled in that voice that made me act the harlot.

I was aroused—remembering our former nights of passion. During my morning sickness—all day and night also—we had not engaged in marital relations. Since the hailstorm incident, our couplings had been tepid and few, furthering our days of discord. I think Ambrose refrained because he felt guilty for his anger and for visiting such ill-health upon me. He was a lusty man but I certainly had not considered enjoying the marriage bed during this time.

But the sickness was gone and with our most immediate disagreement at rest, I was filled with a wanton need to join with my husband. When he removed my gown, I sprawled shamelessly, inviting his gaze.

He hurried out of his clothes, words unnecessary between us. His cock was full and leaking fluid as he shimmied out of his pants, pulled his shirt over his head and came down between my legs, held open invitingly.

The hair on his calves tickled the sensitive skin on my thighs and I made a moue of protest. "I'll kiss it better." He did that and more.

"I want to look at you, here. I want to watch your pussy change." He thumbed my nubbin and I moaned. "Look at you," he crooned tenderly as he unfolded the petals of my womanhood and swooped to kiss and suckle the jewel on my crown. When I raised my hips to meet him, he sucked my pearl deeper and tongued the hot bud, threatening to drive me insane with need. Hissing in pleasure, I rotated my hips, rubbing sinuously against the rough stubble on his face.

"Sweet, sweet honey," Ambrose murmured, lapping my emissions as they flooded my pulsing flesh. "More?" he teased me with his question before stroking one, then two fingers inside me, sucking on the nubbin of nerves until heat prickles raced from my heels up my spine, announcing my release as my back arched tautly and my orgasm rolled over me.

I collapsed, sinking down on the damp sheets. Respite was not to be. Ambrose brushed his lips against my folds, bringing me back to full arousal in moments. My back braced against the headboard of the bed, I spread my legs for him and pushed my pelvis against his chin, grinding my sensitive flesh against his teeth and mouth.

"Make me come again," I begged him. My heat was not to be borne. "Make me come, Quincy, put the fire out."

He came over me then and shafted me until I screamed and screamed as waves of bliss overwhelmed my senses. I swiveled my hips, catching the rhythm of his thrusts, tightening and flexing around his cock until I felt the pulse of his seed spurt hotly inside. I was still enflamed and needed yet more.

Ambrose withdrew and urged me toward his mouth. "All of us," he growled, "I'll taste all of us now."

He buried his face in my pussy and ate at me, taking the combined essence of us and drinking it from my body. I rode his face, holding on to the back of the bed while he held my hips and coaxed more pleasure from me.

His hands squeezed my breasts as his mouth laved and nuzzled, teeth scraping the sensitive bundle of nerves at my apex, tongue plunging deep into my channel, chin riding against my engorged sex.

I moaned, hips jerking against his mouth as he suctioned around my opening and drew from me a spill of honey. He murmured praise against my lower lips, drinking the proof of my need until I collapsed above him. Then he languidly licked away the final drops of my release as I draped above him, satiated and limp.

He chuckled and rolled from under me, kissing me with the taste of both of us on his lips. I heard myself give him words until then withheld. "I love you, Ambrose."

He grunted and pulled me into his arms. I wanted to talk, he already snored softly.

"I'm calling you Quincy from now on. Ambrose sounds like an old fuddy-duddy." I whispered my intent to his sleeping form, rubbing my face against the pelt of hair on his chest and savoring the feel of the rich texture. "Merry Christmas, Husband," I murmured.

"Merry Christmas, Wife," he growled softly. The rumbled words surprised me. I'd thought him asleep. Ambrose pulled me closer and grunted, "Rest now, Little Mama." He turned us so that he spooned around my back, his hand covering my belly.

I closed my eyes and breathed in his heavy male scent, the aroma of our spent passion and the smell of Christmas spices still hanging in the air. Snuggling closer to Ambrose, I grinned, thankful the house was empty but for us and our raucous sounds of lust had remained private. The clock chimed one time in the hallway, signaling the end of Christmas, 1866.

Chapter Ten

December 31, 1866. The Texas winter is a respite from the harsh summer. The days are balmy and I find myself losing my enthrallment with Boston as I embrace my new home.

The remaining days of December were mild and Ambrose made it a point to walk outside with me every day. "Don't want you to get stall crazy," he said, comparing me to a restless mare penned in a small enclosure.

Ambrose prodded me into viewing the ranch on our trek each day. He showed me every nook and cranny I'd never explored, escorting me around the outside of the house to the barn and down by the paddocks.

The temperatures were balmy and when I remembered the brisk, brusque icy winters in Boston, I shivered. "Quincy, back home, we'd be knee-deep in snowdrifts by now." I tried out my new name for him, judging his response.

He ignored the nickname but swiftly corrected the rest of my teasing remark. "You mean back East. This is your home now, Lucille McKenna Quince." He squeezed my arm playfully and then pulled me closer under his arm, adding, "You'll get used to our ways, Lucy. Texas is your home now."

"When you two get through lollygagging around, there's work to be done, Brother." It was Hamilton interrupting our pleasure with his usual glum words.

"I wish he'd smile sometimes, Quincy," I muttered at my husband.

"He's got his tail in a knot over something he can't have. Reckon it'll be a spell before we see Ham in good humor." Ambrose shook his head grimly and ushered me back to the house, saying no more about his brother's thwarted desire in spite of my attempted inquisition.

* * * * *

Quincy's insistence on my daily walks was all the more appreciated when January brought with it biting cold and the leisurely treks around the ranch yard ended. Ambrose and Hamilton spent much of each day hauling wagonloads of hay to the cattle that were unable to forage sustenance from the frozen ground.

The brothers came in each night hunched over and shivering from the cold. It was disturbing to see my husband's hands reddened and chapped from the harsh elements. He was out before daylight and in long after the sun went down. When I fussed about it to Mrs. Carmichael, she rebuked my ignorance.

Waving a dusting cloth at me she snapped, "The cattle will starve if they're not fed. Your husband and his brother are fightin' to keep hold of their ranch. Times are hard, missy. That herd of beef you're whining about is what puts food on this table."

I replied just as sharply, "He could hire employees to lessen his load. I suppose in such hard times, there are cowboys who need a job."

Mrs. Carmichael shook her head at me and said with great disgust, "If you aren't just the silliest child I've come across. Ranch hands cost money that the Double-Q can't spare."

I muttered truculently, "He could use my money."

Mrs. Carmichael snorted derisively, saying loudly, "Your husband's a proud man. He won't ease his way by sucking on your sugar tit."

Before I could reprimand her coarse words she added belligerently, "You need to pamper Ambrose a little. He and Hamilton are carryin' a heavy load. They've got more land and cattle than the two of 'em can manage alone, but they're doin' it anyway."

Hateful as her words seemed, I was mindful of them when my husband and his brother rode into the ranch yard late that night. I had mastered coffee and brewed it fresh when they entered the ranch yard. Mrs. Carmichael had retired hours before, leaving me to serve the cold supper.

Hamilton was first through the back door, sniffing the air and rubbing his hands. "Thank God, Mrs. Carmichael's got the coffee hot and ready."

