



A Redemption Mountain Christmas (Redemption Mountain #27)

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Category: Romance

Description: A Clean and Wholesome Enemies to Lovers Historical Western Romance

She's an ambitious woman doctor new to the frontier.

He's a rugged ranch hand with no time for a greenhorn.

It's going to be a Christmas to remember!

Spencer Haglund is comfortable with his station in life. A ranch hand at Redemption's Edge Ranch, he's worked his way up the ranks to be one of their top cowboys. Setting a little money aside each month, he hopes to buy his own place one day. For now, his life is simple and uncomplicated. Until his path crosses with a woman stranded in Splendor. A woman whose bearing and demeanor signal nothing but trouble.

Eliza Gladstone fought disdain and bias during medical school and afterward while practicing in New York. Believing acceptance might be found out west, she sets out with a destination in mind and little understanding of the frontier. Being stranded in a small frontier town isn't in her plan. Neither is coming across a stoic ranch hand who takes an instant dislike to her.

Receiving an invitation to visit the largest ranch in western Montana, she begins to see the stark differences between her life and the typical day breaking horses in the rugged frontier winter. However, another encounter with the arrogant ranch hand further solidifies her original decision to continue on to San Francisco when the weather clears.

A series of threats to the ranch and the town throw Spencer and Eliza together, even as they try to put distance between them. When a wagon train, slowed by a snowstorm, is attacked, Eliza joins the town doctors to help those wounded, cracking Spencer's rigid dislike of her.

As Christmas approaches and their connection grows, Eliza finds

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Redemption's Edge Ranch

Spencer dug his heels into Cicero's flanks, urging the bay gelding faster through the deep snow. A trio of wolves stalked toward a stray calf not far from a small herd. As he raised his rifle, the wolves paused, hackles raised as they sized up this new threat.

With a fierce yell, he fired a shot into the air above the wolves. The pack scattered, two of the lean gray beasts loping away with their tails tucked. Fearless, the largest wolf stood its ground, icy blue eyes meeting Spencer's gaze in a challenge.

He chambered another round, ready to fire if needed.

The wolf was clever, keeping the bawling calf between them.

As he edged Cicero closer, the other two wolves circled back, teeth bared in snarls.

Spencer kept his rifle trained on the defiant alpha, though his mount skittered nervously beneath him.

He had to end this standoff soon or risk losing the calf.

With a steady hand and quick reflexes honed by years on the ranch, he fired off three shots in rapid succession.

The shots sent the circling wolves fleeing once more.

He shot once more, the bullet whizzing past the alpha's head, ruffling his scruff.

With an indignant yelp, the wolf turned and loped away, admitting defeat.

Letting out a shaky breath, he nudged Cicero toward the calf, speaking soothing words to calm the bawling creature. He was reloading his rifle when the pounding of hooves announced another rider. Turning, he saw Tom Bellamy, a fellow ranch hand, ride toward him.

“Heard some shots over this way,” Tom said, taking in the lingering gun smoke. “Wolves again?”

Spencer nodded. “Brazen attack in broad daylight. We’d best get this herd moving toward the ranch.”

With rifles at the ready, the two men drove the cattle onward, keeping a sharp watch for any flashes of gray or black amongst the prairie grasses.

Though the danger had passed, an uneasiness lingered in Spencer’s mind.

If the wolves were getting this bold already, the coming winter could only make their brash behavior worse.

Tom frowned. “The wolves are getting bolder with winter coming on. We’d best let Bull know right away.”

Spencer nodded, troubled by the encounter. They guided the last of the herd closer to the ranch as the morning sun rose in the sky. He swung down from Cicero’s back, his legs stiff after the long ride.

“Let’s go find Bull,” Tom said, heading toward the large barn. Spencer followed, ready to give their report.

They found the foreman talking to Dax Pelletier, the older of the two brothers who owned the ranch. Bull Mason straightened up as they approached, his face breaking into a smile beneath his stubbled beard.

“You boys are back early. Everything go all right with the herd?”

“Had a bit of trouble,” Spencer answered. He described the brazen wolf attack and how he’d managed to drive the predators off. “Tom and I drove the cattle closer to the ranch.”

Bull’s expression darkened. “Wolves getting so bold this early is mighty concerning. We’ll have to bring the rest of the herd closer in. We can’t risk losing any cattle this early in the season.”

He turned and bellowed toward a group of ranch hands heading to the bunkhouse for lunch. “Over here, boys.”

The men hustled over, curious. Bull explained about the wolves. “I want everyone aware of a pack of wolves hovering around here. From now on, we keep the herds in the valley pastures, no more far grazing. Make sure you go armed with a rifle and extra ammunition when you’re out with the cattle.”

The ranch hands nodded, grasping the seriousness of the situation.

“We’ll keep the cattle safe, Bull,” Billy Zales assured him.

One of the ranch’s best wranglers, he worked with the cattle in the winter months when most of the cowboys were let go.

It was common for ranchers to have cowboys who worked between March and October, and a group of permanent ranch hands.

Tom Bellamy was one of the newer, permanent hands.

Bull clasped Billy on the shoulder. “Go spread the word to the rest of the others. Eat your meal, then head out to bring the cattle this way.”

As they headed toward the new cookhouse, Bull caught up with Spencer.

“I need you to drive the wagon to town for supplies. Rachel will have a list for you. Most everything will come from the general store. Give Stan Petermann her list, and he’ll get it all together for you.

I’d like you to leave right after lunch so you get back before sundown. ”

After eating a quick meal, Spencer headed toward the far side of the barn where the supply wagon was kept. He hitched up the two strongest horses to the front of the wagon, tightening straps and buckling harnesses.

“All set for your supply run?” Rachel Pelletier, Dax’s wife, approached, holding a list of goods needed from the general store.

“Yes, ma’am,” Spencer replied, taking the list and giving it a quick scan. Ammunition, kerosene, flour, sugar, molasses, coffee... “A bit of everything.”

“I know. We’re trying to stock up for Christmas baking before Stan runs out of staples.”

He gave her a reassuring smile. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll get there and back before dark, with everything on the list.”

With a final check of the wagon, Spencer clambered up onto the bench, picked up and slapped the reins.

The wagon rumbled along the rutted, icy road leading away from the ranch, the two horses working in tandem as Spencer held the reins. He kept a steady pace, doing his best to avoid getting stuck in the frequent potholes.

As the ranch disappeared behind him, his thoughts turned to the wolf encounter earlier in the morning.

It troubled him how the wolves were getting bolder, venturing so close to the herd in broad daylight.

If they were already getting desperate for food, how would they be by the end of January?

He'd have to keep an eye out for any signs of the predators while out on the range.

A few miles later, the outskirts of Splendor came into view.

He guided the wagon past the schoolhouse, jail, and telegraph office, waving in greeting to the occasional local walking the boardwalk.

Approaching the general store, he stopped the wagon, eager to get the supplies and return to the ranch.

The general store bustled with activity when he stepped down from the wagon. Securing the horses, he pulled the supply list from a pocket and pushed through the doors. Stan looked up from behind the counter.

"Ah, Spencer. Here for the usual ranch order?"

He nodded, stepping forward. "Yes, sir, and anything you can spare ammunition-wise. We've got some aggressive wolves lurking about."

The shop owner's face grew serious as he listened to Spencer describe the wolf threat. "I'll make sure you get what you need. Can't be too careful with those beasts roaming so near."

Spencer spent some time going through the order with Stan before heading outside. He walked a few doors down to the barber shop, waiting a few minutes until the owner finished with a man Spencer recognized from the bank.

When he was ushered into a chair, his thoughts strayed back to the ranch.

Other than working ten or more hours a day, he led a solitary life.

He ate, worked, and read whatever he could get his hands on, rarely riding into town with other ranch hands when Saturday night came around.

It was a life he'd grown accustomed to, the same as several others at Redemption's Edge.

Paying for the trim, he walked back to the general store, checked off each item on the list, and paid Stan.

After loading the supplies, he stilled as the sound of the approaching stagecoach caught his attention. Glancing down the street, he spotted it approaching the combination telegraph, post office, and stage office.

The coach slowed to a stop in front of the station. The door swung open, and a lone woman stepped out. Spencer was struck by the woman's bearing. Head high, her back rigid, she wore a stylish blue traveling dress. Her neatly pinned hair marked her as someone not accustomed to the rugged frontier.

The woman's voice rang out sharply as she berated the station manager for the delay

in her journey. He watched in fascination as she gestured emphatically, leaving poor Bernie Griggs cowed. Though petite, her presence dominated her surroundings.

With a dismissive wave of her hand, the woman strode into the station house, Bernie scrambling to grab her bags. Spencer found himself wondering what would bring such a refined lady all the way out to remote Splendor.

Tearing his gaze away, he walked around the wagon.

He secured the last of the supplies in the back of the wagon, making sure everything was properly protected from the elements.

Though his mind kept drifting back to the unusual visitor, he focused on the task at hand.

There would be time for speculation later.

Climbing up onto the driver's bench, Spencer gathered the reins. The horses shifted impatiently, ready to be off. With a slap of the reins, he urged them forward into an easy walk. The wagon wheels creaked and groaned as they turned.

Casting one last look back at the station, he felt his curiosity stir again. What was the woman's story? Shaking his head, he turned his gaze to the road ahead, a wry grin tipping up the corners of his mouth. The visitor added a bit of mystery to a routine journey to town.

As Splendor receded behind him, Spencer occupied his mind contemplating the lone woman's presence. Perhaps she was visiting family for the holidays. Or perhaps she was an adventurous soul exploring the frontier.

With a flick of the reins, he picked up his pace, the horses responding eagerly. Their

rhythmic hoofbeats marked the miles back to the ranch.

Guiding the wagon away from Splendor, he studied the sky ahead. He studied the horizon, noting the dark clouds gathering. He decided the time had come to pick up the pace before the weather turned.

An icy wind struck him in the face as the horses trotted briskly along. In the distance, he spotted something moving through the tall grass just off the road. Drawing the wagon to a halt, Spencer squinted against the fading light.

There, loping along, was a lone gray wolf. It stopped and turned to stare at Spencer with unsettling yellow eyes. He tensed, hand drifting toward his rifle as he met the wolf's challenging gaze. A long moment passed as man and beast sized one another up.

While he continued to watch the wolf, an ear-splitting crack of thunder sounded. The wolf broke eye contact first, turning and disappearing into the swaying grass. Spencer let out a breath.

With a slap of the reins, he got the wagon moving again. He needed to tell the others. The ranch would have to be on high alert until the brazen predators were driven off for good. As the snow began to fall, Spencer hunched his shoulders against the freezing wind.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Doctor Eliza Gladstone stared out the large front window of the Eagle's Nest restaurant, watching the blizzard rage outside.

Snowflakes swirled wildly in the gusting wind, reducing visibility to mere feet.

Sighing, Eliza sipped her coffee, the hot liquid providing scant comfort against the icy chill seeping through the glass.

This infernal storm had stranded her here in the remote town of Splendor for two days. Each morning, she rose hopeful the snows had abated, only to find the skies still leaden with foreboding clouds.

As she picked at her breakfast, Eliza contemplated her predicament.

She'd planned to pass straight through Splendor on her journey west to San Francisco.

Now, it seemed she might be trapped here.

The delay irked her, but the isolation troubled her more.

Back east, in bustling New York, she'd always been surrounded by people.

On the frontier, the empty vastness often overwhelmed her.

What was she to do in this tiny town until the stagecoach resumed service? She had no friends here, no family. The locals seemed pleasant enough in their rustic way, but

they were simple folk, uneducated. They reminded her of characters from the dime novels she secretly enjoyed reading.

Eliza sighed again. The beauty of Splendor was losing its luster. She longed for someone to talk to, someone who could understand her sophisticated East Coast sensibilities. Sighing, she knew the chances were as remote as the prospect of escaping this snowbound purgatory.

Nick Barnett and his wife, Suzanne, entered the restaurant, noticing the lone woman sitting by herself. Her refined clothing and posture marked her as an outsider. Nick approached her table.

“Pardon me, ma’am. My wife and I couldn’t help noticing you’re dining alone. We’d be honored if you’d join us for breakfast.”

Eliza looked up, surprised by the invitation. The man had a somewhat sophisticated appearance, with a patch over his left eye, and his smile appeared genuine. Before she could respond, the cafe door opened again, admitting the sheriff, Gabe Evans, and his wife, Lena.

Gabe tipped his hat. “Morning, Nick. Mind if we pull up chairs at your table?”

Eliza hesitated, torn between her desire for company and her natural reserve. She looked at Nick. “You’re very kind, but I’d prefer to dine alone this morning.”

“We’re here if you change your mind,” Nick said. “We don’t stand on ceremony here in Splendor. Any newcomer is always welcome at our table.”

Eliza found herself drawn to the large window to observe the townsfolk passing by outside. Men tipped their hats to the ladies, who gathered in clusters to exchange news. Even in the storm, they stopped to talk to each other and exchange news.

It was all so different from the streets of New York, with their hurried crowds and strict social structure. Here, in this rugged frontier town, a sense of community prevailed. Status didn't seem to dictate one's worth. Eliza found it both puzzling and intriguing.

Part of her yearned to stay here and learn more about these gracious people. The other part still felt the pull westward to the opportunities awaiting in San Francisco.

Eliza sighed, her breath fogging the chilled windowpane. The snow continued to fall steadily outside, erasing the familiar shapes of the town. Perhaps it was intentionally hiding Splendor from view, forcing her to pause her headlong rush to the future.

She knew she couldn't continue her travels until the passes cleared in spring. So, she was trapped here, at least for now. Eliza wondered if she was trapped by the weather or by the faint stirrings of hope this town had rekindled in her heart.

“More coffee?”

Eliza started at Nick's voice behind her. She turned to see her new companions watching her with friendly concern. Their open faces showed no judgment, only a wish to make her feel welcomed.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Eliza managed a smile. “Yes, thank you. That would be lovely.”

After finishing her breakfast, Eliza returned to her room upstairs. She stood at the window, staring out at the back alley and the snow steadily falling beyond. Everything was muffled and softened by the blanket of white.

She'd hoped to occupy her time with a book, but found she couldn't focus on the words. Her mind kept returning to the unexpected encounter with the two couples

downstairs. Their friendliness was so different from the polite distance of New York society.

With a sigh, Eliza set her book aside. She'd always prided herself on being a rational person, not one to make decisions based on emotions or whims. The cold pragmatism that served her so well in the city now felt more like a prison.

Perhaps it was time to take a chance. She would return to the restaurant. If they were still there, she would accept their offer to join them. It was time to embrace this unexpected new beginning.

After gathering her resolve, Eliza made her way back downstairs to the restaurant. Relief washed over her when she spotted the two couples, still chatting over steaming mugs of coffee.

Despite her lingering reservations, Eliza found herself softening.

It had been too long since she had enjoyed easy conversation.

And she had to admit, her curiosity was piqued by these pleasant Westerners.

She almost turned around when she saw a third couple had joined them.

Gabe, Nick, and a third gentleman stood at her approach.

"Is the invitation to join you still open?"

"Most certainly," Nick answered, already moving to pull out a chair.

"Well, if you're certain I won't be a bother, I would be delighted to join you."

After introductions, she sat down, feeling the gloom and heavy mantle of loneliness of the past week lifting. The third couple turned out to be Dax and Rachel Pelletier.

Settling into her chair, Gabe signaled the waitress for another coffee. Eliza took a deep breath, ready to embrace whatever surprises this town and its people had in store for her.

“We’re so pleased you came back, Doctor Gladstone,” Lena said.

Eliza smiled. “Thank you. So am I.”

The conversation resumed, with Eliza hesitant to open up too much about herself. The genuine interest and kindness of her new acquaintances soon put her at ease.

“What brought you out west, Doctor?” Dax asked.

“Please call me Eliza,” she insisted. “I came in on the stagecoach. The storm has delayed my travel to California.”

“Well, the St. James Hotel is a wonderful place to be stranded,” Rachel said.

Eliza nodded. “Yes. It is more elegant than I’d anticipated. My understanding of the frontier included visions of dilapidated buildings, poor food, and primitive conditions. Splendor is not what I expected.”

Gabe chuckled. “We may be somewhat isolated, but we take care of our own. I moved here from New York after the war. Lena came from New Orleans. Splendor offered us, and many other residents, a fresh start.”

Lena nodded, touching Gabe’s hand. “We met and were married here.”

As the conversation went on, Eliza found herself captivated by her new acquaintances.

Strong, resilient, and full of humor and wisdom, they embodied the best of this little town.

She felt connected to people on a deeper level than she'd found possible during her many years of education or her brief medical practice in St. Louis.

To her surprise, Eliza realized she hadn't enjoyed the company of others since before entering university.

Their dedication to community service inspired her, and their easy warmth made her feel welcomed. She found herself wondering if all the people in Splendor were so open.

Eliza enjoyed the growing sense of connection as she conversed with Nick, Suzanne, Gabe, and Lena over coffee. Though they came from different backgrounds, she found common ground with the group. Their lively discussion brought her out of her shell.

Eliza laughed at Nick's humorous anecdotes, Gabe's dry wit, and Dax's stories about his ranch. Listening to their various stories, she admired the women's resilience living in a remote frontier town.

St. Louis had the railroad to deliver supplies, including food, clothing, and medical supplies. As far as she knew, Splendor only had the stage, which couldn't bring large stores of meat, vegetables, and staples. How did they obtain such essentials?

Watching the snow continue to fall, Eliza took in the elegant restaurant and the smiles around the table.

Though the storm had stalled her travels, it had brought an unexpected gift—a better understanding of the type of people who ventured away from their familiar lives to begin again in an unfamiliar land.

Eliza lingered at the table, reluctant to end the interesting conversation. There was still so much more she wanted to learn about her new acquaintances and their charming town.

“We should get going, Lena. I need to check back at the jail.” Gabe stood, nodding at the others. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Eliza.”

“The pleasure was mine.” She prepared to leave when the sound of approaching boots with spurs caught her attention.

She turned to see a towering figure in a sheepskin coat walk toward them. Eliza didn’t recognize the man’s grim visage as one of the few people she’d met since being stranded in Splendor.

Gabe held out his hand. “Lucien Hunt. I didn’t know you’d returned.”

Grasping the outstretched hand, he didn’t return Gabe’s grin. “Just rode in with a group of cowboys from Big Pine. With the storm, we darn near didn’t make it. The weather is a wretched beast.”

Dax chuckled at the wording. “Why didn’t you wait until the storm passed?”

Lucien reached into a pocket, pulling out a wanted poster. He handed it to Gabe. “You’ve probably seen this.”

Looking it over, Gabe’s mouth twisted in disgust before he handed the paper to Nick. “The Tom Wolf gang. They’re supposed to be a bad bunch.”

“They aren’t just bad,” Lucien said. “I’ve seen some real bad characters. Wolf’s gang is a breed of outlaws equal to Quantrill’s Raiders or Bill Anderson’s bunch.”

“Why are you showing me this?” Gabe asked.

“Sheriff Parker Sterling asked me to deliver this and tell you to be on the lookout for them.”

“Why didn’t Sterling send me a telegram?”

“You don’t know?” Lucian asked.

“Know what?”

“The storm has taken down the telegraph lines between Big Pine and Splendor.”

A hush fell over the group before Nick spoke. “Bernie Griggs hasn’t said anything.”

“I doubt he knows about it unless someone has tried to send a telegram from here.”

“Best we get moving,” Gabe muttered. “Come on, Lena. I need to let my deputies know to be on alert.”

“I’ll talk to Horace,” Nick offered, mentioning the bank president, Horace Clausen.

Nick stood, holding out his hand to Suzanne. “Eliza, may I escort you to the stairs?”

Eliza was still reeling from the news brought by Lucien Hunt. “Thank you, but I’ll finish my coffee before returning to my room.”

She watched as the three couples, plus Lucien Hunt, left the dining room, feeling the

familiar sense of isolation.

Eliza leaned back in her chair to stare again out the window at the continuing storm.

She'd spent most of her life alone. As an only child, as one of two female students in her class at medical college, and as a lone traveler after leaving New York.

Her life had always been one of isolation.

Even after the wonderful conversation, Eliza felt a jarring letdown. Standing, she reminded herself how she'd long ago reconciled herself to the fact she was a woman destined to always be alone.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Eliza stood in the lobby of the hotel, watching as large flakes of snow wafted through the air, creating a festive atmosphere.

Over the last few days, she'd been surprised to see shop owners hang wreaths, garlands, and hand-painted signs wishing Merry Christmas in their store windows.

With a sigh, she walked upstairs, determined to get through an article on a new surgical procedure.

She'd been relaxing in a chair by the window when a knock on the door had Eliza looking up from the book she'd been reading, a little annoyed at being interrupted from her studies in one of her medical journals.

Setting it aside, she pulled the door open a few inches, revealing Rachel and another woman standing in the hall.

"Hello." Eliza tried to put warmth in her voice.

"Hope we're not interrupting you," Rachel said.

"Not at all. Please come in." Eliza gestured toward two chairs.

"This is my sister-in-law, Ginny." Rachel picked up her skirt, attempting to keep the rug from getting wet from the soaked hem. "Ginny, this is Doctor Eliza Gladstone."

"Pleased to meet you, Doctor."

“I’d appreciate it if you’d call me Eliza.”

Ginny sat down next to Rachel.

“We wanted to see if you’d join us for a bite to eat at the boardinghouse restaurant. It’s owned by Suzanne Barnett.”

“Ah, yes. Nick’s wife,” Eliza said.

“Yes. Suzanne has a fine way with simple, hearty meals.”

Eliza nodded, tucking a strand of raven hair behind her ear. “How thoughtful of you. I confess, I’m eager to try one of the other establishments in town.”

The three women chatted as they maneuvered the icy boardwalk the short distance to Suzanne’s, glad for the break in the storms keeping them confined.

Inside, the warmth and low voices of the few diners welcomed them. Suzanne greeted them, her face glowing. “Sit anywhere you like. I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

They settled at a table near the window, removing their coats and gloves. Before long, Suzanne arrived with steaming mugs of coffee. “Now, what can I get you? The meatloaf’s real nice today.”

“I haven’t had meatloaf in a long time. Sounds perfect,” Eliza said.

“It comes with mashed potatoes, gravy, and carrots.”

“I’ll have the same, Suzanne,” Ginny added. “And save me a piece of pie. I don’t really care what kind.”

Rachel nodded. "I'll also have the same. Thank you, Suzanne. Do you have time to join us?"

"Wish I could, but my cook couldn't make it to town, so I'm doing her work and mine. I'll get these to you as quick as I can."

Soon, the women were tucking into the hearty fare, savoring the rich gravy and seasoned meatloaf. Eliza smiled as she ate. "My compliments to the chef. Delicious."

Rachel looked at Eliza. "So, what brought you out west to the Montana territory? I can't imagine it was for the fine dining." She chuckled.

Eliza dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "I stayed in New York for about a year after receiving my medical training. Some doctors would allow me to practice with them. Most were skeptical of my skills. The hospital only called me in when no one else was available, and those were for minor issues. At least they were minor for me." Taking a sip of coffee, she set down the cup.

"It was time to venture out and put my skills to use where they're most needed. Traveling west seemed a good idea."

Ginny's eyes widened. "It must have been difficult for you."

"What?"

"Well, taking all those classes, then struggling to prove yourself all over again. Being competent and smart, then dealing with people who believed you were neither."

"How kind of you to say." Eliza swallowed a bite of potatoes and gravy.

"It's a struggle sometimes, but I knew it would be when I made the decision to attend

medical school.

The doctor I worked with in St. Louis was understanding.

He had me work with patients, women mainly.

Still, I was never able to use my surgical training.

I made the decision to continue on to California.

” She looked outside at the gently falling snow.

“And now...” She spread her hands. “Here I am.”

She set down her fork to stare out the window. After a bit, she let out a breath. “And what brought you ladies here?”

Rachel cradled her cup of coffee in both hands and leaned back in her chair. “Well, my story begins back east during the war. I was a nurse for the Union Army, tending to the wounded and ill. When the war ended, my uncle invited me to work at his clinic in Splendor.”

A wistful look crossed her face. “Dax was a Confederate officer during the war. Afterward, he left the south and traveled to Texas with his brother, Luke.” She nodded at Ginny.

“They became Texas Rangers. When a fellow Ranger was killed, he asked them to make sure his ranch in Montana went to the legal owners. So, they came here and discovered their friend had left them the ranch. We butted heads at first. But over time, we fell in love.”

“What a nice story.” Eliza turned to Ginny. “What about you? How’d you meet your husband?”

Ginny blushed slightly. “Well, my younger sister and I ended up here after our parents died. I actually worked for Suzanne for a while before Rachel offered me a job. I was in the kitchen at the ranch, putting up supplies in the cupboard, when Luke returned from an assignment. He’d been working for the Pinkerton Agency.

He thought I’d snuck in and was stealing.

Well, we worked it out and fell in love. ”

Eliza smiled at the two women, touched by their stories. She set down her coffee cup and straightened in her seat, becoming uncomfortable at the somewhat personal discussion. It was her own fault for asking.

“Where did you go to medical school?” Rachel asked.

“I grew up in Syracuse, New York. My father was a doctor, so I was immersed in medicine from a young age. I attended Syracuse Medical College and was one of two women in my class.” Eliza gave a wry smile.

“Needless to say, it was a challenge to gain respect in such a male-dominated field. I persevered and graduated with honors.” She gazed out the window, noting the storm had let up some, allowing her to see the mountains in the distance covered in snow. “The rest you already know.”

Rachel leaned forward eagerly. “Well, we’re glad to have you, even if it’s for a little while. Since you are here, I should introduce you to the doctors at our clinic. Their backgrounds are quite impressive.”

“We’ll see. I don’t know how long I’ll stay.”

“With this much snow so early, it would be impossible to cross the pass toward San Francisco,” Ginny said.

Rachel grinned at her sister-in-law. “She’s right.

I doubt you’ll get out of here for at least eight weeks.

I was thinking. Why don’t you come out and stay with us at the ranch for a spell?

It’ll give you a taste of life on a large ranch.

I know Luke and Dax would be pleased to have you as our guest.”

Eliza hesitated. “I wouldn’t want to be a bother.” She wasn’t thrilled about the idea of staying at a rustic ranch cabin for even one day, thinking they probably didn’t have running water or enough wood stoves to heat the rooms.

Rachel pressed on. “You’d be no bother at all. There’s a guest room already made up. Oh, do say you’ll come, if only for a couple nights.”

Inwardly groaning, Eliza forced a smile. “Well, how can I refuse such a gracious invitation? I’d be delighted to accept your hospitality and see the ranch.”

Rachel beamed. “Wonderful. I can’t wait to get your reaction to Redemption’s Edge.”

When Eliza’s brow lifted, Ginny clarified. “It’s the name of our ranch.”

“Such an interesting name. I’m looking forward to learning all about a working ranch. The few I’ve seen have been quite small, with a few horses and maybe a

couple cows.”

“Well then, this is going to be quite enlightening.” Ginny laughed.

After packing enough for three or four days, Eliza sat on the wagon bench on one side of Rachel while Ginny sat on the other. The storm had cleared, though she knew it could be a temporary respite from the harsh weather.

The scenery on the road to Redemption’s Edge was spectacular. Turning a winding corner, a large ranch house came into view.

“Over there is the main ranch house,” Ginny said as the wagon wheels crunched through the frozen mud.

Eliza’s eyes widened as she took in all the buildings. “It’s rather large.”

Rachel chuckled. “We’ve added to it over the years. It has ten bedrooms.”

