

Eliza's Hope by Vicki Gaia, copyright 2007

Part I – A Rumor

Fall of 1912

Chapter One

Eliza grabbed her hat and stormed out of the one-room schoolhouse. She wouldn't kowtow to Mr. Benjamin or any of the town folks, but her ferocious heartbeat made her knees tremble.

The sun rose above the woods and warmed her face but her body shivered colder than a block of ice because of her encounter with the school superintendent. How dare he judge her virtue, and, above all, her competence! She had been top of her class throughout college. She'd lowered her standards to teach at this backwater one room schoolhouse. She could have gone anywhere, but chose to return, for Jewel's sake.

She gritted her teeth to keep from shouting. The thick fragrance of the silver maples, ash, and cottonwoods hung in the air. Paying no heed to the scents and delights of her surroundings, she cut through the woods, using the path winding past the lake and up the hill to her home. Solitude was what she needed...if only for a few hours.

How could she tell Jewel she'd lost her teaching position? Could she hold her head up high while the town folks gossiped? A lump in her throat choked back her tears. Too lost in her thoughts, she bumped into someone, and stumbled back. Zack Murphy. The one man she'd like to punch in the nose and enjoy every second of it. But as much as she disliked him, she wouldn't follow through with her gut instinct. She'd been raised better.

"Well, well, what a surprise it is to find you like this," he sneered. "Alone."

Eliza strangled out a 'good day' before stepping around him. His chest puffed out like a preening cock.

She'd known men like Zack Murphy all her life. He was a bully who never grew up. A broad shouldered man, she frowned at his chest, and his enormous hands flexing at his sides. Phantom hands of the past skimmed across her memory like an unwanted visitor and made her mouth dry. Fury drove a wedge in her heart. She'd never let a man overpower her again.

A menacing flicker in Zack's eyes warned her to run. Darting around his massive body, she almost got away, but he caught her arm and swung her around. Her hat flew from her hand, and when he bent to kiss her, she gagged from the stale tobacco and alcohol on his breath.

"We've got business, orphan-girl." He grinned, showing off brown-stained teeth. "Been passed around, they say. Willie-boy found you in them woods, did he? Reck'in he had his way with you, too."

The lie sent a flash of rage up her spine. Never had William touched her with any impropriety. If Zack knew the truth, then the whole damn town knew, too.

Ignoring her proper upbringing, she stamped her heel on his instep and lifted her knee to his groin. Oh, how she enjoyed the agony of his howling as he crouched on the ground, squirming and cussing. Hitching up her skirt, she ran, and kept on running, her heart threatening to split open. She came to the lake's edge, relieved to see Zack gave up his pursuit.

Collapsing in a heap, she cradled her knees to her chest. Hugging her arms around her legs, she rocked, but it didn't stop the tears of rage from slipping down her cheeks. She wanted to scream how unfair life was for those who didn't fit in. She wanted to rage against a society that judged a woman by her family name.

Her mother had abandoned her to a foundling home at age four. Maybe she couldn't take care of a baby, or couldn't feed another mouth? But why brand the child because of her parent's mistakes? Zack had accused her of a worst discretion, and painfully, Elena had no idea if it

was true. She'd escaped the clutches of her foster father, but with no recollection of that day.

Stop your whining. She detested self-pity.

Eliza dried her tears and watched the elegant geese float on the lake's surface. They cried out like babies wailing for their mothers. Their heartfelt sound carried across the lake, their wings skimming across the water creating a thunderous noise.

The rippled water beckoned. It would be a release to allow the water to take her, but she wouldn't let others bury her, not just yet. At twelve years old, she'd been reborn, finding a fresh start with the Bennetts. At college, she's learned there were choices for a woman who had a brain. She realized the potential for a different life. Marriage and family was not the only avenues opened to women. Damn if she'd let the Mr. Benjamin's of the world ruin her life.

Drying her eyes with her sleeve, she looked up. The blinding sun glared across the figure of a towering man. He touched her hair which sent frissons of disgust down her back. She gasped and scuttled back from the invasion. "Don't touch me!"

"Lizzie, it's William."

There was only one person who ever called her Lizzie, and usually out of exasperation.

She rubbed her eyes, trying to clear her vision. *It couldn't be...*

William Bennett knelt back on his haunches and withdrew his hands. He removed his hat and ran his fingers through a patch of unruly curls. Falling down over his ears and framing his face, the brown hair emphasized his stark blue eyes. Polished in his tailored coat and matching pointed vest, he wore a crisp white shirt and tie. Yet, for all his fancy get-up, an untamed side showed in his tanned face and hands, and his muscular forearms strained under his coat.

Yes, it was Will who knelt before her, but not like she'd remembered. But then again, it'd been seven years since he went away. She had given up on ever seeing him again.

Excited, her heartbeat hammered a quick rhythm, and she folded her trembling hands in her billowing skirt. "It is you."

Yet, what'd happened to the gangly young man who had taught her to swim in the lake, climb trees, and use a slingshot? This William looked too sophisticated in his blinding white shirt. He'd left at age nineteen to make his fortune and prove his worth. He'd promised to return, but he never did. The monthly money wire and occasional letter must have soothed his guilt, she fumed.

"Why are you here?" she demanded.

William's hearty laugh irked her. So he thought he'd humor her. It was too late to make amends. He abandoned her like everyone she'd ever loved, except Jewel. William's sister would always be there for her.

"I don't see what's so funny?" She frowned at his bemused smile.

"I've been gone for awhile, but this is a funny way to greet me." He brushed the grass from his trousers, than held out his hand. "It's best if you come home with me. Jewel's worried."

Refusing to take his hand, she stood without his help. "I see you're still telling me what to do."

William looked down at his feet, and from the slight coloring of his cheeks, her heart sunk. They all knew. She'd lost her teaching position because of the rumors. Mr. Benjamin, the school supervisor, came into town to personally fire her. The humiliation burned under her skin.

William placed his hand on her elbow, but she pulled back, not wanting his pity. He'd been gone too long to act like the faithful big brother.

"Jewel heard from a neighbor that you were, ah, let go," he said. "I came to find you and bring you home." He glanced towards the woods, his face somber. "Where's your hat?" His shrewd eyes took in the rip in

her sleeve, practically burning into her as he took in her disheveled appearance. "Who did this?"

"I ran into some bushes."

"You've never been a good liar. Tell me what happened."

Eliza refused to be pulled in by William's concerned manner. He was the one who left with no word of returning. Her heart ached for the boy she once knew, and her anger came forth in a torrid rush. "You can't expect to come home after all this time and for me to follow your orders. I'm not a child anymore, Will."

She swept past him and ran up the hill to the house.

How dare he come home now with her shame revealed? She'd waited years for his return. Cried every night for three months before realizing she wasted her tears. She'd loved him, and he'd broken her heart.