I didn't disabuse him of his notion.

Ambrose reached for the mug of coffee I handed him and nodded when I said, "Our housekeeper went on to bed."

I sipped my own cup of the hot brew and listened to talk of feedlots and moldy hay until the meal was consumed and Hamilton said good night. "Early up again, Brother. Best get some rest, dawn will be here soon."

Ambrose groaned and stretched. "You're right."

When I frowned at my husband, he said, "We're pulling a load of hay out to the east feedlot in the morning. I better get to bed."

I'd earlier busied myself preparing Quincy's surprise by partially filling the bathing tub with tepid water. Before my husband could leave the kitchen, I added a boiling kettle of liquid to the tub, warming the contents considerably.

"Mighty late for you to be taking a bath, isn't it, Lucy?" He frowned at my preparations, exhaustion etched on his features.

"Come over here and take off your clothes, Quincy. This bath is for you."

His eyebrow went up and a grin softened his features when he answered, "Wouldn't want to waste good water." Removing his shirt, he crossed the room and leered at me. "You gonna tend me like one of those geisha women I've heard about?"

I swatted his chest playfully, giving him my best seductive look. "I only seek to give you pleasure, sir."

Ambrose growled his appreciation as he sank into the warm water. I lavished soap on his back, lathering it in circles before I said, "Slide down, rinse off and wet your hair at the same time. I'll use some of my shampoo to make you the most handsome man in Texas."

"It'll take more than a bottle of your pretties to do that trick," Quincy said gruffly, but he leaned back in the tub and let me scrub his hair and then leisurely massage his head. Soon his breathing changed to the deeper sounds of sleep. I woke him, whispering in his ear, "Stand up now, Husband. I'll dry you and then you can stretch out on the couch."

It was testament to his exhaustion how meekly he stood before me and let me blot the water from his tired body. I wrapped a blanket around him and led him to the front room where he grunted, "Didn't think to ever use this fancy sofa for a bed."

He was asleep on the couch before I could answer his remark. I noted with satisfaction that his big frame had no problems fitting comfortably on my fancy furniture. Rather than sleep alone, after I cleaned the water spilled on the floor and dragged the tub to the back door to be dumped, then wrapped warmly in another blanket, I sat in the matching blue chair, watching over my husband as he rested. My heart swelled with tender feelings for this stranger I'd married.

Mrs. Carmichael's words acted as chastisement and guidance. I vowed to take better care of Ambrose and pay more attention to the oblique discussions he and Hamilton conducted each meal.

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By February, both men were staggering with fatigue and the cold snap had settled into a fierce winter. Unlike the snow-laden skies of Boston and the slushy streets that unthawed under days of sunshine, the Texas winter froze everything iron hard and kept it so.

I was grateful for the warm robe Ambrose had gifted me at Christmas, drawing it close many mornings to shield me from the chill in the cold house. Mrs. Carmichael kept the fire in my sitting room ablaze and the kitchen stove warmed our cookery, but the rest of the house was so frosty our breath hung white in the air when we dusted and cleaned those areas.

I tried not to think of my Boston home where fires had burned in each room invitingly. The Double-Q ranch, and Texas life as a whole, offered a bleak substitute. My husband was distracted and grim, his expression remaining worried even when he slept. More often than not, he came to bed late, holding me close in his embrace as he curled around me in exhausted sleep.

I trusted Ambrose to care for us, the baby now being part of my concern. But I worried in response to his troubled demeanor. Ambrose quickened into life when we spoke of our child. He was certain it would be a son and though I teased him with images of little girls in pink bows, I silently agreed I carried a boy. Our offspring kicked with such power the jarring motion woke Ambrose up from a sound sleep one night.

"That boy's rarin' to get outside, isn't he, Luce?" He rubbed my belly and nibbled at my ear playfully while our son mounted a cavalry attack inside my body.

"You wouldn't think it so wonderful if it was your stomach suffering the blows," I told him irritably.

I'd been thinking about purchasing a nursery set of furnishings I'd seen in the mercantile catalog. It was quite dear, but I had my funds to cover the cost and had determined to mention it to Ambrose at the right moment. "We need a crib, Quincy."

His chest vibrated against my back as he rumbled, "Not quite yet, but soon." Ambrose slid his hand up from the baby's lower undulations to cup my breast, kneading it with his calloused hand. Soon his attentions became carnal as he tweaked my nipple, pulling on it and twirling it until I panted and arched against his hand, silently begging for more. My timing seemed poor and I got no further with the discussion of baby furniture, intent on enjoying this one joy in our bleak lives.

Our movements were almost furtive as we moved into position for further pleasure, ignoring the kicks of the baby I carried. Ambrose nuzzled my neck and murmured, "I need to feel your warmth wrapping around me tonight, sweetheart." He lay behind me and I felt the prod of his cock against my rump before he lifted my leg and eased into me.

We were huddled under the blankets, cocooned in our own world of erotic play as he stroked in and out, tweaking first one nipple and then another before he dropped his hand to my pearl, arousing me further.

Heat pulsed through me, sending shards of fire throughout my body as my senses spiraled into completion. After, I lay replete, satiated in his arms and he drew out his own pleasure, hugging me to him until I was aroused again. "Yes," I hissed softly as his engorgement stroked through the slippery evidence of my release to rub the inner walls of my channel. My womb clenched and my pussy hugged his cock, milking it wantonly as I swayed my hips, rubbing my buttocks sinuously against his groin.

"Oh sweet, sweet, Lucy," Ambrose murmured words muffled by kisses planted up my neck until his hot breath brushed my ear. "My woman," he growled and nipped the sensitive lobe at the same time he rubbed his thumb against my pearl. Pleasure washed over me, turning my insides to molten fire. I felt his seed pulse in wet heat as I writhed against his body and he caressed and held me even as he came.

We collapsed in a tangle of arms and groans. "I'll get something to clean you up," he mumbled and started to withdraw.

"No," I said drowsily, already half-asleep. "Stay in me. Hold me. The baby's asleep." It was my last thought as I drifted off.

* * * * *

Any possible concern that our wanton behavior might have injured our child was laid to rest the next morning. I woke when Ambrose left the bed. He dressed quietly, clearly intending to let me sleep in. I rolled over to watch, gathering the sheet and blanket close.

As soon as he saw I was awake, he crossed to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress, brushing his lips across mine. "You stay put for a spell. I shouldn't have loved on you like that last night. I might have hurt the baby and you." He frowned at his

behavior and apologized tenderly. At that moment our child woke, stretched and resumed his constant motion.

I couldn't help myself. I laughed softly, pulling Ambrose closer, laying his cheek against my stomach. I knew he could feel the rolling movement, even through the barrier of the thick bedding.

He chuckled, rubbed his face across the blanket affectionately and said, "That's my boy."

I grimaced and tried unsuccessfully to rise. "Well, pull me and your boy out of this bed, Quincy. Morning is here for me too. It would be pointless to lie abed with all of this tumbling inside me."

