

# The Promise

By

Mariella Starr

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# Prologue

*1886 Mason, Texas*

Darcy Stuart stood stoically with her hands firmly gripping her son Murphy's shoulders as he stood in front of her crying. Nine years old was too young to lose a father, and now he had lost two. The first was due to arrogance and entitlement, and the second was due to stubborn pride. Thomas Stuart should not be in the coffin the pallbearers were lowering into the ground. Men! They never listened. She had pleaded with him dozens of times over the last seven years, and he had always laughed. Now he was dead because he was too stubborn to learn to swim. Caught in a flash flood, he was dead at the age of forty-seven.

She was hurting, but she was also so mad she could barely see straight. She would be damned before she would let anyone see her cry.

When her son Murphy glanced over his shoulder at her in expectation, she realized she had not heard a word of the funeral service. She looked to the Reverend, who motioned her toward the grave. She stepped forward to toss a bouquet of Texas bluebells into it. Her son followed her example. Then it was over, they were alone, and on their own...again.

She felt people kissing her cheek, hugging her, patting her on the back, but she had no idea who did what. Her sweet little man, Murphy, led her to their buckboard.

"Mrs. Stuart."

Darcy turned to Mr. Kendall, the only lawyer in Mason, Texas. "Yes."

"Ma'am, I need to go over your husband's will with you, as soon as possible."

"Did he leave me destitute?" Darcy asked.

The lawyer looked shocked, "No ma'am!"

"Then, it can be handled later," declared Darcy. "Mr. Kendall, I will come to your office to discuss this matter. What is today?"

"It's Tuesday, Momma," Murphy supplied.

"I will be in town on Friday, Mr. Kendall."

"Yes, ma'am," he answered.

Darcy was vaguely aware of the bustle of buggies and wagons turning around, and people leaving. She was dimly aware of Mr. Bridges helping her housekeeper onto the buckboard seat. The Circle S cowmen mounted their horses and followed the buckboard respectfully to the ranch house.

She reentered her home with dread. Black crepe draped the porch railings outside. The inside was worse. Black crepe covered every mirror. Superstition held that if anyone saw their reflection in the house of the deceased...they would die next. Tom had liked mirrors, so there were at least two in each room. Even the fireplace mantles dripped with black crepe. Every picture frame was either turned over or covered in black, all based on the old-fashioned Irish traditions of their housekeeper.

Mrs. Connolly turned to her before going to the kitchen and her quarters. "Would you like lunch, Darcy?"

"No, thank you," she said. "Please see that Murphy changes out of his good suit and eats something. Also, please remove the draping and restart the clocks. Tom is gone...." Her voice broke, but she swallowed and continued. "We must get on with living."

The housekeeper nodded as Darcy ran upstairs, closed, and locked her door. She began to remove her black mourning dress and veil when suddenly she was furious. She ripped and tore the veil and dress to pieces. As the tattered remains of her widow's status fell to the floor, she crumpled and joined them.

\* \* \*

Mrs. Alva Connolly opened the door to the Missus' bedroom and shook her head sadly. The young one was in for a tough time of it. The housekeeper marched across the room and pulled apart the drapes. "Elizabeth Darcy Murphy Stuart, you have locked yourself in this room for two days and I have had all I am going to take on the matter!" With a heave of the quilts, Mrs. Connolly dumped her employer on the floor.

"What?" Darcy moaned. "Go away!"

Alva put her hands on her hips. "Get yourself out of this bed, girl! I have done carried water to your bathtub and I want you in it right now. You keep on this way and you will not have anything to lose. Your foreman is already claiming he will be in your bed by the end of the month, and be master of this ranch. Some of your cowmen have already quit because they are not

willing to work for Kurt Hodges without Mr. Tom around to keep him on the straight and narrow. You have to get yourself together, girl. You have your boy to think about.”

“Is Murphy all right?” Darcy demanded.

“No, he is not all right,” snapped Alva. “The poor little thing is walking around hurt and confused. His Papa is dead, and his Momma ain’t doing much better. Do you hear me, girl? Unless you want to marry Kurt, or one of a dozen or more other greedy yahoos wanting this ranch, you had better stiffen your spine. Where is the tough little gal Mr. Tom was so proud to call his wife? Where is the girl who came halfway across the country toting a baby in her arms and wanting a better life?”

“Maybe she is in the grave with him,” Darcy sniffed.

Alva Connolly pointed her finger at the Missus. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You are young, but you are not stupid. You have a boy to raise. Life is rough for all women. Yes, you are now a widow, but you have more than most, so pull yourself together. You have to be careful and rely on the brains God gave you. There will be plenty of men sniffing around here. Some, because you are young and pretty, but most will be after the Circle S. Girl, you won’t be able to trust anyone for a while. You’ve gotten soft having a husband to take care of and protect you. He’s gone, so straighten up your backbone, and get in the tub!”