“Ten?” Eliza’s brows rose.

“We have company quite often. Ginny and Luke have two children and so do Dax and I.”

Dax, Luke, Bull, and Spencer were standing near the barn, deep in discussion, as the wagon approached.

At the sound of the approaching wagon, the men looked up. Dax and Luke lifted their hands in greeting, rushing over to help their wives to the ground.

“Afternoon, ladies,” Dax said, grinning at Rachel as he lifted her by the waist. “Have a nice lunch in town?”

“We did,” Rachel replied. “And we’ve brought back a visitor. Eliza’s going to stay with us for a few days.”

“Wonderful.” Dax introduced her to Luke and Spencer.

Spencer stepped forward, offering to help Eliza down. “Allow me, ma’am.”

Eliza hesitated before giving a curt nod. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Doctor Gladstone.”

She turned away, following Rachel and Ginny into the house. Behind her, she heard Spencer heft her satchel and fall in step several paces behind them.

Stepping into the warmth of the ranch house’s front parlor, she glanced around at the homey décor. A fire crackled in the massive stone fireplace, radiating heat. Rachel and Ginny removed their coats and hats, motioning for Eliza to do the same.

“Make yourself at home, Eliza,” Rachel said. “I want to check the guest room.”

Setting down her satchel, Spencer touched the brim of his hat. “I’ll leave you ladies be. Good day, Doctor Gladstone.”

Eliza inclined her head. “Mr. Haglund.”

As he left, Rachel returned from down the hallway. “Come, let’s get you settled in.” She picked up Eliza’s satchel, motioning for her to follow her.

As Eliza got settled, she noticed the sky had darkened, indicating the approach of another storm. Releasing a deep sigh, she wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, ready to join the women in the parlor.

The next morning dawned bright and cold, the sun glinting off the frosted meadows surrounding the ranch. After breakfast, Rachel bundled up, leading Eliza outside for a tour.

“The main bunkhouse is over there,” she explained, pointing out the long, low building. “The wranglers and ranch hands live there, except the married ones. They live in the cabins behind the bunkhouse.”

She gestured toward a larger cabin not far from the main house. “Bull Mason, one of our foremen, lives there with his family. Our other foreman lives at the ranch house several miles east of here. He oversees operations in the eastern section of the ranch.”

Rachel pointed to another cabin. “The cabin over there is where Billy Zales and his wife, Shining Star, live with their son. They’re expecting another baby soon.”

Eliza peered with interest at the cozy cabin, smoke wisping up from the chimney. “How wonderful for them.”

“I’ll introduce you to them at supper tonight.”

Rachel next showed Eliza the largest of the three barns. As they approached, Eliza heard horses neighing inside.

“This one serves as our main stable.”

Eliza stepped into the dim interior, the smell of hay and horses enveloping her. Her eyes adjusted to the light and widened at the sight of the beautiful horses in their stalls.

“Magnificent, aren’t they?” Rachel said. She walked Eliza along the stalls, introducing some of the ranch’s prized stock. “We breed horses, as well as raising

cattle.”

Eliza reached out a hand to stroke the velvety nose of a chestnut mare. The horse nuzzled her palm.

“She’s one of our brood mares. We’ve had her for years,” Rachel said.

“She seems very gentle. You obviously take good care of her,” Eliza remarked.

“We do our best,” Rachel replied. “They’re the heart and soul of this ranch.”

Eliza nodded, feeling a newfound respect for these hardworking ranchers. She could see beneath their rough exterior lay a deep love for the land and animals in their care.

As they left the barn, Rachel looked at Eliza. “I hope this gives you a sense of how we do things around here. We may seem backwoods to some, but we do know our business.”

Eliza smiled, realizing she felt more at home around these people than she had anywhere in a long while.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Rachel and Eliza exited the barn, blinking against the bright sunlight after the dim interior. As their eyes adjusted, they spotted a horse and rider approaching at a gallop.

Eliza recognized the tall, lean figure of Spencer Haglund astride an elegant bay gelding. He was leading another horse with a man slumped over the saddle, one arm wrapped around the horse's neck while the other arm dangled by his side.

Spencer reined to a sharp stop in front of the women, his face etched with concern.

"It's Tom. His horse threw him when we ran into a pack of wolves up in the north pasture. I think his arm's busted up pretty bad. Maybe his ribs, too."

Tom lifted his head with effort, his face pale and beaded with sweat. "Ladies," he said through gritted teeth. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

Eliza hurried over to examine Tom's arm. The forearm was swollen and bruised, the wrist bent at an unnatural angle.

"It's a nasty break," she said. "We'll need to set it properly and splint it." She looked at Spencer and Rachel. "Is there somewhere we can take him?"

"Let's get him up to the main house," Rachel answered. "We'll put him in one of the spare rooms."

Together, they helped ease Tom down from the horse. He swayed a bit once on the ground, steadying himself against Spencer's shoulder.

“Easy now, partner,” Spencer said. “Let’s get you fixed up.”

They made their way to the house, supporting Tom between them. Eliza felt the weight of responsibility settle on her shoulders.

Spencer glanced at the doctor, gratitude glimmering in his tawny eyes. Eliza met his gaze straight on, reflecting the confidence she felt. An unspoken understanding passed between them before Spencer turned to help Tom up the steps into the house.

Eliza followed Rachel into the house, Spencer and Tom entering behind them. Opening the door of a spare bedroom on the first floor, Rachel turned down the covers.

Spencer helped Tom ease down onto the bed while Eliza examined his injured arm more closely.

“The break is clean. It must be set soon before the swelling gets any worse. I’ll need some cloth for bandages, straight sticks for a splint, and strong alcohol to clean the abrasions around the break,” she said. “Rachel, do you mind assisting me?”

“Not at all. I’ll get the supplies.” She hurried from the room.

Eliza turned to Spencer. “Can you stay to hold him down while I set his arm?”

Spencer nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Eliza placed a gentle hand on Tom’s uninjured shoulder. “I know it hurts. I’ll get this over with as quickly as possible.”

Tom’s face was drawn, his skin pale and clammy, but he managed a pained smile. “Much obliged, ma’am. This isn’t the first time I’ve busted myself up out here.

You're a good deal prettier than the last doctor who patched me up."

Eliza couldn't help chuckling. Even injured, the cowboy's spirited charm shined through.

When Rachel returned with the supplies, Eliza had Spencer hold Tom steady while they worked.

With efficient but gentle motions, Rachel cleaned the area before Eliza reset the broken bone, splinting it securely.

Tom hissed in pain while doing his best not to move. Before Tom knew it, she stepped away.

"All done," Eliza said, resting a hand on his uninjured shoulder once more. "You'll need to go easy on the arm for several weeks. Unless there's a problem, you should be able to start light work after two or three weeks."

Relief flashed across Tom's face. "Much obliged, ma'am. I owe you a debt of gratitude."

"Your arm healing is all the gratitude I need. Get some rest now." She stood, turning to find Spencer watching her, an inscrutable look in his golden brown eyes.

"You have a healer's gift."

Eliza felt her cheeks grow warm at the unexpected praise. "Thank you, Mr. Haglund."

Their gazes held for a long moment before Eliza turned and left the room.

Eliza stood just inside the doorway of the bustling ranch house kitchen, momentarily stunned into silence.

Children dashed about in a raucous game of hide-and-seek, weaving between the legs of adults preparing supper.

The clatter of dishes and sizzle of meat echoed off the walls, almost drowning out the animated conversations swirling around the room.

This boisterous atmosphere was a far cry from the staid formality of meals at her parents' home in New York.

There, supper was a quiet, serious affair, with little communication beyond requests to pass the butter and the latest social obligations.

Eliza had always found it dull, believing meals were the same for all families.

Now, surrounded by uncontrolled chaos, she felt overwhelmed, unsure where she fit into the swirling action.

For a moment, she was an outsider, watching the familiar community carry on without her.

Then, a gorgeous little boy with black hair rushed up and took her hand, flashing a grin. "Play hide-seek?" he asked.

Eliza couldn't help but smile back at the child. "Maybe after supper."

He giggled and scampered off, leaving Eliza feeling a bit less adrift.

Squaring her shoulders, she made her way through the crowd, walking down the hall

to check on Tom Barrett. She knocked on his door. “Tom, may I come in? I’d like to see how your arm is doing.”

At his invitation, she entered to find him propped up on pillows, looking pale but better than he had earlier. She checked his splint and bandages, gently probing the break. He winced and assured her it was much improved.

“You’ll need to stay in bed one more day, then you can move back to the bunkhouse,” Eliza said. “I’ll be back again tonight to check on you.”

Leaving him to rest, she almost collided with Billy Zales in the hallway. “Pardon me, Billy,” she said. “I was just checking on Tom.”

“No harm done,” Billy assured her. He nodded toward the kitchen. “Rachel asked me to let you know supper’s about ready. Ginny’s fried chicken is the best around.”

Eliza fell into step beside him. “I look forward to tasting it. Is your wife joining us this evening?”

“Yes. Shining Star is feeding Spirit Bear in the kitchen right now,” Billy said. “I imagine she’ll be along shortly.”

As they entered the large dining room, the earlier chaos had changed to softer conversation. Billy pulled out a chair for Eliza, placing her between Luke Pelletier and Bull Mason.

Once everyone was seated, Dax said a short prayer, then invited everyone to fill their plates.

Throughout the meal, Eliza listened to the various conversations, surprised at the level of thought. She’d always believed people out west were poorly educated. So far,

nothing she'd understood about people on the frontier was true.

Sitting on the edge of her bed later in the evening, Eliza studied the last entry in her journal before recording the events of the day. Her brief time at the ranch had already opened her eyes to new ideas.

Setting down her journal, she slipped under the covers. As a doctor, she tried to keep an open mind about ways to heal others. A wry grin curved her mouth. Perhaps keeping an open mind would be the guiding light during her travels in this strange new wilderness.

Eliza awoke the next morning to rays of sunlight streaming into her room at the ranch house. For a moment, she was disoriented. Then memories of the wonderful supper the night before came flooding back. She stretched and rose from the bed, going to the window to take in the view.

Outside, the sky was a brilliant blue with only a few wispy clouds. The snow on the ground sparkled like diamonds. She gazed out at the expanse of land belonging to the ranch, dotted with trees and crisscrossed by now frozen, meandering creeks. It was beautiful in its wildness.

She thought back to the stories Billy had shared the previous night about the children who'd been found hiding in the caves above the ranch. How they'd been taken in by the Pelletiers and given a true home here.

A pang of longing pierced Eliza's heart. She'd always been fascinated by the way some opened their arms to others in need while many turned their backs. She envied the sense of belonging those children must feel as part of the Pelletier clan.

A knock at the door drew Eliza from her musings. It was Ginny, peeking her head in. "Rise and shine, we've got hot coffee and biscuits with jam waiting in the kitchen."

Eliza smiled, heart warmed by the kindness all the Pelletiers had shown her. “I’ll be right there, thank you.”

As she dressed for the day, Eliza contemplated her situation. Perhaps she would stay a little longer in this part of the country. California would still be there when it was time to move on.

Making her way downstairs, she followed the aromatic scent of freshly baked biscuits. Entering the large, rustic kitchen, she was greeted by a chorus of welcomes.

Rachel was at the stove, flipping hotcakes onto an almost overflowing platter. Ginny and Shining Star sat at the table, warming their hands with mugs of hot tea. Lydia Mason spooned eggs into a serving bowl, setting it next to a platter of fried ham and bacon and a basket of hot biscuits.

“All right, ladies,” Rachel called out. “Grab a plate. Breakfast is hot and ready.”

The women filled their plates, then moved into the dining room where their husbands had eaten breakfast hours earlier.

Eliza smiled as she took a seat at the table. “Do you eat like this every morning?”

“It’s a routine,” Rachel said. “We cook breakfast for the men, feed the children, then sit down for a quiet meal among ourselves.”

“And eat at least two baskets of Rachel’s famous buttermilk biscuits,” Ginny said. “These are better than those at the Eagle’s Nest.”

“Not quite,” Rachel responded. She looked at Eliza. “May Covington is the pastry and breakfast chef at the hotel. She can bake anything.”

“Her husband is lucky,” Lydia quipped.

Rachel chuckled, again turning toward Eliza. “May is married to Caleb, one of Gabe’s deputies. They’re a wonderful and generous couple.”

Eliza took a bite of the fluffy biscuit, letting it melt in her mouth. “My goodness, you weren’t kidding. These are delicious!”

Rachel beamed at the compliment.

“So, what’s on your agenda today, Eliza?” Ginny asked before taking a sip of coffee.

“Oh, I’m not sure...” Eliza’s voice trailed off.

“Well, I’d like to show you more of the ranch,” Rachel said. “It’s a gorgeous day for a short ride. We won’t get too more like this until spring. I recall you mentioning how much you enjoy riding.”

“Yes, I do, and seeing more of the ranch sounds wonderful,” Eliza said, excited at the idea. She hadn’t been riding in ages.

“It’s settled then,” Rachel said. “We’ll saddle up after breakfast and explore some of the ranch’s acres. We won’t go far from the house. If the weather changes, we want to get back here in a hurry.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Rachel and Eliza finished their breakfast and headed out to the barn to find their mounts already saddled. Rachel checked over the two sturdy ranch horses, a pinto mare named Dancer for herself and a chestnut mare named Maple for Eliza.

“Maple has a sweet temperament but plenty of spirit,” Rachel said as she tightened the cinch.

Eliza stroked her mare’s neck, talking in a low tone before mounting up. Rachel swung into Dancer’s saddle with practiced ease.

“We’re going to head north. I want to show you the hay barns.”

They rode off, the chill winter air biting but also invigorating. Rachel pointed out the different landmarks as they explored a few acres of the expansive ranchland.

Eventually, they came upon a storage barn filled with hay. “We keep hay stored over the winter to make it easier to feed the cattle.”

Rachel reined Dancer next to an opening about three feet above the ground and six feet wide, motioning Eliza over. Inside were huge piles of loose hay.

“There’s one more farther out. Dax and Luke wanted to decrease the time needed to cut and store the hay. This is the second year they’ve been used, and both seemed pleased with the new routine.”

Rachel reined north again. Eliza followed, taking in the beautiful landscape dotted with cattle grazing from mounts of hay.

As the sun rose high above them, Rachel decided to head back. When they reined their horses south, a cold wind picked up. Both mares tossed their heads and whinnied. Attempting to calm them, the women stilled when a chorus of eerie howls sounded behind them.

Eliza's heart leaped into her throat at the same time Rachel drew her rifle from its sheath.

When the howls came again, she fired off two warning shots.

The sound reverberated across the open range, loud enough for those at the ranch house to hear.

Maple startled beneath Eliza, whinnying in alarm.

She fired twice more before turning toward Eliza.

"Wolves." Rachel's voice held a hint of fear. "We'd better get moving."

Eliza needed no convincing. She squeezed Maple's sides, spurring the mare to follow Rachel and Dancer. Her pulse thundered in her ears, louder than the drumming of hooves on frozen ground.

They raced back to the ranch, their horses kicking up plumes of snow in their wake. Adrenaline coursed through Eliza as she leaned low over Maple's neck, urging the mare to keep up with Rachel.

Eliza breathed a sigh of relief when the ranch house appeared on the horizon. She spotted figures pouring out of the house, rifles in hand. She recognized Spencer's tall frame, along with Dax and Bull. Rachel slowed her horse as they reached the assembled group.

“What happened?” Spencer called out. “We heard shots.”

“Wolves,” Rachel said.

Eliza dismounted on shaky legs, reclaiming her balance when Spencer put a hand on her shoulder.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Fine,” she answered without further explanation.

Ginny emerged behind them, relief washing over her face when she saw Eliza and Rachel. “Thank the Lord you’re safe.”

Eliza looked at the concern on all their faces, knowing most of it was for Rachel.

Tucker prepared for his ride to the orphanage, bundling up in warm clothing and bracing himself against the cold wind.

He pulled his wool coat tighter around his broad shoulders as the biting wind whipped through the streets of Splendor.

He tucked his neckerchief up over his nose and mouth and tugged his hat down low, bracing against the icy chill, anticipating the heavy snow to come.

Though the air was bitter, a warmth blossomed in Tucker’s chest at the thought of seeing Rose again. He tried to temper the flutter in his heart, unsure if the shy woman returned his growing affection.

Still, he couldn’t deny the joy pulsing inside whenever he was near her.

Tucker checked his saddlebags one last time, making sure he'd packed the oranges and peppermint sticks for the children.

Satisfied he was ready, he swung up into the saddle and headed out into the blustery day, an irrepressible smile creeping across his face despite the cold.

Tucker arrived at the orphanage a short while later, his cheeks stinging from the biting wind.

He dismounted, grabbed his saddlebags, and stomped his boots on the porch to shake off the snow before making his way to the large front door.

Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, he raised his gloved hand and knocked firmly.

After a few moments, the door opened, revealing Rose's kind face. Her cheeks were flushed a rosy pink from the cold, but her eyes sparkled when she saw him standing on the porch.

"Deputy Nolan. What a wonderful surprise," Rose said, a note of delight in her voice causing Tucker's heart to skip a beat. "Please come in out of the cold."

She stepped back and opened the door wider in invitation. Tucker stomped his boots once more on the mat, then stepped inside the blessed warmth of the house.

"Thank you, Miss Keenan." He unwound his neckerchief and removed his hat. "I hope I'm not intruding on your day."

"Not at all," she assured him. "The children will be thrilled to see you. Let me take your coat."

He shrugged out of his heavy wool coat and handed it to Rose, catching a trace of her floral scent as she turned to hang it on a peg by the door. His pulse quickened at her nearness, and he had to remind himself to mind his manners.

“I brought some treats for the children,” Tucker said, patting his saddlebag. “Thought they could use something sweet before Christmas.”

She beamed, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “How very thoughtful. Thank you.”

Tucker rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly shy. “Please call me Tucker.”

“Very well...Tucker,” Rose said softly, a becoming blush rising on her cheeks. “If you’ll call me Rose.”

He nodded, watching her. They stood there a moment, neither quite sure what to say next. The sound of footsteps thundering down the stairs broke the silence.

“Deputy Tucker’s here!” a young voice shouted.

He couldn’t help chuckling as a herd of children came barreling into view, eager smiles lighting up their faces. His gaze met Rose’s, seeing his own happy contentment mirrored in her eyes. With the children jabbering around them, Tucker knew this would be a wonderful visit indeed.

Rose led him into the cozy kitchen, the gaggle of children following behind. She gestured for him to take a seat at the sturdy wooden table while she poured him a cup of coffee.

“I hope you don’t mind the commotion.” She nodded toward the excited youngsters.

Tucker grinned as a bold little girl climbed onto his lap. “Not at all. I’ve been eager to

see their smiling faces.”

As she busied herself in the kitchen, Tucker entertained the children with funny voices and silly faces, much to their delight. Their joyous laughter filled the room.

After pouring more coffee into Tucker’s cup, Rose sat down across from him. “Now, tell me what you know about a Christmas party in town?”

Tucker launched into describing the plans for the upcoming town holiday celebration, including the tree lighting and carolers. She listened, asking questions here and there.

“It sounds lovely. I wish we could attend, but we’ll have our own festivities here.”

He took a sip of coffee before replying. “Well, if you’d like to bring the children into town for any of the activities, I’d be happy to escort you.”

She looked both pleased and surprised. “Oh, how kind of you to offer. I’ll have to think about it.”

Emma, a little dark-haired girl, ran up to him, tugging on his sleeve. “Mr. Tucker, will you play the piano for us?”

Tucker chuckled. “Of course, Miss Emma.” He let the children lead him into the parlor, where he sat down and played a few simple carols. The children sang to the ones they knew, with Rose looking on with a smile.

Afterward, Tucker helped Rose round up the children for their afternoon snack. As they ate, Tucker and Rose discussed the need for a new cook.

“It’s been a challenge managing the kitchen without extra help,” Rose admitted. “I’m not sure where we’ll find someone qualified. Heck, even someone who can cook well

enough for the children and show up every day would be fine.”

He tapped his chin. “I have an idea. Let me ask around town.”

“I’d appreciate any help you can provide.”

As Tucker rode back into town, he couldn’t help grinning. His visit with Rose had lifted his spirits. He realized how much he looked forward to any excuse to see her, even if it was just to help out around the orphanage.

When he arrived at the sheriff’s office, Tucker decided to ask around about potential cooks for the orphanage. Gabe suggested he talk to Alice Johnson, a widow who was considered to be one of the best cooks in town.

“With her husband gone, she could use the extra money, Tucker,” Gabe told him. “She loves children and might even be interested in staying at the orphanage. Her place in town is pretty rundown. She’s no longer able to keep up with it. Why don’t you go talk to her.”

Tucker found the widow sweeping her front porch. “Afternoon, Mrs. Johnson.” He tipped his hat.

Stopping, she looked up and smiled. “Good afternoon, Deputy. Can I help you with something?”

“As a matter of fact, you can. You know the orphanage outside of town?”

“Of course.”

“I wanted to ask if you might be interested in a cooking position. They’re having a real hard time finding someone to make meals for the orphans.”

The widow looked surprised but nodded. “I could sure use the work. And I’d be glad to cook for those children.”

“Wonderful.” Tucker smiled. “I’ll let Miss Rose know right away.”

After securing the widow’s agreement, Tucker didn’t want to wait to give Rose the good news. Heading to the livery, he saddled his horse and, for the second time in a few hours, rode to the orphanage.

Rose smiled when she opened the door to find him standing on the porch. “Well, hello again, Deputy. Please come in out of the cold.”

Tucker stamped the snow from his boots before stepping into the warmth of the orphanage. “You agreed to call me Tucker, remember?”

“You’re right, I did. So, I know you must have a reason for riding out a second time.”

“I have some good news about your search for a cook. I spoke with Alice Johnson.”

“The widow?”

“Yep. She’s real interested in the position. Gabe told me she’s a great cook and loves children.”

“Excellent. Martha will be so pleased. I’m certain she’ll want to meet with Mrs. Johnson right away. If I recall, she makes the most delicious pies.”

Tucker grinned, happy to have brought Rose good news. “Widow Johnson needs the work. Gabe mentioned she might be willing to stay at the orphanage. If there’s an empty room.”

“I believe we can work something out. It was so thoughtful of you to ask her,” Rose said.

“You have a gift,” he told her. “The children are lucky to have you.”

She blushed at the compliment. “Thank you. You’re very kind.”

“It’s true, Rose.”

As Tucker rode back to town, he thought about the group of men he’d spotted earlier. Hours after watching them, he felt the weight of the men’s stares on his back. A tense anticipation hung in the air, like the stillness before a gathering storm.

Tucker tried to push his unease aside as he entered the house he shared with his friend and fellow deputy, Jonas Taylor. He built up the fire in the stove and fixed a pot of coffee. No matter what he did, his thoughts kept drifting back to the ominous riders.

Who were they, and what business did they have in Splendor? Tucker knew most folks in town, but those men were unfamiliar. Their weathered faces and cold eyes reminded him of the outlaws he’d encountered during his time as a lawman.

Outside, the wind howled mournfully through the pine trees as he climbed under his covers. Somewhere in the distance, a coyote yipped and yowled.

Tucker tossed and turned, sleep eluding him. He kept envisioning those hard-bitten riders, their grim faces shadowed beneath their hat brims.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

The corral was a flurry of activity as Billy and Travis worked to break a wild mustang.

Eliza leaned against the fence, enthralled by the spectacle unfolding before her.

The horse bucked and twisted, desperate to throw Travis from its back.

Mud and ice flew through the air with each powerful kick of the mustang's hind legs.

Eliza winced as the horse bucked again, throwing Travis into the air. "Doesn't what he's doing hurt the poor thing?" she asked Spencer.

He chuckled. "I'm pretty certain it hurts Travis more than the horse. Billy and Travis know what they're doing. Breaking a horse takes skill and patience."

Eliza pursed her lips, unconvinced. As Travis climbed back into the saddle, the mustang erupted into another fit of bucking before finally giving up and calming.

"Why don't you stay and watch them work with the next one?" Spencer suggested. "See for yourself how gentle they can be."

Intrigued, she nodded. This was a world foreign to her city upbringing. Perhaps Spencer was right and there was more to horse breaking than met the eye. She intended to find out.

Her attention was drawn back to the corral as Billy and Travis led in another wild horse, a chestnut mare. She watched as Billy began swinging the rope into the air so

the horse ran in circles around him.

“Doesn’t the rope frighten her?” Eliza asked.

“Billy is tiring her out some,” Spencer explained. “Makes it easier to put the saddle on once she’s not so fresh.”

Eliza frowned but kept watching. When the mare slowed, Billy threw a loop around the mare’s neck and began stroking her, speaking softly.

Stepping back, he nodded to Travis, who also threw a loop of rope over the mare’s neck.

The mare began bucking. This didn’t go on long before the already tired horse stilled, blowing air through its nostrils.

Moving closer, Billy inched a blanket onto her back. The mare bucked in protest, dislodging the blanket. He persisted, picking up the blanket from the ground and setting it back on the horse until she accepted the unfamiliar weight.

“He’s so calm with her,” Eliza murmured.

Spencer nodded. “A good wrangler knows you can’t force a horse. Takes time for them to get used to things.”

Eliza was about to respond when a loud whinny drew her gaze back to the corral. Billy had managed to get the saddle on the mare and was now tightening the cinch. The mare erupted in a frenzy, bucking and twisting violently. Billy and Travis held their ropes firm, waiting for her to tire.

“Poor thing,” Eliza said. “She’s so frightened.”

“Give it time,” Spencer replied. “Billy will win her over.”

Eliza watched as he swung up into the saddle, the mare standing still until bursting into a final explosive fit. Hanging on, Billy’s face was set in grim determination until the mare stopped bucking and came to a stop.

She had to admit, his patience and persistence were admirable. Perhaps she’d judged the process too quickly. As the mare settled under Billy’s steady hand, Eliza felt herself softening.

“Reckon she’ll need more work when he saddles her the next time,” Spencer noted.

Eliza nodded. “Thank you for talking me into staying. It was, well...a learning experience.”

Turning toward the ranch house, she found herself reflecting on the insights she’d gained. Her mind swirled with new thoughts after witnessing Billy’s remarkable patience and skill in working with the wild mare. Hearing shouts from behind her, she turned around.

Travis and Billy were working with another horse, using the rope to move the mustang in circles, the same as with the mare. The horse slowed to a quick trot.

The horse’s eyes were wide, ears pinned back as he tried to evade the loop Travis threw. Billy threw his, dropping the rope around his neck in an easy, practiced move.

Eliza watched the scene from the porch. It was a dance of sorts, this breaking of horses. A battle of wills took infinite patience and skill. Qualities often in short supply back east.

Yet Billy possessed them, along with a deep wisdom about horses Eliza was only

beginning to comprehend. There was much she could learn, if she could open her mind to new ways.

Eliza walked back into the ranch house, her mind swirling with thoughts. She replayed the scene in the corral, seeing it now through new eyes.

Where before she'd judged the process of breaking horses as cruel and domineering, she now saw the nuance—how skill and instinct could align human will with an animal's nature, not simply overpower it. There was an art to understanding the horse's mind and gaining its trust.

Billy had shown remarkable ability at calming the mare, communicating with subtle cues and steady patience. He and Travis seemed to sense when to push forward and when to ease up, adapting to the horse's responses. The results spoke for themselves.

Stepping into the living room, Rachel walked out of the kitchen. "Did you enjoy watching them break horses?"