As soon as my bare feet hit the floor I shivered violently and grumbled. "We need a rug in here."

Ambrose pulled the wool blanket from the bed and spread it on the floor, bowing low and saying, "For you, my lady."

He was playful this morning, more rested in appearance than in former days even though we'd spent our sleep time on other activities.

I scrambled to wash, using the icy water in the pitcher and then hastily grabbed my warm robe to wrap in, frowning in displeasure at the clothes hanging in a line in the closet, all too small to fit my waist. "I could cinch my corset stays tighter," I suggested doubtfully.

"None of that," Quincy said sharply. "That can't be good for a young'un, all squeezed and squashed up tight."

I agreed but didn't like his bossy tone, so I said, "What do you know about babies any more than I do?"

His stern expression melted into a sly grin as he teased, "Common sense says I'd not wrap a steel band around one of my cows or truss up a mare ready to drop her foal. Can't think it would be much different with a woman."

"Oh Ambrose," I declared with exasperation. "Your knowledge of animal husbandry is noted, but please remember I am not livestock."

We remained easy and relaxed until we entered the kitchen. Hamilton sat at the table, gloomily sipping his coffee. "Snow in the air," he muttered as soon as he saw Ambrose.

"Say it ain't so," Ambrose groaned behind me. "Damn, we can't get ahead before bad luck takes us back again."

Mrs. Carmichael set a stack of flapjacks on the table and pointed her fork at him. "Won't do nobody no good if you starve to death as well as freeze your rump off out there. Eat."

By the time the men rode from the barn lot, icy shards of sleet had begun to fall, pinging against the windows and roof, blown by the harsh wind. My unease grew to fright as the day went on and it changed to denser snow, accumulating quickly from inches to over a foot deep.

The wind blew it into great hulking piles like ice sculptures dotting the landscape. I shuddered at the raw savagery of Texas. It seemed no season was without some brutality.

My housekeeper and I hovered in the kitchen, watching late into the evening for the men's return. When they did, they were shaking from the cold, faces raw from the wind and sleet, expressions grim.

We fed them, hastened them to thaw in the two tubs of water we'd kept heating and watched them both stumble off to bed. Mrs. Carmichael helped me clean the mess from the floor, muttering under her breath about starving cows and calamities that were going to befall us.

"Stop that," I said sharply. "We have enough concerns now without you beckoning more."

She departed, grumbling about my ignorance. I sat up through the night worrying about the things I didn't understand. Cattle were animals. Surely they could fend for

themselves in this weather. But the blizzard pelting the house with more snow made me shudder for any beast caught out in such.

I kept the fire burning in the grate all night so one part of the house would be warm when the sleepers came down in the morning. Mrs. Carmichael nodded at me with approval when she rose and put the coffee on.

“Won’t be going out in this today.” She pointed out the window. The wind beat against the outside of the house as if hammering to get inside. She spoke to Ambrose, who stood in the door already pulling on his coat.

I had rarely heard my husband curse, but he did then. “Goddamn this weather,” he gritted out through clenched teeth.

Hamilton entered the kitchen behind him and said, “Give it up, Brother. We’ll have to hope the cows can get to the feed and trust to them to dig it out.”

Ambrose alternated between pacing the floor inside the house and standing in front of the sitting room window, staring out as though the world were ending. As the day crawled on, his shoulders slumped in defeat. I tried to offer comfort by rubbing his back as he glared out the window at the falling snow.

I said softly, “I’m sure your preparations have secured the beasts, Quincy. You need to rest now while you can’t do anything else.”

He shrugged away from my touch, bristling at the suggestion that he sleep. “Don’t talk about what you don’t understand,” he said brusquely.

I stepped away from him, shut out of his crisis and once again relegated to a child’s status in his thoughts. I was so angry I was ready to eject him from the sitting room into the blizzard.

My ire went unnoticed by the other three people sharing the house. And perhaps my hurt feelings were the mark of a child. I tried to understand this disaster but we were safely inside our home and that seemed more important than beasts that lived in the wild.

It was two days before the wind stopped blowing and the snow stopped falling. The men were out of the house the moment it was possible. I hoped upon their return their spirits would be lightened and they would come back confident and assured.

It wasn't to be. Ambrose was grimmer and more distant than before as he and Hamilton loaded the wagon with bales of hay and sacks of feed, driving the team to the feedlots they'd set up for their herd.

"The cattle that survived can't get to the stuff we dumped before. It's buried under ice and snow." Hamilton gave this information to Mrs. Carmichael. I listened, saying nothing as per my husband's earlier growled order, remaining mute and distant from the roiling despair.

"We'll save the better part of the herd by getting more to them," Ambrose said quickly. I heard the false confidence in his voice.

"Not for long," Hamilton answered grimly. "Our winter feed allotment is almost gone. If the ground doesn't unfreeze soon, and the snows melt, we're done."

When they had departed, I asked Mrs. Carmichael, "What did Hamilton mean when he said, 'we're done'?"

My housekeeper took pity on my ignorance and handed me a mug of coffee, sipping her own as she explained. "Everyone knows the Quince brothers are hanging on by a thread. Their pa took out a loan to get him through 'til the boys came home from the war. I expect he didn't care much about holding on to the spread if they didn't return, but he did what was needed at the time. When Ambrose and Hamilton got home, he handed them the deed and the mortgage and told them to get it paid. They've been rounding up wild strays and branding the beef as fast as two men can."

She paused and squinted over the rim of her mug at me. "If they lose their herd to the weather, they've got no way to pay the note and they lose the ranch."

It was appalling. Ambrose had been right. I didn't understand.

"I have money..." I didn't bother finishing. As incomprehensible as it was, I knew Ambrose would not use my funds to save the Double-Q.

I pondered the enormity of the situation, watching my husband and his brother drag themselves in each night, sometimes only to drink a cup of hot coffee and grab a bite to eat before resuming their trips from the barn to the feedlots.

The temperature remained frigid outside, the animals' food buried beneath the frozen landscape. Instead of sleeping at night, Ambrose paced the floor and worried, or left for hours to work in the barn. After he left early one morning, I bundled into one of Quincy's heavy coats and put on my boots.

"Where do you think you're going?" Mrs. Carmichael asked me sternly.

"To the barn," I said. "I want to get some exercise."

Unwilling to let me maneuver my considerable size and awkward gait alone, my housekeeper donned her coat and held my arm as we made the trek to the outbuilding. It was as I'd feared. The haymow, once burgeoning with bales, was depleted to only a meager stack of hay. The feed bin was empty, no sacks of oats or corn to be seen anywhere. I said nothing, keeping my thoughts to myself.

I peeked in the harness room before we returned to the house. A sturdy crib sat there, its wood a golden tone, softened and aged into a beautiful piece of furniture. "Where did this come from?" I stammered.

"Reckon that's the crib the boys slept in when they were young'uns. Ambrose has been working on getting it ready to surprise you." Mrs. Carmichael always knew what I did not and I hated that. "Was it me," she intoned, "I'd not say anything to my man and ruin his surprise. I expect you'll do what you want, though."

