

## Chapter Two

---



**E**liza Dawn grabbed a handful of dough and squeezed. A sticky glop clung to her fingers. She squeezed again, and more dough clumped around her knuckles. Rebecca giggled, dipping a few fingers in a bowl of flour and pulling the dough free of Eliza Dawn's hands.

"You don't cook much, do you?" Rebecca scooted her over with a hip bump.

"No." Eliza Dawn smiled weakly. "Does it show?"

"Here, toss a little flour on top. Then fold and push down and away." Rebecca exemplified the kneading motion. "Don't squeeze it. You'll overwork the dough, and the biscuits won't be light. Mr. Hildesheim, the German baker who boards here, taught us to make biscuits that aren't so hard. It takes a little more time, and sometimes it doesn't turn out, but it's worth it when it does."

"Thank you, Rebecca." Eliza Dawn picked bits of dough from her fingers and made another effort. She mimicked Rebecca's movement, glancing at her for approval. "You understand why I'm willing to pay extra for meals."

"Knead that dough gently until I tell you to stop." Rebecca

*Of Faith and Dreams*

blew a strand of honey-colored hair from her eyes. “You’re welcome to join me in the kitchen anytime. You get plenty of practice making three meals daily for eight siblings and half as many boarders.”

“Nine children?” Eliza Dawn gasped. “How is that possible? It’s so quiet.”

“Four of us are grown, Justin, Ivajohn, myself, and Cordelia. Of course, Cordelia and Simon accompany the younger ones to school. Cordelia assists the schoolmaster. Simon is sixteen. He’s not fond of school, but he’s strappy, and walking through town with a little extra muscle at her side gives Cordelia some peace of mind. Little Edie is with Mrs. Pratt. She’s four years old, the youngest.” Rebecca retrieved a few jars from the pantry.

“I can’t imagine what it must be like growing up in a household with so many children. You must’ve done an incredible amount of cooking, cleaning, sewing, and such.” Eliza Dawn sighed. What a relief to be free of so many obligations to others. Who needed such entanglements?

“Noon meal is my favorite. With the young’uns at school, it’s the boarders and us. Pa hasn’t sat for dinner much lately. Mr. Hildesheim usually takes a lunch pail to the bakery. The pastor and Ivajohn have gone north. Captain Cobb and his brother have stayed on the steamboat this trip. Sometimes, it’s just me, Justin, and Mr. Perry, the stone mason. Fascinating gentleman, when you can get him to talk.”

“One of the boarders is a pastor?” Eliza Dawn forced a smile, keeping her voice light. If she had known Hogue House was home to a preacher, she would have found other accommodations.

“Yes, Pastor Turner has boarded with us for over four years. The church is finally building a parsonage, so he’ll move out in the next few weeks.” Rebecca waved a hand toward the window. “He and Ivajohn took a group of missionaries north and then

into Indian Territory. They'll return later this week, just in time for Easter."

Rebecca turned, cocking her head to the side. "We're about the same height, wouldn't you say?"

"I guess so." Eliza Dawn shrugged.

"If you haven't any longer skirts, you can borrow one of mine." Rebecca picked up a potato and cut it into chunks. "Women here wear their hems ankle-high to keep them out of the dirt and mud. Calf high will have tongues wagging. Mind you, I'd wear britches if I could get away with it. They'd be far more practical for all my work here."

"You're kind to offer, but I can make do."

The front door creaked open and closed.

"Justin, that you?" Rebecca's bright voice rang through the house.

"It's me." The hard beat of Justin's boot heels preceded him. Then, momentarily, he appeared in the kitchen doorway with ledger in hand. He beckoned Eliza Dawn with a wave. "Sit, and let's get to business."

"What about the dough?" She turned to Rebecca, wiping her hands on her apron.

"I've got it. Go take care of business."

Removing the apron, Eliza Dawn joined Justin at the kitchen work table. He flipped roughly through the pages of the ledger. Was he upset with her? Had she done something wrong already? She shot a questioning glance at Rebecca, who shrugged in response.

