



*Reluctant Press* presents:

# My Lady of Diamonds

H. B. KURTZWILDE



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AN 'ADULT TV' E-BOOK

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# My Lady of Diamonds

**By H.B.Kurtzwilke**

If ever there was a wrong place and time to name a child Abraham, it was in the Southern states eighteen years before the election of a certain Mister Lincoln to the highest office of the land. As the world descended into pure chaos, there were fewer and fewer choices for anyone caught in the middle of such a broken land. The tides of disaster proved to be just the excuse necessary to reach for freedom on a radical scale.

Abraham Monroe's parents had two sons before he came along. Those two had taken up arms with their father and marched away, leaving the others behind to cope with the ravages of war. Abraham had taken up the reins of a wagon and led sisters, mother, aunts, cousins and all on the broken road into the west, for Texas and safety. Somewhere between start and finish, the laws about who had to wear the uniform of the Confederacy changed. One morning, Abraham simply disappeared, and Abigail took up reins, shouldering her responsibility.

She had never seen so beautiful a place as Austin from ten miles off. Up close, the town was a mix of desperation, despair and opportunity. Abigail was only a half-step ahead of the wave, only because she had lied and defied Daddy to protect the rest of the family. Instead of carrying a wad of Confederate currency, she hauled food, goods and the 'vain ornaments' of the women's jewelry boxes. She supposed she ought to have more faith in the rebellion, but gold had been around longer and she could do more with it.

"Now, this is Ninth Street, so go left," Clara Monroe said, words running almost too fast for breathing. "Look for a place fixed up in red brick, we need a fella name of Wesker. Wesker. That name don't sound American. You reckon it's some foreign son of a gun?"

"Daddy wouldn't do that to you, Mama," Abigail said, repeating the only assurance that still worked on the nervous lady. "And even if he did, I'll set things right. You just trust in your kin. You hear me?"

"Yes, law, yes," Clara sighed. "I got my hands full with them girls anyway. There, that must be it, has to be. Says 'Wesker' right there in front... ain't you gonna stop?"

"And leave y'all here to sit in the street? I will not," Abigail calmly replied. "You look out for a hotel that'll have a parlor to sit in for all your girls and the kids."

That gave Clara a new worry and she dove into it with a will. Abigail looked the office of Wesker Company over as she passed it by, noting the clean windows and steps swept down to the muddy street. It spoke of an orderliness that the rest of the world seemed lately to lack.

Clara found a hotel some few streets away and bustled in to make her demands. Much as she might flutter to her Abigail, she was made of pure pig iron as far as anyone else knew. That hot-and-cold nature hadn't yet failed her, once Clara understood what was wanted for the Monroe brood.

Clara came back to the door of the hotel and waved her handkerchief. All the wagons boiled over with relations, young boys taking horses by the head, girls and women shaking out limp skirts and flocking towards their idea of civilization: A place to freshen up.

Abigail took her letter box from under the wagon seat and stepped down onto the wooden sidewalk. The feel of shaking her skirts out felt natural. Her legs had already forgotten the separation of trouser legs and the weight of boots.

She was careful of mud and loose boards as she hurried down Ninth Street. She opened her letter box and shuffled out the papers needed, then hesitated over the calling cards. There was no time to have new ones printed, so she resolved to do without. Considering the deprivation all around her, they seemed a small thing to lack.

She hurried up the steps of Wesker Company and sighed in the relatively cool air of the lobby. A young clerk in starched collar and black jacket glanced up, startled by her sudden appearance. He straightened his already perfect tie, cleared his throat and frowned hard at this feminine intrusion into the exclusive world of money and influence.

"I need to make an appointment to meet with Mister Wesker regarding a lease of real estate," Abigail said, one hand clutching at her skirt. "At what hour ought I to return?"

"Ma'am, you ought to find a gentleman to come tend your affairs," the clerk gently suggested. "Mister Wesker is a very busy man. He won't have time to explain all the... little details.. and you ought not sign things you can't rightly understand."

"I don't intend to," Abigail replied. "I'm here to exercise a lease as agreed by Mister Wesker and Mister Thomas Monroe. The terms are fair and equitable if Mister Wesker hasn't taken up some opportunity that would place him in violation of the agreement. As representative to Mister Monroe, I'm prepared to meet the terms as soon as a reasonable survey of the plot has been made."

"Ma'am, I just told you..."

"An appointment is all I have asked you for. Not advice," Abigail said, returning her attention to her letters. "I have my father's word to follow, and no other man's. What hour, please?"

The clerk put on his stern expression again, fumbled with a book and scratched on a page with a pencil. "Two in the afternoon. And that's business hours, not social. Fashionable tardiness is not the way to begin with Mister Wesker."