Darcy dragged herself to her feet, pulled on her robe and staggered from her room.

When she appeared at the breakfast table, she was wearing a split riding skirt, riding boots, a white blouse and a vest that had belonged to her husband. Her blond hair was in a neat bun at the nape of her neck.

“You look a sight better,” Alva said bluntly, bringing several platters of food to the table.

“Thank you,” Darcy said. She caught the woman’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “I’m going into town today to see where we stand.”

“Good morning, Momma,” Murphy said, coming into the dining room. He kissed his mother on the cheek and then walked past his chair next to her. He went to the other end of the table where he sat in his father’s place.

Alva looked at the Missus startled, but Darcy gave a slight shake to her head.

“Murphy, why are you sitting at the end of the table,” she asked quietly.

“I am the man of the family now, Momma,” Murphy said. “This is where the man of the family sits.”

“I see,” Darcy said. She sat for a moment, contemplating his words before rising, stacking their plates and cutlery and moving to the other end of the table. She sat to the right of Murphy where, traditionally, he had always sat to her right at the other end.

Alva followed Darcy, moving the platters of food to the other end of the table where she waited, hovering to see if she was needed.

“Murphy,” Darcy said around the lump in her throat. “I do appreciate how you have stepped into your father’s shoes. He would be very proud of you. Still, my little man, we have to work as a team to hold this family and ranch together. I am a woman and it is sometimes difficult for a woman to command respect from men. You are my son, and now the man of the family. Still, you are only nine years old. You will not command very much respect either. Between the two of us, though, we can do it. We have to do it *together*. I am going into Mason today to see Mr. Kendall, the lawyer. I would like you to finish your homework today so you will not be behind when you return to school tomorrow. A man cannot run an operation the size of the Circle S without having a good head for figures and a reasonable knowledge of language skills. I mean reading and writing.”

“I thought I would quit school and work with the men on the ranch,” Murphy said, his young eyes watching his mother, testing her.

Darcy considered her words carefully. “If this is the case, I am afraid all the business of the Circle S will fall on me. I am not very good at business, son. We may have to hire someone and it is hard to know who can be trusted not to take advantage of a widow and her son.”

“No, Momma,” Murphy said decisively. “I will stay in school and keep learning, so I will get as smart as Papa. We will learn to run the ranch together. As long as you need my help, Momma, I will be here for you.”

Alva squeezed Darcy’s hand under the table, and then she got up abruptly and returned to the kitchen.

Darcy blinked away tears, as a little bit of the heaviness threatening to swamp her lifted. Looking at her little boy, she knew he was her miracle, and he would be her strength to keep going. He had been from the moment she had felt him quicken inside her body.

“Thank you, my little man. We will do this together,” Darcy agreed as her bruised heart swelled with love and pride.

# Chapter One

*1894 Mason, Texas [eight years later]*

Darcy Stuart slid into her seat at the table for breakfast. Her son wasn't there yet, which was unusual because he was generally first in line for any food. Hank Smith, their foreman at the Circle S, came in and sat across from her.

"Is everything ready?" Darcy asked.

"As ready as we can get," Hank said, filling his plate from the breakfast platters. "I'm leaving Will and Pepe here so the chores are covered. Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

"Alva would have my hide if she came home to learn I had gone on a cattle drive," Darcy said with a grin. "Two weeks on the trail with eighteen men, I would never hear the end of it. Murphy would also not appreciate his Momma tagging along with him on his first cattle drive."

"It's only a couple weeks, three at the most," said Hank. "It ain't like the old days when it took two to three months to get a herd to the nearest railroad."

"The newspapers are claiming Texas is becoming civilized and progressive," Darcy mused with a slight smile.

"Barbed wire and sheep ain't my idea of progress," Hank snorted.

"We can't stop it," Darcy said. "The Hoodoo War proved so. I'm going in to talk to E. M. Reynolds while you are gone. I want to see if I can get the Grissom farm."

Hank did not blink an eye at this news. He got to his feet. "Hurry along your boy, we won't wait on him."

"Hank," Darcy said mildly. "I am sending my son with you on this drive in one piece. He has all his original parts and I want him to return with them. Murphy may think he is a man, but he is only seventeen years old. I want you to keep an eye on him."

The older man winced. "I always do, Mrs. Stuart."

"This includes the celebrating after you get to Ft. Worth," Darcy said softly. "His first time should not be in a brothel in Hell's Half Acre. It should be with a gal he thinks he loves."



“Now Darcy,” Hank said, his face flushing to a dark red. “Not even I can watch him that close. It’s your job as his Momma to put the fear of God in him.”

“I have tried,” she said, grinning. “With him wanting to be a man fully grown, it is a hard battle to fight.”

\* \* \*

“Bye, Momma,” Murphy said, running down the stairs.

“You have time to sit and eat one last decent meal before you have to stomach Domino’s cooking,” Darcy said.