"I found it quite fascinating. Your ranch hands are very impressive. They have a remarkable way with the horses."

Rachel smiled. "Yes, Billy has always had a gift when it comes to working with animals."

Eliza nodded.

"Give folks a chance, and you'll find most are not what they seem at first," Rachel said gently. She turned to go back to the kitchen, then looked back with a twinkle in her eye. "Even the wildest ones can surprise you, if you're patient."

She then disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Eliza to ponder the deeper meaning of

her words.

Eliza entered the dining room later in the evening, the aroma of roast beef and freshly baked bread filling the air. Several people were already seated at the long wooden table, chatting among themselves.

“Good evening,” Eliza greeted, taking the chair Dax pulled out for her. “Supper smells divine, Rachel.”

The front door opened. A petite woman, her brown hair swept up in a chignon, entered, followed by her young son who stayed close by her side. The man who followed wore a silver deputy’s badge on his vest and rested his hand lightly on the woman’s back.

“Eliza, I’d like you to meet Dorinda and Dutch McFarlin, and their son, Joel,” Rachel said. “Dorinda is Spencer’s sister.” She motioned toward Eliza. “This is Doctor Eliza Gladstone.”

Dorinda’s voice was soft and melodic. “It’s a pleasure, Dr. Gladstone.”

Joel peeked out from behind his mother. “Are you really a doctor?” he asked in a hushed voice.

Eliza chuckled. “Yes, I am, young man.”

Spencer strode to his sister, brushing a kiss across her cheek and shaking Dutch’s hand before ruffling Joel’s hair.

Dutch tipped his hat cordially as they took their seats. “A pleasure, ma’am.”

Eliza studied Dorinda as they began passing the food around. What had inspired this

delicate woman to start a new life in Splendor? She wondered if it had anything to do with her brother, Spencer.

Her curiosity got the better of her. As Dorinda passed her the bowl of carrots, Eliza said, “So, Dorinda, I understand you are from Utah originally. What made you decide to settle in Splendor?”

Dorinda glanced at Dutch. “Well, my circumstances in Salt Lake changed, forcing Joel and me to leave. Spencer had written many letters telling me of the beauty of the Montana frontier and the opportunities in Splendor. I decided to join him and start fresh.”

“It must have been difficult, leaving your whole life behind,” Eliza said gently.

Dorinda nodded. “It was, but the church provided little support. All the elders backed my former husband. I felt so alone. Here, we were given a chance to build a new life.”

“Which you’ve done,” Rachel said.

Eliza’s eyes shone with interest. She had so many questions, but she needed to be careful. “Forgive my ignorance, but you were part of the Mormon church in Utah?”

“Yes,” Dorinda said. “We followed the teachings of Joseph Smith.” She hesitated. “Though I confess, my faith wavered when my husband took a second wife. His decision was the reason we left.”

Eliza offered a grave nod. She knew little about the Mormon church, or the pressure men felt to take more than one wife. She was glad to have broached the subject. There was much she still hoped to learn about Dorinda and her transition to a new life.

“Well, now, enough of all this heavy talk,” Rachel said. “Dutch, why don’t you tell us a story from your days as a Pinkerton detective.” She looked at Eliza. “He had some real adventures chasing down outlaws.”

Eliza’s eyes lit up with interest. She’d read about the Pinkerton Detective Agency in the newspapers in New York, but had never met an actual agent.

“I know little about the agency,” Eliza said. “Is it true Pinkerton agents often went undercover to infiltrate criminal gangs?”

Dutch chuckled. “Yes, ma’am, we did.” He glanced at Luke, who sat at the other end of the table with his wife, Ginny. “I was asked to play all sorts of roles to get the job done. Though I don’t miss those days. Being a deputy in a fine town like Splendor suits me better now.”

He launched into a tale about working with Luke Pelletier. “At the time, Luke was also an agent.” Dutch continued, with Luke chiming in now and then to add his own anecdotes. Eliza listened with rapt attention, her doctor’s curiosity in full force.

Eventually, the conversation turned to Reverend Paige’s wife, Ruth, who was deeply involved in planning Splendor’s Christmas festivities. Rachel explained how Ruth spearheaded the holiday decorations, nativity pageant, and charitable drives each year.

“Why, she’s got half the town getting ready for the season,” Rachel said. “You must meet her soon, Eliza. I know she’d appreciate an extra pair of hands.”

Eliza’s eyes shone. “To be honest, I’ve never helped with any Christmas preparations. I’m willing to do what I can, though. Please let me know how I can help.”

“Well, there is one event coming up you could assist with,” Rachel said. “We’re doing a donation drive for the local orphanage. All sorts of things are needed—clothes, books, toys for the children.”

Eliza nodded. “Just tell me what’s needed, and I’ll gladly help.”

“We appreciate every bit of help, I assure you. Reverend Paige usually helps gather and sort the donations with some of the other townsfolk. But Ruth has him working on something else this year. Spencer has already volunteered to take his place, so the two of you could work together.”

At this, Eliza’s gaze darted briefly to Spencer. Their eyes met for a fleeting moment before both looked away.

Later, as Eliza helped Rachel and the other women clean up from supper, the conversation turned back to the donation drive.

“It’s important each child gets something suitable,” Rachel said as she handed Eliza a plate to dry. “We organize the gifts by age and whether they’re for boys or girls. It makes the distribution go smoother.”

Eliza nodded, carefully wiping the plate before setting it in the cupboard. “I imagine it takes quite a bit of work to sort through it all.”

“It does, but it’s worth it to see the smiles on those youngsters’ faces.” Rachel’s expression turned thoughtful. “The church ladies will wrap the gifts once you and Spencer have everything organized. I’m sure they’d welcome another pair of hands if you’d like to help.”

“I’ll help however I can,” Eliza replied. This donation drive was important to the community, and she was honored to participate.

As she bid Rachel goodnight and walked to her room, she felt warmth flow through her. This little frontier town was becoming much more than a short stop due to a sudden winter storm.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Lucien Hunt leaned against the worn oak bar in the Dixie Saloon, nursing his second whiskey of the evening.

The amber liquid swirled in the glass as he observed the rowdy card games, debating whether to try his luck or keep to himself.

The raucous laughter and shouts of the gamblers grated on his nerves tonight.

The saloon doors swung open, revealing a tall, broad-shouldered man in a duster and Stetson. Ford Mason scanned the room with sharp eyes before settling on Lucien at the bar. A grin split his rugged face as he approached.

“Well, I’ll be. Lucien Hunt in the flesh,” Ford said, clasping a hand on Lucien’s shoulder. “Stan Petermann mentioned you were back in town. Good to see you.”

Lucien’s mouth quirked up slightly. “Ford. Been a while.”

They shook hands, the easy camaraderie of two men comfortable in their own skins. Ford ordered a whiskey and stood beside Lucien, surveying the noisy saloon.

“Place seems busy for a Wednesday night,” Ford commented.

Lucien grunted in reply, swirling his drink. Ford sipped his whiskey, his keen gaze missing nothing.

“You back for good this time?” he asked.

Lucien was silent, contemplating the question plaguing him for months. Ford waited, knowing better than to push.

After a time, Lucien spoke. "Can't say. The trail calls, but I'm starting to go deaf."

Ford nodded, understanding in his eyes. "A man can only run so long before he's got to turn and face himself."

Lucien met his gaze, seeing his own bone-deep weariness reflected back. Both men had demons driving them, pasts refusing to let go. But change was coming for them, whether they willed it or not.

Ford lifted his glass in a silent toast. As they drank, Lucien thought of another issue bothering him.

He set his glass on the scarred wooden bar with a decisive thump. "I told Gabe Evans about the Tom Wolf gang showing up not too far from here."

Ford's eyebrows shot up. "You don't say. Those boys have been causing problems all over, robbing banks in the Dakotas, Colorado, and Wyoming. Surprised they haven't ventured this way yet."

Lucien nodded. "It's only a matter of time. Sheriff Sterling Parker in Big Pine believes they're coming this way. Wolf's got no limits to his wickedness. Seen it myself."

"And you aim to stop him," Ford said, a knowing glint in his eyes.

"If it comes to it. Someone's got to stand up to men like him."

Both stilled at the sound of the batwing doors opening.

They stared into the mirror behind the bartender, watching a man neither recognized enter.

Lucien and Ford turned to look, tense and alert.

The man was stocky, shorter than either of them, with a beaten felt hat pulled low.

He stepped to the bar, ordered a beer, and knocked it back in one long swallow, all without lifting his head.

Glancing in the mirror, his gaze landed on the two reformed gunslingers, his eyes widening.

As he set down the empty glass, his sleeve rode up just enough for Lucien to glimpse the tip of a familiar tattoo on his wrist. Lucien and Ford exchanged a subtle nod. The stranger dropped a coin on the counter and strode back out into the evening.

“Well, well,” Ford murmured. “Suppose we should warn Gabe one of Wolf’s men is in town.”

Lucien’s jaw tightened, his eyes hard as flint. “Reckon so.”

They left their drinks unfinished, a new urgency propelling their steps. As they exited the saloon and came to a stop, the sound of raucous laughter and clinking glasses faded behind them. Somewhere, an owl hooted, low and lonesome.

Lucien and Ford felt the cool evening air as they took a couple tentative steps along the boardwalk, tense and alert after recognizing the tattoo on the man’s wrist.

Ford squinted down the darkened street. “Don’t see any sign of him. He probably lit out quick.”

“No telling how many more are out there, waiting to make their move.” Lucien’s hand drifted near his hip, where his six-shooter rested.

Ford mirrored the motion, loosening the revolver in its holster. “Town’s quiet as a graveyard tonight. Almost too quiet.”

As if on cue, a sudden commotion erupted from within the saloon behind them. Muffled shouts rang out, followed by the scrape of chairs and the crash of breaking glass.

They exchanged a tense look. Drawing their pistols in unison, they burst back through the doors.

The scene inside was chaos. At one of the card tables, two men were on their feet, red-faced and screaming curses at each other.

Cards and poker chips littered the floor.

Even as Lucien and Ford watched, one man hurled his whiskey glass against the wall, where it shattered, sending broken glass in all directions.

“You yellow-bellied cheat!” one man bellowed.

His opponent’s face twisted in fury. “You watch your mouth, you low-down liar.” He fumbled drunkenly for the gun at his hip.

Lucien and Ford made their move, shoving through the gathering crowd. This situation was ripe to turn deadly.

Ford raised his six-shooter and fired two shots into the ceiling. Plaster rained down as the deafening blasts silenced the saloon. Every head turned toward the tall, stone-

faced men holding their guns on the rowdy card players.

“Enough, gentlemen,” Lucien said evenly. “No call for gunplay tonight.”

Ford kept his revolver leveled at the two card players. “Easy now. Let’s everybody stay calm.”

The men exchanged smoldering glares, making no move for their weapons. Lucien stepped between them and firmly relieved both of their pistols.

“We’ll be taking these for now,” he said. “You can get them back when you’ve cooled down and are acting civil again.”

He handed the confiscated revolvers to the wide-eyed bartender. “Put these away somewhere safe. And if these two start any more trouble, fetch the sheriff.”

The bartender nodded mutely, tucking the guns out of sight.

Lucien gave the card players a hard look. “You boys best call it a night. Sleep off the whiskey. Come morning, all will look brighter.”

With ill grace, the men gathered their hats and stumbled out into the night. The saloon crowd began murmuring again, the tension ebbing as Lucien shoved his gun into its holster.

Ford turned to Lucien. “Tess is hosting a Christmas supper this weekend. She would want me to extend an invitation to you, if you’ll be in town.

Once she knows you’re in Splendor, she won’t take no for an answer.

” He grinned. “You know how she gets. Once Tess decides something, wild horses

can't stop her. ”

Lucien rubbed his jaw, looking conflicted. “Darned kind of her. But a family supper...”

“Now don't go finding excuses,” Ford admonished. “You're as good as family to Tess and the kids. It would mean a lot to have you there.”

He clasped Lucien on the shoulder. “Just some food and fellowship to brighten the long nights. No need to be a stranger.”

Lucien sighed, but a faint smile touched his eyes. “Never could say no to Tess. Tell her I'll be there.”

“I'll let her know. Better get the supplies home.” Ford grinned before heading outside.

Lucien again leaned against the bar, still conflicted about attending a family supper. There'd been no family in his life since, well...for a long time.

He glanced up to see a familiar figure walking toward him. Julia, one of the serving girls at the Dixie, stopped beside him. Neither spoke for several minutes, lost in their own thoughts.

Lucien straightened and looked at her. “Something's on your mind. What is it, Julia?”

She lowered her voice as she inched closer. “I wondered if you've had any luck tracking down your daughter. I know how much finding her means to you.”

Lucien's shoulders slumped. For a long moment, he stared into the whiskey the bartender had set before him. Julia was the only person he'd confided in about his

daughter, now a young woman, in years.

“No luck yet. It’s as if she vanished into thin air.”

Julia reached out and gently squeezed his arm. “You can’t give up hope. I know you’ll find her someday.”

Lucien shook his head tiredly. “Maybe so. It’s a big country out there. She and her mother could be anywhere by now.”

Julia nodded, features grim.

He looked at his untouched whiskey and shook his head. “It’s time I headed out. Have a good night, Julia.”

Julia watched Lucien step into the darkening night, her heart aching for the pain she knew he carried. Though he put on a stoic front, she could see the raw anguish in his eyes whenever he spoke of his daughter. She wanted to help him.

With a sigh, she hesitated several minutes before making a decision. Telling the bartender she had an errand to make, she grabbed a coat, tugging up the fur-lined hood over her head.

She hurried down the boardwalk and crossed the frozen street on her way to the telegraph office. The door jangled as she slipped inside, coming to a quick stop when she spotted a man she didn’t recognize talking with the clerk.

It took the man a while to make a decision about the telegram he planned to send. Several minutes passed before he dug into a pocket for coins, set them on the counter and left.

“Evening, Bernie,” she greeted the clerk. “I need to send a telegram.”

Bernie blinked at her over his spectacles. “Sure thing, Miss Julia. I’ll get it sent right out.”

She scribbled out a brief message, keeping the wording vague. She didn’t fully trust the confidentiality of the telegraph lines.

“I need you to promise me something,” she added as she slid the paper across the counter. “When the reply comes, bring it to me directly. Don’t tell anyone else about it.”

Bernie’s eyebrows shot up. “Don’t have to ask, Miss Julia. I keep all messages to myself.”

“Thank you.” She handed him the money to pay and tucked the receipt into her skirt pocket. As she stepped back out into the night, a prickle of unease crept down her spine. She had a feeling whatever news came back would impact several people.

She hurried back to the saloon, her mind racing. Julia hoped she hadn’t made a mistake contacting an old friend, but Lucien’s anguish tugged at her heartstrings. Maybe her friend could provide some insight into what happened all those years ago.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

The smell of sizzling bacon and fresh biscuits wafted through the ranch house as Eliza sat at the breakfast table with Rachel and Ginny. She sipped coffee, enjoying the warmth seeping through the mug into her hands, a welcome contrast to the frosty air outside.

The front door swung open, and Spencer strode in, his cheeks ruddy from the cold. He paused when he saw Eliza, then removed his hat.

“Pardon the interruption. Eliza, can you take a look at Travis? Fool got himself thrown, breaking a horse. He may have cracked some ribs.”

She set down her coffee, nearly sloshing it over the rim in her haste. “Of course. Let me grab my bag.”

Eliza hurried to gather her medical supplies, adrenaline pumped through her veins. Stepping outside, the icy wind stole her breath. She blinked against the swirl of snowflakes as she followed Spencer across the yard to the corral.

When they reached Travis, she dropped to her knees beside him. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Travis managed a weak smile.

“Sorry to cause trouble, ma’am.”

“Hush now. Let’s have a look at you.” Eliza carefully cut away his shirt and examined his ribs, keeping her touch gentle. Travis still winced.

“I believe you have at least one cracked rib. I’m going to temporarily wrap your chest

so the men can get you inside. It's going to hurt." She glanced up to see Rachel and Ginny. "Rachel, I'm going to need your help."

Several minutes later, Eliza looked at Spencer and Billy, who held a stretcher. "We need to get him inside."

The men nodded, moving to help Travis onto the stretcher. Eliza gathered her supplies, her mind already leaping ahead to what she needed to do inside. As they trudged through the deepening snow back to the house, she sent up a silent prayer her skills would help heal Travis.

Inside, Eliza directed Spencer and Billy to take Travis into the same room where she'd treated Tom's broken arm. Rachel hurried in behind them, ready to assist however she could.

With Rachel's help, Eliza carefully removed what remained of Travis's shirt and unwound the makeshift bandage. Even light pressure made Travis grit his teeth against the pain.

Examining him closely, Eliza's skilled fingers probed along his ribs, confirming at least two cracks on his left side.

"You were right not to move too much," she told Travis. "Cracked ribs can shift and do more damage if they aren't stabilized."

She and Rachel wrapped clean linen tightly around Travis's chest, immobilizing the damaged ribs. Eliza gave instructions on how to check the binding wasn't too tight.

With Spencer holding Travis upright, Rachel and Eliza wound the long strips firmly in place. Travis let out a relieved breath once it was done, the support easing some of the sharp pains.

“You’ll need to stay in bed for at least a week to give those ribs time to start knitting back together,” Eliza said in a commanding tone.

Travis nodded wearily. “I’m not going to argue with you, ma’am. I know broken bones need time to mend.”

Satisfied her new patient would follow orders, Eliza began putting away the supplies while Rachel made Travis comfortable.

The snow swirled outside the windows as Eliza made her way down the hall. The warmth of the kitchen enveloped her, the voices of the women a welcome change from the quiet sickroom.

She headed straight for the coffeepot warming on the wood stove, hoping the strong brew would clear the fatigue from her mind. As she lifted the cup to her lips, Spencer strode into the kitchen, careful not to track melting snow across the floorboards.

“How’s Travis faring?” he asked without preamble.

Eliza lowered her cup. “Resting for now. But he’ll need a week of bedrest at the very least.”

Spencer’s jaw tightened. “Travis would go pure crazy cooped up for a week.”

“Travis’s health is more important than his need to get outside.” She met his gaze. “Surely you can manage without him for now. Once he’s out of bed, it will be at least two more weeks before he’ll be able to do any work.”

Spencer crossed his arms, eyes narrowed. “Travis will be the first to tell you he’s not going to wait long. Ranch hands have a tendency to heal up fast as they can and get back to the job.”

Eliza bristled at his stubbornness. “And I’m sure many have ended up with complications from rushing their recovery. There are proper medical protocols to follow.”

Their terse conversation had drawn the attention of others in the kitchen. Hard glances shot between the women, tensions rising. Realizing her imperious tone could be off-putting, Eliza excused herself, muttering as she stalked back to the sick room.

She spent the rest of the day moving between Travis’s sickroom and the rest of the house, feeling the strain of her interactions with Spencer.

Eliza regretted their disagreement took place in front of others.

It had been apparent the women sided more with Spencer than with her.

Their courtesy remained, but an unspoken standoff simmered beneath the surface.

As the daylight faded and the workday ended, Eliza sensed the gulf widening between herself and the folk of this wild land she found herself in.

Spencer’s world felt, at once, familiar and foreign, their clashing views on frontier living evident.

She retired after supper, pondering how to bridge the divide.

The next morning dawned clear but bitterly cold. The sun emerged during breakfast, so by the time Billy carried her bags outside, the temperature had warmed enough to make the ride to town bearable.

She’d planned to ride along in the wagon to Splendor for supplies and to send a telegram to her parents. Waking, she’d made the decision to pack and return to the St.

James Hotel. It was her bad luck Spencer would be driving the wagon.

Bundling herself against the icy wind as Spencer hitched the horses to the wagon, she rushed back inside to avoid the brooding silence. And to, once again, thank Rachel and Ginny for their hospitality. As she expected, both women had been gracious, inviting her to return.

Eliza climbed gingerly into the creaking wagon, arranging her skirts while avoiding Spencer's eyes. He flicked the reins, and they jolted forward, the horses' hooves crunching through the frozen ruts.

Neither spoke as the wagon rolled and pitched its way toward town, the frosty countryside glinting past. She studied Spencer's stony profile. His jaw was clenched, eyes fixed ahead. The chill between them felt colder than the winter wind.

When they reached Splendor, Spencer pulled up at the hotel. He stepped down and wordlessly helped her to the ground before carrying Eliza's luggage inside. She followed, her tension easing as her boots echoed on the wooden floorboards.

He deposited her bags with the clerk, touched the brim of his hat, his expression unreadable, and strode out without a glance back. Eliza watched him go, an unexpected pang in her chest. With a shake of her head, she turned to arrange for the telegram to her parents.

After relaxing and eating lunch, she decided to enjoy the warmer afternoon weather. Eliza made her way along the boardwalk toward the mercantile. A young boy rushed up to her, waving a piece of paper.

"Ma'am? Are you Miss Gladstone?"

"I am."

“This message is for you. It’s from the docs.” He handed her the slip, tipped his cap, and dashed off again.

Her brows furrowed. “The docs?” she muttered. “Wait a moment, young man.”

When he turned around, she held out a coin. “Thank you for the message.”

He flashed a huge smile, took the coin, and rushed back down the boardwalk.

She scanned the message. It was from Doctors Clay McCord and Drake Ralston, inviting her to join them for supper at the Eagle’s Nest restaurant that evening. Intrigued, she continued on to gather her supplies, pondering what they wished to discuss.

Exiting the Splendor Emporium, Eliza spotted the boy who’d brought her the message. “Boy?”

He turned and waved when he recognized her. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Would you be available to deliver a reply to the doctors at the clinic?”

Nodding eagerly, he took the paper she held out, along with another coin, and ran off.

Chuckling, Eliza stood on the boardwalk, watching as he disappeared around a corner. She continued her walk toward the mercantile, stopping when she realized it would require her to cross the foot-deep muddy street.

Deciding to try again tomorrow, she entered the boardinghouse restaurant, craving a slice of Suzanne’s pie. As she sipped coffee and ate the delicious pie, Eliza watched as soft flakes of snow drifted to the ground. She hoped it would ease and not worsen over the next few hours.

Dressed in her best skirt and blouse, Eliza entered the lantern-lit interior of the Eagle's Nest. She spotted the doctors when they stood to welcome her to their table. Clay and Drake offered smiles as she approached.

"So glad you could join us, Doctor Gladstone," Clay said, holding out her chair. "I'm Clay McCord, and this is Drake Ralston."

"It's a pleasure, gentlemen. Please call me Eliza."

Over hearty helpings of expertly seasoned buffalo stew and warm buttermilk biscuits, the men explained the origins of the Splendor Clinic, how the town had grown, and their need for another physician.

Answering her questions, she couldn't miss the pride both men had in the clinic and their work. She also didn't detect any hesitancy about working with a woman, a refreshing attitude after dealing with so many doctors in New York who refused to consider her a trained professional.

"We could certainly use a doctor of your skills and dedication," Drake concluded. He and Clay watched her expectantly.

Eliza sat back, considering the offer. "I'm honored, gentlemen. As I said, I'm in Splendor because the pass to California is closed. However, I'd like to see the clinic, if I may. Then I shall give you my answer."

As they continued their conversation, Gabe rushed to their table. "Apologies for the interruption, but there's been an attack on a wagon train just east of town. I've got over a dozen injured, some critical. They're at the clinic. We need your help."

McCord and Ralston exchanged grim looks. "We're on our way," Clay said. He turned to Eliza. "Eliza, would you care to assist us?"

She was already standing. “Absolutely. Let’s go quickly.”

They rushed out to Gabe’s wagon. As they jolted down the rutted road, he gave them details of how the Crow ambush happened less than a mile from Splendor.

“Gunshots were heard by several people in town. I heard them, too. By the time I grabbed some men and rode out to the wagons, the Crow party had disappeared. Morgan Wheeler rode back into town and got Noah’s wagon. We loaded the injured and took them to the clinic.”

At the chaotic scene, Eliza steeled herself at the sight of bloodied, moaning people. She joined the doctors assessing injuries, working to staunch bleeding and splint broken bones. Despite the horrific wounds, Eliza felt energized.

As the long night continued, the doctors saved all but one elderly man who didn’t die from his wounds. His heart gave out while the doctors were treating him.

They agreed to a rotating schedule with two doctors always at the clinic.

Eliza returned to the St. James exhausted but invigorated. She’d rest for five hours, then return to the clinic. As she entered her room, she reflected on the injured settlers and how satisfying it had felt to utilize her medical skills to help them.

Undressing, she sat on the edge of the bed, thinking over the offer from the doctors. The frontier clinic would allow her to continue practicing medicine and make a real difference in people’s lives. She had seen the great need today.

Eliza knew accepting the position would mean giving up her original plan to travel farther west. It was a decision she refused to make without careful consideration.

Perhaps after a few hours of sleep, she’d feel up to thinking through the positives and

negatives. She yawned, laid back on the bed, and closed her eyes.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Eliza awoke a few hours later, feeling refreshed and eager to return to the clinic. After dressing, she headed downstairs to the hotel restaurant for a quick breakfast. She arranged for a ride to the clinic, donning the heaviest coat she brought and boots she'd purchased when arriving in Splendor.

She stepped through the clinic doors after stomping her boots on the outside stoop. Surveying the room with a critical eye, she cataloged the patients sleeping on cots. Several cots were empty, blankets neatly folded and placed at one end.

Clay McCord walked down the stairs, looking tired and ready for rest. "Morning, Eliza. I hope you slept well."

"I did, thank you." Eliza gestured at the vacant cots. "It seems you've discharged some of our patients already."

"Just the most stable ones. Noah Brandt came by with his wagon first thing and took them back to the wagon train."

Eliza nodded, appeased by the explanation. "How many were left here?"

"Eight. Of those, I'd estimate at least four will be able to return to their families within the next day or two. The rest will take longer to heal before they should leave."

"Why don't you come upstairs for some coffee while the rest of them sleep," Clay suggested, his gaze scanning the waiting area, which had become their hospital ward. "Carrie MacKenzie, one of our nurses, has been helping me watch over them."

Eliza agreed and followed him up the narrow staircase to the second floor consisting of three more examination rooms, a tiny kitchen, and a large office.

As Clay busied himself making coffee, Eliza's thoughts turned to Spencer Haglund. Something about the stubborn, prideful man intrigued her, though she couldn't pinpoint why. He seemed to disapprove of her. Or he simply disliked her. She sensed a deeper complexity beneath his gruff exterior.

Eliza sighed, shaking away the distracting thoughts. She had patients to focus on now. The coffee Clay handed her was hot and bracing. She took several sips, steeling herself for the day ahead.

Taking the stairs back down to the first floor, Eliza followed Clay to check on the sleeping patients. As she and Clay walked quietly among the cots, Eliza glanced into the examination room where a man had been treated.

"Where's the older gentleman with the leg injury?" she asked.

"He was the wagon master. And he isn't old, though I agree he looks it. His name is Carter McCallister, and he's thirty. He was able to provide some information to the sheriff before he discharged himself."

"Excuse me. Did you say he left without your approval?"

"I did. He told Gabe more about the attack and identified the raiders as Crow Indians. They were on a hill overlooking the trail between Big Pine and Splendor. McCallister watched them for at least an hour before they attacked. He's decided the wagon train will stay camped right outside of town for the winter.

I believe he said there were twelve wagons left out of twenty that left Kansas City. "

Eliza's brow furrowed. She reasoned if the Crow raiders attacked settlers, they might try to raid Splendor.

"After McCallister spoke to Gabe, he got up and walked out."