"Indeed," Abigail murmured, dropped an excuse of a curtsy and turned her back on the man. Never mind that in another place, she might have been just as curt to a lone woman. The assumptions and condescension had to be borne, much as they rankled. After all, the clerk was only treating her like a young lady.

The dirty street offered no respite. She had to walk past interesting bars and dance halls without so much as peeking past the doors. Though the doors did stand open to foot traffic, they weren't there to welcome her, particularly. To her surprise, she found herself lingering over a milliner's window display, wondering that things like ribbon and thread were yet available for purchase. The necessity for such items was only just beginning to make an impression on her.

She dragged out every step between Wesker Company and the hotel, clinging to even a few moments' freedom to idle and muse, but city blocks and steady progress soon brought her back to her mother's side. The pine boards of the hotel's walls and floor were weeping amber sap in the heat. The still, stuffy air made her skin prickle against her underpinnings. Any breeze at all would have brought relief, but she remained in her place in the parlor, as modest and uncomplaining as the rest of the women.

The lunch hour provided distraction, if not real interest. The whole clan crowded in with hotel guests and workers from surrounding shops. The lively hubbub and middling victuals let her stop pondering dimensions and quality of construction in the new home they had come to claim. Though the meal passed her in a blur, she was surprised at how long it dragged on. The strike of the lobby mantle clock alerted her to how near she was to offending with fashionable lateness to her appointment.

She could only gather her skirts up in both hands and trot quick, the whole distance. She had to stand at the corner, gasping to regain her composure before venturing back into the clerk's domain. When she dared to darken his door once more, he was every bit as surprised and offended as she had feared he would be.

Without a word to her, he rose and led the way up a dark stair, into a narrow hallway. Here, a narrow strip of brightly colored carpet lay arrow-straight, like a dividing line between regiments of doors. The clerk went to the last of these on the rearward side of the building, and knocked. A low, barking voice responded, but she couldn't make out the words.

"That Miss Monroe come back," the clerk grumbled to the door. "What should I do with her?"

Boots thumped on the floor within, and the door was pulled open abruptly. "You should go back to your work, Mister Riggins, and let me attend mine."

A tall, broad-shouldered man stood staring razors at Riggins, his blue eyes brimful of command until the clerk retreated. As soon as Riggins began descending the stairs, the man pushed his hand through his thick, titian hair and offered a rakish grin.

"Can you be persuaded to forgive my clerk and come in?" he asked. "Or has our resident terrier struck you with fear of our humble company?"

"It takes more than one yapping pup to put me off my business," Abigail assured him. "I'm here on behalf of Thomas Monroe, my father. Have I found the elusive Lawrence Wesker at last?"

"You have, Lord love ya, Miss." Lawrence stepped back and bowed her into his office. "Again, my most sincere apologies for any misunderstanding."

"As long as the lease stands, I may be persuaded to forgive many things," Abigail allowed. She smoothed her skirts behind her legs and sat on a slat-backed chair before his desk. "If that letter you sent is as worthless as a Confederate dollar, you'll get a surprise out of me you won't like much."

Lawrence went around his desk, got comfortable in his chair and opened a portfolio. "I would not disappoint your father on any account. He knew my father some years ago, and we may never see the like of either of them again in this life. Therefore, I must admit that the lease stands good and ready to be signed. Don't tell anyone. You'll ruin my reputation as a businessman."

Abigail laughed, took out her letters and studied him as he reviewed his own papers. When he knew she watched, his smile was rakish and full of energy. When unaware of her observation, his face gave away a focus which she recognized in any gentleman worth the name.

"I must see the property as soon as possible," Abigail said. "Perhaps tomorrow morning?"

"Why not now?" Lawrence suggested. "We can take my buggy out and return in the morning."

Abigail opened her mouth to agree, but managed instead to sputter with indignation. "Over night? In a strange country, with a strange man? Have you lost your mind?"

"You needn't play coy," Lawrence said. "Thomas never mentioned a daughter named Abigail to me. Who are you, really?"

"Did he mention any other daughters?" Abigail asked.

Lawrence hesitated. "Well... no... but..."

"Then how can you be surprised I escaped your notice until now?"

"Because he did mention a child with jet hair and fair eyes," Lawrence said, looking Abigail over again. "One hates to accuse a lady in troubled times. However... one can not tolerate deception in business."

Abigail put her eyes on the window behind him, took a deep breath, then met his commanding gaze again. "What you see is no deception. What you know isn't the whole truth. How much will you insist on knowing, to believe my sincerity?"

Lawrence steepled his fingers before his lips, taking her in from head to foot once more. "I believe you may have just convinced me. Ma'am."