She couldn't afford to lose these accommodations. Following prospectors meant lodging was limited everywhere she went. She had camped under the stars and enjoyed it until one evening when she narrowly escaped a run-in with a couple of ruffians. Plus, the nagging sense of being followed had plagued her since Alabama. If that were the case, she'd be more easily discovered at a boardinghouse for women.

## *Of Faith and Dreams*

If she intended to continue this journey west, she needed to curry favor with Justin while she was in town. She still required a second horse to give the animals adequate rest on such a long trek, and, with any luck, she'd convince him to sell her one. And she would have to find someone with enough room in their wagon for her supplies.

"Eliza Dawn? That's all the name we're going to get?" Justin drummed his fingers on the page.

"It's all I've got."

Head down, he wrote her name in the ledger. He recorded the details of their arrangement as he spoke. "I didn't notice a trunk or any bags on the porch. No belongings?"

"Only what fits in my saddle bags."

Justin's head jerked up, brows knit together. "You have a horse?"

A slight shudder rippled through her at the sternness in his blue-gray eyes.

"Yes, of course. How else would I have gotten here?"

"You should have mentioned that earlier. So you didn't arrive by steamboat?"

Eliza Dawn shook her head.

"Stable is full." He slammed the book closed. "I'll speak with Mrs. Pratt. She'll know which families can stable a horse."

"No, please don't contact Mrs. Pratt." She seized his hand. "No church families. If I can't stay here, I'll negotiate my way into one of the prospector camps."

"Justin, we can't let her stay in the camps." Rebecca set her paring knife down and picked up a kitchen towel. Wiping her hands, she joined them at the table.

"What do you want me to do, Rebecca?" He threw his hands in the air. Standing, he shoved his chair under the table. "It's above my bend. We don't board women, and we have no stalls." His tone flattened. "Take your advertisement down from the

board at Mooney's Mercantile. If you've placed one at the post office or elsewhere, take those down too."

Crossing the kitchen in quick strides, he departed out the back door by the cupboard. Eliza Dawn flew from her seat. Before she reached the door, Rebecca caught her arm.

"Best to leave him be a while. There's no talking to him when he gets like this." Rebecca gestured to the table, and they both sat. "Let him spend some time with the horses. We'll visit for a minute, finish the cooking, and then maybe we can approach him after dinner. Together."

Eliza Dawn nodded, wrapping her arms around her lurching stomach.

"Now, what is he talking about? What's this advertisement he mentioned?"

"It was impulsive and presumptuous of me." Eliza Dawn rubbed her hands over her face. "I put up notices advertising my seamstress work."

"Of course. How else would you get work?"

"I listed Hogue House as the place to contact me." Eliza Dawn tensed. Would Rebecca find offense like her brother? Spending the morning with Rebecca reminded her of a time when she was part of a family. She wrung her hands. "I didn't mean to offend. Hogue House was my last resort. If Justin hadn't agreed to let me stay, I planned to ask if I could rent workspace for a few hours every morning. I was being hopeful."

"I understand." Rebecca patted Eliza Dawn's hands. "We will work this out. It will be fine."

Later, during the meal, Rebecca and Eliza Dawn sat at one end of the table. Sitting at the opposite end, Justin didn't so much as look at her. Instead, he shared an ambling, relaxed conversation with Mr. Perry. When Rebecca spoke to him, he responded in terse, clipped phrases.

Eliza Dawn shifted in her seat, smoothing the napkin in her

lap. She fixed a bright smile and took a deep breath at a lull in the conversation. “Mr. Hogue, how did your sale go today?”

Justin’s fork landed on his plate with a sharp clang. Keeping his back to her, his eyes stayed on Mr. Perry.

“I lost that sale.” He turned, training his steely gaze on her. “Because of you, I was late. Rode up just in time to watch my buyer ride off on another horse.”

“I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t know.” She broke eye contact, swallowing hard. “I wasn’t trying to cause trouble.”

“That distraction was not worth two dollars a week.” Justin’s jaw clenched. “That was a significant sale you cost me today.”

“Justin!” Rebecca barked a harsh whisper.

