

Chapter Three



Rebecca stood, hands flat against her skirt. Her thoughts swirled like a river-valley whirlwind. A few deep breaths did little to relieve the tightness in her chest. She narrowed her eyes at Simon, who barely raised a shoulder.

Dr. Benjamin Ewing.

She swallowed hard, gesturing toward Mr. Fremont. “I imagine you remember Monroe Fremont.” She fisted her hand on her hip. “He has a fracture in his left lower leg. I haven’t found any other injuries, but you’ll want to check.”

Ben stood, unmoving, his gaze shifting from Simon to the patient. He approached Mr. Fremont, and a low groan escaped the man’s lips. He halted, running a hand through his unruly curls. “I, uh—”

Tommy Weston arrived with two wooden planks. “Will this work?”

“What do you think, Dr. Ewing?” Rebecca glanced at Ben. “Do these splints meet your approval?”

Tommy noticed Ben for the first time and whistled low. “Dr.

Ewing? I hardly recognized you with all that dust and road on you.”

Ben offered a barely perceptible nod, the only response as though some invisible force weighed on him. Rebecca pressed her lips together as she accepted the boards from Tommy and placed them beside Mr. Fremont.

“You okay, Miss Hogue?” Tommy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Someone serve you vinegar pie?”

“I’ll be fine, Tommy.” She squeezed his shoulder. She hadn’t expected to see Ben again. Not like this. Not when she was already stretched thin.

“Listen, Becks.” Simon stepped toward her. “Sam said the Drake boys caused this. Have you seen them since it happened?”

“I don’t know. We’ve been a little busy.” She glanced at Ben. “We could use some help.”

Ben stared at his shoes.

“We came as fast as we could.” Simon placed his hand on Ben’s shoulder. “And we’ll do what we can.”

We’ll do what we can. Why didn’t that work for her? How often did the town call upon her to do *more* than she had trained to do? Some days she wished she could simply be a boardinghouse proprietress instead of tending to the whole town.

Rebecca folded her arms. “Nicholas, are you okay with Tommy fetching a wagon from the livery? We must get Mr. Fremont home as soon as we tend his leg.”

“Fine. Off you go, kid.” Nicholas nodded.

Rebecca turned to Ben. “Examine him or set his leg.” She held eye contact for a moment until he glanced away. “Nicholas has other work to do.”

Mr. Fremont’s eyes fluttered open. “Miss Hogue?”

Rebecca returned to her position kneeling beside the man, her voice calm against the *thump-thump-thump* in her chest. Perhaps he wouldn’t notice her uncertainty.

Fireflies in Sacred Shadows

“Mr. Fremont, it’s your lucky day.” She cut her eyes toward Ben. “You’re in good hands. Dr. Ewing is here to treat you. You’re his first patient since returning.”

“No.” Mr. Fremont’s voice croaked. “I trust you, Miss Hogue.”

Rebecca raised an eyebrow at Ben, who remained silent.

“You should trust Dr. Ewing.” She gave him an encouraging smile, rubbing his arm. “He has much more experience than I do.”

“Rebecca—”

She shot Ben a glare. How could he address her so casually after all this time, especially when he’d failed to tell her of his return?

Ben cleared his throat. “Miss Hogue, patients respond best to treatment when there’s trust.”

Trust. *Humph*. Heat crept up her neck. Why didn’t he take charge of the patient? He knew she was underqualified? She nibbled her lower lip.

“Rebecca.” Nicholas’s deep voice refocused her. “I’d like to get back to my saddles. Mr. Fremont trusts *you*. I trust you. Let’s get to it.”

Shifting to get a better grip on the injured limb, she set her chin and squared her shoulders. She needed to execute a single, swift motion. It was a challenging task with her slight stature, tending to such a sturdy man. Taking a deep breath, she whispered a quick prayer.

Rebecca nodded at Nicholas, who pulled the fabric-wrapped hook from his pocket. She locked eyes with Mr. Fremont, maintaining her steady gaze. “This will be swift but painful. No way around it. Take a deep breath and bite the hook.”

Mr. Fremont took the hook as Nicholas steadied him. His knuckles whitened as he gripped Simon’s and Ben’s hands. He nodded to Rebecca, inhaled deeply, and pressed his eyes shut.