Something warm and soft bloomed in her breast at his words. "If you truly mean what you say, then yes, let's survey this property. Even if there must be something distasteful in our haste. I must arrange lodgings for my family at Alouis Hotel before I go."

"I'll get my buggy ready and collect you," Lawrence said, back to his usual state of complete control. "I think I shall enjoy this adventure more than the cards and beer that would otherwise occupy me."

Abigail couldn't restrain a longing sound at the mention of those luxuries. Lawrence's eyes were filled only with understanding as he took her in again. That commiseration seemed unusual, considering what he so clearly suspected of Abigail. Suddenly, that office seemed too small, and his presence too intimate.

Abigail stuttered out her goodbyes, and sped away from his uncomfortable attention. The heat and light of the busy street did nothing to settle her wildly-beating heart. Even while she made arrangement with the hotel manager, her thoughts clung to the scent and charm of Lawrence Wesker.

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After settling all the arguments, perceived slights and competitions among her brood, Clara finally turned her attention to Abigail. The conflict raging within had more than one source. For years there had been no reason to concern herself about business matters that dragged on past daylight hours. Now the propriety necessary for their subterfuge was in radical opposition to their desire to be under a roof of their own once more.

"Mama, I can take care of everything and have you in your new home by tomorrow," Abigail said, very firm. "He knows nothing, and won't have reason to find out."

"If he's so ignorant, and a gentleman, why would he propose such a thing?" Clara demanded. "He either knows too little of manners, or too much about you."

"And what if he does?" Abigail asked. "What can he do but sign the papers and hand over the keys? If we were back home, there might be gossip to fret, but here, we're all strangers to each other."

"All the more reason to make a good impression," Clara tried.

"By living in a hotel and defaulting with the first business contact I've made? Mama... really..." Abigail tsked. "You brought me with you for a purpose. Let me serve it."

"But..."

"Unless you have something new to say, I need to go wait for Mister Wesker."

"A lady doesn't act this way!" Clara said in a harsh whisper.

"Then you must accept responsibility for the fact that it never crossed your mind to raise me up as a lady," Abigail replied. "This world needs me to be made of stronger stuff, and I am. I got more to worry on than what all these strangers might one day think of me."

Clara finally stood down from her reflexive defense of propriety, but Abigail hovered, watching her. The smell of the street drifted in through the window. Through the thin walls, they could hear the sounds of debauchery and license in the rooms beyond. The

only way to leave was to find a place to go. There was simply no way their simple country family could be comfortable in such a place as this. Abigail kissed Clara on the cheek and went down to the lobby to wait for Lawrence.

When a gleaming black buggy pulled by matched Morgan horses pulled up, Abigail couldn't help but be impressed. Horses, buggies, all the things that had once seemed like necessities were quickly becoming luxuries as the war rolled on. When she stepped up to take her place, she noticed a basket wedged in behind the seat.

"Here, put your bag behind your feet," Lawrence instructed, then leaned close to smooth the lap robe over Abigail's skirts. "The ride isn't far, but plenty dusty."

Abigail fisted her hands into her skirts. "Don't touch me, Sir!"

"I wouldn't fret over such a little thing, if I were you," Lawrence murmured, and took up the reins. "We got a way to go, Ma'am. The Morgans will make it as quick as they can."

Abigail quickly turned her attention to the horses, trying to ignore the stirring in her breast and under her skirts. She shook her head, brushing aside her momentary confusion. "They're a handsome team. Why didn't the army take them?"

"They tried," Lawrence drawled. "Funny how the horse of a poor man can't be spared, but a rich man can somehow find a way. I think you'll like the house, plenty of space and all. Not too much to speak of for property, but I reckon you can get on."

They soon were out of the bustling city center. The buildings sprawled over for blocks around, but Abigail already knew how the land swallowed up the city's attempt to tame its daunting expanses. Lawrence turned on to a dryer road and began pointing out features in a coaxing tone.

"Green grocer, butcher, milliner, bar," Lawrence said, gloved hand pointing out the storefronts. "Billiards there as well, I visit often myself."

"Hmmm," Abigail murmured, trying to sound disinterested rather than betray her longing to investigate the premises. "And the house is near... the... um... grocer, is it?"

"Just here," Lawrence said, turning the horses again. He drove up a narrow street and turned once more, about halfway up its length. The gates stood open, and he stopped the horses, alighted from the buggy and swung the iron gate shut. "It locks on its own, just let the latch catch and you're safe."

"Mister Wesker, I can't help but notice..." Abigail glanced around the lush grounds. "You implied we had to go some distance out of town... overnight, as I recall..."

Lawrence did not answer, but resumed his seat and urged the horses on. He drove into an open buggy house and stopped once more, then hurried down once more to close the doors. Abigail threw the lap robe aside, tried to leap down from the buggy, but her skirts tangled with the heavy robe. She stooped to free herself, and the doors to the buggy house clattered shut, sealing the sunlight out.

