

# SMALL TOWN SCANDAL



LORNA LOCKE



Published by Blushing Books  
An Imprint of  
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.  
A Virginia Corporation  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901

©2019  
All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The trademark Blushing Books is pending in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Lorna Locke  
Small Town Scandal

EBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-072-2  
v2

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

## CHAPTER 1



It didn't seem fair that an object as lovely as Aunt Tamsin's antique mirror would reflect such a terrible reality. Eliza turned her head this way and that, praying she was merely the victim of fickle lighting. With a heavy sigh, she resigned herself to the ugly truth. At the age of thirty, she, Eliza Quinlan, had sprouted her first silver hair. Intolerable.

"Is this the wage of sin?" Eliza wondered aloud to the empty parlor. The furnishings, usually so tasteful and pleasing to her eyes, suddenly took on a funerary aspect, dark and heavy draperies, dark upholstery, dark rugs and gloomy wallpaper. How could Aunt Tamsin stand it? How had Eliza never noticed how oppressive the parlor could be? Only thirty years old, with a gray hair. Had there been anyone around to appreciate the effort, Eliza might have swooned.

Swooning without an audience might not be worth the effort, but lying down held a certain appeal. Eliza's own room was furnished more airily than the parlor, and a ray of afternoon sunshine lent the space a golden glow thoroughly at odds with Eliza's sour mood. She threw herself across the bed and sighed again. Eliza Quinlan was developing a rich vocabulary of sighs.

Eliza closed her eyes, but couldn't close her mind to the

phantom voice of her own mother, hundreds of miles away. The clucking tongue, the Hibernian lilt, the judgment. “Bah! And what does herself have to sigh over? Mattress too soft, is it giving Her Royal Highness a backache? Or is the hard labor of reading aloud from *Colliers* to her aged aunt making Miss Quinlan hoarse? Now that would be a pity, surely, if the world were to miss out on the Queen of Chicago’s every passing thought.” Her mother never, of course, said exactly those words in precisely that order, but it was all too easy to imagine. Even across hundreds, no, thousands, *two* thousand miles, Mary Quinlan’s contempt, and her cruelly musical voice, were the unpredictable and unwelcome companions of Eliza’s lonely hours.

The lingering echoes of Mary Quinlan’s disapproval was one of the reasons, Eliza reflected, that she so enthusiastically sought out masculine company: sporting with a man quieted her mother’s voice in her head. Even spending time with dear, funny Aunt Tamsin was a respite from the specter of parental reproach. How Eliza resented her parents’ talent for dwelling in her head long after they banished her from Chicago! It was entirely unfair. She was deprived of the stimulation and high society of that bustling city on the lake, but without the consolation of freedom from her parents and their old-fashioned ideas and foolish attempts to keep her locked up like a future broodmare in a stable.

Eliza sighed, low and melodious, a sigh rich with longing for her home city, for the fashionable, sophisticated, sometimes knock-about, ever-busy, infinitely fascinating metropolis she loved so much her chest ached to think about it. But she wasn’t in Chicago, and she wouldn’t be allowed back as long as Mary and Martin Quinlan lived to lord their influence over their defiantly ruined, unmarriedable single daughter. “Thirty years old without an honorable suitor to speak of. A damned shame what this heathen country does to a spirited girl,” she could hear her father whuffle through his voluminous mustache. Eliza gritted her teeth. “I am not in Chicago. Mother and Father can’t say boo to me. I am not in Chicago.”

She was, in fact, in the tiny but striving town of Canaple in the young state of Washington, tucked way up in the extreme northwestern corner of the northwesternmost American state. Cast into exile under the pretense of serving as a companion to elderly Aunt Tamsin, Eliza had now been trapped in this perplexingly tiny town for... how long had it been? She blinked in the golden afternoon sunlight. "Christ and all His angels, I am getting old. I can't even remember how long I've been in Canaple!" It had been about two years.

Eliza was saved from further dark reflections by the sound of the front door. From downstairs, Tamsin caroled a greeting. "Eliza! Eliza, dear, are you home?"

Eliza sprang from bed and scampered to the top of the stairs. "I am, Auntie. I was just lying down with a headache, but I feel better now." Eliza descended the stairs, mindful as always of her posture and comportment. Just because she lived the semi-secret life of a hussy didn't mean Eliza wasn't invested in maintaining the dignity of her personal appearance—especially important, she reflected sourly, now that she was a hag of thirty with a gray hair. Scampering, bounding, and slouching might occasionally be forgivable in lithe, pretty young girls. But a thirty-year-old woman, standing almost nine inches over five feet, with a broad bosom and wide womanly hips? She owed it to herself to move as sedately and gracefully as possible, even when the only audience was Aunt Tamsin.

The Aunt Tamsin who was at that moment freeing herself of her bonnet and shawl. Her wrinkled face wore its characteristic half-smile, as if Tamsin Travers just couldn't contain her perpetual amusement at the folly of man. Gray curls peeped out from under her cap, and it was easy to picture Tamsin as the sly but good-natured little maiden she must have been forty summers ago. Eliza smiled and greeted her aunt with a hug.