They looked up as footsteps sounded on the stairs. Drake Ralston emerged, looking bleary-eyed.

"You're up," Clay said. "I was just about to head home for a few hours of sleep. Eliza will stay as long as we need her."

Drake nodded, looking at her. "We aren't going to turn away your help."

After Clay left, she and Carrie ensured each patient had water and was as comfortable as possible. Eliza was impressed with the nurse's knowledge and ability to make each person feel secure and safe.

Gabe Evans greeted each man as they filtered into the jail. They were town leaders, including Stan Petermann, Horace Clausen, the bank president, Nick Barnett, Noah Brandt, and Silas Jenks, the owner of the lumberyard. He got right to the reason for the meeting.

"Gentlemen, we need to discuss protection for Splendor. I'm sure you've all heard about the Crow raiding party attacking the wagon train." They all nodded. "It's likely they'll target more settlements in the area. Possibly make a raid on the town."

Horace cleared his throat. "What's our next move then, Gabe? We can't allow them to ransack our town."

"We need to increase security around Splendor. I'll speak with my deputies about adding to the number of men on night patrols. Nick, Noah. What do you think about

setting up a town militia?”

“We’ve done it before,” Noah said. “Most of those men are still around.”

“Nick?”

“Noah’s right, Gabe. There are still a lot of men who fought in the war around here. Maybe a little older, but I wouldn’t bet against them when it comes to fighting for their town.”

The group turned when the door opened, Spencer Haglund rushed in, breathing hard.

“Spencer, what’s wrong?” Gabe asked.

“Crow war party hit the ranch at first light. Broke into the root cellar, stole some supplies. Bull tried to stop them and got winged by a bullet. Rachel patched him up.”

Horace and Stan erupted into concerned murmurs. Gabe held up a hand for quiet. “Is everyone else safe? Are the Crow still there?”

“No, they rode off when the men opened fire. Dax sent me to warn the town. We’re all right for now.”

Gabe let out a relieved sigh. “A wagon train was attacked east of town late yesterday. Quite a few casualties. We took several to the clinic. Clay and Drake got to work on them. The female doc, Eliza Gladstone, is helping them out. It was a good thing she was in town. We’re talking about ways to fortify the town.

You’re welcome to join us. I’d like Dax and Luke to know what is going on here.”

Spencer hesitated, thinking of the woman he’d treated so poorly yet couldn’t stop

thinking about. “I’ve got a quick stop to make first. It won’t take long.”

He hurried back outside before Gabe could object.

He leaped onto his horse and made for the clinic, his heart pounding.

What would he even say to Eliza? Shaking his head, he decided the words would come when he saw her.

Stopping in front of the clinic, he didn’t attempt to dismount as he rethought the reason for wanting to see her.

After a few more moments of anxious hesitation outside the clinic, Spencer reined his horse around and headed back to the sheriff’s office, leaving his business with Eliza unfinished for now.

Entering the jail, he saw Gabe and the others studying a map spread out on the desk. Gabe glanced up.

“We’re organizing patrols and planning for our best shooters to watch from various locations in town. The Crow raiding party attacked the wagon train last night, then the Pelletier ranch this morning. They’re roving, looking for opportunities.”

“They seem to be targeting places where they can steal food,” Nick said.

“Dax believes lack of food is why they tried to raid the ranch,” Spencer said, rubbing the back of his neck. “What doesn’t make sense is there’s still plenty of game, and only the shallowest streams and rivers are frozen. They shouldn’t be starving this early in the winter.”

“I’ve got to agree with you,” Noah said.

“It doesn’t figure, yet that’s what they’re doing.

The Crow don’t seem to be attacking to kill off people and take hostages.

There were no deaths at the ranch or from the raid on the wagon train.

The only death was an elderly man who died when his heart gave out.”

Gabe nodded. “Whatever the reason, we need to be prepared.”

When they were finished, Spencer mounted his horse, Cicero, and reined around toward Redemption’s Edge. Reconsidering, he turned back, deciding once more to speak with Eliza.

As he approached the clinic, his stomach twisted in knots. Knowing about her selfless actions with the injured travelers stirred something in him—respect, admiration, and something more he dared not name.

He reined to a stop outside the clinic. Through the window, he caught a glimpse of Eliza tending to a patient. Her dark hair was pinned up, with a few loose strands framing her face. The sight made Spencer’s heart constrict.

What was he doing here? Eliza likely wanted nothing to do with him. He was a simple cowboy, while she was a highly educated, independent woman. Still, he didn’t want the hostility between them to continue.

Taking a deep breath, he dismounted and looped Cicero’s reins over the hitching post. His boots sounded on the wooden steps as he approached the clinic door.

As his hand reached for the handle, the door swung open. He found himself face to face with Eliza, whose eyes widened in surprise. For a long moment, they simply

stared at each other.

“Doctor Gladstone,” he said, his voice rough. “I wanted to talk to you, if you’ve got a minute.”

She gazed at him steadily, one hand on the doorframe. Spencer shifted under her scrutiny, wondering if she would turn him away.

“I suppose I can spare a few minutes.” She stepped aside in silent invitation.

He ducked his head and walked past her into the clinic. When he met Eliza’s gaze again, her expression was guarded but patient.

“I had no right to question your orders concerning Travis. I had no call to be judgmental, especially considering what you did for Tom and Travis. It’s just, I know what the men are like, and they don’t take to bed rest well.

No matter what you said, they were going to get back to work on their own schedule, not yours. ”

Eliza studied him for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Spencer resisted the urge to fidget.

Sobering, he met her gaze earnestly. “I truly am sorry, ma’am.”

She gave a small nod. “Apology accepted, Mr. Haglund. And I am coming to understand how much there is to learn about the people living out here. They possess a different temperament from what I’m used to back home. The fact is, they’re nothing like what I expected.”

“No, ma’am. I expect they aren’t.” He fingered the brim of his hat, glancing behind

her when a patient called for her. “I’ll let you get back to work. Thank you for hearing me out.”

While tending to her patient, Eliza watched Spencer mount and ride away through the front window, a mix of emotions swirling within her. His apology had been unexpected. He’d seemed truly remorseful, his tawny eyes earnest as he met her gaze.

Still, she couldn’t help but feel guarded. Spencer Haglund was an enigma to her in many ways. One moment, he was brash and irritating. The next, he was almost charming.

Beneath the rugged exterior, she sensed a complex man, one who’d seen his share of hardship. In unguarded moments, she caught glimpses of a deep well of emotion in his eyes.

What surprised her most was how strongly she was drawn to him, despite their clashes. Or perhaps because of them. He was a challenge, a force to be reckoned with.

Never had she met a man so maddening and yet so intriguing. With a sigh, Eliza pushed such thoughts aside. Now was not the time for idle fancies, not with lives depending on her. She had work to do and decisions to make.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Julia rushed outside to stand under the cover of the boardwalk. Opening the telegram from her friend back east, her heart pounded, and her hands trembled with anticipation. She smoothed out the wrinkled paper, took a deep breath, and began to read.

Her eyes widened in surprise as she scanned the contents.

The telegram revealed Lucien's ex-wife had passed away several years earlier, leaving their daughter to be raised by an aunt in Chicago.

Julia's friend had learned the daughter worked as a nanny for a wealthy family and would attempt to discover her location.

Julia's mind raced as she processed the news. She wondered if Lucien knew about his ex-wife's death or his daughter living in Chicago. She debated whether to tell him or wait to hear back.

Folding the telegram, she tucked it into her apron pocket. She'd wait to hear back from her friend first to confirm the details. For now, she resolved to keep this knowledge to herself until the full truth came to light.

Julia crossed the street to sit on the bench outside the Dixie and gazed out at the majestic mountains to the west. The cool breeze ruffled her hair, doing little to calm her swirling thoughts.

She felt fortunate to have the job at the Dixie.

It was owned by Gabe Evans and Nick Barnett, the same as the Wild Rose.

Both employed female servers who were encouraged to talk to the customers and make them feel comfortable.

Unlike Finn's or Ruby's Grand Palace, neither offered anything beyond drink, cards, and conversation.

The sound of approaching hoofbeats stirred Julia from her thoughts. She stood, her heart pounding in her chest, recognizing the man who'd left her with money and an apology the previous year.

Booker Tillman rode down the center of the street, mud splattering his pant legs and boots. Spotting Julia, he reined his large, black gelding toward her, his gaze never leaving her face.

Dismounting stiffly, he stepped up on the boardwalk and stopped. Julia covered the distance between them, walking into her brother's open arms.

Resting his chin on the top of her head, he looked at an older couple, bundled up against the chill, who stared at them as they walked past. Her arms wrapped around him as a tear rolled down one cheek.

Dropping his arms, he stepped back and swiped the tear from her face. "I tried to get here sooner, but the weather kept me in Bozeman longer than expected."

"Is Lucien on his way back?" she asked.

"He should be about a week behind me."

She nodded. "Are you hungry?"

“I could eat. Do they have food in there?” He looked past her to the Dixie.

“No. We’ll go to the boardinghouse. Come on.” She slid her arm through his. “I’m so glad you’re here. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too. But I had to go.”

“I know. Is everything all right now?”

“Should be. Lucien took care of everything.”

Julia considered what he’d said, wondering if he was right, and if Lucien had been able to make the year-long nightmare go away.

Deputy Tucker Nolan slapped the reins, keeping the wagon moving through the icy mud on the road to the orphanage. The back was filled with the supplies Martha Santori had ordered from Stan Petermann, including two large sacks of flour and another of sugar.

He’d placed his rifle beside him and tucked his coat behind the holster holding his six-shooter.

His gaze scanned the road around him, looking for any sign of the Crow raiding party, though he doubted they’d come after a lone wagon.

Still, he breathed a sigh of relief when the orphanage came into view.

Slowing the horses to a stop near the steps, he jumped down, grabbing one of the flour sacks from under the protective tarp. He settled it over one shoulder. Before starting up the steps, he turned in a circle, spotting no one lurking in the nearby bushes.

The door opened as he lifted his hand to knock, a little girl holding it open for him. “I saw you come, Mr. Deputy.”

He chuckled. “Well, thank you. This bag is heavy.” It wasn’t, but he smiled when she giggled, then ran down the hall toward the kitchen.

“Afternoon, Mrs. Johnson.” Tucker set the sack down near the pantry. “I’ve brought the supplies from town for you.”

“Bless you, Deputy Nolan.” She wiped flour-dusted hands on her apron. “I’m grateful for the help.”

“Stan Petermann heard from Gabe about me coming this way and asked if I could bring everything. I told him I was happy to do it. How is the job going?”

“No complaints.” She made it sound as if it wasn’t important to her, though Tucker knew how much she’d wanted the work.

They turned when Martha Santori swept into the room, her skirts swishing. “Hello, Tucker. Thank you for delivering our order.” Her smile was warm, but Tucker detected a guardedness in her eyes.

“Not a problem.”

“Thank you again for suggesting Alice apply for the cook position. We are thrilled to have her with us.” Martha shot a look at her. “With more children arriving, we need all the help we can get.”

Tucker nodded, anxious for the conversation to end. His gaze kept darting outside, hoping to catch a glimpse of Rose, who was watching the children who played outside.

Martha noticed his distraction. "I can have the older boys unload the rest of the supplies if you'd like to speak with Rose."

Tucker flushed. "No, I'll get them. I'm just watching out for trouble."

"Do you believe the raiding party could come here?" Martha asked.

"You can never be too careful, though I doubt they'd come here. I'd better get the rest of the supplies inside before more snow falls."

When finished unloading the sacks and boxes, Tucker stepped out the back door. Leaning against a post, he watched a few children run around while others threw snowballs.

Rose's laughter floated on the breeze as she spoke to a group of younger children. Their faces were flushed from play. As she led the group toward the back porch, she spotted Tucker waiting at the top of the steps.

"All right, children, inside with you," she said, herding them up the steps, a grin lit up her face.

A few kids said hello to Tucker while others paid him no mind as they scampered past him into the house. Rose lingered behind, tucking back a strand of hair.

"Afternoon, Rose," he said, touching the brim of his hat.

"Tucker," Rose greeted him. An awkward silence followed, both of them suddenly tongue-tied.

He cleared his throat. "I, uh, meant to ask if you heard about the wagon train?"

Rose's eyes widened. "Yes, Martha told me. I heard one man was killed."

"Doc McCord said he was elderly, and his heart gave out," Tucker told her. "The wagon master identified the attackers as Crow raiders. They took supplies."

Rose shivered. "How awful. We'll have to be extra vigilant with the children."

Tucker nodded. "The sheriff has everyone on alert and increased the night patrols."

"Well, we sure appreciate what you're doing." She wanted to say more, but the words lodged in her throat. With a nervous smile, she turned and walked inside.

Tucker watched Rose disappear into the orphanage, his heart swelling. He'd been sweet on her for a while but hadn't worked up the courage to say anything.

With a sigh, he turned and headed for the wagon. Before climbing onto the bench, he paused, looking back at the home sheltering over a dozen young souls. If the Crow were on the warpath, those kids would be sitting ducks.

Tucker debated whether he should ride out and scout around or go directly to Sheriff Evans. His gut told him they needed to shore up defenses before the Crow could strike again.

He settled onto the wagon bench, slapped the reins, and turned toward town. Sheriff Evans would know what to do.

As he made his way along the muddy road, Tucker hoped the sheriff had a plan, including the orphanage. There were few other people Tucker wanted to protect more than Rose and those defenseless children.

By the time he returned the wagon to Noah's livery, Tucker's jaw was set. Striding to

the jail, he stepped inside. Gabe looked up from his desk, setting down his coffee cup.

“Afternoon, Tucker. Back from the orphanage?”

Tucker nodded, unsure of how to broach the sensitive subject. “Yes, sir.”

“Kind of you to help out. Did you see any sign of the raiders?”

“Nothing. Doesn’t mean they weren’t out there, watching.

” Tucker sucked in a breath. “While I was there, I got to thinking. With the Crow attacking the Pelletier ranch and the wagon train, those children could be in danger. I know it’s remote.

They seem to be going after places where they’d find a large store of foodstuffs. ”

Gabe’s face darkened. “I’ve been pondering the same thing. We need to tighten security out there, maybe get some men stationed out there. The problem is, there aren’t many men to spare.”

Tucker sighed with relief. “What do you want me to do?”

Before Gabe could respond, Bernie Griggs rushed inside, waving a telegram in the air. He sucked in a lungful of air, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Got an important message for you, Sheriff.” He handed it to Gabe, who read it, then handed the telegram to Tucker.

Reading it, he nodded. “Sterling says the raiding party is hitting ranches northeast of Big Pine.” Tucker looked at Gabe. “That’s over a hundred miles from here. This means they’re moving away from us. We might not need any men at the orphanage.”

“Do you want to send a reply to Sheriff Sterling?” Bernie asked Gabe.

Gabe thought for a moment. “Not right now. Thanks, Bernie.”

“Sure thing, Sheriff.”

Watching him go, he looked up at Tucker. “For now, we’re going to see if they’re spotted around here. It may be they’ve given up on Splendor and will continue moving northeast.”

“Maybe.” But Tucker wasn’t so sure. “Do you mind if I ride to the orphanage every day to make sure the children and women are all right?”

“I think it’s a good idea. Stagger the times to go and take Jonas with you.”

“All right.”

“The Crow attack on the wagon train has a lot of people spooked.”

Tucker gave a slow nod. “Everyone’s ready for Christmas. It’s hard to get into the spirit when you’re worried about possible danger.”

“The people of Splendor are resilient. They’re going to move forward regardless of the threat of more raids.” Gabe stood, walking around his desk to look out the front window. “I do believe this is going to end up being our best Christmas yet.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Spencer sat in an armchair in the Pelletiers' living room, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, while Dorinda occupied the settee across from him. As the two drank coffee, they enjoyed the fire burning in the fireplace several feet away.

She'd brought Joel out to spend time with his uncle and the other children on the ranch. Rachel had left mid-morning to meet a friend for lunch, giving Dorinda and Spencer time to talk.

"I know it was hard on you after I left home," Spencer began. "Leaving the way I did, without a proper goodbye."

She gave him a sad smile. "You don't need to explain. I know how trapped you felt there."

He stared into the cup of coffee he cradled in his hands. "The church, the different expectations. I couldn't adjust from our old church to the Mormon faith. I respected Pa and Ma's decision, but it wasn't mine." He shook his head. "Doesn't excuse me for running off like I did, Dorie."

"We were both so young then. It's in the past. Where'd you go after leaving home?"

"After Salt Lake, I drifted from one place to another. I worked ranches in Idaho, then Wyoming, and finally made my way up to Montana." His eyes took on a faraway look. "Never could settle, always moving on after a year or two."

She studied her brother's face, seeing the toll those hard, rootless years had taken.

He took a deep breath. “In Wyoming, I met a woman named Helen. We married in a rush. Both of us knew we were in love.” He gave a remorseful chuckle. “Lasted less than a year before she took ill. Doc said it was pneumonia, nothing could be done.”

His voice grew thick with emotion. “Helen died within days. I was too poor to afford a proper burial. I had to put her in a pauper’s grave.” Spencer lowered his head, avoiding Dorinda’s gaze. “Maybe if I’d gotten the doctor sooner...or maybe if we’d left Laramie for Montana sooner, as we’d planned...”

Dorinda moved to sit beside him, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You mustn’t torture yourself over what could have been. I’m sure you did all you could for her.”

Spencer shook his head, a lone tear tracking down one cheek. Embarrassed at the unusual show of emotion, he swiped it away.

“The past is done, let it go,” she urged. “Helen wouldn’t want you living under a cloud of guilt.”

After a long moment, he lifted his head and gave her a small nod. “You’re right. I know it in my head. It’s just hard to convince my heart sometimes.”

She gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. “Maybe it’s time you opened yourself up to finding love again. Eliza seems a sensible woman. And quite pretty, too.”

Spencer huffed out a laugh. “She’s not for the likes of me. Eliza’s an educated city woman, and far smarter than I’ll ever be.” Still, his sister’s words sparked something inside him.

Brother and sister sat in contemplative silence for a long time, watching the fire and thinking about what-ifs.

Eliza settled back into a chair next to Rachel, glancing around as she always did at the beautiful furnishings in the Eagle's Nest restaurant.

"More tea?" Rachel lifted the pot she'd insisted the server leave, her kind eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Yes, thank you." Eliza held out her cup. As Rachel poured, Eliza gathered her courage. "The town doctors have asked me to join their practice."

Rachel's eyebrows shot up. "Well, that's quite an honor after only a short acquaintance."

"It is." She twisted her fingers together. "But to settle in a town so unlike anything I've ever known? It's a daunting prospect."

"I understand," Rachel said. "Still, Splendor grows more every year. Seems we're always searching for another doctor. You'd be a true blessing to us all."

"You're too kind. I admit, the thought of blazing a new trail does intrigue me." She hesitated. "And there are some other factors weighing on my decision."

"Other factors?"

Pink tinged Eliza's cheeks. "My initial plan was to travel to California and spend some time there before making another commitment. Instead, and I mean no offense, I'm stranded here.

"She took a sip of tea. "Your Mr. Haglund is another factor." At Rachel's odd look, she smiled.

"I simply meant he seems an intriguing fellow, though I hardly know anything about

him.” She paused a moment.

“The truth is, we’ve gotten off to a bad start.

I’d like a chance to put the situation right. ”

Rachel hid a smile. “Spencer keeps to himself, but he’s one of the finest men I know.” She grew thoughtful. “He left home at seventeen to find his own way. Worked his way across the frontier before landing here.”

Eliza absorbed this. “He must have such stories to tell.”

“He does,” Rachel said. “Spencer’s worth knowing. If you’ve the patience for it.” Finishing her tea, she set the cup aside. “You should come back for another visit. We’ll be decorating our tree tomorrow. We set food out, and everyone eats while we work. It’s a fun time.”

Eliza nodded slowly, tipped her cup to take another sip. Perhaps she would get a chance to correct misconceptions. After all, she had nothing but time.

Spencer leaned back in his chair and exhaled, his shoulders relaxing. “I do find Eliza interesting. I also find her overbearing, stubborn, bossy, and arrogant.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I doubt she finds me much different.”

Dorinda laughed. “You are honest. Have you thought how you and Eliza might be able to help each other erase your shared flaw?”

His head fell back on a laugh. “It never occurred to me.”

“It was a thought.” Her voice softened. “The past is done, Spencer. It’s time you started living again.”

He stared at the flickering fire, turmoil in his eyes. At length, he looked at her. “I have a good life here, Dorie. I’m not sure I need anyone else in it.” His mouth quirked. “Eliza would be a lot of work. I won’t go out of my way to track her down, but if I see her, I’ll be cordial.”

“Thank you.” She stood, bending to kiss his cheek. “You’ve a good heart, Spencer. Allow Eliza to see all the wonderful parts of you.”

He huffed a laugh as she left. “We’ll see.”

After following her outside to round up Joel for the wagon ride to town, Spencer reflected on their conversation.

He’d become comfortable with his life at the ranch.

All the men got along, Pelletiers were good bosses, the food was excellent, and the job was to his liking.

Why bring an unknown into his life when everything was working fine?

Alone with his thoughts, Spencer sank back into brooding. He walked into the largest barn to toss hay into the stalls. It was work he could do while thinking about something else.

He pictured Eliza’s clear blue eyes and sharp wit. And domineering nature. She was used to throwing out orders and people jumping to comply. As Dorinda suggested, spending a little more time with her could help him understand her prickly nature.

Eliza glanced around the Pelletier ranch house the following afternoon, admiring the festive Christmas decorations. Popcorn and holly adorned the fireplace mantel while a large pine tree stood ready to be trimmed.

“I’m so glad you could come for another visit.” Rachel walked toward her from the hall.

“Thank you for sending a wagon for me. Billy is such an interesting man.”

Rachel nodded. “Yes, he is. He’s so worried about Shining Star. It’s a wonder he can keep his mind on his work.” She clasped her hands together. “We’ll be decorating the tree right after supper.”

Eliza smiled, pushing down a flutter of anticipation. “It looks wonderful already. I can’t wait to help.” She hesitated, clearing her throat. “Will Spencer be joining us?”

“Dorinda, Dutch, and Joel plan to come out from town. So, I imagine he’ll stop by.” Rachel gave her a knowing look.

Heat rose in Eliza’s cheeks. She busied herself examining a porcelain nativity set. “This is lovely, Rachel.”

“My parents sent it to us as a Christmas gift several years ago. It’s an exact match to the one in their home.”

Eliza continued to study the set, unable to recall anything so special in her parents’ home.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Eliza sat at the long dining table, pushing the remnants of supper around her plate.

The sound of conversations and laughter drifted around the dining room, but she barely noticed.

Her gaze kept straying to the empty place across from her, where Spencer had been expected to sit.

His absence tonight left an odd ache in her chest.

She nodded or answered when a question came her way, not wanting to appear disinterested.

With a sigh, she stood and carried her plate into the kitchen.

Rachel gave her a sympathetic smile as she set another plate of roast chicken on the table but didn't comment on Spencer's absence.

She knew Rachel suspected there were deeper feelings between them, though neither Eliza nor Spencer had spoken of it aloud.

When everyone finished eating and moved into the living room, she helped the women clear the table and clean the dishes. Returning to the dining room, she looked around, disappointed when Spencer still hadn't arrived.

Stepping out onto the front porch, Eliza drew her shawl tighter against the chill. The sun had dipped below the distant mountains long ago, casting the ranch in almost

total darkness. She watched as several of the men left the house to fetch boxes from the barn, their breath frosting the air.

Returning to the entry hall, she shrugged out of her shawl, draping it over a bench.

Ginny and a few other women emerged from the kitchen, arms laden with strings of popcorn and cranberries.

Despite herself, Eliza felt a spark of anticipation.

Christmastime was upon them, and the entire ranch was busy with preparations.

Footsteps sounded behind her, and she turned, pulse quickening. But it was several of the Pelletier children, their faces flushed from the cold. They darted past her, their excited laughter lightening her mood.

Eliza's breath caught at the sight of the open boxes.

Gold, green, and crimson bows, carved wooden ornaments, garlands, pinecones, and strings of popcorn and cranberries.

Near the base, Spencer knelt with a box of glass baubles, glancing up as she entered.

Their eyes met, and Eliza's heart stuttered.

How had he entered the house without her noticing?

Then Billy called for Spencer's help, and the moment passed. Spencer set down the ornament he was holding and walked over to help Billy move a heavy trunk closer to the tree. Eliza watched him as she wandered farther into the room, taking in the festive scene.

Little Charlotte Pelletier and Chloe Mason ran to a box of homemade ornaments, excited over the whittled wooden shapes, painted pinecones, and scraps of fabric tied with ribbon. The two three-year-olds found joy in all the Christmas activities.

“Look, Miss Eliza, I made this star!” Chloe held up a lopsided wooden star painted in bright colors.

Eliza smiled. “It’s wonderful, Chloe. Your star will look lovely on the tree.”

All around her, people were laughing and chatting as they continued decorating. Ginny stood on a stool hanging strands of cranberries while Rachel unwrapped a hand-carved horse with a wreath around its neck.

Dax and Luke climbed ladders to adorn the upper branches, trading good-natured teases as they worked. The air was filled with the spicy scent of pine and cinnamon from the hot, spiced cider.

Despite her conflicting thoughts over Spencer, Eliza felt herself getting caught up in the excitement. There was such joy and community here, which she’d rarely experienced while growing up. She joined Charlotte and Chloe in searching through the ornaments, oohing and aahing over their creations.

“You hang this one, Miss Eliza.” Charlotte handed her a little yarn snowman. Eliza found an empty spot halfway up the tree and carefully hung the ornament.

“It looks perfect.” Eliza smiled down at Charlotte’s beaming face. For a moment, she let go of her worries and enjoyed being part of this group of people brought together by shared experiences and love.

As the tree decorating continued, Rachel moved to the piano and began playing “Deck the Halls.” Her energetic music filled the room, making toes tap and heads bob

in time. Rachel continued playing another carol and joined those singing. Eliza couldn't resist chiming in on the third song.

Rachel turned in surprise. "Why, Eliza, what a beautiful voice you have."

She blushed at the compliment. "Oh, I'm not talented," she demurred.

"Nonsense, you have a gorgeous soprano."

Soon, she was singing every Christmas carol Rachel played, her crystalline voice soaring over the room. Everyone paused their decorating to listen in delight as Eliza sang verse after verse, backed by Rachel's skillful playing.

Her voice rang with purity and passion. Though she hadn't sung much growing up or since leaving home, singing with the others made her spirit soar. For the first time since arriving, Eliza believed there might be a place for her in this remote community.

Lost in the music, she didn't notice Spencer watching her, an odd expression on his handsome face.

When Rachel began playing "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," he moved to stand beside Eliza.

His rich baritone joined in, a little uncertain at first, then stronger as he gained confidence.

Their voices blended as they sang, creating a magical moment of connection between them.

Two disparate souls had found common ground in a simple song. The rest of the

room faded away until it seemed they were the only two people present.

When the last note died away, Eliza came back to herself with a little start. She realized her hand had found Spencer's where it rested on the piano bench. His larger hand gently squeezed hers before letting go.

Eliza watched as Spencer said his goodnights and exited the ranch house, heading back to the bunkhouse. She'd hoped their shared moment singing together might lead to more conversation, more time in each other's company. Instead, he hadn't even acknowledged her as he left.