"Wait, I'll help you," Lawrence said, hurrying back to her side. He separated the tangle and held his hand up. "Come now, leave your bag. I have to take the basket. I'll come back for your things in a moment. Let's get in out of the heat."



Abigail hesitated, then put her gloved hand in his. "I hope the promise of furnishings wasn't just big Texas talk."

"Oh, no, I meant every word," Lawrence smiled, reaching with his other hand to steady her as she climbed down. "I'm sure it will be to your liking."

"Yes, but I must think of my mama," Abigail said. "She's particular, and I'll be blamed if she ain't happy."

Lawrence held on to her for just a moment longer than necessary once she was steady on her feet again. Then he let go and pushed past her to lift out the basket. She found herself walking meekly in his wake as he shouldered through a side door and crossed a dusty yard. They went up a brick walkway. The front door opened to a nudge of his foot. Abigail followed quickly and he kicked the door closed behind her.

He bumped through the front hall, through a parlor and into the dining room beyond. He thumped the basket down on a long, polished table and wiped his brow on his sleeve.

"Have a look around. I have a few little things yet to arrange," Lawrence said. "You'll know better than I do what will suit Mama Monroe."

Feeling dismissed and uneasy, she left him to his basket. Drawing out her letters once more, she wandered from parlor to kitchen, upstairs to count bedrooms and examine furnishings. There was an air of use and taste to the place. She ran her hand along bedsteads and peered under armoires, but found little dirt and few places that needed repairs. When she checked off the last item on the inventory list, she felt satisfied as to the terms of the lease. The landlord, however, had only aroused more questions in her mind.

She went back down the stairs and into the parlor, taking in the rosy silk upholstery, picturing her mother and sisters here. The dark woods of the furnishings glowed in the sunset-red light. Lawrence stood at the sideboard, a pair of brandy snifters in one hand and a lit cigar in the other. He went to sit on the lounge under the front window and smiled, offering a glass to her.

Abigail knew she should sign the papers and return immediately to the hotel, but propriety prevented her walking back alone. That same propriety said she could not stay. There was no reason for Abigail to truly care much, except for the appearances she had assumed. For a long moment, she struggled between thought of the front lines, and this minor war within her. She felt herself yield to temptation, but truly couldn't be surprised at her decision.

She drew her long gloves off, crossed the room and accepted the glass. Sitting on the sun-warm lounge, she spread her skirts out to establish a kind of defensive position. Only then did she allow herself to savor the amber heat of Lawrence's brandy.

"Are you hungry at all?" Lawrence solicitously inquired.

"You haven't answered my question yet," Abigail reminded. "Why did you mislead me about needing to drive a long way? We might have walked here, and you went on like the house was miles outside of town."

"You know my business reputation," Lawrence said. "But like your father, you had no reason to wonder at my social reputation. I lied to you because I wanted to. The same rea-

son you accepted my audacious suggestion. A lady could never have been persuaded. Therefore, I must conclude that you are no lady."

"You're too charming to be a real gentleman," Abigail observed in return. "Then again, a rake can never admit to his charms. What I want is to get my mother and family into their home. Nothing more."

"Tomorrow," Lawrence coaxed. "Drink your brandy."

Abigail drank deeply, whole body flushing with the pleasure of its warmth. Lawrence drew on his cigar, and Abigail breathed in its perfume. She tried to content herself with the brandy alone, but couldn't help watching the hollow and release of Lawrence's mouth around the fragrant tobacco.

"Would you like a taste?" Lawrence drawled around the moist tip. "I don't mind if your manners are a shade rough, Miss Monroe. I only wanted to learn more of my new tenant."

"If you'll keep my indiscretions private, I'll be much obliged," Abigail said, and licked her lips. "My tobacco ran out on me on the road. It's been such a long time."

Lawrence just turned the cigar around in his fingers. Abigail leaned forward eagerly and wrapped her lips around the cigar, catching his taste on the rich, sweet smoke. She took only a tentative pull, mindful of her long separation from that heady flavor. When she sat back again and looked up at Lawrence, he was smiling in patient amusement.

"You must be hungry," Lawrence said, as if insisting. "Come, supper is ready and I'm hungry as a bear. My clerk forgot to feed me. I can't imagine what caused the lapse."

"You need a real clerk," Abigail snorted. "Not that puffed-up prig. All right. Supper, then. You are a hard man to understand, Mister Wesker."

Lawrence stood up and offered his hand in a seemingly natural gesture. Abigail smiled and gave in, surrendering her hand to him once more. He led her to the dining room, opening the doors to reveal a table set for two. He took her to the seat at the left hand of the top setting and held her chair while she arranged her skirts and sat.

