

## Chapter Two

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Rebecca headed home, thumbing through her journal as she strolled up Main Street. Slightly larger than her hand, it fit easily into the pocket beneath her skirt. It had been her constant companion since Eliza Dawn gifted it to her last Christmas. She paused at the final few pages, running her fingers over the fishhooks anchored there. How long had it been since her last peaceful afternoon at Lee Creek? Too long. Her soul, like a parched field, ached for stillness.

“Been to the creek lately?” Allie smiled knowingly as she fell into step beside her.

“Balancing my family's needs and those of the boarders leaves little time for myself.” Rebecca closed the journal, gliding her thumb across its soft leather cover before pressing it to her chest. Its worn pages offered a quiet place to ease her burdens, such a contrast to the weighty basket thumping at her elbow, a constant reminder of mounting responsibilities.

“I know how it is.” Allie dabbed her forehead with a handkerchief. “Levi encouraged me to relax, but I had to check on the little ones before returning for the sleepover this evening at the parsonage.”

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“I appreciated his lending us the bell.”

Allie giggled. “It’s the only way to get the sewing circle’s attention when they invite him. They find smithing projects for him, but when he arrives, they’re all a-twitter, showing off their handiwork. He won them over when he filled in for me during a Christmas quilting project years ago.”

“You and Levi have found a rhythm together.”

“It’s tricky, but we make time.” Allie pointed to her uncle’s store up the street. “My uncle keeps the children so we can steal a few hours for ourselves. It’s a choice, intentional time together and intentional time to ourselves.”

“I’ve half a mind to go to the creek right now.” Rebecca smiled past her heavy heart. “But with Pa and Justin leaving for Missouri tomorrow, there’s too much to prepare.”

A wagon passed, stirring dust and a sharp whiff of manure. Rebecca wrinkled her nose and fanned the air with her journal. Digging in her basket for a handkerchief, her fingers brushed the smooth brass of the spyglass. A sudden jerk brought it to the surface, and she discreetly tucked it out of sight before Allie noticed.

“When I finish helping Pa, I’ll prepare meals and tend to the few boarders we have left.” Rebecca squinted against the sun.

“I hate you have to miss the sleepover.”

“Me too.” A twinge of regret. “But at least I’ll have a bedroom to myself tonight.”

“And a peacefully empty room next to yours.” Allie winked. “That’s rare in a house usually full to the rafters.”

“Until recently.” Rebecca dropped her journal into the basket, which landed awkwardly against the spyglass. “We’re losing boarders left and right. The baker added rooms above his shop. Captain Cobb overnights on the steamboat to supervise repairs. Pastor Turner now lives at the parsonage. As for Dr. Ewing.” She hesitated. “He’s simply a fading memory.”

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“Is he?”

Rebecca tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I need to find new boarders soon.”

“Surely business will pick up when the railroad comes.”

“It could be years before it arrives here.” A wave of relief brushed her at the change of subject. “I don’t know what we’ll do if things don’t turn around soon.”

“Could your family lose the house?”

“I don’t believe so. We own the property outright, but feeding and clothing a family of nine is no small feat. And Cordelia has convinced Pa she should attend teacher college in the East.” Rebecca sighed.

“Miss Hogue, may I have a moment?”

Rebecca and Allie turned as a short, stout man approached. His peppered hair, square jawline, and immaculate dark gray suit exuded a stony impression, though his accent lent a disarming charm.

“Yes?” Rebecca raised an eyebrow.

“Forgive the intrusion.” He brushed the dust from his sleeve with a sharp flick. “I’m Ambrose Baas, the new hotel proprietor. I have a business proposal. I’m busy today, but we should talk tomorrow. I’ll find you.”

With a tip of his hat, he turned and disappeared down the street.

“Where did he come from?” Rebecca scanned the street. “Did he overhear us?”

“He seemed to appear from nowhere.” Allie tilted her head. “Coincidence? Or providence?”

“He didn’t allow me to tell him to speak to Pa instead.” Rebecca jostled her basket, causing the spyglass to peek out. Masking a reaction, she nudged it deeper under her sewing supplies from the tea. “Something is unsettling about him.”

“Strange encounter, that’s for sure.” Allie glanced at

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Rebecca's basket. "What an interesting turn of events, Edie gifting the little telescope to Ivajohn."

"I thought it might be Pa's." Rebecca grimaced. "But it wasn't. I almost hoped it was."

Allie's eyes twinkled. "It came from the lost and found then?"

"Edie wouldn't say." Rebecca stopped. "It doesn't matter how she came by it because it's not hers to give and there must be consequences for taking it." She pressed her hand to her chest, soothing the dull ache. "It's times like this I would give anything to have Mama here. Justin and I used to talk things through. We helped each other recognize when one of us was being too hard on the younger siblings. But now he's busy with married life and starting his ranch."

"What about Cordelia and Simon?" Allie rubbed her shoulder. "They're old enough to help now."

"Cordelia is so self-involved. It's all I can do to get her to help with household chores, much less help manage a family. She fancies she'll marry well and be free of such things. And Simon—" She stared into the distance. "Well, it seems like just yesterday we caught him skipping school. I suppose I'm not used to the idea of him being grown yet."

"It's no secret he wants to be a lawman. He's grown to be a fine young man." Allie arched her eyebrows. "Responsible. Dependable. Sensible. You know he would help. All you need to do is ask."