“Naw, I want to be with the other men. Besides, Domino’s been the cowmen’s cook for as long as we have been here. No one has died yet. Are you sure you will be okay with Mrs. C. and me gone at the same time? There is no one here to keep an eye on you.”

“This is a chance to kick up my heels,” Darcy said, teasing. “I might go into town and rent the Presidential Suite at the new Mason House Hotel.”

“You be careful, Momma,” Murphy said in his new, low, grown-up voice. “Roscoe Hoester is still mad about you refusing him. He has been saying mighty nasty things in town about you.”

“Roscoe isn’t mad because I won’t marry him. He is mad because he can’t get his hands on the Circle S Ranch. Every bow-legged cowpoke in Texas thinks all he has to do is ride to my front door, and I will fall at their feet and marry them.”

“It might have more to do with you being the prettiest single woman in the whole of Mason County,” Murphy said with a smile. He followed his statement with a frown. “I am serious, Momma, I want you to be careful!”

“I always am,” Darcy promised. “The same goes for you, young man!”

“I will see you in a couple weeks,” Murphy promised, dropping a kiss on his mother’s cheek.

Darcy followed her son from the house and watched as he jumped into his saddle and rode off with the practiced ease of a seasoned cowman. He was her *boy*, but he stood over six-foot tall and still had a couple more years of growing left in him. He was on the cusp of manhood, leaning far more toward man than a child.

She shielded her eyes from the sun to look at the herd in the far distance. There was over a thousand head going this time. Beef prices were high now on the Livestock Exchange, fifteen

cents a pound on the hoof. Tom had been right to start breeding Angus. The days of the Texas Long Horn were over. They were a sturdy breed, but the open cattle trails were now a part of Texas history. Herds no longer had to cross a thousand treacherous miles of Texas and Indian Territories to Mud Creek, Kansas, to reach the closest railroad. Mud Creek had long since been renamed Abilene and it was only one of many towns built with massive stockyards to receive herds for shipment to the eastern part of the country.

The Ft. Worth Stockyards were their destination. The drives there weren't as hard on men or beasts as the old trails. There were new, closer railroads in Austin and San Antonio, but neither had the huge lots needed to hold thousands of head of cattle.

The latest problem for ranchers was the government program to open the range to settlers moving westward. Easterners and foreigners had put down stakes on open Texas rangeland without having a clue about the culture of the West. They held as little or even less respect than the Washington government for the ranchers who had first tamed the land. Farmers moved in and strung barbed wire, essentially stopping the free-range cattle drives. A lot of older ranchers and cowmen still held a deep resentment over the disappearance of the open range. Now, farmers demanded to be paid when herds crossed their lands, formerly 'free-access' lands.

Darcy had signed right-of-way leases across every piece of land between the Circle S and the Ft. Worth stockyards and she had a wagon going along filled with fence-building supplies. As her men cut and removed barbed wire along their routes, they would also rebuild it in their wake. Her herd would make it and every step of the way would be legal although it had also been expensive and would cut into her profits. This was the way you had to do business now.

Times were changing. Even she had strung barbed wire occasionally, only where it was necessary for the safety of her cattle. Mostly, she took it down after farmers went bust and she bought their land to add to the Circle S.

Marie Cartwright walked past her on the porch, a baby on her hip and two hanging on to her skirts. She had come over earlier to cook breakfast, and then returned home to feed her family. Now she was back to do the cleaning. Marie was replacing her housekeeper Alva Connolly for a couple of months. Mrs. C. had gone to Ft. Smith, Arkansas to help her sister who had fallen and broken a hip.

Darcy had figured she needed no help, as she would be alone in the house for the first time in seventeen years. However, Mrs. C. had made the arrangements without asking her, as

was her nature, and Darcy would let it stand. Marie and Lonnie could use the extra money. Mrs. C. did not think Darcy capable of cooking or cleaning, but she was wrong. Darcy had worked in a mill by the age of eleven and had provided maid service from the time she was thirteen until she had arrived in Mason, Texas at sixteen.

She had a baby in her arms and twenty cents left to her name when she stepped off a freight wagon in Mason. She had gone as far as she could. She went to the Mercantile where she bought four cans of condensed milk for her baby with the last of her money. Her mother's milk had dried up from going too long without food. She saw a note posted at the Mercantile for a housekeeper at the Circle S Ranch.

She had hitched a ride on a wagon for part of the way, walking the last six miles. Tom Stuart opened his door to a little slip of a girl with a baby. She fainted from hunger and exhaustion on his doorstep.

Tom took them in. He lived on burnt beans and hard biscuits he soaked in milk to soften until she learned how to be a passable cook. He watched over her, protected her and Murphy, and never once said or made a disrespectful gesture toward her. Nearly two years later, he asked her to marry him. She accepted. When she took on the duties of a wife, he hired Alva Connolly as a housekeeper. He told people he married Darcy so he would not have to eat her cooking anymore. Everyone thought he was joking, but he was not. She never did get the hang of it.