Lawrence leaned over her shoulder, serving a cold picnic dinner from plates piled high and arranged between them. Golden fried chicken, corn bread, white beans and rice, stewed tomatoes and okra, fresh butter and a bottle of wine quite overwhelmed what the hotel had managed to offer for lunch. He sat and served his own plate, then poured a glass for each of them. Abigail covered her mouth with her hand, smothering a laugh at the incongruity.

Lawrence only returned her chuckle and dug into his meal. Abigail finished her brandy quickly and took up her fork. Even with his irregular behavior, Lawrence was better company than she had enjoyed during those long weeks on the road.

"There's a small dinner soon," Lawrence mentioned. "A private affair, but all good people. Would you care to attend?"

"How can you people throw parties when the war is..."

"We're not in Richmond," Lawrence talked over her. "There's just no way to get anything done in this town during business hours. Most of us are too hung over to think very hard. You don't look shocked, Miss Monroe."

"I had brothers before I came here," Abigail scoffed. "Are you going to tell me next that your fiancée lately broke your heart, leaving you lonely for a lady to step about town with you?"

"Yes," Lawrence said, and drank deeply of his wine. "But more to the point, you'd be a smart mind to help me think. Not a twittering distraction to be placated. I do despise a girl that twitters."

"What's your game, Mister Wesker?" Abigail demanded. "You're too clever to be so clumsy with your compliments."

"What's your game, Miss Monroe?" Lawrence asked back. "You play my game, I'll play yours, and the war will be over by Christmas. It's not as if you have any other way to do business in this town. You're a woman. That alone would be enough to shut you out. I can't make a profit if you can't pay your rent."

"I'll have to ask Mama," Abigail said, suddenly feeling rather vulnerable and exposed. "You're a strange man, Mister Wesker."

"You have no idea," he purred.

Lawrence moved off his chair so fast, Abigail had no time to react. He pinned her hands to her chair, nearly crawling into her lap to keep her from tearing away. He leaned in closer still, smelling of brandy, cigar smoke and something musky... intimate.

"What the hell are you doing?" Abigail snarled, turning her strength against his, twisting hard against his broad hands.

His mouth caught hers mid-protest, pushing her head against the high, ornate back of the chair. Lawrence groaned, then leaned in harder, forcing her lips wider as his tongue plunged in deep.

Abigail turned her head aside, gasping "Get off me, Wesker!"

"Did anyone ever kiss you like that?" Lawrence demanded, nipping at her throat. "Anyone at all. Answer quick!"

"No!" Abigail cried out as his teeth latched on to her ear. "I will kill you if you do it again!"

"Will you?" Lawrence rumbled against her ear. "Will you really? Or will you burn up for me?"

Her body felt hot, tight and pulsing under skirts and bodice. She pressed her thighs together, closed her eyes and tried again to throw him off. He bit harder at her earlobe and she whimpered, sitting very still on her chair once more.

"You're no lady," Wesker said around the throbbing flesh of her ear. "Your mama didn't raise you right, Miss Abigail Monroe. I think you'd make a fine lady, if you'd only do what you're told. There's more reasons to listen than to fight, so don't carry on like a child."

"Please," Abigail begged, breathless and confused. "You'll leave a mark if you keep biting me. I want to go home."

"You are home," Lawrence chuckled, then stood back and smiled down on her. "Sign your papers, Miss Monroe. I'll fetch your mother. You may all move in this very night. I insist."

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Lawrence did exactly as he'd said, charming the Monroes and bringing them all to the house. He ushered Clara in the front door, then disappeared completely in the bustle of moving in at such a late hour. That hurry didn't slow much for hours with Clara in full swing, commanding her troops. When Abigail was finally allowed to fall into bed, she thought she would be too exhausted to dream. To her surprise, she tasted brandy in her sleep, smelled tobacco and Lawrence Wesker. The memories lingered far into the following morning.

Clara had a list of errands for Abigail even before she'd had her breakfast. Abigail looked over the list, adding sums and unable to taste her food from worry. There was no reason to think they could run accounts with the shops when they had no visible means of support. Inwardly, she balked at spending their capital on groceries and curtain cloth, but was too muddled in her mind to make a good argument.

She sneaked a look into the parlor, saw Clara holding dominion, and decided to handle the details without passing on her concern. She drew on her hat and assumed it wasn't too unseemly to be seen about her own neighborhood in broad daylight. She went first to the dry good store and hoped against hope that some supplies would be available so far from the front lines.

"Howdy Ma'am, I hope you don't mind the heat." A heavysset man leaned over the counter and mopped at his brow with a red kerchief. "How can I help you?"