Eliza Dawn excused herself, picked up her plate, and escaped to the kitchen table with Rebecca on her heels. Hands trembling, she set down the plate. She paced back and forth a few times. Then, turning to Rebecca, she slashed the air with her hand. “I *will* fix this. I will make it right, I promise.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Eliza Dawn wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing her shoulders. She slumped into a chair as sounds of intense dialogue rumbled from the dining room. She couldn’t make out the words. The front door creaked, and Mr. Perry called, “Back at suppertime.” Voices in the dining room paused, resumed lower than before, and finally ceased altogether.

Justin appeared in the kitchen with the ledger. He sat next to her and flipped through the pages. “Let’s begin again.”

Eliza Dawn let out a sigh of relief. “Mr. Hogue, I’m so sorry about the sale. I can pay a little more, two twenty-five?”

“Two dollars is plenty.” His back stiffened, and he crossed his arms. “You should have told me upfront about your horse and the advertisement. You don’t want to tell me your family name, fine. But you will tell me about things that affect this family and the other tenants. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” She slowly released a shaky breath.

Rebecca skirted by on her way to do the dinner dishes. She squeezed Eliza Dawn's shoulder as she passed.

"Miss Dawn, I don't need to know your life's particulars. In fact, I prefer not to." He scratched her name into the book. "I can't afford the distraction right now. However, I expect you to have better discretion in the future about what to share with us."

"Absolutely."

"Where is this horse of yours?"

"I tied her to a post in the alley on the other side of the house."

"Why?" His eyes searched hers with an intensity that made her squirm inside. "You hiding something, Miss Dawn?"

"I am a woman traveling alone. I doubt I could fend off a horse thief, and I can't afford to lose that horse." She didn't dare tell him the real reason she kept her horse hidden.

He slammed the ledger shut. "Let's take care of your horse, and then I'll show you the lost and found room."

Eliza Dawn turned to Rebecca. "If you don't mind waiting a bit, I'll help you with those dishes."

"No need." Rebecca gave a reassuring smile. "Save some time for a chat later this evening once the younger siblings have nodded off, if you don't mind."

"That will be fine." She smiled. "Thank you. For everything."

Eliza Dawn led her horse from the alley to the stable. Justin worked the leather thongs loose, untying the saddlebags and dropping them on the bench. He removed the rest of the tack and showed Eliza Dawn where he stored the items in the stable. Then he scratched his head.

"I'm not fond of the idea, but I guess we can stable her in the old forge until I sell Dolly." Justin brushed her. "It's not a proper space for a horse. She might startle being in an unfamiliar place. I'll clear the tools and things out so she won't hurt herself if she spooks."

## *Of Faith and Dreams*

Eliza Dawn reached for the brush. "Here, I'll do that."

"You're paying for this service with those two dollars." Justin held the brush out of reach. "In fact, how about you get those two dollars right now."

She lifted a saddle bag from its resting place on the bench. A sachet of soap hung from one of the buckled closures. She brought it to her nose and sniffed. Lavender. How had it gotten there? Who would have left her such a luxury? Tucking it into the bag, she retrieved the money and handed it to Justin.

As he brushed, his shoulders relaxed. "What's her name?"

"Bonnie. I call her Bonnie the Beauty." She smiled sheepishly. She loved how Bonnie's chestnut face and socks faded to the lightest reddish-blond. "It probably sounds silly, but she is beautiful."

"It's fitting." He grinned, lifting and inspecting the horse's hooves. "You handle her hooves often? She's fairly comfortable with me picking up her feet."

"One of the prospectors showed me how. So, I try to do it regularly." She rubbed Bonnie's muzzle. "I can get her feet off the ground, but I don't know I'd recognize if something were wrong."

Justin summoned her to his side, instructing her on what to look for. The corded muscles in his neck smoothed as tension melted. His voice softened. His movements became more fluid. A gentleness replaced his harsh tone and starchy demeanor as he spoke softly to Bonnie.

"Tell me about you and Bonnie. What sort of things do you do together?" Justin patted Bonnie on the rump as he finished his inspection.

"I practice the usual asks with her, change in gait, staying while I walk away, that sort of thing. We do have one trick, though."

"Oh, what's that?"