Her tone implied I would not be so thoughtful. I hated that too. We returned to the house and I made cookies to practice my secret baking skills. Mrs. Carmichael talked to herself because I remained silent, ignoring her.

Halfway through the afternoon, a pounding at the back door brought us both hurrying to see who visited. It was the housekeeper's son. He sat at the kitchen table and drank coffee, eating my cookies while he visited with his mother.

Since Mrs. Carmichael rarely refrained from inserting herself into my business, I did likewise, not leaving the kitchen and their company. Neither seemed to mind my listening to the conversation.

Ben Carmichael said, "Just thought I'd make sure you weathered things here." He was older than my husband, but not by much if I judged his age correctly. His look was questioning and sympathetic at the same time.

Whether it was to refrain from gossip in front of me or in respect for Double-Q business, I didn't know, but Mrs. Carmichael harrumphed and nodded her head. "As well as anyone could expect under the circumstances."

Ben slumped in relief. "That means you'll still be needed here to help out, what with the baby on the way and such." He included me in his statement, waiting for my assurance his mother would continue with her employment.

Before Mrs. Carmichael could answer, I assured him of that fact. "I could not get along without your mother and look forward to many years of her help."

Not a hint of our troubles passed through my housekeeper's lips. Instead, she asked, "How fared everyone else?"

"Tully lost most of his herd. He started letting go ranch hands this morning." Ben's face flushed red and he looked miserably at his mother. "I was one of 'em."

Mrs. Carmichael's face blanched white. "Oh Lordy," she moaned. "What will he do? What will you do, for that matter?"

Chapter Eleven

February 11, 1867. I have inserted myself into Double-Q business and brought the wrath of my husband upon me.

The housekeeper's son shook his head and closed his eyes. "Glad you've got a job, Ma. I might be needin' a handout soon."

He was suddenly a frightened boy asking his mother for help. I knew it cost him, but admired his trust in her.

"What happened to Mr. Tully's cattle?" I asked, recognizing the stupidity of the question even as I asked it to give him reprieve from his own misery.

"Those that didn't freeze are starving to death. There's not a blade of hay to feed 'em and the grain's been used up already."

It was a horrible counterpoint to my discovery in the barn earlier. Suddenly the enormity of our situation struck and for once, Mrs. Carmichael seemed silenced by dread. I realized the future of her security also rested in our — no, my — hands.

"Is there no feed or hay to be purchased?" I asked hopefully.

Mother and son looked at me pityingly. Ben said, "Sure, if you've got the greenbacks to pay. Some of the ranchers quit early, sat on their feed and counted on others needing it after the storm. Trouble is, nobody's got cash and the Eclipse Bank sure as hell ain't lending money to bail anyone out."

Mrs. Carmichael and I held each other's gaze. "He'll have a conniption fit, missy. I'd rather be penned with a rabid wolf in a cave than around Ambrose Quince when he's got a mad on."

Since we'd shared in Quincy's wrath together more than once, I knew she was right.

Before I could lose my nerve, I turned to Ben and said, "Buy as much of it as you can. I'll give you the bank draft with my letter to Mr. Pauley. Hire as many men as you need to deliver it to our barn and unload and stockpile what can't be used right now. The winter is not over yet."

I was absolutely sure I was doing the right thing. Not until he left, clutching the papers in his hand and riding more quickly than the treacherous ground allowed, did I begin to quake at what I had done.

Mrs. Carmichael unexpectedly hugged me. "You did the right thing, Lucy." Her assurance was delivered gruffly.

"Marta." I used her given name for the first time. "I believe that's the first time you've ever said that." My laugh was more a sob of terror.

"Honey," she said. "You did the right thing for sure. But your man's still gonna be mad. Ben better git the help busy and the hay over here fast, or muleheaded ass that he is, Ambrose will stop your plan before it starts."

We were both filled with dreadful anticipation the rest of the afternoon.

"We'll cook up a storm for the boys. It can't hurt the Quince men at all to have the cowhands bragging about the meals we serve on the Double-Q." Then Marta frowned and added, "I suspect some of the men Ben'll find to hire ain't had a fit meal for a time."

I concentrated my efforts on the baking. Mrs. Carmichael managed the meal. At one point, she drifted over to my loaves of bread I'd set out to cool. Pulling off a hot chunk, she slathered it with butter and ate it with relish. "You're turning into a fine cook," she complimented me.

"Don't tell anyone." I warned her. "I'd hate to destroy Hamilton's image of me as a spoiled ninny."

"You might want to let your husband in on the secret," she said, cocking an eyebrow in question at me.

"No. He'd say I don't need you. You'd be out of a job and I'd rather be considered a useless fribble than be stuck here alone each day." I laughed over the last part of my answer but she nodded, understanding the underlying truth.

"So be it, Miss Fribble. But I'll say it again. You're turning into a right fine cook."

I understood that our relationship had shifted during the course of the day. I had somehow managed to secure Mrs. Carmichael's approval and it felt good. It didn't alleviate my anxiety over Quincy's reaction to what I'd done when the hay wagons began rolling into the yard.

Mrs. Carmichael said, "You stay inside. No reason for you to expose yourself to the cold and the rough men out there. I'll tell 'em to come to the back door and get a plate of food after they unload." She bustled around, donning her coat and looking excited at the day's events.

The men worked quickly and we fed Ben and five others with the food we had ready. Before he left, Ben brought his receipts to the house and gave them to me.

He said grimly, "Pauley at the bank wanted to get your husband's approval afore he cashed your draft. I don't know what you put in your note, but it was enough to prod him into turning loose his hold on the money."

I nodded. I'd anticipated Stephen's tenacious attitude toward my funds. I had stated in no uncertain terms in my letter to the banker that my wishes would be followed or I'd remove my account from his establishment. It was a threat I'd once heard my father use and apparently, had worked well again.

"Much obliged, Missus Quince," he thanked me gruffly. "Today's pay will tide us over some." He looked grimly hopeful when he gestured toward the cowboys who'd emptied the wagons and added, "Those men out there are all lookin' for steady work." His face flushed red, reminding me of his morning plea to his mother. "As am I," he finished speaking and pulled his hat low on his head.

I had no idea whether I had paid a fair wage or not. I accepted Ben's judgment because I trusted his mother.

Not one to hold back from a conversation, Marta chimed in sourly, "Best not've overpaid 'em. If Ambrose has the sense God gave a goose he might keep 'em on." Her observation brought a look of anticipation to Ben's face and he moved with alacrity to join the waiting crew, ready to fetch more feed and bring it to the Double-Q.

We were not so lucky when our second load of hay arrived. Ambrose and Hamilton drove our empty wagon into the feedlot and as I watched, Ambrose jumped from the seat and approached the men who had their wagon backed into the barn, unloading.

"Oh Lordy, here comes trouble," Marta groaned and pulled on her coat. This time I did likewise.

She steadied me in my approach, squeezing my arm to confirm her moral support. I was panting from fear as much from the exertion of navigating the snow-covered path when I arrived by Quincy's side.