Tom was a decent husband to Darcy and a good father to Murphy. He wanted more children, but it never happened. Tom had been disappointed, but he accepted her son, Murphy, as his son, or at least he said he did. He had promised her he would protect her son's future.

She might not have loved Tom in a romantic way when she married him, but she had learned to love and respect him because he gave her no less. Oh, they had disagreements and had raised the roof a couple of times, but after the fireworks, they always made up. Darcy did not have the traditional look of the Irish, being blond with chestnut-colored eyes, but her Irish name and temper compensated for it.

Tom had wanted a lady as a wife. Instead, he proposed to a scrappy Irish girl who had seen more hardships by sixteen than most did in a lifetime. He had learned to live with his firebrand and accepted her for who she was.

Darcy could behave like a lady when she wanted. She could also be a hard-nosed bitch if someone tried to take advantage of her. She might be a woman, but she was not stupid, and she

would not allow herself to be vulnerable. Her temper was well known. She was a woman who took on a man's job after her husband's death. She ran the Circle S with the help of Hank, carefully selected cowmen, and her son. She had to be strong. Playing *Little Miss Sweet and Helpless* did not get the job done.

Darcy went inside, finished her breakfast and strapped on her Colt 45 Peacemaker. The revolver was as old as her son was. It was the first gun she had learned to shoot and it was still her favorite. When she first came to the Circle S, she was the only girl on a ranch full of men. Tom had not counted on a spunky young girl answering his ad. Child as she was at the time, she still attracted men like bees to honey. Tom insisted she be able to protect herself, so he taught her to shoot and handle various firearms. Times were more civilized now, yet she rarely went anywhere on the ranch without protection. She carried her Colt in a cross-draw holster along with a Winchester 5-shot repeating rifle in her saddle holster. She liked being prepared for anything.

As she walked across the barnyard, she looked for the herd in the distance. All she could see was the cloud of dust raised by a thousand head of cattle on the trail. She stood for a moment reflecting on how far she and Murphy had come in seventeen years. Six of those years were under the stewardship of Tom as her husband. He had been kind to her and Murphy for nine years total. It was only after his death she learned he had lied to her. He had made her a promise and he had broken it. Three days after they buried Tom, Darcy vowed to follow through on his promise.

Now, eight years later, she was still working on fulfilling her promise. Darcy kept her word and spoke the truth. She might not have been Texas born, but the strength of truth meant everything to her. She built her life around fulfilling the secret promise she had made to her son. It was her secret to keep. He knew nothing of it because she had never told him. Her husband might have sullied his memory with a lie, but she would not.

She walked over to the barn and nuzzled her Appaloosa, Splash. Solid black with a snowflake blanket across his hips, his official name was Midnight Splash. It had never mattered to her. He had been simply Splash from her first ride on him. He was magnificent, and he was hers. Splash was a rare horse; he hated men, distrusted them, bucked them, bit them and stomped them with little provocation.

Tom had been about to sell him, even though his breeding was impeccable. Not one of the ranch hands could handle him, nor could any of the wranglers break him. She had gone to the corral to see this horse, which had flummoxed her husband. Splash had eaten from the palm of her hand as gentle as can be. They had been bosom friends since.

In spite of Tom's original anger and threats to tan her hide if she went near 'that damn killer' again, she repeatedly snuck back to visit the amazing stallion. It had cost her a sore butt a few times, but Splash was not dangerous to her or to Murphy.

Her husband had given her Midnight Splash on her twenty-third birthday, laying down the law with a long list of do's and don'ts, most of which she ignored from the beginning. She still trusted and controlled the Appaloosa. It secretly pleased her how men had to keep a safe distance, but not her or Murphy.

\* \* \*

Several hours later, Darcy rode into the town of Mason and tied her horse to the hitching post outside the bank. She had not ridden Splash to town, but one of the other good saddle horses in her barns. Splash she kept for herself and solitary rides on the ranch, except when he was needed for breeding. Texas might be more civilized lately, but her stallion was not. She could not trust him to stay out of trouble in town. It made men uncomfortable to know she could handle the rogue when they could not. It seemed to prick their male pride, which tickled her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Stuart," Marcy Reynolds said from behind the bank's teller cage. "Do you need to see Mr. Reynolds?"

"I do," admitted Darcy, letting herself in through a gate to the little waiting area framed with porch railings, which separated E. M. Reynolds' office from the rest of the bank. She took a seat to wait—E. M. made everyone wait.

Marcy pulled a chain and Darcy could hear a bell ringing inside the bank president's office.

Darcy smiled to herself. She doubted the little bell was enough to wake E. M. from one of his numerous daily naps. Marcy pulled the chain a few more times. Then, looking embarrassed, she smiled at Darcy and entered her father's office being careful not to allow anyone to see past the door.

