

Chapter Three



Eliza Dawn strolled through town, taking in the same scene she'd experienced in every city on her journey west. Prospectors overwhelmed the mercantile, dry goods store, and livery. They spilled out of the gambling and drinking establishments. Prim women clutched reticules close and children closer, crossing the street to avoid revelry whenever possible.

She had gotten off to a rough start with Justin Hogue the previous day. In response to her nagging guilt over ruining his horse sale, she determined her top priority would be finding a new buyer for Justin. Once again, she would be the only woman moving toward the revelry in town. It was odd to be constantly in the middle of it yet never join in.

After awakening early to sew, she assisted Rebecca with breakfast clean-up so she could have the table free to cut fabric. Afterward, she sewed until dinner, leaving the afternoon to gather information on the prospectors and search for anyone interested in buying a horse.

Justin was living a life in motion when she arrived. But thanks to her, his business had ground to a halt, resulting in a

substantial loss. She bit her lip. She envied those who could stay in one place without getting stuck. But, unfortunately, being in motion wasn't enough for her. She had to keep moving from place to place to keep her past at bay. Otherwise, it always managed to catch up to her.

Pushing away the thought, she glimpsed the sign overhead: Pool Hall. She slipped through the door and sat at an empty table near the center of the room. Gawking patrons were nothing new to her. A few men changed tables to sit farther away. More than once, she had endured a tense exchange with men opposed to her presence in these male-dominated venues.

The rhythmic tapping of billiard balls played sharply throughout the back of the room. The aroma of cigar smoke laced with notes of nutmeg, coffee, and bourbon hung thick in the air. The staccato laughter of a group of Scottish emigrants added interest to the thrum of easy chatter. Eliza Dawn singled out a nearby table of businessmen making plans.

“So’s, I said to him, ‘Mister, I’m westward bound, and I don’t aim to look back.’” The burly, dark-haired man closest to Eliza Dawn set his drink down with force, sloshing the contents on the table. “I don’t give a rat’s tail about this here letter. Keep it, and don’t pester me no more.’ You wouldn’t think steamboat hands would be so bothersome.”

“Well, I didn’t encounter him, so he couldn’t have stopped everyone passing by him. Never mind that.” A short, stout older man stood and stretched. Then, stroking the gray streak down the middle of his dark beard, he eased into his chair. “I’d like to get one more horse, one that sits well. I stiffen up sitting on that wooden wagon seat for hours on end.”

“Maybe we’ll get a cushion for Gramps.” The big ox slapped the table, laughing forcefully.

Eliza Dawn rose and approached the men. “Good afternoon, gentlemen.”

The conversation halted as their eyes roved from the top of

her head to the hem of her skirt. Tugging at the hips of the garment, she tried to give the illusion of a longer skirt. Perhaps she should have lingered at Hogue House long enough to take advantage of Rebecca's offer for something more fitting.

"What can we do for you, miss?" The dark-haired man next to her straightened his bowtie.

"I couldn't help but overhear you may be in the market for a good horse." She gestured to the bearded man. "I've been staying at Hogue House, and Justin Hogue has some fine horses for sale."

"What does a pretty thing like you know about horses?" The man near her winked, catching her hand.

"Mr. Hogue has worked with my horse. He has a gift." She slipped her fingers free. "I'm sure you won't be disappointed with what he can offer."

"I wouldn't be disappointed with what you have to offer." The man's lips curled into a smile, exposing broad yellow teeth as he rubbed his hand down her sleeve and settled it at her waist. "Why don't you take a seat?"

Eliza Dawn's skin crawled. She pulled away from his meaty paw and smoothed her dress. "I wanted to share a tip on where to find a horse. That's all."

The man yanked her into his lap. "A tip on a horse isn't what I want from a girl like you."

"Turn her loose, Big Jim." Folding his arms across his chest, the bearded man leaned back in his chair.

"I'm just having a little fun." Big Jim took a long drag from his cigar.

Eliza Dawn struggled to free herself from his grip. He leaned close to her face with puckered lips, releasing curls of smoke. Wrinkling her nose, she recoiled. Her back pressed uncomfortably against the table edge. The other men laughed.

"Aye, lass, thir ye ur. Bin looking fer ye." A tall, muscular Scotsman slapped the table. "Didny ken where ye got off to."