With a sigh, Eliza bid her own goodnights before retiring upstairs. She readied for bed, though sleep didn't come easy, her thoughts lingering on Spencer and the powerful connection she'd felt earlier. Drifting off, her last image was of a tall man with a beautiful baritone voice.

She was startled awake by a commotion outside. Shouts and running footsteps disturbed the predawn quiet. Throwing on a robe, Eliza hurried to the window and peered out.

Ranch hands gathered by the barn, saddling horses despite the early hour. She spotted Spencer tightening the cinch on his bay gelding, his hat pulled low and his expression grim. Bull and Billy were also preparing to ride out, as were Dax and Luke.

Her pulse quickened. Something was wrong for the men to display such urgency. Perhaps those cattle rustlers were back.

As the men mounted up and rode off, she hurried downstairs, tying her robe as she stepped outside onto the front porch. The icy morning air raised goosebumps on her skin. Rachel and Ginny were already there, wrapped in shawls and watching the men ride off.

“What’s happened?” Eliza asked.

Rachel turned, her expression grim. “More cattle were taken in the night. At least a dozen head.”

“Do they know who’s responsible?”

“Not yet,” Rachel said. “They hope to find out.”

The three women stood in silence for a moment, gazing out at the empty yard. Ginny broke the quiet. “Well, no use fretting. We’ve got gifts to finish for those orphans.”

Eliza followed Rachel and Ginny back inside, where materials were spread across the dining table.

Glad to find a purpose, Eliza set to work on the dress for a little girl’s doll.

She focused on her sewing, carefully stitching the floral print dress.

As she worked, Rachel and Ginny chatted about preparations for the upcoming Christmas activities.

“I hope we don’t have the kind of blizzards as came through the last two Christmases,” Ginny wondered aloud.

Rachel nodded. “We can always hope. If one comes through, Dax has already said we’re staying home. He doesn’t want to get stuck in town.”

“What about your plans, Eliza? I hope you plan to be here for Christmas Eve and Day,” Ginny said.

She looked up from her sewing. “Oh, I don’t want to intrude.”

“You wouldn’t be intruding, and we’d love to have you,” Rachel said.

“Well, if you’re sure, I’d love to spend Christmas here.”

“Wonderful!” Rachel and Ginny said in unison.

Warmth spread through Eliza as she continued her work on the doll’s dress. The three fell into silence as each concentrated on what they were doing until Ginny looked at Eliza, a question in her eyes.

“You must have gotten offers from hospitals all over after graduating from medical school,” Ginny said. “Why’d you decide to come out here?”

Eliza paused, considering how much of herself to reveal. “I needed a change. A chance to help people who really need me, not just those with money.”

Rachel nodded in understanding. “Well, folks around here sure are grateful you decided to stay, if only for the winter. The town has grown so much since I moved here. A third doctor would be a blessing for everyone.”

“Whatever you decide to do next, you’ll always have a place with us,” Ginny added.

Eliza looked away, forcing away the tears burning at the back of her eyes. She hadn’t expected such heartfelt acceptance.

“Thank you,” she said, a catch in her throat.

The women continued their work through lunch and into the afternoon. By four o’clock, Rachel became concerned, expecting the men to return by now.

Noise from outside drew their attention. The women hurried to the window, peering out to see the men reining up near the barn. Relief flooded through Eliza at the sight of them whole and unharmed.

Spencer slid down from his saddle, his boots hitting the packed snow.

He patted Cicero's neck before looping the reins around the hitching post. As he removed the saddlebags, Spencer felt someone watching him.

He glanced up to see Eliza in the window with Rachel and Ginny, her gaze fixed on him for a brief moment before she turned away.

His heart gave an odd flutter. They hadn't spoken since he'd rushed out of the ranch house the night before in an attempt to hide his growing feelings for her.

He'd missed her quiet presence after he'd left her at the St. James a week earlier.

No matter how prickly she could be, his days felt emptier without her.

Spencer shoved those feelings aside now, as he'd done last night. Whatever this was between them, it was foolish to pursue. Eliza deserved better than some rough ranch hand. She'd be moving on to California soon, and he doubted she'd ever return.

With a resigned sigh, Spencer headed for the bunkhouse. Inside, he sank down on his bunk, dropping his head in his hands. He should be focused on the rustlers. Instead, all he could think about was Eliza. Her midnight hair, her eyes flashing like sapphires when she was riled up, which was often.

Spencer groaned. He was acting like a lovestruck cowboy. Still, he couldn't deny the emptiness settling inside him when he pictured Eliza leaving, the ranch returning to its monotonous routine.

For the first time in years, he'd allowed himself to consider there could be more to his life than working cattle. He'd begun to imagine a life with someone at his side. He had to be realistic. There was no use longing for things he could never have.

Spencer brooded, staring at the flickering lantern, its dim light piercing the darkness enveloping him. Much the same as the faltering hope in his heart. Hope that refused to be extinguished, despite all his efforts to smother it.

Spencer rose with a weary sigh, splashing some water on his face from the wash basin. He had to pull himself together. There were more pressing matters than his personal woes. They'd recovered the missing cattle, but the rustlers were still out there, waiting for another chance.

After eating a large helping of the stew and biscuits the women had delivered, he stepped outside, surveying the yard. All was quiet now, but the threat still lurked in the shadows. The rustlers were growing bolder, and he feared what they might try next.

As Spencer walked toward the barn to check on the horses, light from the living room of the ranch house caught his attention. Glancing toward it, he saw a silhouette pass by the large front windows. Eliza.

He started to turn away, to force himself to stop staring after her like a lovelorn fool. Something made him pause.

An uneasy prickle at the back of his neck, a sense of foreboding clawing at him.

Spencer narrowed his eyes, peering into the darkness surrounding the house. His hand dropped to rest on the butt of his revolver as his senses strained for any sign of movement, any hint of danger.

He began to stride toward the house, then stilled. A wisp of air passed by his head.

Spencer whirled, gun leaping into his hand at the sight of at least a dozen Crow warriors.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Then Spencer looked again at the men on horseback before him, jolting at a new revelation. They weren't Crow. If he wasn't mistaken, they were from the Blackfoot village past the far northern border of the Pelletier property.

Spencer remained motionless, one hand on his six-shooter as he tracked the progress of the braves edging their horses toward him.

They were still some distance off when one of the Blackfoot warriors drew back his bow and let an arrow fly.

It whizzed past Spencer, the same as the previous arrow.

His gaze never left the approaching warriors.

Though his heart was pounding, his face remained impassive.

He would not give these men the satisfaction of seeing any trace of fear.

As the Blackfoot drew nearer, the front door of the ranch house swung open and Bull Mason emerged, boots thudding heavily on the wooden steps. He strode forward to meet the old man seated atop a beautifully marked pinto horse at the head of the party.

"Welcome, Running Bear." Bull held up a hand in greeting.

The older man inclined his head in acknowledgement. "It is good to see you, Bull Mason."

“Welcome, Running Bear,” said Dax, coming to stand beside Bull. Luke joined them as well, nodding politely to the Blackfoot chief.

Billy came down the porched steps and moved to Bull’s side. Running Bear’s eyes crinkled as he looked at the young man who was his daughter’s husband, and said something in Blackfoot, making Billy dip his head, a faint smile touching his lips.

Next to Running Bear was a younger warrior with a hard, brooding look on his face.

His lips were pressed in a firm line, and his dark eyes stared straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge the ranch men gathered before him.

Swift Bear, eldest son of Running Bear and older brother to Shining Star, showed his discomfort in every way possible.

Ignoring his son, Running Bear spoke again in halting English, his voice low and gravelly from age. “My people are hungry.”

Bull nodded solemnly. “We understand. The winter has been hard for everyone.”

“Another village joins ours. Too many mouths to feed now.”

Running Bear’s words highlighted the immense struggle his people were facing.

With the joining of another village, the already scarce food supplies had been stretched to the limit.

Hunger gnawed at the bellies of elders and children alike.

Even the strongest hunters were having trouble finding enough game to feed so many mouths.

The proud Blackfoot did not beg or plead, but their need was evident in the hollowness of their cheeks and the weary stoop of their shoulders.

Dax and Luke exchanged a glance. It was clear the Blackfoot were in dire need.

“We’ll help however we can,” said Dax. “You may take more cattle.” The Pelletiers had made a deal with Running Bear years earlier, allowing them to take up to three head of cattle each winter to feed their people.

Luke nodded. “We have stores of cornmeal and flour. You can take them back with you.”

“Please take the cornmeal and flour,” Dax urged Running Bear. “We have many canned and dried fruits, and vegetables to help see your people through the winter.”

Running Bear considered for a moment, then gave a sharp shake of his head. “We will take cornmeal and flour.” He would not accept more charity than necessity demanded.

In the end, the old chief agreed only to take several sacks of cornmeal and flour when they departed. It was not much, but it would make the difference between hunger and hope for his tribe. The depth of his gratitude shone in his dark, wise eyes.

Shining Star stood on the front porch of the ranch house, one arm wrapped protectively around her young son, Spirit Bear. Though she’d been driven from her village after being accosted by a raiding Crow warrior and becoming pregnant, her heart ached for the struggles of the Blackfoot.

As Running Bear spoke with Dax and Luke, he glanced up and met his granddaughter’s gaze, and into the eyes of the little boy clinging to her skirts.

He nodded slowly to the child, Spirit Bear, acknowledging the lifeblood flowing in the boy's veins.

Shining Star drew her son closer, warmed by her grandfather's unspoken acceptance.

When the negotiations for food were complete, Dax turned to Running Bear with a broad smile.

"Please come inside where it's warm," he invited, with a sweep of his arm toward the front door. After their long ride, Dax knew the Blackfoot men would appreciate getting out of the biting cold.

Running Bear considered the offer, then inclined his head in agreement.

He said something in his native tongue to the warriors who still sat astride their horses in the yard.

Only Swift Bear would join the chief. The rest would stand guard outside, preferring the chill air to the stifling confinement of walls and a roof.

Running Bear and Swift Bear dismounted from their horses while the other Blackfoot warriors remained seated atop their steeds.

Dax respected their decision, and led them up the steps, where Shining Star waited to usher them inside, Spirit Bear still clinging to his mother's skirt.

Running Bear murmured something to his young grandson, noting the boy's heavy coat, jeans, and small boots.

White man's clothing. He couldn't object, as it had been him who left his daughter behind at the Pelletier ranch.

Spirit Bear looked up at the elderly man, eyes wide.

“Spirit Bear, this is your grandfather, Running Bear,” Shining Star said, introducing the two for the first time after her father and brother had ridden away after her son’s birth.

Her son blinked several times as he looked at the formidable Blackfoot chief before him. “Grandfather?”

Running Bear offered a solemn nod, setting a hand on his grandson’s slim shoulder.

Spencer crossed the open distance to join everyone on the front porch. He looked toward the house. Eliza watched the happenings from the window, marveling at the scene unfolding before her. She’d read about the native people of America, but never imagined seeing them up close.

A few minutes earlier, Eliza thought they’d been poised on the brink of violence.

Now, they stood united. It was a poignant sight, one giving her hope for a future where such alliances were the norm, not the exception.

The image would stay etched in her mind long after the Blackfoot party had departed.

The group moved inside the ranch house and into the study. It was a welcoming sight with its leather chairs, two leather sofas, and mahogany desk, all exuding understated wealth. Moonlight streamed through the windows, glinting off the glass doors of the sideboard.

Dax settled behind the desk while Luke and Bull took the chairs opposite. Running Bear remained standing, as did Swift Bear.

“Please make yourselves comfortable,” Dax offered. But the Blackfoot chief shook his head slightly, preferring to remain on his feet.

The men’s conversation turned to recent events, including the Crow raiding parties plaguing the area, driving off cattle, and leaving burned out homesteads in their wake.

“They’re getting bolder with every attack,” Luke said grimly. “We’ve doubled the night patrols, but these mountains have more hidey holes than a rabbit warren.”

Dax nodded. “They seem to be moving between Big Pine and Splendor. If we don’t stop them soon, more people will lose everything.”

Running Bear listened intently, his expression grave. This land was in his blood, yet he knew the Crow had as much right to it as his people. Still, wanton destruction served no good purpose.

Shining Star entered with a tray laden with cups filled with steaming coffee. Rachel followed close behind, bearing a plate of cornbread and jars of peach preserves.

The women moved quietly around the room, handing out coffee and offering the food they’d prepared. Though worlds apart in upbringing, they shared a common bond of providing sustenance and hospitality to weary travelers.

Running Bear gave an approving nod as his daughter pressed a cup into his weathered hands. Her heritage dictated she serve elders first.

As Shining Star moved to leave the study, she hesitated, glancing back at her father and brother. Though they acknowledged her with a slight nod, their attention remained fixed on the men’s discussion.

She bit her lip, yearning for a kind word or smile. Since they’d arrived at the ranch an

hour earlier, she'd felt adrift. It was as if she straddled two worlds, one of the Blackfoot and another of the white man.

Only her father's stern visage held her back from rushing into his arms like a child. At twenty-one winters, she must behave as a woman grown, despite inner turmoil.

With a resigned sigh, Shining Star slipped from the room. She would find solace in the ones who never failed to greet her with joy. Billy Zales and their son, Spirit Bear, always made her feel she had a place in the world, and it was with them.

As another hour ticked by, Running Bear and his men made their way to the barn behind the main house. Bull and Spencer stoked the forge, its embers casting a dim, reddish glow across their stern faces while providing warmth and comfort.

The Blackfoot wrapped themselves in blankets near the forge's growing warmth. Come dawn, they would be gone, vanishing like phantoms into the mist, with sacks of cornmeal and flour secured on their horses. Running Bear would find suitable payment for the hospitality shown them this night.

The bonds forged here would not be easily broken. As in the past, an alliance had been solidified between unlikely allies against a common foe. For now, cultural divides had been bridged.

Bull Mason awoke before dawn, a lingering unease gnawing at his gut. Though the meeting with Running Bear had gone smoothly, something felt off. Perhaps it was apprehension at having the fearsome Blackfoot warriors camped so close.

Rising quietly so as not to disturb Lydia, Bull slipped outside into the dim pre-dawn light. A thin mist clung close to the ground as he made his way toward the barn.

He was surprised to find the barn empty, the blankets neatly folded where the men

had slept. Running Bear and his party had already departed before first light.

Bull shook his head. He should have expected as much from the elusive tribe. Their early departure still left him unsettled, as if unfinished business lingered in the air.

Turning back toward the house, Bull paused as a flash of color caught his eye. Crouching, he retrieved a solitary eagle feather from where it lay on the ground by the forge.

Running Bear had left it intentionally. Whether it was a gift or a parting message, Bull didn't know. Gripping the feather tightly, he headed back inside, mind churning with questions.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

The clatter of hooves and wagon wheels on frozen ground followed Eliza and Rachel as they made their way to Splendor.

The back of the wagon was filled with handmade gifts and donations for the town's orphanage, collected by the women at Redemption's Edge.

Riding alongside on horseback were Spencer and Dax, who'd volunteered to accompany them, and help unload the precious cargo.

As they rode, Spencer found his gaze drifting to Eliza.

Her dark hair peeked out from under the hood of her heavy coat.

She held the reins surely in her slender hands, guiding the horses with a confident and gentle touch.

He'd been surprised when learning she'd known how to drive a wagon, buggy, carriage, and phaeton since she was a child.

Her family may have had money, but it didn't stop her father from insisting she was competent at several tasks.

As an only child, she felt it her duty to do anything to please her parents.

Admiration stirred within Spencer as he watched her. Even if her manner sometimes poked at him the wrong way, her determination and strength of character impressed him each time they interacted.

When they arrived at the community building, a stately woman, with streaks of silver in her brown hair, greeted them.

“Good morning,” she said. “Thank you so much for your help.”

Together, they unloaded the wagon, bringing the gifts inside the simple clapboard building.

Spencer and Eliza carried in armfuls of hand-sewn quilts, knitted scarves, whittled toys, and more.

The generosity of the Pelletiers brought a smile to Ruth’s face, knowing how these donations would brighten the orphans’ Christmas morning.

After unloading the last crate, Spencer and Eliza lingered behind as Ruth left for an appointment, and Dax and Rachel left to gather more donations from around town.

Spencer suggested they set up some tables for sorting and organizing, starting with the items they’d brought from the ranch.

As they worked, Spencer found himself stealing glances at Eliza’s profile, hoping their time together might become an opportunity to learn more about the intriguing woman who’d landed in their small town.

Eliza could feel Spencer’s gaze on her as they got to work, a slight flush rising to her cheeks. She busied herself setting items on the table, avoiding his eyes.

Inwardly, she chided herself. She needed to get ahold of herself. She barely knew this man. Still, Eliza couldn’t deny her growing curiosity about the rugged ranch hand.

As they continued sorting the gifts into piles, she ventured a tentative question. “So,

Spencer, what brought you out to a ranch in Montana? You mentioned your family has a farm back in Utah?"

He nodded, his expression thoughtful. "My family had a farm near Salt Lake City. When they converted to the Mormon faith, it changed everything. After a time, I found the change wasn't for me, and I left.

Working at the Pelletier ranch has been a real blessing.

I never knew I'd enjoy ranching this much. "

"Do you think you'll stay here permanently?"

He paused, glancing around the room. "I might. I know I'll never live in a big city.

Too cramped and too many people. The openness out here has a way of getting inside a man, making it hard to leave.

" His gaze met hers. "What about you, Doc? You plan on setting up shop in Splendor, or are you just passing through?"

She busied her hands refolding a quilt, considering. "I hadn't planned on staying. The longer I'm here, the more unsure I am about what to do. The people here have been so welcoming. And according to Clay and Drake, the town could use another doctor." She shrugged. "For now, I've yet to decide."

Their conversation trailed off as Dax and Rachel returned, their arms laden with more donations.

Spencer and Eliza worked side by side, sorting the donations into piles on the tables.

Girl's clothes in one stack, boy's shirts and trousers in another.

Eliza hummed softly as she worked, a faint smile on her lips.

"You seem happy," Spencer commented, watching her from the corner of his eye.

Eliza's smile broadened. "I am. There hasn't been much time in my life over the last few years to volunteer. It feels good to help out."

Spencer nodded. "I know what you mean. Getting to be part of something other than every day work." They shared a look of understanding.

After a few moments, Spencer spoke again. "Eliza, I was wondering..." He hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck. "A lot of us come into town for Christmas Eve service, I thought maybe you'd like to ride in with me. If you don't have other plans."

She blinked in surprise, a faint blush rising on her cheeks. "I'd love to," she said softly.

Spencer's face lit up. "Yes?"

"Yes," Eliza confirmed, her eyes bright. Spencer grinned back at her.

The sound of a door opening drew their attention. Dax and Rachel had returned with a load of donations. Spencer and Eliza hurried to help unload, both wearing smiles having nothing to do with Christmas.

Eliza's heart fluttered as she and Spencer unloaded the new donations from Dax's wagon. She couldn't stop thinking about his invitation for Christmas Eve. A chance to get to know him better, away from the constant activity of life on the ranch.

As she carried a bag of children's toys into the community hall, she noticed Spencer watching her. He gave her a small, private smile before turning back to his task.

"More toys and clothes," Dax announced, dropping another crate on the floor with a thud. "Folks have been real generous this year."

"It's wonderful to see," Rachel said. "This will make Christmas special for the children at the orphanage."

Eliza nodded, touched by the town's kindness. Her gaze drifted back to Spencer as he and Dax conferred over the remaining items in the wagon. She admired his strong profile and the way his shirt pulled across his broad shoulders.

Eliza carried a sack of wooden toy horses of varying sizes to the table designated for toys. As she set them down, she chanced a look at Spencer, who worked with Dax across the room. He turned, catching her watching him, and smiled.

She felt her cheeks flush and glanced away, busying herself by organizing the toy horses. Spending time around him the last few days, she'd come to appreciate Spencer's thoughtful nature and rugged capability. Beneath his stoic exterior, she sensed a deep well of compassion.

Dax dropped another large crate on the floor with a thud, causing both Rachel and Eliza to jump. "Sorry, ladies. More toys and clothes." He shrugged.

Spencer hefted another crate from the wagon and carried it into the community hall, his muscles straining against the weight.

He set it down on the floor next to one of the sorting tables.

Prying off the lid, he saw it contained more carvings, including horses, barns, cabins,

a church, and other buildings.

Eliza joined him to examine and set each piece out. Her chest squeezed as she moved the pieces around. “It’s a town. Well, a town, at least one ranch, and a farm.” She looked up at Spencer. “Isn’t it marvelous?”

“It’s Splendor,” Spencer answered. He picked up one piece. It was a building. Up high, above the bat-wing doors, were carved two words. Dixie Saloon .

The rising sun found Lucien Hunt miles away, pushing his horse across the frost covered open plains on a northwest trail used by deer, elk, bear, and sometimes, members of the Blackfoot and Crow tribes.

He rode not toward something but away. Away from the rundown ranch, the first place he’d felt a spark of belonging in longer than he cared to recall.

It was the same spark of hope urging him to leave Splendor weeks earlier. Lucien told himself he’d done what he could, more than anyone expected. The ranch was now owned by a family with the means to restore it to its previous glory, and he had enough money to get another chance somewhere else.

Lucien didn’t believe he deserved another chance, not with blood staining his hands. Better to disappear like smoke in the wind before he brought violence and pain to the generous townsfolk in Splendor.

As the ranch faded into the distance, Lucien ignored the hollow ache in his chest. Maybe this was his fate.

Perhaps he was destined to wander alone, seeking absolution from a past he’d rather forget.

With a grim smile, he tipped his hat against the morning sun.

The past could not be outrun, but he would certainly try.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

The bank's doors swung open, cold wind and snowflakes swirling inside. Spencer held the door for Eliza, touching her elbow lightly as she passed, her wool coat damp with melting snow.

"I'll just be a few minutes," she said, unbuttoning her coat.

Spencer nodded, his eyes lingering on her flushed cheeks. "Take your time. I'll be at McCall's, with a cup of coffee waiting for you."

Eliza smiled briefly before joining the line inside. Spencer stepped back into the biting wind, pulling his hat brim low. Two doors down, he spotted the carved door of McCall's and made his way along the boardwalk, eager to escape the cold.

The warmth and clamor of the restaurant enveloped Spencer as he stepped inside. He spotted Deputy Cash Coulter sitting alone at a table, nursing a coffee.

"Mind if I join you?" Spencer asked.

Cash gestured to the empty chair. "Have a seat."

He sat, unwinding his wool scarf. "Sure is coming down out there."

"Snow won't stick around long. The cold might, though." Cash took another sip of coffee.

They sat in companionable silence until Betts Jones brought Spencer's coffee. He took a sip, savoring the heat. "Betts, I'll need one more for Doctor Gladstone."

“I’ll bring it out when she gets here, Spencer.”

“Thanks.”

Cash lowered his voice. “Been keeping an eye out for any of Tom Wolf’s men drifting through town. With the weather changing, seems likely they’ll hole up somewhere nearby.”

Spencer nodded grimly. “Assuming they’re somewhere nearby.”

Tom Wolf was a notorious outlaw who’d been moving through the Dakotas, Wyoming, and Montana, robbing banks, stagecoaches, and the occasional larger ranch. His gang was vicious and unpredictable.

“I know Redemption’s Edge would be a tempting target,” Spencer said. “Dax has already mentioned the outlaws to everyone. He increased the number of men watching day and night to make sure no one comes around looking to cause trouble.”

“Dax and Luke are good men.” They finished their coffees hastily as the wind howled through the streets.

Spencer looked outside at the increasing storm, his thoughts clouded with concern. He hoped Eliza would reappear soon so they could get back to the ranch ahead of the worst of the coming blizzard.

As Spencer watched those outside fight the wind, he spotted a man on horseback outside the bank, trying to keep three horses steady. He kept looking around as he pulled on the three sets of reins. His behavior didn’t make sense to Spencer. Unless...

Eliza waited patiently in line at the teller’s window, keenly aware of the worsening weather outside. She glanced around the nearly empty bank, taking in the gleaming

countertops and ornately carved woodwork. It was a far cry from what she expected in an isolated frontier town.

Her thoughts drifted to Spencer. In the short time she'd known him, he'd proven himself trustworthy and capable, if somewhat ill-tempered at times.

Eliza realized she'd come to rely on his steady presence more than she cared to admit.

She wondered if her initial resistance to him was born more of caution than true dislike. It was something to consider.

"Ma'am?" called the teller, shaking Eliza from her reverie. She stepped forward, opening her reticule to pull out a small, slim journal.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. How can I help you today?"

"I'd like to make a withdrawal, please," She slid the journal across the counter.

The teller nodded, checked the booklet, and opened the drawer in front of him. She tapped her foot impatiently as she waited. The snow was now coming down hard, reducing visibility. She wanted to get back to the ranch before the roads became impassable.

The teller counted out her withdrawal, and Eliza tucked the bills into her reticule. With business complete, she bid the teller good day and turned for the door, mindful of the need for haste.

Surprising her, the door burst open. Eliza jumped back with a gasp as three rough-looking men rushed into the bank, their faces obscured by bandanas.

“Everybody freeze!” The apparent leader was a burly man with cold, flinty eyes. He held a six-shooter aloft. The two other outlaws fanned out on either side of him, holding similar six-shooters.

A shocked silence gripped the bank, broken only by a few frightened whimpers. The leader stalked toward the counter, his spurs jangling with each step.

“All right, folks, you know the drill,” he barked. “Nobody move and nobody gets hurt. We’re here to make a little withdrawal.” He tossed a burlap sack at the nearest teller. “Start filling it, nice and easy now.”

The teller’s hands shook violently as he shoveled bills into the sack. Eliza’s heart pounded, her thoughts racing. How would she and the others get out of this alive?

In McCall’s, Spencer kept his gaze on the lone figure on horseback, still holding the reins of three riderless mounts. The man’s face was obscured by a hat and turned-up collar, but his posture seemed strangely tense and alert.

Spencer’s instincts tingled. Setting down his coffee cup, he caught Cash Coulter’s attention. “Take a look.” He nodded toward the odd scene outside. “What do you make of that?”

Cash peered out through the frosted window, eyes narrowing. “Nothing good.”

The deputy pushed his cup of coffee aside as his hand dropped casually to rest on the butt of his holstered revolver. Spencer felt his own Colt heavy and reassuring at his hip.

As Cash shifted to stand, the door opened.

Deputies Shane Banderas and Hawke DeBell entered the restaurant.

Before they could sit down, Cash explained the situation.

The three deputies talked among themselves, then left the restaurant through the back and raced for the bank's rear entrance, pistols drawn.

Spencer watched them rush off, his concern for Eliza elevating.

Leaving McCall's through the front door, he strode toward the bank, doing his best not to catch the attention of the stranger holding the horses.

Judging by Cash's behavior, he figured the deputies believed something was going on inside the bank.

He slowed his pace, moving through the swirling snow toward the suspicious stranger outside the bank. As he drew closer, the man's head jerked up, eyes widening in alarm when he spotted Spencer.

"You need help with those horses?"

The man sputtered, tugging his hat brim lower. "No. Just waiting for some folks."

Spencer's gaze flicked to the bank. A prickle of unease crept up his neck. "In this storm?"

Before the man could respond, their attention turned at the sound of gunshots inside the bank. The front door burst open, and a burly man appeared.

"Time to go!"

Inside, the back door of the bank crashed open.

Eliza dropped to the floor as a volley of shots from the outlaws boomed through the bank.

She glanced up in time to see three deputies cut down two of the robbers immediately.

The third, the leader of the outlaws, made it halfway out the front before a final crack of a six-shooter dropped him onto the snow-covered boards.