The girl shortly came back out of the office. "Mr. Reynolds will be with you in a moment."

“Marcy, E. M. is your father,” Darcy said. “Do you have to call him Mr. Reynolds?”

“Papa says it is more professional,” Marcy said with a giggling laugh. She glanced behind her at the door to her father’s office. “Has Murphy left on the cattle drive?”

“This morning,” Darcy said. She would have shared more details with the girl except the door to her father’s office creaked and Marcy dashed to her teller’s cage.

“Mrs. Stuart,” E. M. Reynolds said, coming from his office. “How may I help you today?”

Darcy grabbed her folder and walked into the banker’s office. He followed her and closed the door.

“Land, E. M.,” Darcy said, unrolling a land-office map on his desk. She pointed to two properties. “The Flying G has a connection to the north tip of my right-of-way to the Circle S and the Rolling J flanks my property on the west. The bank owns them and I want them.”

“Now, Mrs. Stuart,” E. M. Reynolds exclaimed. “The Circle S is one of the biggest spreads in the county, you don’t need more land.”

“Says who?” Darcy asked, pinning the banker with a steely look.

E. M. grimaced. “Word about town is Roscoe Hoester and you are about to merge your properties.”

“Over my dead body,” Darcy said plainly.

“When a woman marries....”

“I am not marrying Roscoe Hoester,” Darcy snarled. “If he said so, he is a damn, liar.”

“Now, Mrs. Stuart, there is no reason for vulgarity,” Mr. Reynolds huffed.

“E. M., you have dealt with me for eight years. You are the one being vulgar when you give credence to such lies,” Darcy scolded. “Put an end to it right now. I am not marrying Roscoe or anyone else. Now, are you interested in selling these two properties or not.”

“The Rolling J is still for sale,” E. M. Reynolds blustered.

“What about the Flying G?” Darcy exclaimed looking surprised.

“I sold it three days ago,” E. M. Reynolds said. “A man walked in and didn’t dicker on the price. I can still sell you the Rolling J.”

“Consider it sold,” Darcy snapped. “Who bought the Flying G?”

“Mrs. Stuart, we have a fine working relationship, but it only takes us so far, as to what private information I can divulge to you.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes at the banker. “E. M., if you sold the Flying G to Roscoe Hoester, I will personally make your life a living hell. You know I can do it.”

The banker swallowed hard. “It wasn't him. A stranger walked in here three days ago and paid cash money for it. Mr. Kendall finalized the papers and the man signed them yesterday. I'm sorry, Mrs. Stuart, usually if you want something, you are in here pestering me as soon as the bank takes ownership. I didn't know you wanted Flying G.”

Darcy gave a sigh. “It was my fault. I have known for a couple of weeks the loans defaulted. I should have come in sooner, or at least sent word I wanted it, but we were in the middle of the roundup. Process the papers for the Rolling J. It's a lot smaller, but it is still adjacent to our property and has good water. Is the new owner of the Flying G a rancher or a farmer?”

“He didn't say, I didn't ask,” E. M. sputtered.

“Well, if he is a farmer, he probably won't last any longer than the rest of them. Most leave within their first three years. If the property becomes available again, do send word to me.”

“I have heard rumblings around town, Mrs. Stuart,” Mr. Reynolds said quietly. “People aren't real happy that you keep buying all the farms and available land.”

“Why are they complaining?” Darcy demanded. “No one is saying *they* can't buy them.”

“Well, times are hard. Folks resent the growth of the Circle S while they continue to struggle.”

“They struggle because the government keeps sending settlers here who don't understand the land. I return the land to what it is fit for, ranching and grazing, not farming,” Darcy snorted.

“There are a lot of folks who don't want to believe what you're saying. They think you want to buy the whole county.”

“E. M., have I ever told you I hate how you live in the biggest house in Mason?” Darcy asked.

The man drew himself up, looking affronted. “Why would you feel that way?”

“I don't,” Darcy said, contradicting herself. “I don't resent your beautiful house. I have no right to resent it. You worked for it and you paid for it. You should be proud of it because it is a beauty. The same thing applies to the people complaining about the size of the Circle S. If they want to buy property, but don't, they have no right to complain when someone else buys it. I didn't make anyone default on their loans. Some of them were friends. Some of them were

merely outsiders with no understanding of the land here, people who would not listen to the folks who have lived here their entire lives.

“As pretty as our Texas Hill country is, it is not fit for much more than cotton, a few fruit trees, and cattle. It grows lush only when given enough time to recover. Grazing cattle gives the land time to recover if you’re smart about moving the herds around. Plowing fields and planting the same crops year after year doesn’t give the land time to recover, so it goes dry and barren. If people aren’t willing to listen and they go belly-up, they have no one to blame except themselves. Now, if you will draw up the papers, I will be in town at least through tomorrow.”