"I need beans, flour, rice, uh..." Abigail glanced up at the shelves. "Crackers? Cheese?"

"I... uh..." the storekeeper hesitated. "My name's Mort Baker. May I ask your name, Ma'am?"

"Abigail Monroe," she said. "I'm new to town, don't expect you'd have heard of me."

"No, no, I know who you are," he smiled brightly. "Most strangers in my door end up disappointed one way or another. I'm glad I can tell you I got all you're askin' after and more."

Abigail started to hand her list over, then stopped. "Is there something particular about me that makes a difference?"

"Well, I were told to watch out for a pretty lady with ebony hair and diamonds in her eyes, who answered to the name of Monroe," Baker said. "Your account's already set. We can deliver today."

"Were you told by Lawrence Wesker?" Abigail asked, crushing her list in her hand. "Was he here talking about me?"

"Just enough to say your credit's good and I ought to have your way in the shopping, Ma'am," Baker said, eyes wide and innocent. "He said y'all ere doin' without menfolk and you were... well. He did you a kind turn, little miss."

Abigail cleared her throat, smoothed out the paper in her hand and read her mother's list to him. Baker wrote up her order and showed her where to sign his account book. He patted her hand approvingly once she had signed. She went out into the street, feeling numb in her fingertips.

As she worked her way through her errands, she started to anticipate the way the proprietors would react. A simple introduction opened doors, but she was made to know she was a special case, and who had cleared the way before her. It made her progress easy, but a conflict began to build in her as the morning wore on.

Part of her wanted to be grateful for Lawrence's kindness, but her pride rebelled at his presumption. Moreover, it became clear that the shopkeepers intended to accept Wesker as her benefactor without asking her opinion. She felt trapped. As she turned her steps homeward, her frustration slowly converted to anger.

The rise in her temper and the thought of Lawrence worked a strange alchemy in her body. The throbbing of blood in her veins set up a low tattoo in her temples. That heat reminded her of Lawrence's hold on her struggling body, and the rush of prickling tension as his lips parted hers. The angry blush in her cheeks changed in nature, and became an embarrassed blush as her nipples grew swollen and sensitive against the fabric of her corset.

She stepped off the walkway into the shadows of an ally, leaned against the warm boards of a building and tried to catch her breath. Instead, she caught the scent of burning tobacco and felt a familiar tightening between her thighs. Fisting her hands in her skirt, she clenched her jaw, trying to force these conflicting thoughts of Lawrence from her mind.

She stood there, head bowed, struggling against the heat, trying to shake off her growing sense of arousal but her efforts were in vain. Lawrence's embarrassing questions came rushing back. Had she ever been kissed like that? Most emphatically, she had not. Never before had the power of a man's touch so overwhelmed and thrilled her. She had never before imagined that it could.

She bit her lip hard, waiting for her heartbeat to slow, then hurried home to Clara. There were pictures to hang, boxes to carry, bins to be emptied of garbage. She took one of the young boys outside and set pegs to mark their kitchen garden. She looked around the buggy house and shed, checking the spaces meant for livestock, if any could be gotten. Everywhere she was reminded of her audacious landlord and his seemingly capricious proposals.

Only when the time came to wash and dress for supper did she stand before her mirror and wonder at herself. Her smooth cheeks and rosebud lips seemed no different to her now than when she had arrived in this town. But in her posture, the shape her clothes gave her, she saw something more than petty deception.

For a long time she stood fingering the lacy frills of her underpinnings, touching the tops of her stockings and wondering over Lawrence Wesker. Her hands moved to gently cup herself between the thighs, crushing the thin cotton of her pantalettes to her heated

flesh. That touch collided with her confusion over Lawrence, her body tensed and she let out a soft moan.

A quick glance assured that her door was locked, so she drew her lengthening flesh out into her bare, strong hands and began to gently to stroke, teasing that sensitivity out until her heels lifted from the floor and her spine bent, leaning her into her own hand. She put two fingers into her mouth, sucked them wet and slid them down inside her bodice, grasping at her nipple.

The rush of her own grasping hands dragged her along the same path of heat and need she had tried so hard to ignore. She kept her lips parted, panting quietly as she stroked harder, urging herself on to higher peaks of pleasure. The feel of soft fabrics, her own prickling skin, the slow undulation of her hips fused and gathered low, deep inside her.

Slowly, her rear began to flex, picking up the pace of her hand, making her thighs quiver as her shaft thudded harder, heavier, and began to grow moist in her fingers. Inside the restriction of her corset, her bosom grew sensitive even as her nipple peaked harder and became almost painfully aroused. She slid her hand to the other side, but even the rub of soft cloth and whalebone ribbing was enough to make her gasp, then moan.