Eliza's heart hammered as the gunshots faded. Near the front door, a stray bullet had shattered the glass of a lantern near the body of the burly outlaw.

A tense silence fell as the deputies crept forward. Eliza slowly sat up, shaking but unharmed. Spencer appeared, his tall frame silhouetted in the doorway.

"Eliza!" He rushed to her side, gripping her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, throat tightening. Wordlessly, she let him pull her close, welcoming the strength and comfort of his embrace.

Spencer held Eliza tight, one hand gently cradling the back of her head. She clutched at his shirt, breathing in the familiar scent of horses and leather. The terror of the last few moments slowly ebbed away.

"It's over now," Spencer murmured.

Eliza nodded against his chest. She took a deep, steadying breath before easing back to meet his gaze. His eyes searched her face, full of concern.

"I'm all right," she assured him.

Spencer exhaled in relief. He brushed a stray lock of hair back from her face, his touch lingering.

Eliza glanced past him at the bodies on the floor.

The deputies were checking them for signs of life.

She stepped around Spencer and went to kneel beside one of the robbers.

After a moment, she shook her head grimly.

She checked the next man and, finally, the leader of the gang, whose body still lay partway outside on the boardwalk.

“This one’s gone, too,” she said.

Spencer watched her, eyebrows raised in surprise. He hadn’t expected such stoicism from the big city doctor. But Eliza had proven herself made of sterner stuff than he first thought.

“What went on here?” Horace Clausen, the president of the bank, stepped over the body in the doorway and looked around. Snow swirled around as he stood, staring at the carnage. Behind him, Rachel and Dax looked inside, faces tense.

“Excuse me.” Gabe slipped around those blocking the doorway, stepping inside the bank and walking around. He looked at his deputies.

“Everyone all right?” Gabe’s gaze moved between Spencer and Eliza.

“We’re fine,” Spencer assured him.

Eliza went to Rachel, giving her friend's hand a reassuring squeeze. Though still shaken, she was glad the danger had passed. Then she turned toward the young teller still huddled behind the counter, his eyes wide with shock. She walked to him and knelt down.

"It's over now," Eliza said gently. "The danger has passed."

The teller blinked rapidly, seeming to return to himself. "Oh...oh my..." he stammered.

"Just breathe deeply. Take your time." She rose, still watching him.

After a few moments, the teller's trembling eased. "Thank you, ma'am. I thought for certain those men would..."

"But they didn't," Eliza said firmly. "You're safe now."

The teller managed a small, grateful smile. Eliza stayed with him until he stood, placing a hand on the counter to steady himself.

She crossed the lobby where Spencer, Dax, and Rachel spoke to each other in low voices.

The three surveyed the chaotic aftermath of the attempted robbery. The air was hazy with gun smoke, the floor littered with splintered wood and broken glass.

Gabe's gaze swept the room, quickly taking in the situation. He strode toward the man sprawled out at the door to get a closer look, his expression grim.

"It's Tom Wolfe," he said with a sigh.

Hearing the name, Spencer rushed outside and looked around.

“What is it?” Eliza asked.

He shook his head, walking past her to stand beside Gabe. “There was a fourth man waiting outside the bank. He’s gone, and so are the horses he was holding.”

“From what I know, Wolf had a lot of men riding with him. He’s probably on his way to wherever the others are waiting. Nothing we can do about it now.” Gabe turned to speak with Horace.

“Eliza.” Spencer walked toward her. “Let’s get you out of here.”

They, along with Dax and Rachel, made their way outside into the cold, late afternoon. The snow had stopped falling, leaving behind a glittering blanket of white. It crunched under their boots as the small group walked back to the community building.

Dax helped Rachel up onto the seat of the wagon. Spencer did the same with Eliza, his hands lingering a few seconds longer than necessary.

Eliza shivered as a chill wind gusted down the street. “Let’s go home.”

Home. The word settled between them as the men mounted up and turned toward the ranch.

Eliza rode in thoughtful silence, processing the day’s harrowing events. So much had happened in such a short span of time. She thought back to the terror she’d felt when those outlaws burst into the bank, shouting and waving their guns. The deafening crack of gunshots ringing out.

She shuddered at the memory, her breath catching in her throat. If not for the deputies' brave intervention, things could have ended tragically.

Glancing over at Spencer riding beside her, she felt grateful for his solid, reassuring presence. The warmth and strength she'd felt cradled against him made her cheeks flush, even now.

What did it all mean? She wasn't sure what to make of the growing connection between them. Yet she could not deny what her heart told her.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Eliza sorted through the wardrobe in her room, events of yesterday still weighing on her mind. The attempted robbery, the gunshots, the deaths of the outlaws, and the realization she might very well be needed here as a doctor. A possible future was opening up to her in this frontier town.

And then there was Spencer. Kind, hardworking Spencer, who'd somehow become important to her in these past weeks. She couldn't deny her growing affection for him, though she hardly knew what to make of it yet. This was all so new to her.

Eliza turned from the window with a soft sigh, smoothing her hands over her apron.

She had pies to bake this morning, along with Rachel and some of the other women.

As she made her way downstairs, the rich aroma of apples and cinnamon wafted up to greet her.

The women were already hard at work in the kitchen.

"Good morning," Rachel greeted as Eliza entered. "I'm so glad you could join us this morning. We can use every extra pair of hands with all the baking to be done."

Eliza smiled and nodded, rolling up her sleeves. "It smells wonderful already. What can I do to help?"

The women fell into easy conversation as they worked, kneading dough and slicing apples. Rachel mentioned Dax had proposed hiring a full-time cook to help manage the increasing demands of the growing ranch.

“With the new hands we’ll need to take on in the spring, and the men coming and going from the herd drives, it’s getting to be quite a lot running this kitchen,” she said.

Eliza hadn’t realized how much Redemption’s Edge had expanded since Dax and Luke inherited the ranch. She marveled at how the Pelletiers had built up the ranch. It was a true testament to their grit and vision.

The tantalizing aromas of cinnamon and cloves filled the warm kitchen as the women kept busy with their baking. Eliza wiped her floured hands on her apron, glancing out the window.

The hours passed, the sun was climbing higher in the sky. Soon, it would be time to depart for the Christmas gathering.

“Well, ladies, it’s about time we cleaned up the kitchen so we can get ready for the party tonight,” Rachel said.

Eliza chuckled and made her way upstairs to change into her finest dress. She thought the deep green velvet with white lace trim would be perfect for San Francisco. It had traveled all the way from New York in her trunk, after all. How could she have known its debut would be in Splendor, Montana?

She finished buttoning the dress, pinned up her dark hair, and dabbed rosewater perfume onto her wrists before heading back downstairs.

The parlor was abuzz with activity as the gentlemen and their ladies gathered, ready to climb into the wagons for the trip into town. Eliza spotted Spencer looking sharp in a tailored suit, the waves in his hair tamed for the occasion. He broke into a grin when he saw her.

“You look beautiful,” he said, offering his arm. Eliza smiled, her cheeks warm.

“Shall we?” Spencer motioned toward the front door.

Eliza nodded, butterflies taking flight in her stomach as they stepped out into the bracing air. She’d been surprised when Spencer invited her to attend the supper in town to benefit those who needed help this Christmas. She couldn’t wait to take part in the party awaiting them in Splendor.

Though the freezing wind chilled their faces as the wagons rolled toward town, it was still warmer than the previous day. Eliza sent up a thank you for the beautiful winter day.

Eliza marveled at the lobby of the St. James Hotel, festively decorated for the Christmas season.

Garlands of pine boughs lined the balcony railings, red ribbons and bells adorning each post. In the dining room, the tables were set with fine white linens, crystal glasses, and flickering candles, each napkin topped with a sprig of holly.

As the guests mingled, Rachel introduced Eliza around. “This is Doctor Eliza Gladstone, our visiting physician from back east,” she said to Camilla MacLaren, the wife of the local veterinarian, Sean MacLaren.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Camilla said. “Will you be staying on with us in Splendor?”

“I haven’t decided for certain yet,” Eliza replied. “Everyone has been so kind, I’m considering it.”

Eliza next met Abby Brandt, Noah Brandt’s wife. “You must come for lunch after

Christmas,” Abby invited. “I would love to learn more about you.”

The chime of a fork on a glass quieted the crowd as the supper service began. Eliza sat next to Spencer and took her first bite of the roast turkey, savoring the delicious herb dressing and gravy.

“My compliments to the chef,” she declared to those at their table after sampling creamy mashed potatoes and roasted autumn vegetables.

For dessert, May Covington had prepared plum pudding served with hard sauce. There were also slim slices of rich pound cake and cranberry tarts. Eliza tasted each one, closing her eyes in delight with every sweet, delectable bite.

The excellent food had put everyone in fine spirits. As the evening wound down, the guests prepared for the annual benefit auction to raise money for those in need. Noah Brandt, the auctioneer, took his place at the front of the room, gavel in hand.

“All right, folks, listen up,” he bellowed. “We’ve got some fine items up for bid tonight. Quilts, canned fruit, framed drawings, leather goods, blankets, boxes of cigars, perfume from New York, jars of preserves, and more. So open your wallets, and don’t be shy.”

The bidding started off at a slow pace, soon growing raucous as people vied for the same items. Eliza chuckled as an older woman nearly came to blows with Stan Petermann over a lovely patchwork quilt.

A couple items later, Silas Jenks, owner of the lumber mill, faced off with Wayne Caulfield, who owned the meat market. It was the item they haggled over, causing raucous laughter. A bottle of perfume from New York. The fact Silas had never married made it so much more intriguing.

“Now, now, let’s keep it civil,” Noah admonished them. “Stan, I see that glare. Don’t make me toss you out into the snow.” The crowd roared with laughter.

Noah kept up a lively banter, cajoling and teasing the bidders, making droll comments about the items up for auction. His antics highly amused Eliza. She bid a few times herself, winning a jar of blackberry preserves.

As the last item sold, people started putting on their coats and hats, the excitement of the evening winding down. Eliza spotted Dax and Rachel gathering their things. Other couples from the ranch were also getting ready to leave.

Spencer helped Eliza into her coat and offered his arm. She took it with a smile and they made their way outside into the crisp, cold night. Their breath frosted in the air as they walked to the wagon.

“Eliza, do you have a moment?”

She glanced over her shoulder to see Clay and Drake standing a few feet away on the boardwalk. “Excuse me, Spencer.”

The three doctors huddled together, talking in low voices. As they spoke, Spencer spotted two men rushing toward them.

Deputies Tucker Nolan and Zeke Boudreaux rushed to where the doctors stood. Both wore grave expressions.

“We have a situation at the clinic,” Zeke said. “Tucker and I found two children huddled behind the general store about an hour ago. Cold clear through. We took them to the clinic, and Tucker fetched Carrie. Griff is with her. She wants one of you to examine them.”

Eliza thought of Carrie MacKenzie, a nurse at the clinic. Dax had mentioned Carrie and her husband, Griffin, hadn't appeared at the benefit. Now she knew why.

Clay and Drake excused themselves, turning toward the clinic.

"I'd like to come with you," Eliza called after them.

"I'll let Dax know," Spencer told her.

The doctors made their way to the clinic, escorted by Zeke and Tucker. Eliza thought of the children, her mind filled with questions. Were they hurt? Sick? Abandoned?

At the clinic, they found Carrie and Griffin in an exam room with a young boy and girl, both scared and hollow-eyed. Eliza's heart broke at the sight. She stepped in front of them.

"Hello. My name is Doctor Eliza. Let's take a look at you and see how we can help."

With Clay and Drake observing, Eliza examined the children. She learned Tommy was nine and Sherilyn was six. Though frightened and exhausted, neither appeared injured or ill.

"You've been through quite an ordeal, it seems. Are you hungry?"

At the mention of food, both children's eyes lit up. Carrie fetched them some bread and preserves, which they devoured.

As they ate, Spencer arrived, concern etched on his face. "Are they all right?"

Eliza nodded, then relayed what little she knew so far. "We need to find their family." Everyone agreed. Zeke said he'd speak with Gabe at first light before he and Tucker

left.

Moving before Tommy and Sherilyn again, Eliza asked gently, “Can you tell us where your mother and father are?”

Tommy’s lip quivered. “They died,” he whispered. “Our uncle didn’t come get us...” His voice trailed off. He fought to keep his eyes open.

“They need sleep.” Eliza looked at Clay and Drake. “I can stay here with them tonight.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Spencer offered.

“If you’re sure?” Clay asked.

“I am.”

“All right,” Clay said. “I’ll be in early, and Carrie is due to be here at nine.”

Eliza nodded at him, though her heart broke as everyone left for the night. It seemed the children were all alone. She exchanged an anguished look with Spencer.

As if reading her thoughts, Spencer placed a hand on her arm. “We should speak to Martha Santori about taking them in. For now, they need sleep and so do you. There will be time to sort everything out later.”

The children, exhausted from their ordeal, had already slipped into a deep slumber on the same clinic bed. Eliza tucked the blankets around them. Gazing at their peaceful faces, she was reminded of the resilience of the human spirit.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Eliza awoke to a gentle shaking of her shoulder. Blinking away the last remnants of sleep, she saw Spencer leaning over her, his hair tousled from slumber.

“Rise and shine,” he said, his voice a soft rumble. “We’ve got a full day ahead.”

Eliza sat up on a stifled yawn and stood. From the other room came the murmur of young voices.

“The children are awake,” he said.

“And hungry, from the sounds of it.”

“I’ll fetch them some breakfast from the boardinghouse while you tend to them.”

Eliza smiled gratefully. “Thank you, Spencer.” Still adjusting to frontier life, she appreciated his thoughtful assistance. She pinned up her dark hair and went to greet the children.

Tommy and Sherilyn were sitting up on the examination bed, faces alight with anticipation. At nine and six, brother and sister still had an air of innocence despite their recent tragedy. Eliza’s heart ached for their circumstances.

“Good morning.” She smiled. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tommy replied.

“I’m hungry,” Sherilyn said, placing a hand on her stomach. “Can we have breakfast

now?”

Eliza smoothed the girl’s tousled hair. “Mr. Haglund is getting your breakfast now. He’ll be back soon.”

Sherilyn’s lip quivered. “But I want pancakes. Mama always made us pancakes.”

At the mention of their late mother, Eliza paused, unsure how to broach the delicate subject. She leaned against the edge of the bed.

“I know you miss your parents,” she said gently. “What is your last name?”

“Weber,” Tommy answered. “We were supposed to meet Uncle Web,” Tommy said, glancing around the room for what must be the hundredth time as his sister sniffled.

Eliza assumed Web was a shortened version of Weber. Her heart constricted. She settled an arm around Sherilyn, who leaned into her embrace. At least here, they could provide some small comfort until more permanent arrangements were made.

Spencer entered with their breakfasts. “Anyone hungry?”

“Me!” Sherilyn called out.

He opened the wrapped food. “We have hotcakes and bacon.” The children’s faces lit up at the sight.

Eliza nibbled on a piece of bacon as the children ate. She looked at Spencer, lowering her voice to explain her conversation with Tommy, and learning their last name. “We need to learn more about their Uncle Web. Perhaps someone in town knows him.”

The clinic door swung open, and Dr. Clay McCord strode inside.

“Good morning, all. I see everyone is enjoying breakfast.”

“Hotcakes!” Tommy piped up through a mouthful.

Clay chuckled. “Nothing better on a cold morning.” He turned his attention to Eliza. “Shall we discuss the day ahead?”

As the children ate eagerly, Clay, Eliza, and Spencer discussed the mystery surrounding the two young charges.

“Have you learned anything more about the children’s situation?” Clay asked.

Eliza’s expression grew somber. “Their parents recently passed, and they were sent here by the family’s attorney to live with an uncle. We don’t know who this uncle is or if he’s even in Splendor.”

Clay frowned, troubled by this news. “Then I suppose we must try to learn more, see if anyone in town knows of their family.” He sighed.

“I agree,” she said. “Even if we are unable to locate their uncle, they’re resilient children. With time and affection, I believe they’ll recover.”

“Do we know the children’s surname?” Clay asked. “It may provide a lead on any relations in town.”

Eliza glanced at the boy and girl before sharing her conversation with Tommy. “I believe it’s Weber, though we know little else. Tommy said his Uncle Web was supposed to meet them when the stage arrived.”

“Weber or Web...” Clay murmured thoughtfully. “I’ve been in Splendor long enough to know most of the local people. Neither name rings a bell.”

“I could speak with Gabe and some of the other men to see if anyone recognizes the name,” Spencer said.

Clay nodded. “Please do. And inquire about any luggage or belongings found with the children. Those items may offer clues as well.”

“Will do, Doc,” Spencer affirmed. He turned his attention back to the children.

Tommy looked up at Spencer with large, trusting eyes. His sister continued eating, happy to have food and a warm place to stay.

After Spencer departed to begin his inquiries around town, Clay and Eliza found a moment alone to discuss the clinic.

“I must say, Eliza, your rapport with Tommy and Sherilyn is remarkable,” Clay commented appreciatively. “You have a true gift for connecting with patients, particularly women and children.”

Eliza smiled at the praise. “Thank you, Clay. I’ve always felt drawn to pediatric and maternal medicine.” A thoughtful look crossed her face. “Do you think Splendor is ready for a female doctor? I wonder how the community will respond if I agree to accept a role here?”

Clay considered the question. As a former military surgeon, he’d seen firsthand how someone’s skills and compassion shone through, regardless of prejudices. He also knew times of crisis created different degrees of tolerance.

“Change often requires time and perseverance,” he said. “You’ve already proven your worth here. Continue doing what you trained for and minds will open.”

She looked again at the children before giving a slow nod.

The clinic door opened. Carrie MacKenzie shivered before spotting Clay and Eliza. “The wind has picked up, and it’s snowing again. I hope this doesn’t turn into another blizzard.”

Not long after Carrie’s arrival, the clinic bustled with activity. Ford and Tess Mason entered not long after Carrie, seeking medical attention for their children. Both had been coughing for the last few days.

Clay and Carrie swiftly began examining the sniffing young patients while Eliza slipped away to check on Tommy and Sherilyn. She found them sitting up in bed, faces etched with boredom.

“I wanna go home.” Sherilyn pouted, lower lip jutting out and arms crossed. “When will Uncle Web come get us?”

Tommy flopped back against his pillow. “I don’t know. Maybe he isn’t here any longer.”

Eliza perched on the edge of the bed, concern showing in her eyes. The creak of a floorboard made her turn. Ford Mason stood in the doorway, his expression unreadable.

“Pardon me,” he said gruffly. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. But I couldn’t help overhearing about your uncle. What was his name again?”

Tommy eyed the tall cowboy warily. “Uncle Web.”

Ford rubbed his chin. “And what’s he look like?”

“He’s tall and skinny, with gray hair,” Tommy answered.

“His eyes are strange,” Sherilyn said.

Tommy shook his head at his sister. “They aren’t strange.” He looked at Ford. “They’re just light blue eyes.”

After a moment, Ford touched the brim of his hat. “Much obliged for the information,” he muttered. “I’d best get my family back to the ranch.”

His questions and rapid departure left Eliza to puzzle over his odd behavior. As his wagon rumbled off, she sensed Ford might know more than he let on about the children’s uncle. She turned back to the children, who were watching the doorway with wide eyes.

“Do you think he knows our uncle?” Tommy asked.

“I don’t know. Mr. Mason is a good man. If he’s curious about your uncle, it’s only to help figure out why he hasn’t come for you yet.”

Tommy scowled. “Well, I wish he would hurry up.”

“I know it’s hard being away from home. Is there anything I can do to make it better?”

The boy shrugged before looking at her. “Maybe you could help us find Uncle Web.”

“Spencer is asking about him around town. If he’s here, someone will know him.”

Sherilyn looked between them. “Could we go outside?”

“I don’t see why not.” Eliza held out her hands. “Come on then, let’s stretch our legs.”

The children slid from bed, the promise of an outing chasing away their gloom. Eliza led the children outside. Though it was snowing, the bright morning sunshine made it seem warmer than the freezing temperature. The brisk winter air felt refreshing after being cooped up indoors.

They hadn't gotten far from the clinic when Tommy bent down to pick up a handful of snow. Forming it into a ball, he threw it at Sherilyn, who screamed in delight. For several minutes, the uncertainty of their future fell away as they played.

After returning his family to their ranch and completing a few more chores, Ford reined up in front of the Dixie. He hoped what he had to do wouldn't take long.

Stepping into the dim interior, he paused to let his eyes adjust. The air was thick with tobacco smoke and the sour smell of old beer. A few patrons sat nursing drinks at the scarred wooden tables while others played cards in the corner.

Ford spotted Julia behind the bar, wiping out a glass with a rag. He angled toward her, leaning against the counter.

"Afternoon, Julia," he said.

She glanced up, her expression guarded. "Ford. What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping you could help me out with some information." He kept his voice low, not wanting the other patrons to overhear.

Her eyes narrowed. "What sort of information?"

"Did you hear about the children who were found by two of the deputies and taken to the clinic?"

She shook her head.

“A young boy and girl. Their last name is Weber.” He lifted a brow. “They said their uncle was supposed to meet them when the stage arrived yesterday. He never arrived. Do you know anyone with the last name of Weber?”

Julia stiffened. “The name isn’t familiar to me.” Her gaze wouldn’t meet his, which made Ford certain she was lying.

He leaned in closer, speaking barely above a whisper. “Where’s Lucien?”

“He isn’t here,” Julia said, though her face had paled. For a long moment, she stared at the floor. Then she sighed. “My brother rode in from Bozeman. He said Lucien should be back here soon.”

“When he gets here, you tell Lucien it’s important we talk.”

Before Julia could respond, Ford turned and strode outside.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Rachel glanced over at her sister-in-law, who sat on the wagon seat beside her, a crease of concern marking her brow. Slapping the reins, she guided the horses through a slow curve in the trail to Splendor.

Ginny nodded, her expression solemn. "I wonder what happened to those children."

Before leaving the Christmas benefit the night before, each had heard what Deputies Zeke Boudreaux and Tucker Nolan said to the three doctors. Two children had been found huddled together outside and needed medical attention.

As they approached the clinic, a knot formed in Rachel's stomach. She'd been a nurse, caring deeply for the well-being of folks in need. Situations involving children always weighed heavy on her heart.

Maneuvering the wagon to a stop outside the clinic, the women entered the small building. Eliza stood near the stairs, her intelligent eyes weary but kind.

"Eliza, how are you all holding up?" Rachel asked.

She gestured for them to follow her away from the exam room.

"As well as can be expected. Physically, the children are fine." Her voice dropped.

"Their parents died not long ago, and they were sent here to live with their Uncle Web. Unfortunately, he didn't meet them when they arrived.

Their last name is Weber. Do either of you know anyone around Splendor going by

the name? ”

They shook their heads.

“I wish we could locate their uncle. So far, the responses have been the same as yours.” She trailed off with a helpless shrug.

“Don’t you worry,” Ginny said. “We’ll figure something out.”

Spencer strode into the clinic, his coat dripping on the wooden floor. Removing his hat, he ran a hand through his tousled hair and let out a weary sigh.

“No luck finding any Webers or Webs in town,” he reported, his voice tinged with frustration. “Asked everyone I could, checked with Bernie Griggs, too. Doesn’t seem those are names known around here.”

“Maybe Martha would have space up at the orphanage,” Ginny suggested.

Spencer shook his head. “I already asked her. She’s got all her beds filled. Martha did offer to take them for a week or so. All she has to offer are pallets on the floor.”

Rachel straightened, a light dawning in her eyes. “The ranch has plenty of room. We’ve got extra bedrooms in the main house.” She turned to Eliza and Spencer. “Seems to me, those children should come stay with us until their uncle is found.”

“What if he isn’t found?” Spencer asked.

Rachel released an uneasy breath. “I suppose we’ll figure something out.”

Eliza let out a breath, relief relaxing her shoulders. “Thank you, Rachel.”

Ginny beamed. “Well, it’s settled then. We’ll get them bundled up warm and take them out to the ranch to settle in.”

Spencer felt the tension in his chest ease. Though the children’s situation remained uncertain, at least for now they would have food, shelter, and caring folks to watch over them.

“I’ll see if there are a couple extra blankets the docs can spare for the ride back,” he said, already taking the stairs to the second floor.

Spencer rose with the sun the following morning, eager to resume his work on the ranch. As he pulled on his boots, his thoughts turned to Eliza.

He wondered if she would stay on at the clinic in Splendor, or continue her journey to California as planned.

The thought of her leaving cut into him in a way he’d never experienced with another woman.

He enjoyed her company, the way she looked at him with her piercing blue eyes.

Her passion for medicine and dedication to her patients revealed a caring heart underneath her serious demeanor.

As Spencer strode outside into the brisk morning air, he glanced toward the big house. Somewhere inside, he knew Eliza would be up and tending to the children. Spencer paused, struck by the tender scene his thoughts created. She would make a wonderful mother someday.

Shaking his head, Spencer strode toward the barn. He needed to focus on his work, not daydream about a woman he barely knew. Still, he couldn’t deny the growing

attraction he felt toward clever, courageous Eliza.

Inside the barn, Spencer began repairing a broken bridle, but his thoughts kept wandering.

Close to lunchtime, Rachel invited him to eat inside.

Spencer ended up next to Eliza at the bigger of two tables.

Partway through the meal, she moved to where the children sat, gently wiping Sherilyn's hands and face when she was done eating, Spencer felt his heart squeeze.

Her compassion and care for the abandoned children made his regard for her grow even more.

He only hoped her own feelings toward him might be changing, too. Spencer longed to know her mind, but didn't dare ask. For now, he would simply enjoy her company, and hope she chose to remain in Splendor.

Eliza sat on the porch of the ranch house, watching the sun drop behind the western mountain range.

She let out a long sigh, her mind troubled over the decision to stay in Splendor or leave when the western passes were clear.

The offer from Clay and Drake was a wonderful opportunity, a chance to put her medical skills to good use with doctors she could respect. And who respected her.

Yet she felt conflicted. If she accepted the position, she would be staying in Splendor for the foreseeable future. The journey she'd planned would have to be postponed, maybe indefinitely.

Part of her mourned the adventures she would miss, the new places and people she hoped to discover. But there was another reason Eliza was hesitant to remain in Splendor—a tall, handsome, quiet ranch hand with kind eyes and a gentle smile.

She couldn't deny her growing feelings for Spencer. He was unlike any man she'd ever met. Hardworking, unfailingly polite, with a subtle humor she enjoyed, which was so different from the men she'd known back home.

Could she give up the opportunity to get to know Spencer better if she stayed? Eliza didn't know if he returned her feelings, but the possibility was enough to give her pause.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew Eliza from her reverie. She looked up to see Spencer striding up the porch steps, his brow furrowed as if he, too, was lost in thought. Their eyes met and Eliza felt her heart leap.

Spencer slowed his pace as he approached Eliza. Seeing her filled him with a mix of excitement and apprehension. Over the short time since she'd arrived in Splendor, he'd found his thoughts constantly turning to the pretty doctor with a quick smile and compassionate heart.

At first, he'd tried to dismiss his interest as a passing fascination. After all, Eliza was unlike most women he'd known. Educated as a doctor and determined to make her own way in the world, she had an unexpected degree of courage. What could a simple ranch hand possibly offer someone like her?

Still, the more time they spent together, the more Spencer realized his feelings went beyond mere interest. Her strength and passion for helping others inspired him. And her warmth when they talked the last couple evenings resonated somewhere deep inside him.