“I will do so, Mrs. Stuart,” Mr. Reynolds said, shaking her hand. “Will you stay at Mr. Bridges Hotel?”

Darcy smiled. “I think I will. I haven’t had time to get there since his grand opening. I know he’s going to be annoyed about it.”

She left the bank feeling good over her purchase of the Rolling J, and disgusted she had missed a chance at the Flying G. She looked over the town, noticing new names on two storefronts. She walked to them, but they were not open yet. One was a spirits and tobacco/cigar shop and the other was a new boot and hat shop. Imagine...a store only selling boots and hats. Mason was growing again.

Darcy hadn’t been here during the town’s heyday or during the Mason County War, the ‘Hoodoo War’ as the locals called it. The year of murder and mayhem in 1875 had taken a toll on the county, the town, and the residents of Mason. The town was only now recovering almost twenty years later. She had arrived two years after the killings stopped. However, hostilities and distrust between the ranchers and farmers never ceased entirely. She had heard the stories of rustling, murder and vigilante lynching.

There were two versions of every tale, depending on whether you were a rancher or a farmer. There had been talk for a while of the Texas Rangers and the U.S. Army continuing investigations. Nevertheless, they dropped the issue when the courthouse burned to the ground destroying all the paperwork concerning the brutal past. With no evidence and locals refusing to talk, both government groups surrendered and returned to their stations. What the people of Mason knew, they kept to themselves. They returned to their daily lives, trying to forget and forgive.



Upon her arrival at the Circle S, Darcy's universe revolved around taking care of her baby and attempting to learn how to cook and keep a house. She had also spent an awful lot of time spurning lonesome cowboys. At the time, she was not aware of much beyond her insular world consisting of the ranch house and her child.

Now, Darcy made her way to the new Mason House Hotel. It had been open for two months, but she had not made time to get into town. Even if she had, she would have been in a hurry to return to the ranch. Men tipped their hats and ladies nodded their heads in her direction, the townspeople mostly in respect, and a few strangers in curiosity at a woman wearing a holstered gun.

She was a rancher and saw no reason to hide it. She wore a holstered gun more from habit than necessity, but she still wore it. She also wore split skirts, boots and a blouse with a man's vest over it to cover her bosoms. Although not overly endowed, she hated it when men looked at her chest before raising their eyes to her face. When they did, she usually saw a gleam of interest. She was not having any part of it, and it did not take long to put the men in their place.

Her manner of dress was almost a uniform. It was comfortable and did not display her figure as much as the fitted dress style of the times. Oh, she had dresses, quite a few of them in fact, but she rarely had an opportunity to wear them. She wore them once a year when she and Murphy took their annual two-week trip to San Antonio or Austin, or on the rare occasion when she attended a wedding or christening.

"Mrs. Stuart," S.F. 'Lace' Bridges greeted her enthusiastically as she entered his establishment. "You have finally come to see my new hotel."

"I have," Darcy said, turning around to take in all the details of the grand foyer with its huge crystal chandelier and grand piano. A fire had destroyed the original hotel the previous year. Lace Bridges had rebuilt the Mason House Hotel...bigger and better. The new hotel looked very similar to the old one. Everything seemed to be in the same place, except it was bigger and newer.

Lace's incentive to rebuild was because he had lobbied at a town meeting to move the stage stop shortly before the fire. The stagecoach no longer stopped at the old Ft. McKavitt buildings, which were an eyesore to the town. Instead, it stopped directly in front of his establishment, and the hotel handled the stagecoach ticket sales.

He no longer had to pay someone to meet the stagecoach and transport the passengers and luggage to his hotel. Travelers no longer unwittingly rented shabby rooms above the old saloon unaware of the better accommodations available. Now, they willingly paid to stay in his new hotel.

“This is very elegant, Lace,” Darcy agreed. “I am impressed. It is every bit as elegant as the hotels in Austin or Houston. I hope you decorated your rooms as nicely. I am treating myself tonight. I would like to stay in the Presidential Suite.”

Lace Bridges shook his head sadly. “I’m sorry, but it is already booked. I can give you the next best room. I call it the Lily Langtry Room and I will throw in free dinner to make up for the disappointment.”

“Good enough.” Darcy laughed. “Have you named all your rooms?”

“Only the ones on the second floor,” Lace said with pride. “We have the Presidential Suite, the Lily Langtry Room, and a Big Jim Hogg Room on the north side.”

“A Big Hogg room might deter more guests than it gains,” Darcy teased. “Big Jim’s ego is large enough!”

Lace laughed. “Well, I figure I’ll change it if our fair Governor gets roused out of office. We also have a Sam Houston, a Davie Crocket, and a Yellow Rose of Texas on the south side.”

“Book me in and tell Miss Sally to save me a piece of cherry pie.”