Ben was talking fast but looked relieved to see me approaching next to his mother. "Husband," I called loud enough for the others to hear. "I hope I wasn't precipitous."

Marta delivered me to his side and stepped away. Breathlessly, I finished my explanation. "A sudden opportunity availed itself and I was unable to discuss it with you. These men needed work and Mrs. Carmichael's son vouched for them when I mentioned your plan to hire help. Ben took my draft to the Eclipse Bank, authorizing funds to restock our barn with the necessary feed you've been making room for."

From my earlier observation, with the barn swept clean and the few bales remaining so neatly aligned, it could easily be the truth. I placed my hand on his arm and felt the bunched muscles that radiated tension.

"Is that right?" he drawled and stared down at me, ignoring Ben who shuffled nervously, waiting for the owner of the Double-Q to approve the transaction. I stood silently between them, trying to still the trembling of my fingers on Quincy's arm.

He removed my hand from his arm and said sternly, "It's too cold out here for you. Go back to the house."

I was summarily dismissed and directed back to the schoolroom.

I mustered a dignified expression and nodded at Ben. "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Carmichael."

Hamilton interrupted the tableau when he climbed onto the seat of a wagon still fully loaded and yelled, "Best hurry up, Ambrose. We've got feedlots to fill and hungry steers waiting." He slapped the reins on the horses and drove away from the barn, accepting my interference with no dispute.

As he departed, he pulled up next to us, saying in a low voice, "The two of you can sort it out later. Right now, there's work waiting." He grunted a command at the horses and slapped the reins, moving the team from the barn lot and leaving Ambrose to yell at me or follow suit.

I didn't delude myself for a moment into mistakenly thinking our discussion was over. His eyes were hooded and his expression enigmatic when he said, "The house, Lucy – now."

I didn't tarry, gladly leaving him to discuss the rest with Ben, to whom he directed, "Finish unloading and bring in the rest of the feed."

As Mrs. Carmichael and I shivered our way back to the house, I muttered, "He's furious."

"Yep." She had the audacity to laugh at my dilemma. "You've got his back up, all right. But oh my, if that wasn't the fanciest way you had of skating around what you done." She snickered at my carefully worded description. "Lucy, darned if you didn't coat the deed in a layer of chocolate."

My fear of his wrath proved only too accurate. My ploys of misdirection and penitent humility I had once used on my father seemed useless in the coming confrontation. When Quincy came in late that night, stomping his shoes free from snow and mud, he brushed aside the mug of coffee I offered him and poured his own.

Leaning against the counter, he said to Mrs. Carmichael, "I have words to say to my wife that need to be said in private."

Hamilton slid into his seat at the table and filled his plate, ignoring the warning in Quincy's voice. "I'm hungry and put in a full day and half's work in the last twenty-four hours. You'll have to take your brawl elsewhere, Brother, 'cause I'm not moving."

I would rather have stayed in the kitchen with the semi-protection of the cook and my brother-in-law. Ambrose grunted a curse and grabbed my arm, marching me into the sitting room to have his say.

As soon as we were through the kitchen door, I shrugged away and turned to face him. He walked to the other side of the room, putting distance between us before he said, "You stuck your nose in where it doesn't belong." His words were harsh and his hands hung by his sides, opening and closing as though he wished to grab hold of me again.

"If I belong on the Double-Q, than that's not the case. Make up your mind, Husband, if it's a wife you want or a mindless ninny. I did what was needed."

"You don't have a clue what's needed to run this ranch. You made decisions without discussing them—"

I interrupted him, saying fiercely, "How could I know what's going on without you telling me? You are in the wrong here. You should not have kept our circumstances secret from me."

He forgot privacy and bellowed, "Do not tell me I'm wrong. You don't understand your place here, Lucille, and that better change."

I tried to be conciliatory and moved closer to him. "Quincy, I had the money, you didn't. Why was I so mistaken in using my funds where they were most needed?" And then I rushed on before he could interrupt. "Think of the improvements on the ranch you could make. I know the money in the Eclipse Bank could help you advance your business—"

His growl emerged, a loud rumble as his face flushed red and he answered grimly, "You can spend every damn cent of your money on fancy fripperies and doodads for all I care. But as for the Double-Q, your bank account doesn't touch it again." His mouth was a thin line, red slashes marred his cheekbones and his eyes glittered with savagery when he finished his rant. "And you'll get every penny of your cursed money back as soon as we sell off some beef."

I pointed out tartly, "Beef that would have died without my cursed money." My words turned from appeasement to challenge, my own anger suddenly unleashed.

"If it makes you feel better, add interest on to the sum and think of it as a business transaction."

We glared at each other, both breathing hard and ready to do battle. I knew I was right and harbored so many resentments at my treatment since our marriage I fumbled with more castigating things to say. "If my money bothers you so much, you shouldn't have married me."

The words hung there between us. I waited for him to refute them and apologize for his ill-treatment. He said instead, "Maybe you're right, but since you're carrying my brand, and a Quince inside of you too, you'll do as I say, when I say and what I say in the future."

All the steam went out of me. I shook my head wearily and turned toward the stairs. "You are a foolish man, no better than a pigheaded stubborn mule. You don't deserve me."

Halfway up the steps to our bedroom, I added, "It might be best if you slept on the couch tonight. I no longer wish to share my space with you."

When he said nothing, I added, "The old couch. I don't want you breaking down my fancy new fripperies with your big frame."

I lay in bed, half hoping he'd follow me there and we'd resolve our differences and cuddle in the night. He didn't.

Alone in the bed, I tossed and turned and for once, the Quince baby I carried slept soundly and offered no distraction. I wanted to weep. But more than that, I wanted to walk downstairs and continue my quarrel with Ambrose.

I delivered my remarks to the mirror across the room. "What else could I have done?" I asked myself aloud. "He should use my money to grow his business," I whispered, then added, "Shouldn't he?"

I pulled the covers tighter around me and sat up, unable to sleep at all. My diary lay on a chair next to the bed and I picked it up, leafed through the pages to the beginning and started to read. It was a child's account of her first adventure. I blushed when I read some of the silly twaddle I had written. But one clear theme dominated the pages and it was named Ambrose Quince.

I smiled at his one-sided courtship, surprised at the number of times he'd joined Papa and me in the evening. I compared that to what I now knew about his work and the huge investment of time he had dedicated to knowing me. To garner Papa's approval?

I snorted delicately, remembering Papa's frustrated attempts to gain Mr. Quince's undivided attention. No, he had come to see me. For Papa's money if he married me? I frowned over that thought and discarded it as impossible.

Guilt assailed me when the thought occurred that Quincy had spent time courting me when he could have been baling hay and getting his animals ready for winter.

Ben's admiration for the Quince brothers had not been feigned when he'd said, "There's no give-up in those two. Hell, they've been going it alone, not a cowhand have they hired. We all stood back and made bets on when they'd fold, and they just kept comin'."

My senses were overwhelmed at the enormity of what Ambrose and Hamilton had accomplished working as a team. Tears filled my eyes as I recognized their struggles to retain their father's legacy. My heart swelled with pride at what they'd achieved and

my anger melted away under a wash of love for Ambrose so powerful it stopped my breath.