"I don't know if I can step out of my role of protective older sister."

"You should try." Allie squeezed her shoulder. A sly grin emerged. "Now, what about this telescope?"

"I'd rather not discuss it." Rebecca continued up Main Street. "I don't have time for stray objects stirring up trouble. I'll put it in the lost and found when I get home." She rubbed

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her forehead. "I need a quiet afternoon at the creek. Far from problems, peculiar men, and spyglasses."

Allie snickered. "Maybe I'll swing by and brew you a pot of tea."

Before Rebecca could answer, a shout pierced the morning air.

"Miss Hogue! Miss Hogue!"

Seventeen-year-old Tommy Weston raced toward them, kicking up dust, panic etched across his face.

"Careful." Rebecca steadied herself as he grabbed her forearms. "You nearly toppled me."

"Yes, ma'am." Tommy panted. "Someone's been terrible hurt at the top of Main Street. Come quick."

Without waiting for permission, he seized her hand, almost pulling her off her feet. Rebecca clutched her skirts, heart pounding.

Allie jogged a few steps behind. "Rebecca, what should I do?"

"I don't know," Rebecca shouted as Allie drifted farther away. "Find Nicholas and send him this way."

Sam Mooney flung open the door of the mercantile, hurrying to Allie's side. "What's happening?"

"Trouble with those Drake boys." Tommy tugged Rebecca.

"I'll find Simon." Mr. Mooney waved, rushing in one direction while Allie went the other way.

Tommy slowed, and Rebecca tried to catch her breath. She barely managed to inhale when he tossed her over his shoulder like a hay bale. An angular shoulder jabbed her midsection with each galloping step, forcing air from her lungs.

"Tommy Weston!" The syllables bounced from her throat as her basket swung haphazardly. "Put me down this instant."

"No time, Miss Hogue. It's bad."

As Tommy shouldered his way through the gathered crowd,

Rebecca tried to make sense of her upside-down view of the world. She offered a faint smile and a diplomatic, "Pardon me. Excuse us. We're here to help," as they jostled a few bystanders.

Finally, Tommy planted her next to a motionless figure in the street and Rebecca dropped to her knees beside the unconscious man, gently stroking his well-whiskered cheek. Placing two fingers on the man's neck, she checked for a pulse. Elevated. She nudged his shoulder. "Mr. Fremont, can you hear me?"

A torn left pant leg revealed a disturbing injury, and she fought a wave of nausea. "Tommy, did you see what happened? Was he knocked out right away?"

"I saw the whole thing." Tommy wrung his hands. "The Drake twins tore through town on their little green-broke horse, spooking Mr. Fremont's mare, and she kicked. He was talking before I ran for you. I cut his pant leg."

Rebecca checked Mr. Fremont's head for injuries. "Did he hit his head when he fell?"

"No, ma'am. His elbows hit first. He passed out when I opened his pant leg, and he saw his injury."

"Nicholas." She searched the crowd. "Anyone see Nicholas Franks?"

No response.

"Tommy, see if you can spot him. Allie must have found him by now." She scanned the crowd again and pointed to two young boys. "Go get the barber."

The boys ran off. A man pointed toward Cane Hill. "Boys, not the barber. Get the doctor."

"The barber." Rebecca shook her head. "The doctors are out of town."

But the boys were already gone. Hopefully, Nicholas would be help enough. She wiped her brow before examining Mr. Fremont further.

Tommy and Nicholas appeared, maneuvering through the

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crowd. Nicholas muscled past a few stubborn onlookers with Tommy pressing close at his back.

“Scram, or you’ll have to deal with me.” Nicholas’s words took immediate effect, prompting a faint smile from Rebecca. He knelt beside her. “Someone causing trouble, Rebecca?”

“No. I need a strong pair of hands to assist.” She patted Nicholas’s broad shoulder before turning to Tommy. “I’ll need splints for this leg. Can you find some wood planks?”

Tommy was already in motion.

“Let’s make this quick.” Nicholas rubbed his hands. “I’ve got saddles to make. It’d be nice if doctors would stop riding outta this town.”

“I agree.” Rebecca smiled at his usual impatience. Nicholas had always been there when she needed to treat injuries or illnesses in Ben Ewing’s absence. Sometimes, she summoned the well-built saddler, while other times, he simply appeared.

“What do you want me to do?” Nicholas spread his hands.

She handed him a handkerchief-wrapped dogwood crochet hook. When he had gifted it to her, she hadn’t known it would help mend limbs as well as socks. “Keep this in your shirt pocket. Hold him steady while I set the leg. If he wakes, he may bite the hook. Please keep it wrapped. I prefer no teeth marks on my new crochet hook.”

“Not a mark.” Nicholas flashed a toothy grin. “Took me forever to carve those hooks.”

“I thought you’d ask Mr. Styles to make them since you’re so busy.” She appreciated Nicholas’s light, easy banter in these situations. It put her at ease, distracting her from the fact she had never apprenticed, much less attended medical school. Though he frequently pointed out anyone could claim to be a doctor, she refrained from using the title.

“I wanted to make something special for you. But don’t expect it every birthday.”

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“Miss Hogue! We’ve got the Doc!” Two boys skidded to a halt.

Doc? But how? Who?

She squinted into the sun. Her breath caught when she saw her brother, Simon, followed by the last person she ever expected to see again.

Ben Ewing.