Darcy went to the Mercantile where she inquired about a pair of boots she had ordered for Murphy’s birthday, which still had not arrived. It ticked her off because she had ordered them in plenty of time to arrive for her son’s birthday. She told Mr. Ranck, the owner of the store, if the boots did not arrive within the next two weeks, she would cancel the order. Perhaps she would try the new boot and hat store opening down the street.

Meanwhile, she selected enough durable yard goods for two blouses and two new split skirts. She glanced for a moment at the pretty, soft colors of the calicos and silks but moved on quickly. She did not need any more dresses. Since she was not prone to gaining or losing weight, what she had still fit. After making her fabric purchases, she took them to Louisa Patterson’s dressmaker shop. Louisa had been making Darcy’s clothes since she came to Mason. Louisa was also her only good female friend, besides Alva Connolly.

“Welcome, old friend,” Louisa greeted her. “Is Murphy off on his big cattle drive?”

Darcy nodded. "He left this morning at the crack of dawn. My boy is practically grown. He didn't even give me a backward glance when he rode away."

"Are you feeling a little melancholy today?" Louisa asked, giving her friend a hug.

"Maybe, my baby is all but grown. By the way, Marie came in this morning to do the cleaning and she is showing again."

"My goodness, Lonnie Cartwright is not giving her any rest," Louisa exclaimed. "How many is it now?"

"This one makes six and she is only twenty-five," Darcy exclaimed. "They do make beautiful babies. Every one of them is as cute as a bug. She has two sets of Irish twins, and she is happy and healthy."

Louisa gave her friend a sideways look. "You envy her."

Darcy nodded. "Yes, I do. I'm not ashamed to admit it, at least to you. I did want more than the one, but I guess I can't complain since I was given one of the best."

"Honey, you are only thirty-three. You could still have a passel of kids if you said yes when asked."

Darcy frowned. "To whom?"

"George Toliver, Dan Miller, Pete Worster, Major John Miller, and now I hear Roscoe Hoester is back in the pack of hounds," Louisa chided. "They are all good men, Darcy. Then there are about half the ranchers and cowmen in the county who have been panting after you for years."

"They don't want *me*, Louisa. They want the Circle S. If they got me as part of the package deal, they probably would not complain, but it is not happening. I don't want to be part of a business deal. I'm not desperate for a husband," Darcy insisted. "The Circle S belongs to Murphy. When he is man enough, he will take it over!"

"Darcy, do you ever look in the mirror?" Louisa asked. "You are a beautiful woman. Major John Miller rode a hundred miles to propose to you. If a man did such a thing for me, I would be over the moon."

"John Miller came a hundred miles because he is a narcissistic fool! He rode right up to my porch, declared he heard I was the prettiest woman in these parts, and since he was the handsomest man in the state, he intended to have me!"

"He probably thought it sounded like a good joke," Louisa said.

“Oh no, ma’am, he believed it,” Darcy stated. “Men don’t want me for me, Louisa. They want me for my ranch, my body, or my face. They don’t give a damn about the brain or feelings inside this body.”

“Most men don’t see past the obvious at first, Darcy. They would later if you gave them a chance to know you. I find it hard to believe not one man since your husband has taken your fancy,” Louisa said. “How many proposals have you had in your lifetime?”

“Proposals don’t mean a thing. It’s the man behind it who is important,” Darcy complained. “The pickings around here are mighty poor.”

“Roscoe’s mother was in this week. She was looking at patterns for me to make her a new dress for his wedding...his wedding to you.”

Darcy gave a sigh. “I told him no. Murphy said he was spreading rumors. The man is as dense as a stone. Never mind, I came to see if you mended the skirt I dropped off the last time I was in town, and to give you this fabric to make a couple more for me. I am spending the night at the hotel to soak up the luxury of indoor plumbing. Would you like to join me? I’ll leave tomorrow as soon as Mr. Kendall gets some property papers ready for me to sign.”

“I forgot about him,” Louisa laughed. “Didn’t *he* propose to you?”

Darcy snorted. “Yes, three days after we put my husband in the ground, the dirty bastard. He probably thought his being a lawyer meant he was a great catch. I haven’t been able to stand him ever since. Unfortunately, he is the only lawyer in town.”

Louisa shook her head and wagged her finger at her friend. “It’s a good thing Mrs. Connolly isn’t around. She would be washing your mouth out with soap. I have your skirt ready.” Louisa disappeared into the backroom, raising her voice so her friend could hear her. “I have something else for you, and I want you to try it on before you say no.” She returned, carrying Darcy’s brown split skirt over her shoulder and dragging a sewing form with her.

“Don’t say no before you try it on,” Louisa ordered firmly.

Darcy smiled as her friend righted the dress form. “It’s the Murphy Clan Tartan,” she said softly, touching the green wool plaid.

“Yes, it is. I looked it up. It is also a split skirt,” Louisa said, raising two draped and gently ruffled sections over the front to show her. “If worn with this white blouse, it will be beautiful on you.”