He knew Eliza was considering whether to stay on at the clinic in Splendor or continue her journey west. Spencer wanted to ask her to stay but held back, unsure if she could ever feel the same way about a simple cowboy as he felt about her.

Eliza looked up at him, the softness in her eyes making his heart skip. Clearing his throat, he took a seat next to her.

“Eliza, there’s something I need to ask you...” He cleared his throat again, determined to continue. “I was wondering if you’ve given any more thought to staying in Splendor.”

“I have. It’s a difficult decision. I feel I could do meaningful work at the clinic. It’s difficult, as my plans were always to go west.”

He nodded, trying not to let his disappointment show.

“I must admit, there are certain things making me reconsider leaving.”

“Like what?”

“Well, the children at the ranch, for one. I’ve grown quite fond of them.”

“Of course,” Spencer said. Though he had also grown attached to the orphaned brother and sister, he sensed her answer hid more.

“And also...” She shifted her gaze back to his. “I find myself not wanting to leave behind the new friends I’ve made here.”

“Anyone in particular?”

Eliza held his gaze. “Well...the doctors, the people at the ranch. And you, Spencer.”

They stared at each other. Before he could think better of it, Spencer reached out and took Eliza's hand in his.

"I'd like you to stay."

Unable to resist any longer, Spencer put an arm around her, drawing her close. Her lips parted in anticipation as he lowered his head for a brief kiss.

She leaned into Spencer's embrace. For a blissful moment, the kiss erased all doubts and fears, leaving only longing and the thrill of new beginnings.

When they broke apart, both were breathing hard, faces flushed.

"I don't want this moment to end," she admitted in a hushed voice.

He smiled. "There could be many more moments like this one. If you stay..."

She returned his smile, but didn't voice her thoughts.

"We should get inside for supper, before Rachel comes looking for us," he murmured.

Eliza laughed, the sound soft and musical to his ears. "You're right."

As Spencer lay in bed later, his mind spun with thoughts of Eliza and a possible future together. Somehow, without even realizing it, she'd found her way into his heart...

The kiss lingered in Eliza's mind as she readied for bed, replaying the moment over and over. The feeling of Spencer's lips on hers had sent her heart racing in a way she'd never experienced. This gruff rancher had awakened something in her she

didn't know was there.

As Eliza drifted off to sleep, she dreamed of a life in Splendor with Spencer. A small voice of doubt crept in about whether a marriage between them could last, but she pushed it away. For tonight, she'd let the idea of a new beginning take over.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Eliza stood in Rachel's kitchen, kneading dough for the evening's biscuits while Rachel chopped vegetables at the counter beside her.

As she worked the dough, Eliza thought back to the times the family cook had let her help in the kitchen.

When her mother learned about her working with the hired help, she'd forbidden Eliza from doing it again.

After a few weeks, she'd start sneaking in again.

Looking back, she was glad for all the cook had taught her.

Ginny and Lydia's laughter drifted in from the parlor as they set the table. The cheerful comradery ended when the front door banged open.

"Doc! I need the doc!" Billy's panicked shout echoed through the house.

Eliza abandoned the dough, wiped her floured hands on her apron, and hurried to meet Billy in the foyer. His eyes were wild, his hair disheveled.

"What is it, Billy? What's happened?" Eliza asked.

"It's Shining Star...the baby...it's coming early. She's in awful pain."

Eliza spun on her heel, calling to Rachel over her shoulder. "I'm going to Billy's."

She grabbed her bag and was out the door before Rachel could respond, Billy on her heels as she raced along the path to the small cabin he shared with his wife. Throwing open the door, she found Shining Star writhing on the bed, clutching her swollen belly and moaning.

She laid a soothing hand on the young woman's shoulder. "I'm here now, it's going to be all right," she murmured.

Behind her, Billy hovered anxiously in the doorway as Eliza assessed his laboring wife, her experienced hands and eyes searching for clues to guide her next actions.

Rachel arrived moments later. She took in the scene with a glance—Shining Star crying out on the bed, Eliza bent over her in concentration, Billy's worried face.

"Billy, let's give them some room to work," she said, steering Billy by the arm into the main room of the cabin. She settled him into a chair by the fireplace. Less than a minute later, he was up and pacing.

"Try to stay calm," she soothed. "Eliza will take good care of Shining Star and the baby."

Billy sat back down, his leg bouncing with nervous energy as his gaze kept darting to the bedroom door. "It's too early. What if something's wrong? I can't lose them, I can't..." His voice choked off.

Rachel clasped his shoulder. "You must have faith. Eliza is highly skilled, we're blessed to have her."

He dropped his head in his hands. "I know, I know. It's just, she's my whole world, Rachel."

“I understand. But fretting yourself to pieces won’t help her now. Why don’t I make us some tea while we wait?”

Billy gave a jerky nod, lost in the tumult of his own worried thoughts as she moved around the familiar kitchen. The comforting ritual of preparing the tea soothed her own concern for her friend. Rachel had no doubt if Eliza needed her, she’d call out.

In a few minutes, she handed a steaming cup of tea to Billy. He wrapped his hands around it, taking a sip of the hot liquid.

“Thank you,” he said hoarsely.

They sat in silence for several long moments, the only sounds the ticking of the clock on the mantel and the occasional creak of a floorboard from the bedroom.

When the door opened, Eliza stepped out.

Billy shot to his feet. “How is she? The baby?”

She gave him a reassuring smile. “They’re fine. Shining Star did have some contractions, but upon examination, the baby is not ready to be born yet. It was false labor, nothing to be too concerned about.”

Billy sagged in relief. “Thank the Lord. Are they in any danger?”

“Not at all. The contractions are slowing and should stop completely soon. Shining Star needs rest now. I’ll check on her again tomorrow.”

As the women exited the cabin, fat snowflakes began drifting down. Spencer and a few other ranch hands hovered nearby, stamping their feet against the cold.

“Well?” Spencer asked. “How are they?”

Eliza explained the situation, leaving out private details. The men nodded, tension easing from their stances. The baby wasn’t coming yet after all.

As the men dispersed, Spencer met Eliza’s eyes. “Thank you, ma’am,” he said with quiet intensity. “We’re lucky to have you.”

Eliza felt her cheeks warm. “I’m happy I could help.”

Their gazes held a moment longer before Spencer strode off into the swirling snow. She let out a slow breath, heart fluttering. With a final glance back at the cabin, she headed to the house, the chill night air doing nothing to cool her lingering blush.

The next morning, Eliza visited Shining Star again and was pleased to find her recovering well. Billy was attentive but not smothering, bringing his wife broth and extra blankets. Eliza made plans to check in every few days until the birth.

As she left the cabin, Spencer came around the corner, leading two horses. He touched the brim of his hat in greeting. “Morning. How’s your patient?”

“Doing well.” An awkward silence fell as she searched for something else to say. “Will you be working near the house today? I could bring you some coffee later.”

“Much obliged. I’ll be mending fences on the other side of the barn.” He walked away before she could respond.

Still, her steps felt a little lighter as she made her way back to the main house. After their kiss, she knew her interest wasn’t one-sided. There was more to Spencer than she’d ever expected, and she was eager to learn everything about him.

Riding up to the Dixie, Lucien swung down from his large, roan gelding and looped the reins around the hitching post. He scanned the street, instinctively checking for threats. Seeing none, he rolled his shoulders to relieve the ache from long days of riding.

Shoving through the bat-wing doors, he leaned against the bar, signaling the bartender for a whiskey. Fighting constant snowstorms, it had taken longer than expected to travel from Bozeman to Splendor. He was ready for food, a bath, and a couple days of rest.

Sipping his whiskey, he glanced around the saloon. The threat of another storm appeared to have kept most of the boys away, which was fine with Lucien.

The door leading to the office and supply room swung open, and Julia emerged, carrying additional bottles of whiskey. At the same moment, her brother, Booker, clomped down the stairs from his rented room on the second floor.

“Lucien, you’re back.” Surprise and pleasure lit up her face. She set down the bottles to give him a quick hug.

Booker gripped Lucien’s hand. “Glad you made it. Weather hasn’t been the best.”

“I understand this is normal for December.” His voice was a low rumble.

Julia’s smile faded. “If you have time, we need to talk.”

“I have plenty of time for you, Julia. What’s on your mind?”

She leaned against the bar. “Ford came by while you were gone. He told me about a couple children who were found behind the general store a few days ago. I hadn’t heard about them, but he seemed real concerned. He wanted to talk to you. Made it

sound real important.”

He took another sip of his whiskey, listening while thinking about the transaction he’d finalized in Bozeman.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Ford said the children’s last name is Weber.”

Lucien stilled and met her gaze. “Weber, you said?” He kept his voice carefully neutral.

“Yes.” Julia studied him curiously. “Do you know them?”

“Can’t say as I do.” Lucien tugged at the brim of his hat. “Did he say where these children are?”

“I know they were at the clinic, but I heard they left. You know how gossip travels around this town.”

He shifted toward the front doors. “So, you don’t know where they are now?”

“Sorry, Lucien. I don’t.”

“Appreciate you telling me, Julia.” He tossed back the whiskey the bartender had poured. “I’ll be riding out to see Ford. Do me a favor and reserve a room upstairs for me. I don’t know how long I’ll need it.”

She nodded. “Sure, Lucien.”

“I’m going with you,” Booker said as he buttoned up his heavy coat. “It’s not a good idea for a man to ride alone with a storm brewing.”

Julia watched as the two men walked outside and mounted up.

They reined their horses toward Ford's ranch, keeping a slow pace through town before kicking them into a lope. Lucien's mind churned over the unexpected news. What did it mean? Was it connected to his shadowed past?

He hadn't let on, but he definitely knew the Weber name. Once upon a time, when his life was normal, it had belonged to him. Lucien Weber. Life choices had led him to make a change. He'd become Lucien Hunt to protect his family back in Missouri.

He shook his head to dislodge the vivid memories. No use dwelling on the past. This news had him unsettled. What were the odds another Weber family would end up here, in this remote Montana town?

A coincidence? Or something more?

Lucien had to know.

Lucien and Booker rode as hard as they could in an attempt to stay ahead of the growing storm. Ford and Tess's ranch was about four miles west of town on a winding trail barely wide enough for a wagon.

They slowed their horses as the ranch house came into view. Lucien spotted Ford leaving the barn at the same time his friend looked up, noting their approach. Ford stopped to turn toward them, waving them toward the stable next to the house.

Lucien remembered when Ford had shown him a crude drawing of the structure the previous summer. He'd offered to stay to help Ford build the stable. It took them less than a week to complete the structure, meant to be used for bad weather days.

Dismounting, they traded out the bridles for halters, allowing the horses to drink from

the water trough and eat from wooden feed bins. Ford met them as they stepped onto the porch, holding out his hand to each.

“Just get back?” Ford asked.

Lucien nodded. “I came out as soon as Julia said you wanted to talk. The children?”

“Are safe at the Pelletier ranch. Let’s go inside. I’ll tell you what I know.” Ford opened the door, ushering them inside. “Tess and the children are at Ty’s house. She knows nothing.” He mentioned her brother-in-law who lived a few miles south.

Lucien nodded in understanding.

Without offering, Ford poured three cups of coffee. “Sit down and we’ll talk.”

The three took seats at the table, cradling the cups to warm their hands.

“Two children, a boy, Tommy, and a girl—”

“Sherilyn,” Lucien completed for him. “Tommy should be about nine. Sherilyn around six.”

“Have you gotten word about your brother?” Ford asked.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Lucien shook his head. “I figure he and his wife are dead.”

“I don’t know many details other than your brother’s attorney sent them to live with you. It’s odd, though. Bernie Griggs told me he wasn’t holding a telegram for you.”

Letting out a breath, he stared into his coffee.

“Yeah. My brother and I made an agreement years ago, right after Tommy was born.”
He removed his hat to run fingers through thick, prematurely gray hair.

“Never thought it would come to this. I don’t even have a place to live.

The ranch near Bozeman is, well...as of last week, it’s no longer mine. ”

Ford nodded. He, Lucien, and Booker understood the life of a wandering man hired for his gun. The three had played many roles but never included being hired to kill. The distinction was why the three had formed what some would call a friendship, and maybe it was.

Lucien hesitated. “You say they’re at the Pelletiers’?”

“Yep. Two deputies found them a few nights ago, huddled together behind the general store. They were freezing and hungry, so the deputies took them to the clinic. Clay, Drake, and a woman doc on her way west took care of them. From what I understand, the woman is staying at the ranch, so they took the children there.”

“They’re all right then?” Lucien asked.

“That’s what I understand.”

Lucien nodded, relief flooding through him.

“One of you want to tell me what’s going on?” Booker asked, looking between them.

Ford looked at Lucien and nodded. “It’s your story to tell, my friend.”

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Leaning back in his chair, Lucien closed his eyes for a moment, thinking back to the last time he'd seen his family.

Booker's question didn't bother him. The memories are what ate at his soul.

The memories of the family farm, his brother, the wife Lucien once had, and the daughter they'd once shared.

How had he let everything meaningful slip away?

"It's not complicated, Book. I left the family farm in Missouri years ago. Changed my last name from Weber to Hunt when I started getting hired for my skill with a gun. My younger brother stayed, got married, and never left Missouri. They had two children, Thomas and Sherilyn."

"What are you going to do?" Booker asked.

Ford stood, grabbed the pot from the stove, and poured them more coffee. Setting the pot back on the stove, he returned to his chair.

"What I promised. I'm going to ride to the Pelletier ranch and get my family."

Booker's eyes widened. "But where will you live? How will you provide for them?"

Lucien thought of the money in the pocket of his jacket. Enough for a ranch near Splendor or anywhere in Montana or the Dakotas.

“I’ll figure it all out.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Booker said, his mouth tipping up at the corners.

Lucien didn’t return the slight smile. “I’m listening.”

“Julia’s comfortable here. She feels safe, likes the people. She even went to church for the first time since we were young.”

“Did she drag you along?” Ford asked.

Booker chuckled. “Tried. Julia’s relentless when she gets an idea in her head.”

“It’s a matter of time.” Ford grinned.

“Afraid it might be.”

Lucien drummed fingers on the table, waiting, considering what to do after getting the children. “And Julia?”

Taking a swallow of coffee, Booker set the cup down. “I’ve got some money tucked away. Julia needs a place to live away from a saloon. You and your kin need a place.” He shrugged as if the solution was obvious.

Ford barked out a laugh. “How long has it been since you shared a house with someone, Lucien?”

He thought of his wife and daughter, knowing they were a topic for another time. “Not since leaving home.”

“Seems Booker’s come up with a fine idea.”

Standing, Lucien grabbed his hat, settling it low on his head. Heading to the door, he turned back, narrowing his gaze on Booker.

“Might work.”

The bitter wind whipped at Lucien’s face as he and Booker rode the winding trail toward the Pelletier ranch. Their breath came in icy puffs, vanishing in the chill. Pulling his coat tighter, he anticipated the warmth of the ranch house awaiting them.

His thoughts turned to Booker’s suggestion about combining their money to buy a house large enough for everyone. As Lucien mulled it over, hope began to rise in his chest. Having a permanent home could allow him to locate his daughter. A chance at a new life, a stable life. It was a tempting idea.

They crested a small rise, and the sprawling Pelletier ranch came into view. Lucien took in the sight. The large two-story ranch house with smoke curling from several chimneys, the big barn, and several smaller outbuildings made an impressive sight.

They rode to the front of the house and dismounted. Lucien paused, steadying himself as he prepared for the reunion. His nephew and niece were here, family he hadn’t seen in years. How would they react to seeing him again after so long?

Anticipation and nervousness twisted Lucien’s insides. He wanted this to go well. With a deep breath, he nodded to Booker, and they approached the front door.

Rachel Pelletier opened the heavy oak door, stopping short at the sight of the two unfamiliar men on her doorstep. She studied them with curious eyes, taking in their solemn expressions.

“Afternoon, ma’am,” the taller one spoke, dipping his head respectfully. “Name’s Lucien Hunt. I’m looking for Tommy and Sherilyn.”

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "And what business do you have with the children?"

Before Lucien could respond, Eliza Gladstone joined Rachel at the door. The doctor eyed the men with equal wariness. Lucien cleared his throat.

"I'm their uncle. Their father was my brother."

Rachel and Eliza exchanged a surprised look.

"You'll forgive us for wanting some proof of your claim," Rachel said.

Lucien nodded. "Of course. I'll explain everything, if you'll allow me to come inside."

Rachel considered a moment before stepping back and gesturing them in. "All right then. Please come in."

The two men stepped into the warmth of the house. Eliza helped relieve them of their coats and hats before leading them into the parlor. Rachel fixed Lucien with an expectant look.

"It would be best if I started at the beginning..." Lucien said. He launched into an account of his relationship to the children, ready to answer their questions and convince them of the truth.

Before they could speak further, the study door opened and Dax Pelletier stepped out to join them. He approached Lucien with an outstretched hand and a smile of recognition.

"Lucien Hunt. I'll be," Dax said as they shook hands. "Haven't seen you for a while. What brings you out this way?"

Lucien returned his smile. “Good to see you, too, Dax. I’m here about my niece and nephew, Tommy and Sherilyn. I just found out they were staying here.” He introduced Booker.

Dax nodded, gesturing for Lucien to follow him. “Let’s talk in my study.” He looked to Booker. “You’re welcome to join us.”

The two men followed Dax into the richly furnished study. As they settled into the leather chairs, Lucien studied the family photograph on the desk.

Dax didn’t speak, letting Lucien tell the story in his own time.

“I didn’t know my brother had passed until I arrived back in Splendor this morning,” Lucien said. “If I’d known, I would have come for the children straightaway.”

Dax leaned forward, steepling his fingers. “I take it you plan to take them with you when you leave?”

Lucien nodded. “I surely do. They’re my blood.” He hesitated. “Assuming they’ll have me. I know it’s been some years since they last saw me.”

“I’m sure they’ll be glad to see their uncle again.”

Lucien shifted in his chair. “There’s more, Dax. I plan on settling down for good. No more wandering. Booker and I are looking to put down roots.” He met Dax’s gaze. “A fresh start for all of us.”

Dax stood, clasping Lucien on the shoulder. “That’s real good news. Those kids deserve some stability. You have my full support. Now, let’s go find those children.”

They left the study and joined the women in the living room.

A magnificent Christmas tree stood in the corner, trimmed with ribbons, candles, and ornate glass balls glimmering in the firelight.

Garlands draped the mantle and windowsills, filling the room with the fresh scent of pine.

The atmosphere was one of warmth, joy, and celebration, a stark contrast to the bitter cold outside.

“Why don’t I get the children?” Rachel didn’t wait for a response before leaving the room.

A minute later, giggles and small footfalls preceded Tommy and Sherilyn entering the room. Tommy’s eyes went wide when he saw Lucien.

“Uncle Web!” He ran to him with arms outstretched. Lucien swept the boy up in an embrace before setting him down. “Look how you’ve grown.” He chuckled. Seeing Sherilyn hold back, Lucien walked to her, kneeling down. “Do you remember me?”

She shook her head, then nodded. “I don’t know.”

“I’m your Uncle Web, and I remember you, Sherilyn. As I recall, you were three the last time I visited.”

“I’m six now.”

“That’s what I understand.” He rose and held out his hand, waiting until she placed her much smaller hand in his. “How about we sit down?”

She nodded, moving her gaze between Tommy and her uncle.

Lucien sat on the sofa with Tommy and Sherilyn, listening as they talked about everything they'd been up to on the ranch. Neither harbored any resentment about him not being at the stage office to meet them, only delight at being reunited with their uncle.

When Tommy mentioned their parents were gone, Lucien told them a story about him and their father fishing as boys, bringing bittersweet smiles to their faces. Eliza watched the encounter with misty eyes, moved by the obvious tenderness Lucien showed toward his niece and nephew.

Rachel relaxed as she watched Lucien reconnect with Tommy and Sherilyn. When there was a lull in the conversation, she stood and placed a gentle hand on Lucien's shoulder.

"It's getting late, and you two must be tired and hungry after your long journey," she said. "Why don't you and Booker stay for supper and spend the night? We have plenty of room."

Lucien met her gaze, surprise and gratitude in his eyes. "We'd be much obliged for the hospitality, ma'am."

Rachel waved her hand. "Hospitality is what the season is all about. Now come, let's all gather at the table while we bring out the food."

Soon, they were all seated around the large dining table as Rachel, Ginny, and Eliza brought out dishes of roast beef, mashed potatoes, vegetables, and a bowl of canned fruit.

As they ate, the conversation and laughter flowed freely. Lucien and Booker found themselves enjoying the stories shared by Dax and Luke.

When supper ended, Lucien took the children back into the living room. Booker followed while Dax and Luke disappeared into their study.

Needing some air, Eliza slipped into her coat and stepped out on the porch. Tears burned at the back of her eyes as she walked down the steps and away from the house. Even from where he stood by the barn, Spencer could see she was distressed. He strode across the yard to meet her.

“Eliza?”

She turned, tears glistening on her cheeks. Without a word, Spencer opened his arms, and she stepped into his embrace. Her body shook with quiet sobs as she pressed her face into his chest. Resting his chin on her head, he held her close, doing what he could to provide the comfort she needed.

After a long moment, Eliza’s crying eased. She lifted her head to look up at Spencer, gratitude shining in her eyes. He smiled, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

“I’ve become more attached to the children than I planned,” she said. “They are so precious.”

“And you’ll miss them.”

“Yes, I will.”

“I’m sure Lucien will let you see them as often as you’d like.”

“If I stay,” she said.

“Yes, if you stay.” Leaning down, he brushed a kiss across her lips.

Inside, the mood was much lighter. Laughter rang out as Booker told the children a story about him and his sister, Julia.

Lucien watched as Tommy and Sherilyn became lost in the tale of a boy teaching his sister how to ride a horse, warmth gathering in his chest.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Eliza awoke to the stillness of the ranch on Christmas Eve morning. Though the house was full, an odd hush lay over her. She rose, dressed, and made her way downstairs, where voices drifted from the dining room.

She found the long table nearly filled. Dax, Rachel, and their children, Patrick and James, sat at one end with Lucien, Booker, Tommy, and Sherilyn clustered around them.

Tommy and Sherilyn chattered about the coming holiday while Eliza studied Lucien's somber face.

His presence still troubled her, though she could not deny the comfort he brought the children.

Nor could she ignore the flutter in her heart whenever Spencer was near.

At the thought of him, she glanced around, realizing he hadn't joined them.

Rachel noticed her, waving her over. "Good morning, Eliza. Come, join us."

Eliza settled into a chair beside Lucien.

His eyes crinkled with a subtle smile. "Morning, Doc."

"Good morning, Lucien," she said as platters of ham, eggs, and biscuits were passed around.

Lucien nodded. "I've learned the children are quite fond of you."

"I assure you, it's mutual."

As the meal wound down, she found herself glancing again at the empty chair beside her. Though he most often ate breakfast with the other ranch hands, she couldn't deny how much she wished he were there.

Eliza's musings were interrupted as Rachel stood, indicating breakfast had ended.

She helped Rachel clean up, then slipped into her heavy coat, tugging on boots and gloves.

As she stepped outside, the brisk air reddened her cheeks.

Tugging up the fur-lined hood, she decided to take a quick walk to check on Shining Star.

The pregnant woman smiled in greeting as Eliza entered. Billy closed the door behind her, before moving to stand beside his wife.

"Morning," Eliza said. "I wanted to see how our patient is faring today."

Billy looked at Shining Star and smiled. "Tell the doctor how you're feeling today."

"I am ready to have this baby."

Eliza chuckled, seeing the slight strain on the young woman's face. "I'm sure you are. I'll be going with Spencer and the others to the church service this afternoon. Do you plan to attend?"

Shining Star looked at Billy.

“We’ve decided it would be best to stay here,” he said. “If you and Rachel are both gone, then it might be best to go. What do you think?”

Eliza thought a moment. “It may be best. Bull is taking the large wagon with two bench seats, so there will be room for you. She’ll need to stay warm, so we should bring extra blankets.”

“What do you think, Shining Star?” he asked.

“Maybe we should go with the doctor. All the women and children will be gone, and Spirit Bear wants to go, too.”

“All right. We’ll go with you.”

“Excellent,” she said. “Spencer said we should leave early.”

“I’ll ask Bull,” Billy said, taking Shining Star’s hand in his.

“Well, then, I’ll see you at the wagon this afternoon.” Eliza headed back out into the cold.

Her breath clouded before her as she glanced around, hoping to spot Spencer. But the yard was empty save for two ranch hands tossing hay into the horse corrals.

“Eliza.” She looked toward the house, seeing Rachel waving to her from the porch. Crossing the distance, she walked up the steps.

“Lucien and Booker had decided to ride into town this morning to speak with Horace Clausen about their need for a house. When Tommy and Sherilyn heard the news,

they became upset.”

Eliza’s brows drew together. “Feeling abandoned again?”

“Perhaps. Ginny and I were going to drive to town early to help Martha deliver the presents to the orphanage. Dax suggested we all go early. Once the presents are delivered, we can meet at the church. Would you like to come with us?”

“I would, except Spencer asked me to ride in with him.”

“I do recall hearing him talk to Bull about driving the larger wagon. We’ll be leaving soon and meet you at the church.” Rachel grinned as she hurried to get ready.

Several minutes later, the wagons rumbled down the road toward town. Eliza waved after them before she turned to scan the ranch area once again.

Spencer had been noticeably absent all morning. She wondered if he’d been sent to check on the herd. She also couldn’t blame him if he was ignoring her, maybe having second thoughts. This thing between them was complicated, with no easy answers.

Part of her urged caution, knowing she still might move on come spring. Another part insisted she stay, discover if a life with Spencer was possible.

She sighed, her breath fogging the air. She cared a great deal for him, but was it enough to alter the course she’d charted for herself?

Whatever she decided come spring, for now, this place had become home.

Spencer continued to toss hay onto the ground from the feed house north of the ranch house. He and two others had ridden out early to make sure the cattle had enough until the following morning.

Stopping, he leaned against the pitchfork, allowing himself a minute to rest. He thought of Eliza and how she'd allowed him to see her tender heart the previous evening.

The woman he'd come to know was unexpected.

Nothing about her was the same as how she'd presented herself when first arriving in Splendor.

Her distress witnessing the children reuniting with their uncle had come as a surprise. He wondered how he could've ever thought Eliza possessed a cold heart. Hers was as warm as any woman he'd ever known.

He thought of what he planned and how she'd respond. They'd known each other for such a short time. Less than a month. Could he rely on his feelings after a few weeks? Spencer had no answer.

"Hey, Spencer," Tom called out, using his one good arm to spread out the hay.

He turned to look at his friend. "What?"

"We've spread out enough hay. Let's get back to the ranch."

They rode into the stable an hour later, removing their saddles and tack. Spencer left to find Bull, expecting him to be in one of the other barns. Glancing toward the house, his pace slowed. Eliza sat on a rocker with a blanket covering her legs while she read something in a large book.

Stopping, he turned around. So engrossed in whatever she was reading, she didn't look up until his boots sounded on the steps.

“Spencer...”

“Sure is quiet around here.” He took a seat in the rocker next to hers.

“Almost everyone left for town to deliver the presents to the orphanage. We’re going to meet them at the church. Assuming we’re still riding in together.”

“Of course we are.”

“I wanted to make sure. We’ll be riding with Bull, Lydia, Billy, and Shining Star in the large wagon.”

He nodded, considering. “It has two bench seats, which will give us enough room. How is Shining Star doing?”