"She'll lie down on cue." Eliza Dawn motioned for Justin to



step away from Bonnie. She removed the lead rope, handing it to Justin. Making eye contact with Bonnie, she straightened her arm at her side and held a flat hand parallel to the ground. She rewarded the horse by rubbing her nose and around her ears. Bonnie responded by standing when Eliza Dawn raised her hand.

“Good girl.” She ran her hand along Bonnie’s neck. “She’ll do it even when I’m not looking at her. I make a *tsk*-ing sound, and she looks for my hand signal.”

“That’s a good trick. My brother, Simon, would love it. He’s sixteen and teaches my horses to do trick riding.” Justin reattached the lead rope and scratched Bonnie’s belly. “She’ll need to be reshod soon. I made new horseshoes yesterday and will be shoeing horses later this week. I’ll take care of her.”

“You *made* horseshoes?”

“Levi, the blacksmith, boarded with us, and I was his apprentice for a spell. That’s how we came to have a forge.” Justin tied Bonnie off and retrieved a bucket of oats for her. “I still make my own horseshoes. Now, Levi’s moved to the edge of town. He allows me to stable some horses at his place. I pay for the space, of course.”

“I feel terrible. You’re already splitting your time between two stables, and I ruined your sale.” She caught his arm. “I will make it up to you. I’ll find a new buyer.”

“What’s done is done. Let’s leave it in the past.” He nodded toward the bench. “Get your bags. I’ll show you the room.”

Eliza Dawn followed him upstairs. At the top of the stairs, he paused.

“That end of the hall is boarders’ rooms. Men only.” He eyed her fixedly. Then, turning, he motioned to the other side. “These are the family rooms and the lost and found. You are to keep to this end of the hallway and your room when upstairs. Boarders are welcome to use the dining and sitting rooms

downstairs. As Rebecca mentioned, she would be fond of your company in the kitchen if you want to visit.”

“I understand.”

When he opened the door to the room, she sucked in a quick breath, and her hand floated to her mouth. Her gaze drifted slowly around the space, soaking in the details.

“You still want it?” He chuckled.

“You weren’t exaggerating. This room is full to the rafters.” It was a labyrinth of stories waiting to be explored. Her pulse quickened. Her voice floated through the air, settling among the treasures. “This is delightful.”

“This is a mess.” Justin sighed. “Pa won’t let us get rid of anything. Says precious memories could be attached to every item.”

“He’s right.” She picked up a child’s doll from the floor. A dull ache filled her chest. Smoothing the doll’s dress, she nestled it among some blankets in an open trunk. “Well, this room suits me just fine.”

“Do you have any idea how long you’ll stay?”

“I’m not certain.” She shrugged. “It could be days or a few weeks. Depends on when the prospectors move out.”

“Where will you go when the forty-niners leave town?”

“I’ll follow them west.”

“You’ll follow them?” Justin’s eyebrows arched.

“Naturally. Prospectors are my business.”

“That’s wild territory, a hard place for a woman.” Justin leaned against the door facing, his strapping frame almost filling the doorway. “Why don’t you stay and do your work here?”

“Because there are plenty of wives, mothers, and church ladies to keep the town clothed, I’m sure.” She rearranged things to create a pocket of space for herself. “Besides, I like an adventure.”

“It’s been my experience adventure has no trouble finding

people who put down ties. I didn't mean to pry." Justin scooted out the door. "I best get back to the horses."

"Oh, wait. Do you have the time?"

Pulling the timepiece from his pocket, he flipped it open. "Getting close to three o'clock."

"I'd better be heading out too. I'll finish making myself at home later."

"Where are you headed?"

"I've got to get to the mercantile before it closes."

"Do you have any longer dresses? If not, one of my sisters could lend you one."

She edged past him with a smile. "This will do for now."

"What do you need from the mercantile? I don't mind making the trip." Justin kept eyeing her hemline. "That way, you and Rebecca will have time to scare up a dress that might fit better."

"I want to browse the flannels. I like to choose supplies for myself." Eliza Dawn moved toward the stairway. "Now that I have a place to stay, I'll need to stock up on fabric and notions."

She couldn't tell him she intended to spend the rest of the afternoon at the pool hall observing the forty-niners. She couldn't tell him the real reason she was following them. If he objected to her hemline, he would certainly take exception to her true profession.