“The idea of a split skirt is not to have to deal with so much skirting,” Darcy reminded her friend.

“It’s the latest fashion from London for riding,” Louisa gushed. “I saw it in a print ad for the tartan wool and I made it for you. The picture did show the woman riding sidesaddle, so I modified it to have only two drapes, not the original five. Look, if the draping gets in the way, I attached it to the waistband so all you have to do is unhook it. This way, though, it looks as if you are wearing a fashionable ladies outfit instead of dressing like Annie Oakley. From what I’ve read, she is a very nice lady, but she dresses so plain. A lot like you do.

“Please, don’t say no, Darcy. I don’t want you turning into another Calamity Jane, who we see pictured in the papers. She looks more like a man than most men do! I even made a matching jacket, although why you want to hide one of your best features is a mystery to me.”

“How much time did you spend making this?” Darcy asked suspiciously.

“A goodly amount,” Louisa admitted. “I made it for your birthday present. I know it’s late, but you haven’t come into town recently. The least you can do is try it on.”

“You didn’t have to do this,” Darcy said. “It was sweet of you.”

“You paid for my stage fare when I got the telegram on Momma,” Louisa said. “If you hadn’t, I would never have seen her alive again.”

“Oh, honey,” exclaimed Darcy, hugging her friend. “It was the least I could do. I will try it on, but if it interferes with my holster....”

“Go,” ordered Louisa, shoving her friend into the tiny room where her clients tried on dresses. “Contrary to what you believe, a holstered Colt is not a ladies’ accessory! You can get dressed without a gun!”

“It does look good, but the skirting would interfere with my holster,” admitted Darcy standing in front of the mirror. “I will wear it tonight for dinner at the hotel, and I’ll leave off my gun and holster. As usual, you are an artist with a needle.”

Louisa looked at her friend critically, “One more thing!” She went behind her counter and returned with a hatbox. She pulled out a green velvet Bowler hat with a large red silk flower and blue feather and perched it on Darcy's head.

“Now, this is just plain silly!”

“It is not,” Louisa denied. “I had Mrs. Claritan copy it exactly from the advertisement. You don’t have to wear it on the ranch, but it is entirely fitting for dinner at the hotel this evening. Promise me you will wear it?”

Darcy rolled her eyes at her friend. “I will if you join me.”

Louisa blushed dark red. “Actually, I can’t. Hurley Gunderson has asked me to go for a buggy ride this evening.”

“Do I know him?” Darcy asked.

“Probably not,” Louisa said. “He has only been in town a couple of weeks. He is opening the boot and hat store. He is a real nice man, a widower with a two-year-old son. Gilderoy is a sweet child.”

“Gilderoy,” Darcy snorted. “He had better teach the poor boy how to fight before he goes to school. With such a name, he will need to defend himself. Well, I guess I will have to go to dinner in my finery all by myself,” Darcy said. “Thank you, Louisa. This is a beautiful birthday present. I hope you have a good time tonight.”

Darcy made her way to the Mason House Hotel. She took advantage of the indoor plumbing to have a long hot bath. The Hotel was only the second building in town to get indoor plumbing. E.M. Reynolds’ fancy three-storied house was the first and had been the talk of the town. People knocked on his door, curious to see how it worked. E. M. was proud of it and enjoyed giving folks a tour of the place until his wife had a hissy fit. She called it an ‘invasion of privacy,’ pronouncing it with a snooty, fake English accent. Francis Reynolds was a snob.

Indoor facilities were a luxury Darcy had not been inclined to spend money on yet at the ranch. They had water in the house, which saved a lot of time and effort. However, heating enough water for baths on Friday or Saturday night was tiresome. The cowmen had rigged a waterfall device from the cistern tank out by the well, which they used in the summer. She did not dare use it though because there were always men around.

She took her time in the fancy Lily Langtry hotel room. It was a little too fancy and frilly for her taste since she was used to the ranch house and much simpler fare. She sorted through a basket of magazines provided and laid on the pink velvet chaise lounge to indulge in reading time. She selected *Lippincott's Magazine of Literature, Science and Education* for after dinner reading. For now, she took her time to thumb through *Ridley's Fashion Magazine* and part of

*Harper's Bazar* before it was time to dress. Her dear friend, Louisa, was the only person beyond her housekeeper and son who knew she actually did like fancy clothes and hats.

However, Darcy had a reputation to maintain, mainly so she could hold her own against men. If she had let her softer side show after Tom died, every cockroach in pants would have arrived at her door. As it was, there were still far too many eager to woo her, wed her, and bed her...not necessarily in that order. She'd had a fair share of offers. She felt better off deflecting all their advances, letting them know she could take care of herself.

She had given up hope a long time ago of ever finding a man who would want her only for herself. Then there was the issue of the Circle S. She could not marry until the ranch was safely in Murphy's hands.