“As of a few hours ago, she’s fine. Billy knows to come for me if the contractions return.”

“Is it safe for her to go into town?”

“They decided with most everyone else in town, there’d be no one with medical training to help if the baby does come,” she answered.

He nodded. “What are you reading?”

“A medical journal I brought with me. It chronicles new research.”

“Sounds interesting.” He reached out, placing his hand over hers.

Laughing, she closed the book. “It isn’t for anyone who isn’t a doctor.”

They fell silent as they rocked, watching horses graze on the hay in a corral to the side of the large barn. “If it was spring, I’d get you on a horse for a ride to the creek. Maybe if you stay long enough.”

Right this moment, with Spencer sitting a few inches away, his fingers threaded with hers, she wanted to be here in the spring to take the ride.

The big wagon, as those on the ranch called it, was just that.

Wider and longer than the other wagon at the ranch, four people could sit in comfort on each of the two benches.

The back was deep, able to hold enough wood to build a small cabin or stable, or deliver every window in the large ranch house.

Bull and Lydia sat on the front bench, and at Shining Star’s insistence, she, Billy, Spencer, and Eliza were on the second.

Bull had loaded the back with loose hay and lots of extra blankets.

Just in case. The extra weight also helped to stabilize the wagon, which rumbled over bumps in the trail easier than the smaller wagons.

As they traveled toward town, the men entertained the women with stories of their time on the ranch.

Eliza found herself mesmerized by what they’d gone through for the life they’d created on the frontier.

Her life seemed so old-fashioned and narrow in comparison.

She wondered if San Francisco would make her feel alive in the same way as Splendor.

Reaching town, Lydia spotted the others from the ranch and waved. The last two days had been warmer than usual, resulting in melted snow and foot-deep mud. Even though the women wore boots, the men carried the women from the wagon to the steps of the church.

After Spencer set Eliza down and she straightened her dress and coat, he snagged her hand to walk inside.

By the smiles and nods from others, the gesture didn't go unnoticed as they found seats on one of the two long pews Rachel and Ginny had saved.

Behind them, Spencer's sister, Dorinda, leaned forward to whisper in his ear, causing her brother to blush. Eliza could barely contain a chuckle.

Spencer didn't let go of her hand. Not when the choir walked in, not when everyone stood to sing, and not when Reverend Paige entered.

Eliza glanced over at Spencer, his handsome profile bathed in candlelight as he sang along to the opening hymn. She gave his hand a small squeeze, overcome with emotion.

After the opening hymns, they took their seats on the wooden pews. She spotted Lucien, Tommy, Julia, and Booker in the row in front of them, little Sherilyn perched happily on her uncle's lap.

Eliza was jolted from her observations by the pastor beginning his sermon. She tried to focus on his words about new beginnings and leaving the past behind. But Spencer's thumb gently caressing her palm kept distracting her in the most wonderful

way.

She studied his handsome profile again as he listened attentively to the pastor. The flickering candlelight illuminated his chiseled features. Sensing her watching, he turned and met her gaze.

Eliza listened as the reverend used Bible verses to illustrate all the times significant figures were called upon to start over and build their lives anew.

She found herself thinking of Lucien and the children, Booker and his sister, and of herself.

Eliza wondered if she had the same courage as those who'd come before her.

At the end of the service, as had become a tradition, Beauty DeBell sang Silent Night, Holy Night , bringing many to tears.

The pastor concluded the service, inviting the congregation to share the refreshments in the community building. Spencer turned to Eliza, his golden-brown eyes twinkling.

Eliza smiled up at him, her decision made. This rugged ranch hand had stolen her heart, and she would follow it wherever it led. Starting with the rest of this wonderful Christmas Eve.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

The adults trudged up the porch steps, the church service, as wonderful as it was, had left them exhausted after the busy week preparing for Christmas. Inside, the warmth from the crackling fireplace embraced them, thawing the chill.

“I’ll make coffee,” Rachel said. “Dax, would you bring out the wrapped presents?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll help you.” Booker followed him down the hall.

It took little time for the two men to retrieve the presents, setting them near the tree. The adults set about arranging the gifts around the tree. Quiet laughter filled the room as they speculated on the reactions their presents would elicit come morning.

“I hope Tommy and Sherilyn like what I bought them.” Lucien set two wrapped boxes beneath the tree.

Julia, who’d been invited to stay at the ranch for Christmas, gave his arm an affectionate squeeze. “I’m sure they’ll be thrilled.”

The others murmured in agreement. In this small way, they could create a little extra Christmas magic for the children.

Julia stifled a yawn as she entered her bedroom an hour later, the events of the day catching up with her. She sat at the vanity and began brushing out her long, chestnut hair, thinking back on the lovely Christmas Eve service. Reverend Paige’s sermon on new beginnings had given her much to ponder.

A hint of a smile played at her lips as she recalled Lucien's rapt attention during the service. Perhaps he, too, felt the tug of the message. She sighed, wishing she could glimpse inside his complex mind.

As Julia prepared for bed, she retrieved the telegram on her nightstand. She had read it so many times since its arrival, still having a hard time believing the news it contained. In the morning, she would share it with Lucien, though she couldn't guess his reaction.

Setting the slip of paper back on the nightstand, Julia climbed into bed. She blew out the lamp and soon drifted off, the telegram's message echoing in her mind.

Outside, the wind howled as Eliza and Spencer stood together on the porch. His arm was around her waist, drawing her close as they talked in soft voices. Their breaths mingled to create soft wisps of white vapor.

"It's so beautiful out here," Eliza whispered. She felt his grip around her tighten in response.

"Yes, it is." His voice was husky with emotion. Tilting up her chin, he claimed her lips in a tender kiss.

Eliza broke the kiss on a reluctant sigh, knowing they both needed rest before the busy Christmas Day ahead.

"We should get some sleep," she murmured.

"You're right." He pressed one more kiss across her lips before stepping away. "Sweet dreams."

Her heart fluttered as she watched him make his way to the bunkhouse. Entering the

house, she touched her lips, feeling flushed, as she walked up the stairs to her bedroom.

Preparing for bed, Eliza couldn't keep the smile from her face. The decision she'd wrestled with now felt so clear. She would stay in Splendor and hope to find a future with Spencer.

Going to the window, Eliza peered out at the bunkhouse, picturing Spencer asleep within. Anticipation bubbled within her at the thought of telling him her choice to stay. She hoped with all her heart he would want the same.

Christmas morning dawned crisp and clear. Eliza awoke to the sound of laughter and footfalls down the hall. The children were already up, no doubt agape at the gifts around the tree. The smell of coffee and sizzling bacon wafted up from the kitchen.

After washing and dressing, Eliza made her way downstairs. She found Rachel, Ginny, and Julia already at work.

"Merry Christmas!" Julia greeted her.

"It smells wonderful in here." She grabbed an apron and pitched in, making the coffee cake her mother served every Christmas since Eliza had completed medical school.

Soon, the table was laden with food and ringed by the boisterous, happy family. Eliza placed her fragrant coffee cake on the table.

"My mother's recipe," she said, setting it down.

The children's eyes grew wide at the sight of the treat. Tommy licked his lips while Sherilyn bounced in her seat.

As everyone began passing plates, the conversation grew more animated. Eliza watched in fascination as the children talked about the presents, speculating on what they'd get. She'd never experienced such excitement. As an only child, there was no one to share the excitement.

After breakfast, the real Christmas cheer would come when the children opened their gifts. And tonight, she would tell Spencer her decision. Her chest squeezed, anxious and excited at the same time.

Lucien kept a watchful eye on the children as the happy commotion of Christmas morning unfolded around him.

Though Tommy and Sherilyn were smiling and laughing with the others, he noticed a lingering sadness in their eyes they couldn't fully mask.

His heart ached for the hardships they'd endured at such a young age.

As Tommy helped Sherilyn spoon strawberry preserves onto a biscuit, Lucien vowed to himself these two would never again feel the uncertainty of being abandoned.

Nor would they face the bitter chill of sleeping unprotected on a back street.

He would do everything in his power to surround them with a home, food, and love.

After breakfast, the gift giving began in earnest. Lucien made certain Tommy and Sherilyn received extra attention.

He showed genuine interest and delight as Tommy demonstrated how his new bugle worked, getting the attention of everyone in the room.

Lucien picked up Sherilyn, settling her on his lap when she ran to him with a huge

smile and her new doll clutched in both hands.

Though Lucien said little, his steadfast presence and undivided focus on the children spoke volumes. By the time the last shreds of wrapping paper had been cleared away, Tommy and Sherilyn were both chatting with ease, their troubles forgotten under their Uncle Web's reassuring watch.

When the children ran off to play with what they'd received, the adults opened their presents.

These were more practical. Shirts, socks, gloves, sweaters, scarves, sewing material, hair ornaments, and perfume.

Booker was stunned to receive a pair of well-crafted leather gloves from his sister.

Julia was equally surprised at the emerald green wool shawl from her brother.

Booker smiled at his sister's delight over the shawl, glad to have chosen something both beautiful and practical to help keep her warm.

Dax eagerly donned the warm knitted socks Rachel had made, wiggling his toes in their woolen comfort. Luke gave an approving nod to Ginny as he inspected the sturdy new work gloves, flexing his fingers to test their fit.

Eliza's eyes lit up when she opened the lavender sachet Rachel had sewn, breathing in the soothing floral scent. "What a thoughtful gift, Rachel. Thank you."

Though simple, these heartfelt gifts brought joy and conveyed the love between family and friends. As pleasant conversation filled the room, a spirit of gratitude and community swelled in the ranch house, the true meaning of Christmas overtaking all.

As the adults continued exchanging gifts, Rachel and Ginny made their way over to Lucien.

“We have something special for you, too.” Rachel handed Lucien a neatly wrapped box. Though caught off guard, Lucien accepted it with a polite nod. Carefully, he untied the string and lifted the lid.

Inside were several items of children’s clothing, clearly worn but well cared for.

There were warm flannel shirts, a pair of sturdy boots, pairs of woolen socks, dresses, and sturdy shoes, all in children’s sizes.

Folded beneath were picture books and two handmade quilts in bright, cheerful patterns.

Lucien’s eyes misted over at the generosity. These were gifts for Tommy and Sherilyn, who’d arrived with so little. Rachel and Ginny were ensuring the children would be warm and comfortable in their new home.

Clearing his throat, he looked between the women.

“We know you’ll give them a good life,” Rachel said.

Lucien swallowed hard, overcome with emotion. Unable to find the words, he enfolded both women in a heartfelt embrace.

The meaningful gift would help provide for the children’s needs, but more importantly, it conveyed the Pelletiers’ quiet welcome and support. Lucien was deeply moved.

Lucien was still absorbing the kindness shown to him when Julia approached, holding

a telegram against her chest. “This came to me yesterday. I contacted a friend, and, well... It’s best if you read it.” She held it out to him.

He took the slip of paper, intrigued. As he read the words, his eyes widened. He read it again as if struggling to comprehend the message.

After a long moment, he met Julia’s earnest gaze.

“It’s from my daughter, Miranda.” She nodded, already knowing the contents of the telegram.

“She is doing fine, is living in Chicago, and wants to arrange a visit.” He looked up.

“I haven’t seen her since she was a young girl.

I can’t believe it,” he murmured. Lucien quickly folded the telegram and tucked it into his shirt pocket as if afraid the news might slip away.

“Did you do this?”

“All I did was send a telegram to a long-time friend who lived in the same town as your wife and daughter. I didn’t expect it to do much good. I was shocked when she responded.”

He embraced Julia. “Thank you,” he whispered, voice thick with emotion.

Then, overcome, Lucien stepped outside into the brisk morning air. He needed a moment alone to process this staggering news. Another unexpected gift.

After Lucien departed, Eliza walked to the tree to pick up a wrapped package, handing it to Spencer. “This is for you.”

He unwrapped the gift to reveal a handsome tooled leather belt with an ornate silver buckle, his initials in the center.

“It’s beautiful,” he breathed out, running his fingers over the intricate tooling. He lifted his gaze to Eliza’s. “I’ll think of you every time I wear it. Thank you.”

She flushed with pleasure at his reaction.

Setting the belt down, he reached into his pocket, ready to pull out his present to Eliza when the front door burst open, and Billy rushed in, his face flushed. His wild-eyed gaze landed on Eliza.

“It’s Shining Star! She’s having the baby.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

“Billy. It’s going to be all right,” Eliza soothed. “Let me get my bag.” She rushed up the stairs. Grabbing her medical bag, she rushed back down, slipping into the coat Spencer held out.

“I’m ready, Billy. Let’s go.” She hurried out after him, with Rachel and Spencer following.

They stepped inside the cabin to find Bull nursing a cup of coffee while watching his children, Joshua and Chloe, and Spirit Bear. He nodded toward the bedroom. “Lydia is with Shining Star.”

Eliza stopped Billy when he started to walk into the bedroom. “Rachel and I will take good care of her. You should stay here with Bull and Spencer.”

“But...” His voice trailed off before he nodded. “All right.”

Lydia sat on the edge of the bed, holding Shining Star’s hand as the latest contraction slowed. Eliza could see the sheen of moisture on the young woman’s face. Setting down her bag, she took Lydia’s place.

“Everything is going to be all right. Try to relax.”

Shining Star nodded, though her features showed the exhaustion she felt.

Eliza washed her hands and examined Shining Star. The baby would be here soon.

Working swiftly, she guided Shining Star through the birth, encouraging her through

the pain. Twice, Billy knocked on the door. Each time, Rachel spoke to him, confirming Shining Star was doing well and it wouldn't be much longer.

As the baby finally emerged, Eliza's breath caught in her throat. The umbilical cord was wrapped tightly around the newborn's neck.

With expert hands, she unwound the cord and cleared the baby's airways. A tense moment passed as she waited for the little one to draw breath. Then a weak but miraculous cry emerged, followed by a much more boisterous one.

"You have a son," Eliza said softly.

She handed the baby to Rachel, who wiped a soft, damp cloth over his face. Wrapping him in a swaddling cloth, she placed the squalling infant into his mother's waiting arms. Shining Star cooed to him, weeping with joy. Rachel then opened the door, signaling for Billy.

He rushed to the door, then stopped, looking at Eliza.

Eliza smiled wearily. "Mother and son are doing just fine."

"A son..." Billy breathed out before kneeling beside the bed and taking his wife's hand. As he gazed at his new family, Spencer strode over to Eliza.

"Seems you've worked another miracle."

She nodded, filled with quiet wonder at the fragile tenacity of life.

Eliza and Spencer walked back toward the ranch house, neither feeling a need to rush. She took a deep breath, invigorated by the chilly air. She felt Spencer studying her.

“You look happy,” he remarked.

“I am. It’s been a good day.”

He nodded. “We’re lucky to have you here.”

She felt a rush of warmth at his words. When Eliza first arrived, she’d doubted this rustic town would ever feel like home. To her surprise, the people had won her over with their generosity and spirit.

As they drew closer to the house, laughter drifted out to greet them. They stepped onto the porch and entered the house. Most of the adults were gathered in the living room, chatting amiably and sipping coffee. A few called out cheerful greetings to Eliza and Spencer.

Excusing herself, she found Ginny and Julia busy preparing supper.

Ginny was kneading a large ball of dough, dusting it liberally with flour.

Julia stood at the wood stove, tending to several bubbling pots and pans.

Eliza inhaled the savory aromas of roast duck and split pea soup mingling in the air.

“Something sure smells good in here,” Eliza said as she entered the kitchen.

“Did Shining Star have her baby?” Julia asked.

“Yes, she did. A beautiful baby boy.”

Ginny looked up and smiled. “Wonderful. If you want to help, grab an apron, and we’ll put you to work.”

Eliza smiled and tied a checkered apron around her waist. “What can I do?”

“Here, you can peel these potatoes for the potato cakes,” Julia said, passing her a bowl of spuds as Rachel walked in to help.

Eliza set to work, comforted by the domestic tasks. The women chatted as they prepared the meal, sharing funny stories and memories of past Christmases.

Rachel began setting out the desserts prepared over the last few days. Apple and huckleberry pies, along with pound cake and jars of brandied peaches.

“Those look delicious,” Eliza said.

Soon enough, the food was ready, and it was time to gather everyone for supper. Dax stood at the head of the table and gave a simple blessing for the food and the company.

“Dear Lord, thank you for this meal and for all of us being together. Bless this food to our bodies and our time together to our spirits. Amen.”

“Amen,” everyone echoed. The table came alive then with the clinking of silverware and the passing of bowls and platters laden with food. Laughter filled the room as the ranch hands and their families enjoyed the meal. Spencer sat beside her, sharing private smiles as they ate.

After supper, the women cleared away the dishes while the men retired to the parlor for brandy and cigars. Eliza was humming as she helped wash up, already looking forward to dessert and the rest of the holiday.

Julia picked up two pots of coffee from the stove. “I’ll take this on out to the parlor. Heaven knows they’ll be wanting more by now.”

Eliza nodded, stacking the last of the dishes on the sideboard. She could hear the deep rumble of the men's voices punctuated by hearty laughter. The children's lighter tones chimed in now and then as they shared in the joy of the evening.

After dessert, Rachel took a seat at the upright piano. Her slender fingers moved gracefully over the keys as she played a medley of familiar carols. The festive music filled the room, complementing the crackling fire and murmur of happy voices.

Eliza found an empty spot on the sofa next to Spencer. As Rachel launched into "Joy to the World," Eliza couldn't resist joining in, lending her clear soprano to the cheerful refrain. Spencer's deep bass provided a pleasing counterpoint as he, too, sang along.

Eliza marveled at how perfectly their voices blended, weaving in joyful harmony. She flashed Spencer a smile. Brushing his hand against hers, he returned the smile.

These people had become like family during her brief time in Splendor. And the man beside her, his strong voice mingling with hers, represented the promise of a future.

When the song ended, she turned toward Spencer. "Let's sneak outside for a moment." He nodded, and they grabbed their coats, quietly slipping out the front door into the bracing night air. Eliza drew her coat close against the chill, though she glowed with an inner warmth.

Unable to contain her news any longer, she shared her decision to stay in Splendor and accept the offer of a position at the clinic.

Spencer stilled, considering her words, and for a moment, she didn't believe he would respond. Had she made a mistake in thinking a future in Splendor with him was what he wanted?

Spencer took both of Eliza's hands in his own. "You have become the most important person in my life, Eliza. With you by my side, I'll have the strength and courage to face anything. I love you. Will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

Joyful tears sprang to Eliza's eyes. "Yes! There's nothing I want more than to be with you."

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small tin container. "This belonged to my grandmother. She wanted me to give it to the woman I married."

He removed the lid, revealing an oval cameo pendant set in engraved silver. Eliza gasped. It was exquisite.

"May I?" Spencer asked. When she nodded, he gently pinned the cameo to her blouse, over her heart.

Eliza touched it lightly, tears welling up in her eyes. This heirloom represented the joining of their two families. A symbol of the future they would build together.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:11 am

Eliza finished tying off the last suture in Mrs. Wilson's arm, then wrapped a clean bandage around the closed wound. "There you are. Keep it clean and dry for the next few days and let me know if you notice any increased swelling or redness."

Mrs. Wilson nodded in gratitude as Eliza helped her down from the exam table. Eliza could see the woman's husband pacing anxiously out front.

"Thank you, Dr. Gladstone. You've been a godsend to this town."

"Just doing my job. Now go on home and get some rest." She walked Mrs. Wilson out to meet her husband, giving him instructions for changing the dressings.

As she turned to go back inside, Rachel Pelletier pulled up in a wagon. "Eliza! We need to hurry if we're going to get you to the church on time."

Her eyes went wide. "The wedding! I completely lost track of time when Mrs. Wilson arrived. I'll be right back." She rushed upstairs to grab her belongings, stopping when she saw Clay and Drake talking. "I'm heading to the church."

The men chuckled, watching her hustle about. "We'll be right behind you," Drake called as she rushed past them.

Donning her coat and hat, she hurried back downstairs to join an excited Rachel. As she climbed into the waiting wagon, her heart pounded with equal parts joy and nerves.

Today was the beginning of her new life with Spencer, and she couldn't wait to join

him at the altar. First, she had to get to the church.

Rachel beamed at Eliza as the wagon slogged through the soaked streets. Even with low temperatures the last few days, the sun had melted the snow and ice on the roads.

“I’m so happy for you and Spencer. We’re all thrilled you decided to stay in Splendor.”

She smiled, though her stomach was a tangle of butterflies. “I’m happy, too. Also nervous.”

They soon arrived at the community building next to the church. Eliza took a deep breath as she stepped inside, her gaze landing on covered platters of sliced meats, salads, and desserts. Sunlight streamed through the windows, catching on the beautiful ivory wedding dress hanging on a wall hook.

“Oh, Eliza, it’s gorgeous,” Rachel whispered. “Allie outdid herself,” mentioning Deputy Cash Coulter’s wife, who owned the dress shop. “Go on, try it.”

Rachel helped her slip on the exquisite gown, relishing the feel of the satiny fabric against her skin.

The bodice hugged her torso before flaring at the waist into a full skirt, and delicate beadwork traced the sweetheart neckline.

Eliza hardly recognized herself in the nearby mirror.

The dress Allie created was as good as any she could’ve found in New York.

“You look like an angel,” Rachel said, dabbing at her eyes. She straightened the skirt a little and adjusted the veil. “I believe you’re ready. Oh, except for one more thing.” Rachel handed her a beautiful bouquet of greenery and red berries.

Eliza's eyes grew wide as she pressed the creation against her chest, her heartbeat quickening. "Thank you," she breathed out.

She longed to see Spencer, to join their lives together at last. Raising the dress's skirt, she followed Rachel out the door toward the biggest moment of her life.

Entering the church, she sought out Spencer's tall form at the front. Her breath caught at the sight of him in his smart black suit, his hair neatly combed. His eyes lit up when they met hers, crinkling at the corners with his smile.

She didn't notice the gathered crowd as she glided down the aisle, focused on her soon-to-be husband. When she reached Spencer's side, he took her hands in his. His warm, calloused grip reassured and calmed her.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured. Her cheeks heated at the sincerity in his tone.

Reverend Paige began speaking, his melodic voice filling the church. Eliza soaked in Spencer's presence, the intensity of his gaze, as they exchanged their heartfelt vows.

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Spencer's smile was radiant. He leaned in and pressed his lips to Eliza's in a tender kiss. Then they turned toward their guests. He raised their joined hands high to cheerful applause from their friends and family.

Eliza glanced at the crowd, her heart overflowing. This community had welcomed her with open arms, and she'd found her home in this wild, wonderful land.

Spencer led Eliza from the church to the adjacent community building, where the reception would be held. She clutched her bouquet, nerves fluttering in her stomach at the prospect of meeting so many new people at once.

Spencer gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t worry, they’ll love you.”

The first to approach was Ruth Paige. “Congratulations, Eliza. I’m so pleased you decided to stay in Splendor.”

Eliza flushed. “Thank you, Ruth. I’m delighted to be here.”

More townsfolk offered congratulations and introduced themselves. Their genuine delight at meeting Spencer’s new bride soon put Eliza at ease. She was touched by their eagerness to make her feel at home.

By the time they’d spoken to everyone, Eliza’s cheeks ached from smiling. These were good, hardworking people. She knew she would come to cherish them as friends in this new chapter of her life.

The fiddler struck up a spirited reel, and Spencer turned to Eliza, eyes twinkling. “May I have this dance, Mrs. Haglund?”

“I’d be delighted, Mr. Haglund.” She laughed as he whisked her onto the dance floor.

Eliza had never danced like this before, swept up in the rollicking music. But Spencer guided her with ease, his strong arms supporting her through the steps. She was breathless and giddy when the music ended.

“You’re a natural,” he said.

When the fiddler began a slower waltz, Spencer drew Eliza close. She rested her cheek against his chest. Dancing in his arms, she was enveloped in joy and hope for their new life together. This union marked a new beginning for them both.

Lucien leaned against the wall, watching Tommy and Sherilyn play with other children across the room. Beside him, Booker and Julia sipped punch while observing

the couples dancing.

“It’s nice having a place of our own,” Julia said. “The house you and Lucien bought is perfect for us.”

Booker nodded. “It was time to put down roots. And the children need a proper home.”

“Won’t be easy,” Lucien rumbled. “Providing for a family’s a big responsibility.”

He and Booker hadn’t mentioned to Julia about their meeting with Finn Hanrahan to purchase Finn’s Saloon. He and his family were moving on in the spring, heading to San Francisco to make their fortune.

Booker sent a meaningful glance at Lucien. “We’ll manage somehow.”

Lucien nodded. “I’m certain we will.”

On the other side of the room, Tucker stood with his friend and fellow deputy, Jonas.

He was trying not to stare at Rose Keenan as she chatted with Amelia Wheeler, the wife of their other good friend, Morgan Wheeler.

Rose had recently been appointed the new administrator at the orphanage, taking over from Martha Santori.

“Why not ask her to dance?” Jonas suggested, nudging his hesitant friend.

Tucker shook his head, a blush rising in his cheeks. “I’m thinking about it.”

“You’ll never know if you don’t try.” Jonas grinned. “What have you got to lose?”

As Rose laughed at something Amelia said, Tucker felt a surge of longing. Maybe Jonas was right. He had to speak up before someone else did. Squaring his shoulders, Tucker started across the room.

Tucker halted mid-stride, seeing a tall, broad-shouldered ranch hand approach Rose and extend his hand, asking her to dance. She glanced at Amelia, then placed her small hand in the man's large, calloused one.

As Rose allowed herself to be led toward the other dancing couples, Tucker froze, his courage evaporating. Doubt and insecurity flooded his mind. What did he have to offer a woman like Rose? She deserved more than a deputy could provide.

The ranch hand whirled Rose into the dance.

She followed his steps, smiling. But Tucker noticed she lacked her usual carefree joy, a small detail igniting a spark of hope in Tucker's heart.

Taking a deep breath, he strode onto the dance floor as the song ended.

Before the next one began, he tapped the ranch hand on the shoulder.

"Mind if I cut in?" Tucker asked, amazed at his own boldness.

The man shrugged and relinquished Rose's hand. She gazed up at Tucker, surprise mingling with a glimmer of pleasure in her eyes.

He took Rose in his arms as the band struck up another reel. Grinning, they whirled across the floor, carried away by the music.

"I haven't had a chance to congratulate you on becoming the orphanage administrator."

“Thank you, Tucker. I’m thrilled Martha and the other women put their trust in me.”

He watched Rose as they danced, unable to take his eyes off her radiant face. Her cheeks were flushed pink with exhilaration, tendrils of hair escaping from her braid. She’d never looked more beautiful.

As the song ended, the band shifted into a slower waltz. Tucker adjusted his hold on Rose, resting one hand gently on her back. She settled her arm on his shoulder, their hands clasped together.

They moved together, Tucker leading with a confidence he’d never felt before. The couples swirling around them faded away until it was just the two of them, locked in their own private world.

Rose lifted her face to his, a question in her eyes. Though his heart pounded, he gave her a reassuring smile.

A few feet away, Spencer and Eliza danced, their smiles indicating total joy. Tucker felt a pang of envy, knowing he wanted a future with the same happiness.

As the song ended, Tucker escorted Rose off the dance floor. Around them, the wedding guests laughed and chatted, caught up in the joy of the occasion. Tucker only had eyes for his partner.

He took both of Rose’s hands in his. “Thank you for the dance, Miss Keenan. It was a pleasure.”

Her cheeks turned pink again, but her voice was steady. “The pleasure was all mine, Deputy Nolan.”