A swift tug scraped bone against bone. Mr. Fremont released

a guttural moan. Rebecca's breath caught at the faint vibration. The bone wasn't aligned completely. She swallowed hard. He had trusted her, and she had fallen short.

"Mr. Fremont, it's not quite right. It needs another adjustment. Do you need a moment?"

The pleading in his soft gray eyes tugged at her heart. "Go ahead."

Rebecca exhaled. With a second, successful adjustment, the bone aligned, and Mr. Fremont's hands relaxed. His head rolled to the side. He went silent.

Rebecca sighed with relief. "Mr. Fremont?"

Ben placed two fingers on the patient's neck. "Pulse is strong. He likely passed out from pain and shock. You did well."

"A better job would have been setting it in one motion instead of two." She picked up the wood scraps.

"Setting a break like this isn't easy." Ben rubbed his hands together. "You did great."

Rebecca arranged the wood around Mr. Fremont's leg. She extended her hand to Ben. "Your belt."

Ben raised his eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

"You act as if you've never done this before." She sighed. "Your belt, so I can secure the boards."

"Aw, Rebecca, don't be like that." Nicholas chuckled, rummaging through his pouch. "I have leather scraps and buckles right here."

"I can always rely on you, Nicholas." She took a long piece of leather. "Can we cut this?"

"I don't have a knife with me." Nicholas rested his hands on his knees.

Simon withdrew a knife from the back of his waistband. "Hand it over."

"My goodness, Simon." Rebecca leaned back. "It's practically a sword."

Fireflies in Sacred Shadows

“Nah. Just a little Arkansas toothpick.” He grinned, cutting the leather.

Tommy arrived with the buckboard, stopping near the intersection. Nicholas waved at him. “Should be a canvas litter in the back. Bring it over.”

“Before we move him, Dr. Ewing, how’s his breathing?” Rebecca positioned the boards on either side of Mr. Fremont’s leg.

“Seems fine.”

Rebecca tilted her head. *Seems fine*. She pulled a pocket watch from her basket, dislodging the spyglass. It tumbled out with a clink and rolled across the ground.

Ben picked it up. “What’s this?”

“Nothing.” Rebecca’s pulse quickened. The spyglass in his hands was worse than Allie or Eliza Dawn getting attached to it. She swapped it for the pocket watch, quickly hiding it under the fabric. Eliza Dawn’s reminder about items not staying put came to mind. “Check his breathing. I want to know his respirations before we load him.”

Ben flicked open the timepiece, counting breaths. “Have you been to Indian Territory? Have you ventured so far west to help patients?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why the spyglass?”

“It’s from the lost and found.”

“So you’re searching for the owner?”

“No.” Rebecca fastened the first strap. “Respirations?”

“Normal.” Ben snapped the watch closed and handed it back. “Why do you have it?”

“Long story.” Rebecca sighed. “Short version, Edie.”

Ben laughed softly, a smile lighting his face. “Edie. My goodness, she must be half-grown by now. I doubt she’ll remember me.”

“Not likely.” Rebecca finished splinting Mr. Fremont’s leg. “She was barely three when you left.”

Ben grimaced.

Had she been overly harsh? Perhaps she ought to soften her approach, select her words more thoughtfully. She sighed, more exasperated with herself than with him. Hadn’t she forgiven him? Hadn’t she laid this at the Lord’s feet? Or had she only said the words?

“How old is she now? Seven? Eight?” Ben rubbed the back of his neck.

“She turned eight a few months ago.” Rebecca stood, dusting off her skirt. “Let’s focus on the task at hand.”

She pressed her eyes shut. After a moment, she fixed her gaze on Ben. “I apologize. I’ve been short with you, perhaps unfairly so.”

“No.” His gaze stayed on his shoes. “No less than I deserve.”

“Nicholas, let’s take Mr. Fremont home.” She stepped aside as Simon and Nicholas loaded the patient into the wagon.

“I’ll ride the mare for him.” Tommy approached Mr. Fremont’s horse with a gentle shushing. “She’s a fine horse, just got spooked.”

Rebecca faced Simon. “I imagine you’d rather walk home, Simon, since it’s not far.” Then she turned to Ben. “We can save some wear on your shoes. Where are you staying?”

“Justin didn’t tell you?” Ben rubbed the back of his neck. “He settled me in my old room at Hogue House.”