I remembered his awkwardly tendered proposal. *That's what I want for us, Lucy. A cleaving together that makes us incomplete without each other.*

I wanted to creep downstairs and beg him to forgive me for—my maudlin sentiment disappeared and I straightened in the bed, disgusted with myself. Wonderful man aside, I had nothing to apologize for to Quincy.

I stared in the mirror, reliving the last year, reminding myself of the washboard and mud-covered denims I'd struggled with, the lack of social activities and paucity of friends, the horrible weather, the archaic bathing facilities and the bloated state I now found myself in.

"I've cleaved," I told my image firmly, slapping the diary back on the chair. Sliding deeper under the blankets, I squirmed into a more comfortable position, disturbed by the empty side of the mattress. Then I glared at it and punched his pillow, sorry it wasn't Quincy's head. "I've cleaved," I muttered again. "Now it's your turn."

* * * * *

I woke the next morning to find my husband already up and gone. Hamilton finished his coffee, in no hurry it seemed to join Quincy.

He carried his cup to the sink and shrugged into his coat, giving me a sheepish look. "You did fine, Lucy. He'll get over his mad. He's stumbling on his pride right now. I don't cotton to you foolin' in Double-Q business either, but I'm ready to admit you sure as hell saved our bacon."

It was the longest conversation Hamilton had ever conducted with me, and one-sided at that. As soon as he spoke his peace offering, he fled.

Mrs. Carmichael snorted at his retreating back and proclaimed, "Oh how the mighty are fallen."

I'd given up trying to manage my housekeeper's irreverent comments and since I'd been the butt of so many, this observation pleased me. I nibbled a piece of toast and asked, "Where is my husband?" It was no secret to the household Ambrose had slept on the couch so I made no pretense that all was right between us.

Marta's head bobbed, as it was wont to do when she was ready to make a pointed remark. "Your man's out earning back the money, with interest, he owes you. I expect we won't see much of him 'til that's done."

I was embarrassed that our quarrel had been heard and my spiteful remark now repeated. Humiliation and despair overwhelmed me and must have shown on my face. Mrs. Carmichael set a plate of food on the table and pointed at the chair. "Eat, you'll feel better. No sense starving while he worries over bein' wrong." Her expression was relieved when she added, "He kept on three of those hands you hired yesterday. Ben was one of 'em."

I had hoped Quincy would keep at least one man on temporarily to ease his labor. The magnitude of his expansion stunned me and I frowned, mentally assessing his judgment.

Marta read my expression well and shook her finger at me. "Lucy, what you did had to be done. He'll get over that and someday bow down and kiss your toes for it. But don't go second-guessing his decisions or worrying about the ranch business. Trust your man's brain and good business sense and let him know you do."

I murmured, "If he ever speaks to me again, I'll endeavor to follow your advice. Until then..." I sniffed, holding back tears.

Chapter Twelve

February 14, 1867. Dear Diary, I am cutting and pasting a wonderful surprise for Ambrose. I'm making him a Valentine's Card. We are still not speaking and I have decided upon a course of action – I will seduce my husband.

For three days, Quincy and I remained estranged until the housekeeper said, “You best get that man back in your bed. I like to have the mornings to myself while I fix breakfast, and having him snoring on the couch gets my day started off wrong.”

“How?” I muttered miserably. Ambrose came in late, left early and avoided my company.

Mrs. Carmichael suggested a course of action that had eluded me. I, a woman heavy with child, would enthrall my husband with desire. It was so silly and incongruous it made me laugh – and then comply.

We pillaged my closet looking for dresses that could be let out and redesigned. I had no sewing skills and hers were limited. But as she noted, anything would look better than the wool robe I had fallen into wearing around the house night and day. When we’d inspected the barn, I had changed in order to go outside. Nothing had fit and I’d had to leave the back of my dress undone and wear a heavy shawl to cover the exposed underclothing. Since then, my depression had left me wandering in a disheveled and untidy state, indifferent even to dressing.

My spirits rose as we pillaged the closet and chose any outfit from my wardrobe that seemed worth redesigning. “Not very practical, these things,” Marta opined around the pins in her mouth.

“But oh so pretty,” I countered, stroking the soft burgundy velvet of the gown I stood in. In my physical wretchedness, I had forgotten how wonderful it felt to look

elegant. When Mrs. Carmichael began ripping seams apart, I cringed, hating the deconstruction of one of my favorite winter gowns.

But when she loosed the sides and raised the waist, recreating it into an empire style, I began to have hope.

"We need an insert here," she frowned at the material pulled taut over my burgeoning breasts.

We both looked at the pile of dresses on the bed and spied the grayish pink gossamer silk at the same time. I watched eagerly as she cut into the fabric, not caring this time at all with the promise of a beautiful costume before me.

Many tiny stitches later, I stood in front of the rosewood vanity and admired the outcome.

"You can't stand there drooling over yourself all day, missy," Mrs. Carmichael reminded me. "You need to take a nice long bath, splash in some of that smell-pretty you use and present yourself tonight looking fine."

We were two women engaged in battle using the weapons God had blessed us with. I luxuriated in the steamy tub of water, planned my coiffure and felt like a human being for the first time in months.

After I emerged and toweled dry, Mrs. Carmichael waved me into the sitting room saying, "I've got men to feed. I brought your clothes down here for you to dress in front of the fire. You'll have to finish by yourself."

I combed out my hair and plaited it into a long braid that hung down my back, then walked to the window and peered at my reflection. The burgundy velvet cascaded down my torso, hiding my stomach and hugging my bosom. Mauve rose in a swirl of silk brushing across my plump breasts, offering a suggestion of flesh as the bodice rose into a draped collar wrapped high on my neck.

I walked to the kitchen and stood before Marta for inspection. She laid down her spoon, folded her arms and circled me, checking the fit and presentation.

Ending her perusal in front of me, she stepped back and cackled like a witch. "If that don't git him off the couch, I don't know what will."

Perhaps Quincy was thawing, or else he had simply run out of ways to stay out of the house. I heard his voice from the sitting room, where I remained when the men came in to eat. Ben Carmichael joined them as he had each night, and I heard the murmur of the men's voices as they discussed the day's work and what the morrow held.

When I judged the end of the meal near, I carried my handmade card into the kitchen, removed his plate from in front of him and laid the lace and beribboned message next to his coffee. He ignored my actions as if I were no more than a serving maid in a tavern and I retreated, sure that my attempt at wanton wiles had just incinerated.

As the kitchen door swung shut behind me, I heard him growl, "What in tarnation is this?"

The sound of a scooting chair sent me hurrying to take up a penitent stance in front of the fire. I was not disappointed. He pushed the door open and filled the room with his presence, striding across the floor to my side. Holding my heart-shaped missive in his hand he loomed over me, asking gruffly, "What's this?"

I'd made it quite ornate. Burgundy ribbons matching my dress were tied in tiny love knots woven around the outside of a lacy doily, inscribed with the message, "Lucy loves Quincy forever". "It's a valentine, Husband. My first to you."