Her knees went weak and she dropped to the floor, both hands working hard and fast as she knelt on the soft carpet. Her head fell forward, eyes glazed with passion, the mindless cravings that pushed her beyond any memory of modesty. Her hips churned, soft, rounded cheeks gently caressed by the lace and soft cloth of her pantalettes. She circled her thumb about the hard, wet tip of her firm shaft, slicking her hand even more. Low moans poured out of the perfect red circle of her lips.

Without reason or intention, her thoughts flashed on Lawrence, the strength of his hands, the heat of his mouth. Her head rolled against her shoulder, fell back and and she bit her lip hard, imagining that his taste still lingered there.

"Oh, what have you done to me?" she whispered, half-accusing, half desperate for a real answer.

She let her hips rock fast then pump harder, ass flexing tighter as she thrust through her fingers. Her legs slid apart on the floor, and she writhed as if offering up to her own need. In the warm cleft of her buttocks, her passage flexed and grasped at nothing. The quality of that fluttering felt unbearably new and undeniable. She reveled in it, rocking faster, squeezing tighter, the scent of her own sweat rising up like a rare perfume.

"Oh, Lawrence... Lawrence," she gasped, and leaned forward over her own clenching fist, riding that tight, urgent touch with all her strength.

Her ass pumped up higher, churning and warm. Her spine curved, trying to bend with the power of her exhilaration. Harder and harder she bucked and squirmed, a creature of longing and fire, urging herself on towards that white-hot pinnacle of release, careless of anything beyond her own burning desire.

Her flesh jerked and writhed in her palm. Thick, wet jets of pure passion flew from her, breaking her breath down to stuttering sobs. She licked the sweat from her lips and moaned again, shuddering as she slid to the side, falling full-length on the carpet. She lay there gasping and dazed, eyes open but seeing nothing.

Slowly, the sounds of the household crept back in, and she turned onto her back, righting her clothes even as her knees shook and her body throbbed with her own satisfaction. She closed her eyes again, put her sticky fingers in her mouth and sighed over the rich flavor.

"Oh Lawrence," she murmured again. "What in the world did you do to me?"

But in her heart, she already knew. The real question she dared not even whisper to herself. Would he ever do it again? The only way to find out was to play his game and discover what kind of man Lawrence Wesker truly was.

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Abigail sat quiet and mortified in the parlor, painfully aware that she was in the very spot where Lawrence had shared his cigar with her. On this occasion, Lawrence was sitting in the most comfortable chair, and held a cup of tea that had been served with great ceremony and gratitude from Clara herself. The whole Monroe clan was outfitted in their social best, making the parlor as crowded and warm as any might be when entertaining an honored guest.

"Has the city changed much since... well..." Clara hesitated over directly mentioning anything unpleasant before their landlord. "It's just that there's so much upheaval everywhere else..."

"Well, among ladies and gentlemen, there's not much change to mention," Lawrence said, smiling convivially. "Of course, those driven from their homes by the violence... one feels compassion for such poor creatures, but what can be done? I'm just glad I've already done what I could for y'all. It's not often I get the chance to help refugees."

"Yes, well..." Clara frowned at being classified as a refugee in her own country. "We were fortunate indeed to travel from haven to haven, rather than wander aimless and lost like so many have done."

"And at last you are in safe harbor," Lawrence agreed. "I'm so glad to have been able to offer a port in this storm. My father knew your husband... in better times. He never forgot an honest man, and so neither do I."

The room fell silent with thoughts of those absent. Eliza, Abigail's sister-in-law, hid her face in a handkerchief and contrived a delicate little sob or two. Lawrence made soothing sounds, accepted their gratitude with gracious good will, adroitly sorting through their relations without seeming to pry. Clara used all her charm to establish herself as a proper lady from a proper family, despite her unusual circumstances. As expected, the fact of the family having money went a long way towards proving their claims.

"And will we soon be able to return your call and meet Missus Wesker?" Clara delicately inquired. "I can not bear the thought of long remaining a stranger in my new home."

"My brother's wife, Belinda, would be most happy to know you," Lawrence carefully replied. "My poor bachelor's lodgings would make a sad reception, I'm afraid."

"I see..." Clara said, trying to not sound like she was thrilled to learn of his marital availability. "And what may we expect of our new society?"

"Your eldest has already been invited to debut at the Marshall's supper party," Lawrence said. "Of course I mean Miss Abigail Monroe. Invitations come from Marshall only once in a blue moon, so I hope you'll allow her to attend. I imagine she must have been used to being seen in society, back where you come from."

"Abigail?" Clara squeaked. "I... I couldn't possibly... I mean to say she's... not at liberty... I just can't do without her for a moment."