He freed Eliza Dawn from her entanglement and tucked her close to his side. The honeyed glow of lantern light highlighted a faint hint of red in his unruly blond hair. His blue-gray eyes flashed as he wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her uncomfortably close. Was she being rescued or newly entrapped?

“Relax, lass. Ye’re safe ’nough.” He whispered in her ear as he shepherded her away from the table. Then, removing his hand from her waist, he placed it gently on the side of her head. He kissed her temple and added, “Make a good shew of it.”

Eliza Dawn laid her head on his shoulder and draped her arms around him.

“Back in a minute, lads.” He called to his table as he escorted her out the door. The table erupted with whoops and whistles.

Outside, Eliza Dawn turned him loose. Stepping back, she straightened her shoulders and smoothed her dress. “I appreciate your help.”

“Wis ’eh proper thing to do.” He brushed wavy locks away from her face. “Feel lek I ken ye. Ye’ve shewed oop ev’rywhere we’ve camped since we left Georgia.”

“You noticed?” Heat rose in her cheeks.

“Aye, lass. Ye’re a difficult one no’ to notice.” His eyes flickered. “Ye’re following us lek a stray pup, so the lads and I hev adopted ye.”

“You’ve been leaving things on my saddle?” She raised her hand to her collar, fidgeting with the button. “Bags of food, sachets of soap.”

“Aye, that’d be us. We call ye pup, but I imagine ye’ve got a more suitable name.”

“Eliza Dawn. And your name so I can thank you properly.”

“Name’s Ewan MacKinnon.”

“Mr. MacKinnon.” She tipped her head. “My deepest gratitude for rescuing me. Please thank the lads for the gifts they’ve left along the journey. It’s kind but unnecessary.”

Of Faith and Dreams

She turned to go, and Ewan grasped her elbow. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Call me Ewan. I’ll be offended if ye don’t. Hev ye bin to the bakery?”

Releasing a long breath, she relaxed. “The bakery? No.”

“It’s doon ’eh way. The baker makes a well tidy strudel.” He flashed a warm, broad smile. “Permit me one more gift?”

She gave a nod, and he offered his arm. He grew taller as she placed her hand in the crook of his elbow. They strolled in silence a moment before he spoke again.

“Whit causes ye to be continually in oor midst?”

“Sewing.” She caught her toe on an uneven plank in the boardwalk and stumbled. Ewan quickly steadied her. “I make flannels and do mending.”

“Tis a long journey fer a little work. How mooch fer a shirt?”

“A dollar fifty.”

“The lads and I will gi’ ye two dollars a shirt.” He pulled a wad of bills from his pocket. “How many can ye make?”

She blushed, pushing his hand away. “Oh, no. that’s not necessary.”

“It’ll be necessary ’nough when we’re a thousand miles from home.” He held out the money.

“Payment on delivery, I insist.” She pushed it back again. “I only make a shirt a day.”

“A shirt a day. I’ll hev five shirts then.” He returned the money to his pocket and wheeled her into the bakery. “Five shirts ought to gi’ ye joost ’nough free time.”

“Enough free time for what?” she asked.

Ewan’s wide smile reappeared. He held up two fingers to the baker as he spoke. “Fer more strudel wi’ me, o’ course.”

Eliza Dawn laughed brightly. Ewan paid the baker and handed her the flaky pastry, awaiting her approval. Taking a bite, her eyes widened with delight. “Is that caramel?”

Tonya B. Ashley

“Tis. Caramel, apple, and raisins.” He ushered her out the door. “Brilliant, isn’t it?”

“*Mm-hmm.*” She replied with a mouthful of pastry.

“Better get back to ’eh lads.” He nodded toward the pool hall.

“Oh wait, when would you like to select fabric for the shirts?”

“I troost ye. Pick anything ye like. Will ye be all right on yer own?”

“I’ll be fine, Ewan.” She leaned close, placing her hand on his shoulder and pecking him on the cheek.

Turning to leave, her body slammed into something hard. Her gaze traveled slowly up the pressed white shirt front, landing on steely gray eyes. Justin Hogue. Her heart sank.

Clutching her arms, Justin pushed her back a step. The sticky caramel filling smeared as she wiped at bits of strudel smashed into his shirt. She glanced behind her. MacKinnon had vanished.