Quincy's eyes crinkled the slightest bit at the corners, his expression softening just a hint as he said, "My first, ever. I've heard of such, but never seen one before."

His brusque comment was accompanied by his hand stroking the folds of my dress. He feathered a touch across the velvet, then walked his fingers down my shoulder to brush across the opaque material of my bodice. The pads of his fingertips spread a trail of heat as his fingers climbed up my neck and tilted my chin, capturing my gaze with his own. He asked, "Are you conniving to get your own way again?"

I lifted his fingers, carrying them to my lips and kissing them before answering. "Yes. Is it working?" I murmured my question mischievously.

His face resumed its stern expression and he growled, "What is it you want?" But he caressed my bottom lip with his thumb, sending shivers of desire through me at the same time he stepped closer, molding his body to mine.

"You," I whispered in a voice suddenly husky. I had set out to seduce my husband but found myself intoxicated by his male scent, his burning touch and the naked hunger for me his harsh demeanor couldn't disguise.

His chest brushed against the bodice of my dress and my already sensitive nipples became taut, straining toward Quincy, asking to be pleased. My womb clenched and liquid heat pooled between my thighs. The baby shifted as though rolling over in sleep, causing a ripple across the velvet material covering my stomach and reminding me of my delicate condition.

Ambrose laughed gruffly and turned me in his arms so that my hip nestled against his swollen member. He put his hand on my belly, his fingers claiming the great expanse as he caressed me through the soft material.

"There'll be no combining McKenna money with Quince funds," he warned gruffly.

I pressed his hand against my stomach and said, "We have other mergers that are of greater importance."

Quincy plowed on, determined to cover each point of our discord. "I'll pay the loan, with interest, into your Eclipse account as soon as we cull the herd this spring."

I said breathlessly, "You owe me no interest. You wasted time courting me when you could have been getting ready for winter." Before he could disagree, I pulled his head down, angling my own to steal a kiss, brushing against his mouth and nibbling on his lower lip.

He tucked my face against his shoulder, preventing me from seeing his expression as he spoke. "I married you because I had to have you," he confessed, segueing back

into our final words from our quarrel days before. "You don't belong with a rough man like me. Your ways are too different from mine."

"Sometimes differences give life a little more spice, Husband." I quoted from his days of wooing.

Quincy clasped the velvet between finger and thumb, measuring its worth as his words rumbled against my cheek. "I can't buy you fine clothes such as this."

I said tartly, "I can dress myself, thank you." Then I added softly, rubbing sinuously against his groin. "You can undress me."

"Woman," he growled, lifting me into his arms as easily as if I were a fragile maiden and not a voluptuous mother-to-be. "It will be my pleasure."

I wrapped my arms around his neck, nuzzling the line of his jaw until he captured my mouth in a kiss lasting the duration of our ascent to the bedroom.

The stark cold of our sleeping quarters penetrated the heavy velvet of my costume and Ambrose wrapped me in his warmth as he threw back the bedcovers, crawling with me under them to make a nest and generate a cocoon of heat before we disrobed.

"Someday, I'll get a fireplace in here," he promised as I shivered in his embrace. *Sooner than that, I'll have a Franklin stove delivered, Husband,* I assured him silently.

Our passion changed to tenderness as we huddled under the blankets and faced each other. Ambrose smoothed his hand over the velvet material, then fumbled open the closures Marta had devised. I wiggled out of the dress and he set it aside.

I tugged his shirt over his head and tossed it on the pile. Piece by piece we disrobed, stopping to inspect each revealed body part, both his and mine.

"You could have been killed." I traced the jagged scar on his thigh, evidence of his time in war.

"Wasn't my time—at least that's what Ham decided. He dug the bullet out and burned the hole shut. He carried me most of the way home."

They had been far from Texas at the time and Quincy's few words wrought such a vivid picture of his past I shuddered and pulled him closer. "I don't want to have to thank your opinionated brother for anything, but I will endeavor to be tolerant of his misguided advice from now on."

I did not mention the olive branch Hamilton had tendered, counting it as a temporary aberration in my brother-in-law's usual obnoxious behavior.

Ambrose said gruffly, "You've made it a home for both of us, Lucy. It's been a long time since either of us came home to a light in the kitchen and a meal waiting on the table."

I poked his chest and said archly, "And the lovely sitting room, don't forget that."

He chuckled and rolled me onto my side, curving around my back until his hard manhood prodded my rump and he slowly eased inside me. "Lucy," he growled in my ear. "You feel that thumpin' inside?"

I shifted, rubbing my buttocks against his groin. "Yes," I confirmed, giggling.

"Not that, sweetheart, this." He pulled me tight against his chest until I felt the heavy beat—a steady cadence that matched the rhythm of my own. "I didn't get you a valentine today, Lucy. But I want you to know, you have the real deal. You'll always own my heart."

I melted into a puddle of emotion and whispered, "I love you too, Quincy. Never forget that. I'll love you always."

* * * * *

March 26, 1867. I am a lumbering cow. Even Marta's contrived costumes no longer fit, and my husband is an insensitive boor.

The harsh winter abated and March brought with it wind that dried out the sodden landscape. Ambrose and Hamilton were busy from dawn to after dusk, rounding up the herd and getting ready for what my husband called spring calving. Evidently, his

cattle were in gestation also, and the pride he and his brother shared over their stock left me almost jealous.

I had become resigned to my husband's frequent analogies that compared me to his livestock. His latest volley was by far the worst. Ben Carmichael sat at our kitchen table, talking over the day's work. He interrupted the discussion to say, "You're a lucky man, Ambrose."

Ben's voice carried to where I lingered in front of the sitting room fire, waiting for him to leave so I could have a few hours of my husband's company. I preened, waiting for Quincy to agree.

Ambrose drawled, "Yep, a plump wife and a full barn never did a man any harm."

I almost fell off the settee. Plump? I looked at my distorted figure and wished for the power to exile Quincy to his precious barn.

* * * * *

March 31, 1867. I am filled with spring fever and the need to clean the house, polish the windows and shake out the doldrums left from winter.

"Your time's close, missy," my housekeeper nodded her head at my bucket of water and cleaning rag. "You're nesting."

Everything here in Texas appeared to be equated to animal husbandry of some nature. Now I was a chicken ready to lay an egg. I sighed and scrubbed harder at the dirty window, answering, "I certainly hope so. I long for the day I can regain my former shape and wear the dresses in my closet."

Since I'd overheard Quincy's description of his plump wife, I was consumed with the need to be agile and slim again.

Nothing in the house seemed right. The floors were too scuffed, the curtains smelled of smoke from our winter fires and even the air seemed musty and foul. I insisted that we open the windows and let in the scent of spring.

Energized, I moved from one task to another, filled with a euphoric sense of goodwill. Ambrose noticed that evening when I smiled at him instead of tendering my usual scowl. "Guess I'm not consigned to the outbuildings anymore." He chuckled and pulled me under his arm, mussing my hair with a playful gesture.