"That would explain why so charming a lady remains a maiden," Lawrence nodded sagely, but his tone hinted at the very real wealth behind the Monroe name. "Perhaps you might find that I could impose on you for just one evening, to escort her to Marshall's little shindig. I don't reckon it'll do her much harm. It might do her some good, Ma'am."

"I..." Clara looked at Abigail, then raised a hand, summoning forward a different daughter. "Have I introduced you to Daisy? She's a very steady girl, accomplished in many..."

"Forgive me, Missus Monroe," Lawrence said, then cleared his throat. "I'm not accustomed to having daughters traded for one another as if we were dealing in ponies. Your Abigail has proven herself to be clever and accomplished in forums where ladies generally are not allowed to excel. I must admit to a particular desire, in this case."

"I... well... Abigail?" The high-pitched tone to Clara's question all but begged for her child to rescue her from this awkward invitation. "Have you nothing to say?"

"Yes, Mister Wesker, I'd be happy to accept," Abigail said, quirking a frown at Clara. "It will give me a chance to air my evening gown."

"Abigail!" Clara cried, shocked to the core.

"Well how else can our interests be put forward? Of course she must accept," Eliza said, showing a support Abigail hadn't expected. "She may not be the fairest Monroe lady, but her knowledge in... what interests a man... outshines all the rest. Her wit and cleverness, as Mister Wesker says."

Clara sat stunned at this youthful uprising, then once again regained her composure. "You can't be asking to take her out in your buggy, after sunset of all things, without a chaperone. Nobody would ever believe it."

"Mama, don't you dare try to talk for me," Abigail snapped. "You had your chance, but you wanted to know what I thought. I'm going. I want to. This ain't no different than how it's been since I was eighteen."

Lawrence shifted on his seat. Abigail recognized that particular roll of hips, and dared a glance south of his waistcoat. She felt a twinge between her legs, deep inside, and glanced away, trying not to squirm on her chair. Lawrence cleared his throat and directed his questions at Clara, just as he had at the beginning.

"I would be honored to protect and serve Miss Monroe, if only I may be allowed to enjoy her company," Lawrence smoothly agreed.



"Just what skills do you think she's got?" Clara asked, mouth tight and unhappy. "Dancing? Singing? Clever conversation? I really can't imagine what you're thinkin' on, good sir."

"Can you deal cards?" Lawrence asked Abigail. "Any game at all will do."

"Of course I can..." Abigail rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Well, that'll put me at the table when it's time to talk business, anyway. You are a shrewd man, Mister Wesker. I was trying to think how to sneak out of the drawing room after supper."

"Just don't go in to begin with," Lawrence said. "Your mama just said you got nothin' to offer in there anyway. It'll be better if they never find out. May I come tomorrow evening then? I must have your consent, Missus Monroe. Please."

"Yes," Clara weakly replied. "Though you should know, Mister Monroe would never allow such a thing if he were here."

"If he were here, it would not be necessary," Eliza sharply reminded. "Or if my Taylor stood ready to speak for us. What we have is Abigail. It'll be enough if you'll stop being so particular, Mamma."

"Splendid," Lawrence smiled, and finished his tea. "I'm afraid a few small business matters must be attended today. Until tomorrow, then."

Daisy hurried away to bring his hat, then he was gone. Clara shooed the household back to their tasks, with only Eliza and Daisy lingering by her side. For a long time the four of them sat silently fretting over these unexpected complications. At last, Abigail remembered herself and spoke.

"There's just no way for me to provide for us if I can't do business," Abigail said. "There's only one real disgrace on me. If that gets found out, I'm dead before sundown anyway. I ain't got any virtue to protect, though I hate to tell ya that, Mama. It might not be proper for a lady, but I want to, and I won't do a thing to make you ashamed of me."

"That Wesker's no gentleman, or he wouldn't have dodged the army," Eliza frowned. "If you were my daughter, I would never allow him near you. You wouldn't let him near Daisy, and we all know it."

"He's scary," Daisy whispered. "When Mama put me forward, I thought I would die. How can you want to have a friend like him?"

"If you like the house you're living in, remember it's his," Abigail said, finally exasperated enough to really set them all down to behave. "If nothing else persuades you, remember he's the damn landlord. Stop being so picky, all y'all. I ain't got reason to be afraid of him. I've known men like him before, and he don't scare me a bit."

"I'm just glad it ain't me," Daisy said.

"Feel however you want to, but help me with my dress," Abigail said. "I need your particular expertise so I don't ruin your chances of showing your faces in this town."

Daisy giggled happily under the compliment, Clara frowned, and suddenly all was back to normal among them. Daisy took Clara away to ransack wardrobes, already on Cloud Nine over her part in the family needs. Elizabeth brought more tea and settled in beside Abigail, looking more worried than even Clara had been.