"Oh!" Tamsin giggled. "And good afternoon to you too, miss. And what have you been up to?"

"Feeling sorry for myself, mostly."

“You do live a hard life, it’s true,” Tamsin replied gravely, but with a wink. “What unspeakable burden has fate placed on your shoulders today, beloved niece?” She patted Eliza on the shoulder and bustled past her to the family sitting room. Eliza glided behind her.

“Only the most dreadful thing imaginable, I found my first gray hair.”

Tamsin cackled affectionately. “Poor pet! Hard to learn that time neglects none of us, hmm?”

“It’s a tragedy.” Eliza’s mood was improving already, just having Aunt Tamsin home. “Now tell me your news, Auntie. What’s the gossip in town?”

“Oh, well,” said Tamsin thoughtfully, “Mrs. Youngs, you know, the lawyer Xavier Youngs’ wife, is tremendously pleased with herself.”

“And why is that?” Eliza asked, toying with the tassel on one of the plump pillows crowded on the davenport.

“She beat out Mrs. Marshall for chair of the Decennial Committee, and Mrs. Marshall pulled quite the sour face when she found out. Or so I heard from Mrs. Henry.”

“Tempest a-brewing, eh?”

“In the Canaple teacup? Yes, always. Oh, and there is a bit of real news.”

Aunt and niece sat on the luxuriously overstuffed davenport, decorative pillows closing in on them. The atmosphere was almost-but-not-quite oppressive in its coziness. Aunt Tamsin patted Eliza’s knee and continued, “The Library Committee was just notified that they won the grant!”

Eliza had to think for a moment. “The Carnegie Grant?”

“The very same.” Aunt Tamsin sighed contentedly and settled against her mound of pillows, gnarled hands folded neatly in her lap. “It really is very exciting.”

Mr. Andrew Carnegie, the great industrialist, had been funding small-town libraries for well over a decade now. It was no small feat to provide the documentation that a town desiring a Carnegie

library was worthy of and ready for the honor and responsibility. Eliza reminded herself not to be amused; Canaple wasn't Chicago and it was a little boorish to be amused by the earnestness with which her aunt's neighbors pursued the elusive dream—a library of their very own! A memory surfaced. On the first day of a new year, when Eliza was only three years old, her father had taken her to witness the official opening of the Chicago Public Library, a gift from England after the devastation of the great Chicago Fire several years before. Now *that* was an edifice! The entire present-day population of Canaple could probably fit snugly in its vestibule.

"What's wrong, dear?" Aunt Tamsin asked.

Eliza realized she'd been caught frowning. "Just pining for the majesty of the Chicago Public Library, Auntie," she replied breezily. It wouldn't do for Tamsin to suspect her niece might really be pained to remember her hometown. Better to say it airily, self-deprecatingly.

But Tamsin understood. "I hope you're not too unhappy in our little village, dear heart."

"No, Auntie," Eliza replied honestly. Most of the time she wasn't unhappy. Maybe a little bored. Maybe she passed long stretches of time more or less numb, feeling neither sad nor happy. But Canaple, for all its aggressive quaintness, was situated on a singularly beautiful stretch of land. Chicago boasted modern skyscrapers and Lake Michigan, but from downtown Canaple one caught sight of blue-gray mountains, peaks austere white with snow no matter the season, the backdrop to the steely mystery of Puget's Sound. The stunning fjord cut into western Washington State and looked like the setting for a fairy story.

"I hope not," Tamsin said sweetly. Such a good old lady! Tamsin continued, "The best part of the Library Committee receiving the good news about their grant?"

"Is?"

Tamsin chuckled, cheeks pink with mirth. "Now Wallace B. Walpole can breathe a sigh of relief. Mr. Walpole spent *so* much of the last few months 'negotiating', begging is more like it, with some

fancy Canadian architect he was determined to hire to design the library. Well, a few days ago I guess this fellow agreed and signed the contract and is *en route* to Canaple! Think of the egg on Mr. Wallace B. Walpole's face if the grant had fallen through after he'd finally succeeded in seducing his architect."

"Mercy! I suppose it's for the best, but I won't pretend I wouldn't treasure the spectacle of Mr. Walpole receiving bad news. How red his face would glow."

Tamsin giggled. "Oh, I know! I know. We'll have to content ourselves with wild imaginings, though, since Wallace got his architect *and* the committee won their grant. It really will be a boon to our little town."

"Yes, it will. And now I feel shabby for mocking Mr. Walpole. He's a good man, if a little pompous."

Aunt Tamsin agreed and they absolved each other of the sin of making fun of the prominent Canaple citizen. They chatted amiably awhile longer, and after Aunt Tamsin retired for her afternoon nap the rest of the day passed with little to complain about but even less to enjoy.