"You may walk me around the barn lot and do penance for your ill-chosen description, Husband," I told him, already putting a shawl around my shoulders and waiting for him at the door.

"I can do that," he agreed quickly and escorted me twice around the ranch yard, steadying me in our journey.

For two more days my incessant cleaning and primping continued, even to the point I insisted that Ambrose and his brother rearrange the furniture in my sitting room. Hamilton objected, saying, "Oh for God's sakes, it's fine where it is."

Ambrose waved him to the end of the couch and said, "What Quincy's woman wants, Quincy's woman gets. Hoist up your end, Brother, and quit bellyaching."

I was supremely pleased when Hamilton pinched his finger moving the writing table across the floor.

On the third day of April, I woke exhausted. A nagging ache in my back blossomed into intolerable agony Mrs. Carmichael described as birthing pains.

"You need to get Quincy," I ordered her after a particularly severe assault had left me panting for breath.

"Time enough for that, missy. We've got a long spell ahead of us 'til this baby gets born."

That was not the opinion I wished to hear but, as it turned out, Marta was right. She divided her time between watching me anxiously and making noodles. I tried to concentrate on her technique in between the pains that rolled over me.

When the men rode in for supper, the beef and noodles were ready and so was I. "This ends now," I snarled at Quincy. "Do something. You're supposed to be the expert on calving."

What Ambrose did was send Hamilton scurrying for the doctor. I had not bothered to ask for him. He was a noxious man, usually reeking of spirits, and I trusted my husband and Mrs. Carmichael more than the odious physician.

* * * * *

April 4th, 1867. Dear Diary, I have given Ambrose a son. We named him Alexander McKenna Quince, after my father.

When Dr. Pritchard arrived, which was tolerably later than expected, he was accompanied by Hamilton's explanation for their tardiness. "Had to look through every saloon in Eclipse to find him."

I took one look at the drunken sot and said, "He's not touching me."

For once my husband did not disagree. "Get him out of here," he growled at Hamilton. "And bring that water upstairs Mrs. Carmichael's got boiling."

While the doctor sobered up and Hamilton paced the floor, Ambrose delivered our son, waited for his lusty cry to fill the air and collapsed in the chair next to the bed as though it had been he who had endured the mortal agony.

"You did good, sweetheart." He managed his compliment through stiff lips, looking pale as though he had done battle.

I took pity on him and grabbed his hand, squeezing it with the last of my strength. "We did good," I corrected him.

Marta shooed him from the room with her usual acerbic wit. "Yes, yes, we all done good together. Now you, Ambrose Quince, git. Lucy and I want some privacy. Out with you – and don't come back 'til I say you can."

Quincy departed, carrying our baby wrapped in a blanket, ready to show off his heir to the men below. Mrs. Carmichael set about cleansing my body, all the time telling me what a fine man I had, in spite of the fact she'd just chased him from the room. Though I was tired, she insisted I comb my hair and put on my loveliest wrapper. "You'll want him to remember you this way, missy."

I drifted to sleep waiting for Ambrose to return our son, and woke when he laid him in my arms. "You're beautiful," he murmured, his expression one of rapt wonder.

"The question is," I muttered sleepily, "will my clothes now fit?"

* * * * *

April 8th, 1867. Dear Diary, my birthday is today. I am out of sorts and frustrated as my size has not diminished enough to wear my former clothes. When I view my son, who already resembles his father, I cannot regret the loss of my former finery too greatly. I will commission more to be made once I am again able to travel to Eclipse.

Finished with my daily scribbling, I looked at the book in wonder. Inside is written the story of Lucille McKenna Quince, so that someday my children may read this account of the journey I made this year. Perhaps I will continue to write—perhaps not...

I was supposed to stay in bed but couldn't stand the confinement and rebelliously gained freedom as soon as left alone. I hadn't mentioned that it was a special day and, although long ago on our wedding day the date had been written down, I doubted Ambrose remembered. It didn't matter. I was unwilling to lessen the occasion of Alexander's birth by celebrating my own.

I leaned over the crib and watched our baby sleep in the same bed Ambrose had occupied as a child. Restlessly I moved to the window, thinking about my life in Boston just one year before.

Through the glass pane, I viewed my new home. Everything I saw across the landscape had the stamp of Quince on it. As if my thoughts called him, the door opened and I felt the air stir with power as Quincy entered our room.

"You're supposed to be in bed resting," he scolded.

"Resting makes me tired," I disagreed without turning. I heard him travel to the crib and waited while he inspected Alex for new growth and Quince attributes. Smiling, I stared at the ground below that Mrs. Carmichael and I had claimed for a garden.

Behind me, Ambrose cleared his throat as though unsure of his next words before he said gruffly, "I want you to know, I wouldn't change anything about our marryin' up and I hope you wouldn't either. But I figure this whole year has been a mighty big shock to a young woman like you."

I turned, ready to reassure my husband that I belonged right where I had landed — by his side.

Before I could say a word, he handed me a nosegay of spring flowers tied with a ribbon from my sewing box. "Happy birthday, Lucy." The flowers were accompanied by a box of the most delicious kind of chocolate confections Kelly's Mercantile sold.

"Thank you for remembering my birthday, Quincy. It's special for more than one reason now." I put the posies in water and frowned at the candy, wanting nothing more than to tear the wrapper off the box and consume the contents.

"I'll put them in the sitting room and share with everyone," I said magnanimously.

Quincy frowned and said, "I thought these were your favorites."

"Husband, I will never regain my figure if I indulge in your treats. My only solution is to put the box beyond my reach. I'll share with Mrs. Carmichael and your brother, both of whom will make certain I don't have a chance to overeat."

"Hell, no," Quincy growled, reaching for the candy. "Put that box right by the bed you're lyin' back down in, where you can rest up, do your writin' and enjoy your day."

I rolled my eyes at him. As usual, Ambrose had his plan and ushered me toward his goal. Sighing, I climbed on the bed and picked up my diary where I had left it after making the last entry.

He leaned over me, brushing my lips with his, his expression changing from stern to gentle as he said gruffly, "I like you just the way you are. I just want you to know, I'm sure sorry for the rough spots this year, sweetheart."

I stroked my hand along his jaw, my heart melting at my husband's awkward attempts to tell me how much he cherished me. "I will duly note that in my journal," I teased him, clasping it in my hand.

He shifted uneasily and then asked, "You put everything in that book?"

I smiled at him and answered, "Everything important."

When his expression remained questioning, I murmured, "Let me skip to the good parts."

I flipped the pages to the beginning and watched my husband's worry smooth into stern satisfaction when I read the most important line.

"May 11, 1866. I met a man today. His name is Ambrose Quince..."

The End

About the Author

Gem Sivad is a multi-published, award-winning author. She crafts stories about fictional worlds of half light and half shadow. Gem writes about roaming alpha males, unsavory outlaws, and fearless women who use their wits and powers of seduction in their struggles to survive.

Because Gem believes romance is the essence of life, every hard-bitten male finds his mate, and even a strong-willed woman accepts the lover who is the other half of her soul.

Visit her website for her current projects and books coming soon.

Gem welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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